

TO OUR OWN DEVICES

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CREATING A FICTIONAL CONTEXT: A CRITICAL PREFACE

For those interested in creative writing, most critical approaches seem inappropriate to the making of fiction. Criticism belongs more to the reader than the writer, since to be a critic is to describe what is already on the page, while the creative writer needs to know how to compose a fiction. To say Sherwood Anderson's story, "Adventure," is about loneliness, or the lack of communication between human beings, may serve as the thesis for a critical essay, but it does not tell us much about how Anderson wrote the story, or why Alice Hindman's frantic dash into the street should evoke a theme of loneliness. The notion of "theme," while useful for a reader, may create problems for a writer who is overly concerned with "meaning."

Wayne Booth, in The Rhetoric of Fiction addresses the problem of theme:

"Theme," "meaning," "symbolic significance," "theology," or even "ontology" -- all these have been used to describe the norms which the reader must apprehend in each work if he is to grasp it adequately. Such terms are useful for some purposes, but they can be misleading because they

almost inevitably come to seem like purposes for which the works exist. (73)

Booth suggests that to assume a work of fiction is merely a vehicle for theme is to misread and mistakenly limit the critical task. Furthermore, fiction that is "spelled out" tends to be very unsatisfying for the reader, as Wolfgang Iser points out when he addresses the relationship between reader and author:

. . . a literary text is . . . something like an arena in which reader and author participate in a game of the imagination. If the reader were given the whole story, and there were nothing left for him to do, then his imagination would never enter the field, the result would be the boredom which inevitably arises when everything is laid out cut and dried before us. A literary text must therefore be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative. In this process of creativity, the text may either not go far enough, or may go too far, so we may say that boredom and overstrain form the boundaries beyond which the reader will leave the field of play. (Tompkins, 51)

If a reader senses the author making overt gestures in order to create a "meaningful" story, the necessary space that divides author from reader will be violated, and the illusion will most certainly be broken.

As Booth points out, the intrusiveness of the implied author is not simply a matter of telling versus showing. Fiction is always telling, always artifice. Yet, even in artifice there are boundaries of acceptable behavior on the part of the implied author. The problem faced by a fiction writer is how to determine those boundaries and provide direction for the reader without being heavy-handed.

There have been many attempts to define the "boundaries" of the short story as a genre. Unfortunately for writers, the definitions are usually reader-oriented. For example, Frank O'Connor claims "there is in the short story . . . something we often do not find in the novel -- an intense awareness of human loneliness" (May, 87). But, as O'Connor admits, novels too are populated by lonely people, as are poems, plays, and films. Certainly, in my story "To Our Own Devices," Lily is lonely and isolated, but I created a context that might evoke a sense of anger, frustration, kindness, love, and devotion to family, as well as a sense of isolation.

Mary Rohrberger says the short story "derives from the romantic tradition . . . that there is more to the world than that which can be apprehended through the senses. . . "

(May, 81). Her definition is very useful as a reading strategy, prompting readers to dig deep for meaningful sub-structures, but will plumbing the depths of existence help me write a story? Must I be a romantic to write short fiction?

Creative writers have not done enough themselves to adequately describe the writing process, and too often their pronouncements are mysterious, like finding the "right space" in which to create, or maxims about never starting sentences with "the," or the importance of grabbing a reader's attention in the opening line, or making characters "live and breathe." Creative writers need a definition of fiction, whether short story or novel, that focusses on the activity of writing, not the activity of reading. Such a definition should also avoid irrelevant, Romantic pronouncements about where to sit or what mood to be in while composing a story. The best definition of a good short story from a writer's point of view may have little to do with character, tone, setting, theme, symbol, or milieu. Rather, it is more useful to think of a good short story as the effective creation of a fictional context. By context, I mean something similar to Wolfgang Iser's "boundaries," that is "an arena in which reader and author participate in a game of the imagination." In fiction, as in all linguistic situations, context determines meaning. For the fiction writer, however, it is not simply the creation of any

context, but one recognized as fictional, as opposed to purely expository, or even critical. Furthermore, a specifically fictional context necessarily includes narration, characterization, setting, tone, milieu, as well as other literary conventions recognized by readers and authors alike.

A frequent error writers make is to consider meaning, or theme, as context, rather than creating a context that evokes meaning. In other words, the writer suddenly takes a critical stance toward his own text, and writes a story according to principles of explication rather than implication. The implied author, in such cases, usurps the roles of narrator and reader, becoming both author and critic. Of course, authors read their own texts in the process of creating them, and when writing the stories in this collection, I intermittently stopped to read over passages, thus acting as a reader of my own fiction. But, hopefully, that "reader" does not become a permanent figure, like the narrator, or worse yet, become the narrator. This imagined reader, like the real author, remains implied, lying somewhere beyond the fictional context. If that reader functions explicitly within the text, other readers, who come along later, will find little to engage their imaginations.

Of course, this notion of roles of reader and writer is a modern distinction, and there is some question how pres-

criptive any formalist model of the writing process can, or should, become. Also, the more one investigates the nature of interaction between the various participants in fiction, the more those boundaries Iser describes become fluid, and the interdependence of author, narrator, and reader emerges. My claim that "theme" or "symbol" should not dominate the creation of a story reflects a preference for a particular kind of fiction, influenced by writers like Hemingway and Joyce, stories that react against what Anderson called the "poison plot." The assumption I make, both in the production and description of my own fiction, is that a reliance on "theme" tends not to work as a mode of writing, though it remains highly valuable for the reader. My aim as a writer, therefore, is to create a context where a reader can imaginatively participate in a fictional world, guided by a compelling fictional narrator.

Eudora Welty, in her essay "The Reading and Writing of Short Stories," discusses the element of violence in Hemingway's "Indian Camp." Welty notes that "violence in itself is not a story; there is violence and there is the story, . . ." (May 165). Similarly, in my fiction "If Nothing Happens Like It Should," the violent act of shooting the deer has less to do with the theme of violence than with how a young man reacts to a violent situation. He reacts violently, but he does not represent Violence: to create a character who overtly represents Violence is to limit the

reader's role to confirming the author's interpretation, or rejecting it altogether.

The same principle applies to other "themes" in my fiction as well. Both "Catbirds" and "If Nothing Happens Like It Should" can be considered initiation stories, but the "initiation theme" is not the focus of either story. Mordecai Marcus defines the initiation story as one that

may be said to show its young protagonist experiencing a significant change of knowledge about the world or himself, or a change of character, or both, and this change must point or lean him towards an adult world. It may or may not contain some form of ritual, but it should give some evidence that the change is at least likely to have permanent effects. (May, 192)

The protagonists of "Catbirds" and "If Nothing Happens Like It Should" are not aware they are experiencing an initiation, and if they were, both stories would be seriously flawed. Certainly, "Catbirds" is told from a considerable temporal distance, some twenty years after the event, and one may argue the narrator is aware of the importance of his boyhood contact with death. But there is no real sense that the narrator understands how the burial of his great grandfather was important. Instead, he simply relates an emotional episode he has yet to fully comprehend. The story

is meant to be cathartic: a preface to, rather than a story about, understanding what it means to change the way a family deals with death. His telling, in other words, may imply the theme of initiation, but initiation is not his primary concern. Theme, therefore, is not a method of telling in either story, but the result of telling.

One of the traps writers must avoid, particularly when employing an adolescent narrator, is what I call the Salinger-esque mode. If one is not careful, any narrator below the age of eighteen, unevenly articulate and a bit sassy, will be thrown into the Holden Caulfield heap, never to be heard from again. The difference between Holden Caulfield and his clones is the intensity and consistency of Salinger's narrator. He is not inarticulate for the sake of being obscure, or for the sake of theme. When faced with a poor imitation of Holden, astute readers readily pick up on the deliberate blurring of authorial voice with the fictional voice merely for the purpose of achieving irony. But such irony strikes the reader as unearned, and unearned irony seldom commands serious consideration.

The challenge of writing "If Nothing Happens Like It Should," and to some extent "Catbirds," was being consciously aware of what my narrator could or could not say without falling into that foot-shuffling, coy voice so common among imitations of Holden Caulfield, or even Huckleberry Finn. To have the boy suddenly muted, unable to

tell his own story, would suggest the implied author deliberately lowered the narrator's capacity to narrate, purely for the sake of obscurity, or unearned dramatic irony. Readers know when their literary sensibilities are being overtly pandered to, or when their active involvement in the text is hindered. Certainly, the author can create a more or less articulate, more or less perceptive narrative voice, but to maintain the intensity of the narrative, the voice should remain consistent in its capacity to narrate.

In the five stories in this collection, I try to follow Booth's advice, that by

the silence he maintains, by the manner in which he leaves his characters to work out their own destinies or tell their own stories, the author can achieve effects which would be difficult or impossible if he allowed himself a reliable spokesman to speak directly and authoritatively to us. (273)

Knowing how to create an effective fictional context also means knowing when to leave characters alone, allowing the context to connote rather than denote meaning. To trust a reader's capacity to fulfill his role makes fiction interesting enough to read more than once. I readily admit I prefer reading Joyce or Anderson to Hawthorne, not because the former are better writers than Hawthorne, but because they are more interesting to a writer of modern fiction. My

story, "To Our Own Devices" is much closer to Joyce's "Eveline" or Anderson's "Hands" than it is to "Young Goodman Brown" or "The Minister's Black Veil." Bunny, the main character in "Swamper," is very close in demeanor to Maria in Joyce's "Clay;" both are passive figures who allow themselves to be exploited by others, but neither, it seems to me, is pushed forward as a symbol of innocence or inexperience like Robin in "My Kinsman, Major Molineux."

As Joyce does in "Clay," I employ a narrator in "Swamper" that closely reflects the protagonist's sensibilities, while maintaining some intellectual distance. Moreover, the language used by the persona reflects Bunny's own colloquial speech. In "Shooting Swifts," the narrator remains emotionally and intellectually close to Poe, and the near proximity of the persona hopefully allows the reader to experience Poe's drunkenness and isolation in a way a more detached narrator could not accomplish. More importantly, once I have established the relationship between narrator, character, and reader, that relationship must remain relatively constant. If the narrator in "Shooting Swifts" suddenly leaped to the sensibilities of Pammy or Rachel, the story would be flawed, not because narrators cannot leap, but rather to abandon Poe would require a completely different narrative voice. Poe thinks and articulates his situation in a manner peculiar to him, as does Bunny in

"Swamper," and to change points of view would require a change in narrative voice.

In Joyce's "The Boarding House," the narrator shifts its point of view from Mrs. Mooney, to Mr. Doran, and finally to Polly, but this is possible only because the persona has maintained enough distance from Mrs. Mooney at the outset that a shift in viewpoint character does not necessitate a change in voice. Thus Joyce's leap is a controlled leap, justifiable and free of deliberate or inadvertant obscurity. In fact, the shifts in point of view create further ironies, not by trickery, but by revelation.

One reason I find Booth's The Rhetoric of Fiction so useful is his insistence on the importance of the narrative voice, which fits well with my own notion of a good short story as the effective creation of a fictional context. The narrator is the point of control in my stories, and indeed in all stories. It is the one element of which I am always conscious, and the one device my readers will encounter from the opening line through the conclusion. Most importantly, the narrator is part of the fictional world, and serves as the fictional focal point for both implied author and reader. The narrator acts as guide within the fictional field of play, with greater or lesser reliability, and to lose control of the guide is to lose control of the fictional context.

Not surprisingly, stories I find unsatisfying seldom are because the author could not adequately describe what a character was wearing, or the inside of an apartment in Brooklyn, or the sound of crashing waves below a limestone cliff. Perhaps more surprisingly, few stories are unsatisfying because they fail to "mean" something. Indeed, more fictions go awry because they obviously "mean" something very specific, as if the author left a trail of bread crumbs to follow. Once readers know where the narrow trail ends, there is little to make them want to go back and do it all over again.

What I hope to create in my fiction is a particular relationship between author, narrator and reader; a fictional context from which the author withdraws, or distances himself, leaving the reader dependant upon the fictional narrator, as well as his own creative abilities. Intrusions by the implied author, at least in my fiction, would be disruptive, since my intentions are to create a fictional context that challenges the reader to participate, to make something meaningful from the text without direct authorial guidance. As Booth says:

Every literary work of any power - whether or not its author composed it with his audience in mind - is in fact an elaborate system of controls over the reader's involvement and detachment along

various lines of interest. The author is limited only by the range of human interests. (123)

In other words, there are many ways to interest a reader, and choosing to distance the implied author from the narrative voice is simply one way of encouraging reader involvement.

Whatever the technique, if we have learned anything from writers like Joyce, Hemingway and Welty, it must be that the task of fiction is to make the ordinary extraordinary, not by tricks and themes, but by craft, like cultivating a productive garden or making a sturdy rocking chair. Admittedly, this practical view of art will not set well with everyone. Nevertheless, the most important feature of a rocking chair is that it rocks. Similarly, the most important feature of a story is that it works, and controlling the context by means of a compelling, consistent, fictional voice makes fiction work.

What comes afterward belongs to the reader.

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SWAMPER

Bunny had swamped for backhoes since he was fifteen. He was small, narrow at the pelvis, a little narrower than the ditch cut by the bucket. He had good eyes when he didn't drink too much the night before, could spot the dark line of a water main and wave off the operator before any damage was done. Hoe operators liked him because he was quick to move if the bucket's teeth snagged a gas line or the operator was on a tight deadline. The phone company didn't like slow hoe operators, so hoe operators didn't like slow swampers.

Bunny didn't like dodging a bucket in the heat of August, but the dispatcher at Temporary Services didn't want to lose business sending him to restaurants. Even dishwashers had to be squeaky clean. Besides, Bunny asked for partial cash payment from the telephone contractors, and usually got it, while the restaurant managers sent him away with a time card or a check that cost twenty cents to cash at the grocery store.

He landed some good work. The other guys from the Service spent most of the summer at the Rehab playing dominoes and eating bologna on white twice a day. Bunny spent his nights with Waynette. She lived in a government

duplex a mile from the zoo. He liked Waynette because she acted like it didn't matter if he needed a bath. She said he just had a chemical imbalance. She usually wore a pink bathrobe and filled the tub with warm water for him while he drank a beer in front of her Sears Solid State. "You ought to get cable," he told her once.

"I don't have twenty dollars extra a month," she said, leaning against the doorjamb just inside the hallway. Her brown arms were wet to the elbows from testing bath water.

"I'll give you twenty," Bunny said.

She touched the back of her wrist to her forehead to cool herself. "You damn right you will," she said, grinning.

The phone company was taking all the lines off poles and burying them. Squirrels chewed the rubber coating off and the exposed wires rusted through after only one winter. Without squirrels, no one worked. Bunny didn't like the wrecking jobs though. He had to climb up the thick poles to cut the lines. Wallace Holt, fresh out of the army, lost a leg when a strand fell, bringing a power line down with it. The charge was so strong he didn't even bleed when it burned through just above his left knee. Besides, the black pitch on the poles ate a man's skin off if he didn't wash within an hour. Bunny liked working on the ground, in the trenches, waiting for the white PVC water line, or the shiny black gas pipe to show. He liked knowing he only had to wave his

hat in the air and the whole process stopped until he gave the go-ahead. He dug around the line with a shovel, smoothed the dirt off it with his glove, tied a red bandanna around it. "Okay to go back at it," he said. "I've got her found."

The only hoe operator Bunny didn't like was Miles. When he saw the big Massey Ferguson sitting on the side of Rosemont Highway, he felt like lying down in the back of the pickup, letting the job go. He thought maybe a guy could stand one or two weeks at the Rehab, until another job came up. But this job was too good. Two months of steady work. The phone company was laying a tow line to serve the entire county. Bunny heard it cost one million to bury. Miles wasn't worth losing his cut.

"Hey there, Rabbit," Miles said. He sat in the black swivel seat of the backhoe drinking coffee. He was only thirty, at least ten years younger than Bunny. The sun wrinkled Bunny's skin around his eyes and mouth, though, and he looked closer to fifty. "I hope you're feeling fleet of foot," he said, laughing, lifting his Goodyear cap from his pumpkin-sized head.

The engineers from the phone company, wearing yellow hard hats, holding long scrolls of blueprints, stood under a shade tree. "Don't pay him any mind, Bunny," one of them said. "His old lady's been chewing on his ass."

"Sheet," Miles said, pulling the cap's brim over his

eyes. Bunny pulled a pair of cotton gloves from his back pocket, sat down in the grass beside the road, and waited for Miles to start digging.

"Keep your eyes peeled for the red ones," Miles yelled over the sound of the engine. Bunny was in the trench. He straddled a tree root, chopping at it with a sharp-shooter. He looked up and touched the brim of his Budweiser cap in answer. Miles was color-blind and couldn't see the red, spray-painted lines the gas company used to mark buried pipe. "Nothing more flammable than a color-blind hoe operator," Miles laughed, though he squinted his hard blue eyes at Bunny to let him know he shouldn't laugh back.

Charlie Wykes drove by in his silver Bronco and squeezed Bunny a ham sandwich through the wing window. It cost Bunny three dollars from his check and all he got was a stiff sandwich and warm water from a milk jug. Charlie was the field personnel agent for Temporary Services. His wife stabbed him in the thigh with a steak knife when he was sleeping, so he rarely got out of his truck because of his limp. "What time you finished?" he asked.

Bunny stood next to the door and talked to Charlie's reflection in the side mirror. "Don't know. Don't really have a say."

Charlie adjusted his dark, fisherman's sunglasses. He wore a gold nugget ring he liked to tap against the steering

wheel. "What time Miles say you could go?"

Bunny looked over at the shade trees where Miles drank iced tea from a quart jar. "Didn't say." Waynette was coming to pick him up after dark, but he didn't want to tell Charlie.

"Tell Miles I want a time card for you this time," Charlie said, his fat face squeezed into the mirror. "Tell him he can't pay in cash."

"He don't pay in cash," Bunny lied.

"Don't take less than they owe," Charlie said. "Five dollars an hour, written down on a time-card. That's the contract."

"He don't pay cash."

Charlie rolled down his window. "Don't take three and a half an hour just because they promise cash." He said it louder than he needed for Bunny to hear.

Miles smiled wide, his mouth full of white bread. "I don't give cabbage to your Rabbit, Charlie!"

By three o'clock Miles was ready to bore under 125th street. Bunny stepped off the distance, laid eight, ten-foot sections of black bore stem side by side in the grass. The stems were hot from lying in the sun. Cotton gloves kept the heat off his hands long enough to link the pipe together without getting burned.

"Guide in straight and level, Rabbit," Miles laughed.

"Think about Miss Waynette when you shove it under the street." He sat on a red trencher, like a big kid on a toy fire engine. Bunny stumbled into the trench, wrestled the bit into position and gave Miles a wave. The bore stem jerked, the chiseled bit chewed into the earth. After twenty minutes of a slow grind, Miles shouted, "I think you shot it too high there, Bugs! It's sure to come up in the middle!"

Bunny took a shovel, walked to the center line of the road, stood the metal blade against the concrete, and pressed his ear to the round end of the handle. He closed his eyes, listened for the slow, steady turn of the bit. He knew by the sound it made, like somebody eating corn nuts, it was up against something. Maybe a storm pipe. If the concrete was thin enough the bit would go through. Most likely the pipe wasn't in use anymore, but he couldn't be sure. He just wanted the bit to make it through, to grind until the concrete gave up. He was the only one who would know. The pavement was hot, made his legs sweat, burned his feet through the thin soles of his boots.

Once, two summers back, Bunny and Waynette went to the Gulf of Mexico when the phone company went on strike. It was in May, before it turned humid. They rode in the car with the windows up so Waynette's permanent lasted until they crossed the Texas border. The car smelled of onion rings. Bunny propped his feet on the cracked dash, shading

the ice chest in the floorboard. They drove all the way to Galveston with the windows rolled up, air conditioner blowing warm air, Bunny's white-socked feet pressed against the windshield, Waynette's hair sagging a little more with every hour. They sang songs to themselves, Bunny thinking Waynette didn't hear him, until she joined in with an unsteady voice. She knew all of the words to "Galveston."

That's what he remembered in the middle of 125th street, listening to the drone of the bit three feet below him. It was up against something, but Bunny waited, listening intently, remembering happier times, until Miles yelled, "Where the hell's it coming up at! Is it going to make it across!"

When it was dark, after everyone was gone, Bunny wrapped a towel around his neck to keep the mosquitoes away. He felt the folded dollar bills in his pants pocket. He worked two hours past the time card. Slave wages, but Waynette always wanted something to eat for having to drive out to pick him up after dark. He was glad Charlie hadn't come back. He swiveled back and forth in the seat of the backhoe, jiggled the control sticks that moved the heavy bucket up, down, right and left. He squinted at the ignition to see if Miles left the keys. It was too dark to see, though if he really wanted to know it was easy to reach out his hand and feel for them.

In all the years he swamped for a backhoe, not once had

he operated one. He sat on them when they were dead solid quiet, sometime after dark, waiting for Waynette to find him. He wanted her to see him in the high swivel seat, although she knew more about swampers than anybody. She knew they never operated. But when the lights of her maroon LTD moved across the tractor, throwing a spotlight on him, he didn't worry about the truth. He looked into the beams, took off his hat, wiped his dirty shirt sleeve across his forehead, then across his eye, like he just turned the beast off.

Waynette drove slowly down the highway, far to the right, hugging the shoulder. "What are you going to do with that money?" Her dark hair was flattened on one side from sleeping. Bunny smelled sickness when she turned toward him to talk. Cigarettes and flu on her breath.

"Could get something to drink." He had enough for a shot of J & B. He thought of her as his girlfriend now, wanted to spend what little he had on her.

"Get me some Coke from the gas station," she said.

"What kind of coke?"

"What do you mean what kind of Coke?" She looked ill, even in the dark car. When they passed a street lamp the skin on her arms turned yellow. "I keep telling you everything soda-pap isn't Coke. Coke is its own kind."

"I know," Bunny said. He wanted to take a bath. He imagined them squeezed into the tub together, him pulling a

warm wash rag across her arms until the color came back. Lately, it seemed she was always sick.

"I saw Roger yesterday, while you were working," Waynette said.

"Roger don't work for anybody anymore," he said, taking a cigarette for himself, letting it hang cold from his lip.

Waynette blew air through her nose. "Does too. At the airport driving a runway sweeper."

Roger was a Korean War vet and told everybody. He lived at The Moses Mission when he felt religious, and at the lake when he didn't. "I thought you didn't want Roger around anymore because you were afraid he'd die in your bed?" Bunny knew Roger had emphysema, or at least that was what Roger told him. "He probably got you sick to begin with," Bunny said. He didn't believe Roger was even in town anymore, and the way Waynette kept sniffing while she talked, he figured Roger wasn't working at the airport either. She was trying to make him jealous, he thought.

"You can't get emphysema from nobody's parts," Waynette said, then turned on the radio.

They passed the airport, the rental car businesses, the aerospace school. The lights of departing planes flashed from the runways. Bunny locked and unlocked the door. Waynette blew smoke over the window, batted her thin eyelashes at herself in the rear view mirror. The air was hot, laden with the smell of asphalt oil and jet fumes. Street

lights disappeared a few hundred yards beyond the last airport exit, the concrete shoulders crumbled into the banks. Waynette followed zoo signs, cut out shapes of a rhinoceros, an elephant and a gorilla. "We should go there on Saturday," Bunny said finally, pointing at the silhouette of the gorilla. "Maybe pack a lunch."

"I could go for a sandwich about now," Waynette said, rubbing her round stomach. "A goddamn bowl of chicken soup to go with it. And a salad." She flicked ashes into the tray, sending a stray spark into the back seat. "You know how long it has been since I had a good salad, with a sliced hard-boiled egg and cheddar cheese?"

Bunny paused to think. He ate a salad with Renard Johnson at the Salvation Army on 49th St., sometime during the winter, after an ice storm. He thought he could still taste the red vinegar dressing on the back of his tongue.

"And some freaking croutons to go with it. And a package of soda crackers," she said, watching herself talk in the mirror. Bunny felt for the thin square of cash and the folded time card in his pocket. "I desperately need some roughage," Waynette sighed, flipping the last inch of cigarette through the window. Bunny saw it fly past the rear glass, bounce along the highway, like a plane with red landing lights, tumbling end over end.

At the end of a treeless road, among a series of

identical buildings, next to a set of silver monkey bars donated by a church, Waynette stopped the car. The duplex was dark. Bunny decided to take the light bulb out of the refrigerator and replace one in the porch lamp. Waynette needed protection from burglars, he thought. He gave her a glass of Coke and took a chair outside to stand on. He smelled zoo animals on the west wind, hay and manure. "Take those boots off," she said, but he was already on the chair. The seat was covered in red vinyl. Chairs for playing cards in, Bunny thought. Afterwards, he wiped it clean with a paper towel.

Waynette took her sandals off and threw her skinny legs over one arm of the blue sofa. propping herself up on her elbows. "Smells like chicken in here. There any chicken left in there? Bunny, come rub my feet."

Bunny walked from the porch into the kitchen. In a moment, he returned with a glass of cola. "Must be the zoo you smell."

"I already have a Coke," Waynette said, throwing her head back like she was drunk, like a weak-muscled baby. He set his glass on the floor and lifted her foot. He noticed her big toe, red from the plastic straps of the sandals, the way it turned inward. He felt fever in her heel.

"Miles said he'd pay me again tomorrow."

"Four dollars," Waynette insisted. "Otherwise, you tell Charlie."

"I got a few dollars left over. Want a Bomb pop?"

"I like the blue part on top," she said, lifting her head, running her foot around Bunny's front pant pocket. "The red part is good too, but you can't taste the coconut because your tongue's too cold by the time you get to it." Bunny wondered if she weighed more than three pieces of twenty-foot bore stem, or more than the front tire of a tractor. "If Miles don't pay you at least three and a half you better tell Charlie," she said, pinching and tugging his shirt tail with her crooked toes.

He figured he could lift her if he scooped behind her knees and shoulders. Her shoulders looked heaviest. Waynette was broad backed for a woman. "Want me to run some bath water for us?" he asked. He wondered if he could lower her gently into the bathtub without dropping her at the last second, just when she touched the water. She smiled, her neck muscles gave way again, her head plopped back against the couch cushion, like it was the silliest thing she ever heard.

It wasn't long before Waynette walked to the bedroom and crawled under the sheets. Bunny ran bath water and soaked for an hour, trying to rub the dirt from the furrows of his skin. His fingernails and toenails were circled in black. No matter how tight his laces, dirt always sifted inside his boots. He was small enough to lay on his back and float in the tub with his eyes closed. He floated on his

back in the Gulf of Mexico while Waynette covered herself with sand. The floating and the salty taste in his mouth and being hungry afterwards, he remembered, just like he remembered the ride to Galveston. If he ever got back to Texas, he would take Waynette to the Gulf again. Swampers traveled where the work was good, or at least where it was. Miles told him once he had the color of a Comanche and that Comanches lived in Texas. "You got small feet," Miles said. "You ever seen a big-footed Indian?"

Bunny watched the water lap over his legs. He knew everything Miles said was underhanded, even the part about him being a Comanche. It was a dig. But Bunny had the advantage because he was the one who spotted gas lines that could roast an operator in his swivel chair. He spotted the phone lines that linked sick old ladies to hospitals, stock brokers to banks, people to police, college kids to their mamas, lovers to lovers. All he had to do was hesitate to tip his hat and the whole county stumbled. Maybe for just an hour, or a week, until the lines were repaired, but that much he had on everybody.

He left a pile of dirty clothes in the plastic hamper just outside the bathroom door. With a yellow towel wrapped around his waist, he slid into the bed next to Waynette. The sheets were hot from her fever. She smelled of sweat. Strands of hair stuck to the side of her face, just in front of her ear. Bunny moved the hair with his fingers. "Bring me

that Coke, Bunny? You didn't drink it all, did you?"

"No," Bunny said, rolling over on his side, laying his hand on her warm, yellow stomach.

"I'm sick. Get me a Bomb Pop, Bunny?" she asked. He felt her suck her stomach in, away from his hand. "I need something cold to keep me going."

Bunny stood up, letting the towel drop. He pulled a cardboard box from beneath the bed, searched through the clothes for a pair of underwear. Waynette used to fold everything neatly, stacked according to size, pants on bottom, then shirts, then underwear, T-shirts and socks. Now they were just thrown inside. He dug deep, his fingernails scratching bottom. How clean they were he didn't know, but at least they were safe under her bed. Everything he left at the Rehab ended up under somebody's coat or tucked inside a pillow case. He found a pair of heavy wool pants, some socks and underwear. The only shirt he found was missing the bottom three buttons, but tucked in far enough it didn't show. He kissed Waynette on the forehead, whispering good night into her ear. She pushed against his cheek with the back of her hand. "Hurry," she said. "It's too goddamn hot to live."

Bunny thought of the bathtub again, what the cool water would do for her, but she moaned so loudly he left the room to find his boots.

Outside, the wind turned to the south, carrying the

musky scent of elephants toward downtown. Bunny opened the car door and slid behind the wheel. He moved the seat forward a few slots to reach the pedals, then turned on the headlights. The crooked beams shot into the dark, one hitting the ground, the other lighting up the monkey bars. Someone peered from behind a curtain in the other half of the duplex, a pale man with a fat cigar. Bunny lifted his hand from the wheel to wave. The curtains quickly closed.

The driveway was narrow, so Bunny backed out slowly, steadily, until he rolled into the street, turning the wheel hard to miss the drainage ditch with the right rear tire. The hood ornament pointed out a direction like a compass, guiding the car to the center of the road. At the stop sign, at the top of the hill, Bunny looked into the rear view mirror, back toward the row of duplexes, to the now darkened window where the face had appeared. Back to the porch light he replaced earlier in the evening, to the chair he left beside the front door.

He thought of Waynette, lying feverishly in bed, smacking her thick lips together, flicking out her pink tongue in anticipation of a popsicle, or another glass of Coke, or a cold leaf of salad lettuce. His palm was still damp from touching her stomach, his lips still salty from the brief kiss on her forehead. For a moment, he thought he saw the entire day reflected in the mirror; the glaring eyes of Miles, the yellow hard hats of the engineers, the backhoe

bucket dropping so close to his knees he stiffened against the shining teeth, the hand of Charlie Wykes wrapped around a sandwich, pressing dents into the soft bread.

He blinked hard, pushing it all out of his mind, until he saw his own dark eyes staring back.

His muddy boot slid from the brake to the gas pedal. The heavy car moved past the stop sign, around the corner, starting a slow downhill glide, the hood ornament pointing along the straight stretch of highway, where half a mile away a row of street lights made a path for him. He leaned back into the seat, steered only with the tip of his little finger, raised his foot from the accelerator, gave the car and himself over to gravity.

SHOOTING SWIFTS

Poe Horner walked from behind the cash register of his bait shop. He cradled a .22 caliber rifle in one arm, and in his free hand held a yellow box of twenty-five cartridges. That was all he allowed for, and even then he usually kept one or two back in case he scared up a rat.

Pammy volunteered to watch the shop again, like she did most Saturday nights. She wore her blue gingham dress, the one Mimi gave her for high school graduation. She sat on the edge of the shad tank, her legs crossed tightly, arms straight and stiff at her sides. She looked just like Mimi in the dim light, Poe thought; the round, moon-like face, and darting eyes, eyes that looked slightly away when she talked to him. "Go ahead, Daddy," she said, bouncing the heels of the blue flats against the concrete tank. "they won't be along for another two or three hours."

Poe looked at his watch. It was seven. He knew flatheads didn't bite until midnight or after and channel cat didn't take anything but stink bait before nine, and no one but kids ever asked for stink bait. It was the chicken liver and shrimp that made the money for him. Pammy was right, he thought. The flathead fisherman wouldn't show up until at least eleven o'clock.

"You can stack up some more of those coolers," he said,

even though the wind through the open front door blew them everywhere.

Pammy wrinkled her nose at him. "I don't really want to do anything in the shop tonight. I think Rachel is coming over."

Poe was already looking around the shop for other things she might do. Finally he told her to watch t.v., but to leave the light on in the shop and listen for customers. "If Horace comes by looking for that Lazy H jig he ordered tell him they don't make them anymore, he'll have to fish what he's got."

"Horace hasn't been here in a month," Pammy said.

He looked over the rifle barrel for rust; it rained the last time he went out. "And if he comes in tell him not to break a six-pack unless he's going to buy the whole thing. Tell him fishhooks come in ten, minnows by the dozen, water dogs by the half and crickets by a box of two dozen. With all that evened out by nature I can't sell a five-pack of beer." He counted on his dry, thick fingers while he talked. While he was counting he thought Pammy should eat the turkey and cheese sandwiches in the upright refrigerator before the expiration date. But he didn't tell her since Rachel was coming over.

He walked to the cold box to take a beer from the wire shelf. He kept cans of chewing tobacco close to the sliding glass doors so the fishermen saw it despite the white

blotches of moisture. The fogged glass was a sure sign of a bad seal, but the beer and pop stayed cold if he kept the thermostat down low. White, margarine-sized bowl of chicken livers lined the shelf on the other side. He kept the shrimp in an old Sears Cold Spot in the back.

Before leaving, he slid a tall, silver can of beer into the front pants pocket of his fatigues, then pulled the pocket away from his thigh. He felt like a kid who just wet his pants. "Damned cold." He balanced the rifle over his shoulder and clicked his tongue at Pammy. "Be back," he said.

The bait shop stood on a V-shaped piece of land between the old river road and the state highway. The McPhearsons owned most of the property to the south as well as the long, flat pasture between Poe Horner's bait shop and the river three hundred yards to the north. The McPhearsons raised prized Herefords and were in the pecan business; the land was littered with three-foot high crates to protect the saplings from the lumbering cattle. Poe climbed the barbed-wire fence and stepped into the pasture. The grass was short, like grass on a golf course, heavily grazed and growing sparse now that it was late summer. Six reddish-colored bulls lay in the center of the field, eyes closed, mouths chewing cuds.

He kept close to the fence. If he stayed on the road, it was a quick walk to the bridge; from the bridge railing

he could lower himself down the embankment without leaving state property. But he made a point of walking across the pasture toward the dark line of trees; from the open field he could see the swifts coming in over the oaks before they turned and flew back across Mud Creek looking for mosquitoes.

When Poe and Mimi were still married, he told her the black, flittering objects against the horizon were bats, and she started wearing scarves and heavy gloves when she followed him into the fields on Saturday nights. That was back before Lulu sold her bait shop to the county for demolition and the highway was four-laned between Springs and Rockland. And the Hansons' shop, with their six children all sleeping in the add-on room back by the minnow tanks, was situated at an angle across the road from Poe's. The Hansons lost their place to a fire just before Halloween. But before everyone disappeared, before Lulu went to work in the glass plant in Springs, before Mimi left for good, before the Hansons were burned out, they gathered along the pasture fence just outside the McPhearsons' property boundary with .22s and slingshots and rocks to harass the swifts as they chased insects through the night air. No one ever hit one, though. Hanson had a fine Remington pump shotgun he used on the squirrels in the cottonwoods closer to the river, but he never brought it to shoot swifts.

Poe kept going on his own, even after everyone else cleared out. When Mimi left him for the owner of the Mohawk Sand and Gravel Company, the first evening she was out of the shop, he climbed into the McPhearsons' pasture and popped off a hundred or more rounds into the trees. That was when he decided not to carry more than twenty-five shells, in case he thought too much about Mimi and wasted two or three boxes on nothing but leaves.

Once, when he did think too much about Mimi and drank most of the beer he kept cold for the fishermen, he recognized her as one of the black swifts zigzagging over his head. She stopped in mid-air, hovered for an instant, then fell straight down at him and disappeared. Another came by and he knew it was Hanson, and then Mrs. Hanson, then all six Hanson children, with their sharp faces and squinted eyes. Then Lulu. Then Mimi again.

He told Pammy it was as bad a night as he ever had and it kept him out of the fields most of the summer.

Poe stopped to load. Afterwards, he looked along the ground for a good place to sit and wait for one to draw close as it made a fast arc over the edge of the pasture before turning back into the trees.

He chose a spot seventy-five yards from the tree line. Any further out and the swifts would be too small to find in the sights; any closer, he wouldn't be able to see them for

the shadows of the trees. He pulled his baseball cap low over his eyes to block out the sun. It was the worst time of day to see. He took off his black-frame glasses and cleaned the lenses with his shirt tail. He checked the rear and front sights of the .22 against an outcropping of sumac trees by squinting down the barrel, the butt of the gun pulled against his shoulder, his cheek pressed against the cool wood. Mosquitoes buzzed around his face and he tugged the brim of his hat even lower and pulled on a pair of cotton work gloves to protect his hands. He re-laced his boots, making them loose so when he sat cross-legged on the ground his feet wouldn't fall asleep under him.

Poe looked back over his shoulder to the tiny blue light in the back room of the bait shop. Pammy hadn't turned on the flood light over the gravel drive. She had no sense for the business, he thought. She was always forgetting the lights or to start the aerators in the shad tanks, or turn the dirt in the worm beds before adding nightcrawlers. Summers passed slowly for her.

The swifts flew for only half an hour, in a frenzy between late evening and darkness, just before they went to roost under the highway overpasses. When the birds returned from the cottonwoods, dipping low over the fields before springing straight up at the trees along Mud Creek, they were at a perfect distance for Poe to squint his eye and find one in his sights, coming almost straight at him. He

couldn't follow them right to left if they cut directly in front of him, but coming head on, he found them in the gap of the rear sight and raised his rifle barrel to cover them.

In an instant he held one in the sight before it lifted and turned full speed towards the tree line to his left. It was high over the horizon. He fingered the trigger. The rifle popped, shivered a little as it threw the spent shell, then popped again. The swift turned and flew hard over the treetops. Poe moved the rifle barrel back to the horizon and waited for another.

There were three. He picked the one farthest to the right, coming straight at him. It flew lower than usual, skimming the pasture, just high enough off the ground to be seen against the lighter sky. It was low enough for Poe to rest his elbows on his thighs to steady the gun. The thought he might actually hit one flickered through his mind and made him blink. When he found the bird again, it turned, moving left to right along the horizon. In desperation he pulled the trigger just as he lost the swift altogether behind a sumac tangle.

He waited for more, but it was too dark, and although he heard a few twitters from late flyers, they were invisible against the sky. One of the bulls stood up in the pasture. Poe, feeling unsettled after only a few good shots, squinted down the rifle barrel at the hereford's large silhouette and gently fingered the trigger. He relaxed

momentarily, then clicked the safety off. The bull took a step. Poe squared the rear and front sights, making a frame around the animal's head. A clean shot behind the ear would drop him, he thought. Anywhere else and the bull would bleed to death slowly. It might even last the entire night, until one of McPhearsons' hands found it at feeding time in the morning.

The bull eased its head to the ground and pulled at the thinning grass. Poe followed with the rifle sight, trying to keep squared up behind the animal's ear. That's exactly how the slaughter house dropped them, too, he thought. A .22 behind the ear. He pulled at the finger of his glove with his teeth until it dropped to the ground. He brought his hand back to the rifle, running his finger along the edge of the trigger housing, then wrapped it around the trigger. It all ended up the same, he thought, whether he did it now or it was done in the slaughter house.

McPhearson would take everything, he thought. A good registered Hereford was worth more than all the tackle and bait Poe owned. And there would be no doubt who pulled the trigger; McPhearson had the sheriff out on trespassing calls three times already. And he was right to do so, Poe figured. The cattle were in the line of fire, and when the swifts flew particularly low, it wasn't unusual for him to pull up when he knew he was swinging too close.

He tightened his finger around the trigger. The stock

warmed in his hand. He shifted his aim slightly, making adjustments when the bull moved its head. His eye watered from staring down the barrel so long. He was afraid to blink, afraid the rifle might go off.

Then he felt a mosquito biting him on the neck, like a slow pinch spreading down his back. The bull raised its head. Poe heard grass pulled up by the roots. The rifle sights wandered. The mosquito bite felt like a bee sting. It must have hit a nerve, he thought. He gripped the rifle stock hard with his right hand, and in one motion let go of the trigger and slapped the back of his neck.

The bull dropped its head and pulled up another mouthful of grass. Poe clicked the safety on and laid the rifle across his lap. He pulled the warm beer from his pocket and drank it noisily. He held his hand under his chin and caught what he couldn't swallow. When the can was drained, he splashed the puddle of beer in his palm onto the back of his neck to soothe the mosquito bite. When the pasture was completely dark, he stood up and waited for the blood to come back into his hands and feet.

Rachel's brown, two-toned Granada was parked in the gravel drive. It looked red in the thin light from the open door of the bait shop. Poe crossed the dry drainage ditch and stumbled slightly as he came up the other side. The warm beer on an empty stomach made him dizzy.

Pammy stood behind the cash register, counting change back into the drawer. He could tell she wasn't really counting, only listening to the sound of the coins drop into the metal tray. When she saw Poe she stopped. The aerators hummed in the background and the warm odor of moist worm beds hung in the air. "Thought I heard gravel popping," he said, wiping his face with a bandanna.

Pammy closed the register drawer and leaned her thin, sharp elbows on the counter. "That was Rachel," she said.

Poe took two steps forward and turned to look at Rachel. She sat in a metal folding chair with her feet propped on the edge of one of the concrete tanks. She wore thongs and her pudgy toes stood straight up when she spoke. "Kill anything, Mr. Horner?" she asked. Her brown hair was tied into a thin rope that hung down the back of the chair. It was almost long enough to reach the floor.

"Just a beer," Poe said. Rachel gave him a quick thumbs up and a thin smile. Her face was round and uneven in color, her lips all but disappeared between her large nose and square chin. "Anybody else come in?" he asked, turning to Pammy.

Pammy rested her chin in the palm of her hand. "Just the Roland kids trying to get me and Rachel to sell them beer and cigarettes."

"You bet," Rachel said loudly. She was still smiling. "So we gave the little beggars a Marlboro apiece and kicked

their asses out until they turn twenty-one or grow moustaches. Whichever comes first."

Poe leaned the rifle against the counter and took off his glasses to clean them on his shirt. "If a smoke keeps them from stealing my corks you made a good deal." Rachel gave him a thumbs up again, put her hands behind her head and leaned back in the chair.

At ten-thirty Rachel and Pammy were still playing cards. Poe stood behind the cash register and poured the last foamy drops of beer into his mouth. It was his fifth since coming back from the fields, and when he leaned his head back he fell against the wall, rattling a line of Zebco rods and reels hung from the ceiling. Pammy looked up momentarily, then quietly returned to the game, throwing a card to the center of the table.

Rachel held a spread of cards in one hand, her long braided hair in the other. She pointed the frayed end of the braid in Poe's direction without taking her eyes off the card Pammy played. "They say beer is good for the digestive system," she said. "With the exception of your stomach lining, that is. Too much fizz for the stomach."

"I'll take one," Pammy said, and Rachel flipped a card from the deck without letting go of the braid.

"Of course, if you drink more than two or three the whole thing gets flushed before it does your intestines any

good. Then look where you are." She pressed her lips together and nodded.

Poe pulled a stool to the counter and opened the last beer. It was cold and tasted of aluminum. He wished he had beer in a bottle and some potato chips. He thought he might call Mimi and ask her to bring some over and they could talk. They could talk about sending Pammy to college or wherever she wanted to go. Mimi left clothes in the drawers and closet, clothes she could still wear even after ten or fifteen years. Her dress shoes were in the closet corner, along with a pair of snow boots. There was a pair of eyeglasses folded by the soap dish in the bathroom, tinted ones for fishing or shooting swifts. The car was in her name as well. There was no money, Poe thought. Even if she asked there was no money.

"It seems to me you could do better with a convenience store." Poe realized he was staring at Rachel's thick, brown legs while she spoke. He glanced over at Pammy, who looked blankly back at him. "You know, one of those gas-and-go, eat-and-run kind of places. You got a good location." Rachel stacked the cards neatly on the table and leaned forward. She was several years older than Pammy, and the way she talked and rested her elbows on the table and smiled, Poe wondered why she and Pammy were friends. She struck him as a difficult person, although she always spoke to him with respect, the way Pammy or Mimi or Hanson or Lulu used to

look at him and talk about everything. Now even Pammy watched him from a distance, rarely saying anything beyond the obvious. But Rachel always talked to him, twitching out a smile whenever they made eye contact. More than once Poe thought he saw Pammy trying to wave Rachel off.

"I like the bait business," Poe mumbled. "I don't think I could sell anything that didn't smell bad." He tipped the beer.

Rachel laughed out loud and told Pammy her old man had a real low-key sense of humor. Pammy pulled the deck of cards to her and started shuffling.

It wasn't long before someone drove up and left the doors open and lights on in a pickup truck. Two men came in carrying empty bait buckets. Poe recognized the Carvers, father and son. Both were about the same height, though old man Carver was nearly sixty and his boy was only fifteen. Both wore red baseball caps with twisted brims. Old man Carver held up a Polaroid of his son hugging a thirty or forty pound mudcat. "Caught this one last evening on a glob of liver," he said. "Wonder if I can put it on the counter?"

Poe took the photograph and taped it beside the other photographs of his customers' catches. He figured it was good for business, having people stare at big fish while they bought cut shad and shiners. They might think he had something to do with it and buy a jig or a box of treble hooks too.

"It's not square," Carver said, tilting the picture even with the counter.

Poe felt himself swaying on the stool. "Everything doesn't have to be square, you know," he said. Carver smelled like Old Spice. Poe thought he was going to tell Carver it was stupid to wear after-shave on a night out fishing. He thought he might have already said so, but the man and his boy were still shuffling through the bubble gum and hard candy by the pop machine. If he had said it, he knew Carver well enough to know he wouldn't still be there.

He felt Pammy brush against him and slip behind the cash register. "Go to bed, Daddy," she said out of the side of her mouth.

"What time is it?" he asked, then squinted at his watch. "One-thirty? Mr. Carver, you know it's one-thirty? You and your boy won't catch anything but turtles once the water cools down."

"It's only eleven-thirty," Pammy said before Carver opened his mouth.

Poe looked at his watch again. "I'll be damned," he said. He thought he was drunk the way the stool moved under him. Rachel called to him from the card table back by the minnow tanks. He stretched his neck, pretending he couldn't find her. She waved at him like she was waving at a circus clown. "What?" he asked.

"Do you want me to open the register or give Mr. Carver

four cents out of your pocket?" Pammy asked.

"No," Poe answered and twirled himself on the stool. Rachel continued to wave at him, and her lips seemed to be moving but his ears were warm and full of air. She wasn't making any sound. She didn't make sense to him. "What!" he yelled.

"Go to Rachel while I help Mr. Carver get his dozen."

He felt her elbow in his side and he lifted himself from the seat. "Goddamn if my feet aren't asleep," he said.

Rachel pushed a chair out with her foot and he sat down. In a moment, he had another beer in his hand and Rachel was dealing him cards. "What are we playing here?" he asked, concentrating on the way the cards fell onto the red table top. He heard Pammy using the dip net in the shad tank. She always tapped the net three times before dropping the shad into the customer's bucket. Mr. Carver was still in the shop. Poe smelled his after-shave even over the worm beds.

"We aren't playing anything," Rachel said. "I just like to flip cards."

He looked up from the table and she squinted back at him. She was wearing round, gray-tinted glasses. He never saw her wearing glasses before. "Going blind?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Nope."

"Don't deal off the bottom," he said. Her hands moved too fast for him to keep up with the deal. The way her nails

looked, he knew she bit them. He took deep drinks of beer. Rachel dealt, and when she finished the deck she scraped all the cards together, tapped them into alignment, and started again. She made them pop from her hands and dealt the whole deck without breaking her rhythm. He closed his eyes and listened. When he opened them again Pammy was sitting between them at the table, Rachel dealing to all three.

"You're good," Poe said.

"So are you," she said.

"I mean at cards. You ought to go to Vegas." His voice seemed extraordinarily loud. He noticed Pammy wince.

"I wouldn't be good in Vegas," she said. Pammy stacked hers very neatly and waited for Rachel to finish the deck before she slid them across the table. "Why don't you open a convenience store?" Rachel asked, starting a new deal. "You could still sell bait and things." She looked around the shop, tilting her head down to look over the glasses resting on the end of her nose. "Just add gasoline, bread, milk, Twinkies and a pop fountain."

Poe got up and went to the refrigerator. He leaned against the cold, glass door, then slid it open. He grabbed a six-pack from the rear shelf. "Goddamn, I must look like a desperate man," he said as he sat back down to his cards. She dealt them face up now. He saw a full house and gathered it in his free hand. "Somebody needs to drive me around," he said.

Rachel's car smelled like lime air freshener, and Poe leaned his head out the back window to avoid the smell. Pammy sat in the front seat and twisted the radio dials. She turned around occasionally to ask if he was all right. Poe smiled and she went back to finding a station through the static.

He knew they were on the old river road. Rachel swerved back and forth to miss the swells in the asphalt. Poe felt his body move one way while his head moved the other. "Moon must be full!" he shouted so they heard him over the wind through the open window and the growl of the Granada's engine. "Seems like gravity is a little thicker tonight than usual!" Rachel watched him in the rear view mirror. She wore the pair of glasses on top of her head now. Her eyes squinted like she was smiling, though he couldn't see her whole face. He figured she had the kind of face that squinted naturally.

Beyond the bait shop there were few lights, but as they passed a driveway, Rachel and Pammy glowed under fluorescence, then the light fell on his own face and arms, making him cold. He saw the lights even with his eyes closed, like something crawled over the hood of the car, then over the front seat to cover him. Rachel handed him another beer. "Don't give him any more," Pammy said.

Poe dug his fingernail under the tab. "Don't give me any more, Rachel," he repeated. "Too much fizz for the

stomach I hear," and he sipped at the warm foam that spewed out and covered the top of the can. He asked to be taken to see the dam, then back to the bait shop. Rachel didn't answer, but he felt her accelerate slightly. He closed his eyes to steady himself. His tongue was numb, felt swollen. He opened his mouth to keep from choking. When the car rode over a swell in the road, or Rachel swerved to miss it altogether, he felt his stomach slosh. He tightened his abdomen because he thought it might all spill over into his lungs and drown him right there in the back seat, without Pammy knowing anything until it was too late. "What time is it?" he heard himself ask. The car seemed to be going around in a circle.

"We're at the overlook, Daddy," Pammy said. He thought she was smiling at him, but she turned to Rachel and said something. In a moment he opened his eyes again and was alone in the car. He sat up to see over the dash. Pammy and Rachel stood close together at the edge of the asphalt drive, facing away from him, toward the brightly lit steel and concrete dam. He thought he heard them whispering to each other, but it turned out to be his own labored breathing. He fell asleep fighting the odor of Rachel's lime air freshener, grown stronger without the wind to blow it away.

In his sleep he dreamed of Mimi. She was dressed for shooting swifts, and walked over to the Hansons' to tell them it was getting late. She wore her winter boots to keep

the sand burrs from clinging to her socks, and the orange scarf she wore over her head and around her neck pushed her dark hair down against her cheeks. Poe told her she looked like a peasant woman. She always walked in front, carrying a bait bucket she flipped upside down to use as a seat. She looked like a big kid sitting in a small chair, chin to her knees, every square inch of her body covered against mosquitoes, well-protected just in case some of the black swifts turned out to be bats after all. Poe told himself in the dream, like talking to himself in a mirror, he was going to get her back.

Then he thought of Rachel. The glasses she wore were Mimi's glasses, the pair left in the bathroom by the soap dish. He opened his eyes and sat up angrily. The car was empty and he was back at the bait shop. He rubbed his still numbed face, then threw open the door. An empty beer can clattered to the ground. He steadied himself against the hood of the car before going into the shop. The Bait sign was off, and only the fluorescent light over the drive let him find the front door. He thought it must be past two in the morning. The closed sign hung in the window. He struggled to find the door knob and thought it was locked until it suddenly swung open, like someone pulled it from inside.

It was dark near the register so Poe put his hand out to steady himself against the counter. He heard the aerators bubbling in the tanks and the sound of water trickling. He

followed the counter until he reached a small square of light on the floor. It came from the refrigerator and Poe looked over out of habit to see if the white splotches of moisture on the inside of the glass were any larger. His head felt heavy, and as he let his chin drop he saw Rachel.

She stared at him from the edge of the minnow tank, the light bulb above the aerator nearly touching the top of her head. Her hair was out of its braid and spread over her round shoulders. Beside her, almost invisible but for the contrast in skin color, sat Pammy in her blue dress. Rachel lifted a handful of water from the tank and let it trickle between her fingers, her eyes fixed on Poe, her cheeks thickening into a smile. "Need anything, Mr. Horner?" she asked, cooling her forehead with a few drops she let fall from the side of her hand. Then, she pulled a strand of hair forward and twisted it around her finger. "Something to eat, maybe? Beer will do that to you."

He shook his head slightly, then broke away from her stare and stumbled outside. The door of the Granada was still open and he slid head first into the back seat, stretching himself so his feet hung outside. A light wind blew through the window and open door, carrying the scent of lime away, enough to make breathing comfortable. He hovered between sleep and consciousness, until the sound of tires on gravel woke him. He looked up through the windshield at the gray sky.

Crappie and sandbass fishermen were coming in for minnows and worms.

TO OUR OWN DEVICES

Lily drew much comfort from her husband, Jack. Especially those first few weeks after Jimmy, their oldest, went to the state prison at Monroe for using a jagged beer bottle on a man's neck. But even family heartaches would not slow the plowing of a new road in Center County, so he left her with the grandchildren for two months to ride a dozer through one hundred foot stands of Southern pine.

He was gone only a day when the grandchildren cornered a Tabby cat behind the rose bush outside her bedroom window. Lily stopped sweeping the pieces of wheat toast left from breakfast, pushed into a little brown pyramid on the blue-tiled floor.

"Bally-hooo! Bally-hooo!"

"Gimme something to chunk! Gimme me a pine cone! Gimme me a rock from the flowerpot, Jenny!"

"Get your own rock."

"Shake the bush, why don't ya?"

"I need something to chunk. Don't make so much noise."

"Yoo-hoo, Kitty!"

"You're making him bristle!"

"Here kitty kitty kitty kitty kitty."

Lily pushed the crusts onto the morning newspaper and shook it clean over the sink. She splashed the sides of the

enameled basin, then stood with her fingertips slicing through the water flowing from the faucet. The cold steadied her nerves, relieved the tightness that gripped her forehead, settled her breathing. After a few long minutes, when she felt she might be able to stop breathing altogether without any ill effects, she turned off the water, dried her hands on her apron, and rolled the newspaper so it fit neatly into the trash sack beneath the sink. It was almost eleven, nearly time for lunch. The baloney needed slicing, lettuce washed, dill pickles fished out of the jar and quartered. The utensil drawer opened stubbornly in the high humidity. Her carving knife, a black-handled Chicago Cutlery Jack got her for Christmas, was buried under a potato masher, a silver whisk, a tangle of cookie cutters and a pair of beaters.

She put out the call for lunch at eleven-thirty. "Bally-hooo!" Courtney sang, skipping into the kitchen.

Jenny already sat at the table with a black-haired doll, trying to feed it a corn chip. "Eat it, eat it, eat it." she said.

"Richey's afraid to leave," Courtney said, sliding next to her sister. "Afraid the cat might get away. Want me to get at him again, Granny?"

"Eat this one," Jenny said to her doll, selecting a chip from a special pile next to her plate. She had a ring

of red dirt around her chin and dribbles of something darker on her shirt.

Lily poured purple Kool-Aid into three glasses, dropped a straw into each. "Mind yourself," she warned. Courtney's round nose wrinkled up, the tip of her pink tongue pressed between her lips. Jenny paused to watch her sister and absent-mindedly ate a corn chip herself.

Richey squatted on the ground, peering under the tangle of rose vines. "Leave it," Lily said. He looked up, rubbed his eyes with freckled, dirty fingers. He had her face, or at least her eyes, and Jimmy's chin and hair color, maybe even Jack's nose. Unlike the girls, with their brown hair and square faces, he had none of his mother's features. It was an absence Lily strangely regretted, despite her opinion of Darla, the abandoning mother, the weak wife. There was nothing soft about him, nothing needy or open or thin-skinned, and although he often invited his sisters to pull his hair or punch him in the stomach, he cried only spiteful tears. They couldn't muster the strength to make him do more.

"I'm standing guard," he said, pulling at his belt loops. She stepped off the porch, stooped over his shoulder. "I think he's ready to bolt," he said. Beneath the window sill, on bare, red ground, hunkered a large grey Tabby, feet drawn under, dull yellow eyes half-closed, tail

curled around its legs like a striped snake. It let out a low growl.

"I don't think he's going to go anywhere. Looks like you scared him right into a nap."

Richey leaned over even further, his red hair dragging the ground. "Nope, I don't trust him."

"Come inside," Lily said.

"Nope. I don't trust him. If I leave him, he'll take off."

"Maybe he won't."

"He's wild. Saw his tail puffed up when he went in."

"I'll watch him for you."

"Not hungry," he said, sitting down, crossing his legs Indian-style.

"I didn't ask you if you were," Lily answered, feeling the grip tighten on her forehead. She grabbed his arm, felt the hard thin bone, and pulled him to her. She aimed at his ear with her mouth full of words, and told him he had two seconds to get inside with his sisters. He drew his neck tight into his shoulders and tried to pull away from her. He groaned as if she was tearing his arm from the socket. It was enough to make Lily let go. Instead, she slid her hands under his arms and lifted. He was heavier than she thought. She only made his shoulders shrug.

"Hey!" he shouted, breaking into a laugh, "Those ain't

handles!" He straightened, brushed the dirt from his knees, grinned belligerently.

"Move," she said, spinning him onto the porch, keeping her fingers pressed into his back, pushing him through the doorway. He ran free of her, screaming for help. He fell in beside his squealing sister, biting his nails, shaking his head, chattering his teeth, crying "I'm scared, Granny! Don't beat me, Granny!"

"Bally-hooo!" Courtney yelled.

"Granny's gonna beat us all," Jenny said seriously to her doll, which made the other two laugh even louder.

Lily ate standing next to the refrigerator, her back against the cool wall. They reminded her so much of her own four children, though her last boy was lost to leukemia. His death came slowly, marked by thinning cheeks. She measured his dying like she measured the growth of her first three, feeling his face with her fingers rather than standing him against the closet door and making a pencil mark. The other three did well, until Jimmy lost his temper over a football game. But her two girls were settled into good homes, with fairly good men. Neither daughter had children, and neither made any offers to take Jimmy's once the trouble started. Lily took them because she was a practiced mother and because she saw no alternative, though nearly sixty, with thinning yellow hair, and a chronic shortness of breath.

Besides, with all the heartache and a certain coolness from her daughters after the trial, Lily felt the need to make some repairs, to keep the widening crack in the foundation of the family from swallowing everyone up. It was a flaw she believed existed from the very beginning; missing memories of her children when they were babies, toddlers, teenagers; memories, instead, of those headaches that came on summer afternoons, and the long naps she took that left blank spaces in her life. Those blank spaces added up to a barroom brawl. Jack told her she had no apologies to make, but now she had the grandchildren, whom she loved if only to enjoy herself loving them.

They all got rid of their sandwiches, Courtney by giving half to Richey, who stuffed the whole thing into his mouth. Jenny left most of hers on the bench, mustard fingerprints all over it. Lily kept it on the counter for a while, thinking she might come back hungry after reassuring herself the cat was still there. By twelve-thirty they were standing at the rose bush again, Richey barking orders to his sisters for supplies, Jenny and Courtney refusing to do anything he demanded.

Lily wiped the tablecloth clean, untied her apron and went into her bedroom. It was warm. With the window open, she heard everything the children said. She took a pen from the top drawer of her bureau. The ink was nearly gone, pooled near the tip. Enough left for a letter to Jack, she

thought. She also had five sheets of lemon-yellow stationery from the motel they stayed at during the trial, along with some matching envelopes. Dear Jack, she wrote in tight little letters, then crossed out. Her hands dropped to her lap. It would not look good if she wrote too soon. He needed the distance, time on the dozer, time to get his hands sticky with pine tar, to wear out a pair of boot soles on the clutch and brake pedals, time to hear all the rumors circulate around the job site, whispers between his co-workers, questions about his son who made the newspapers. She crumpled up the piece of stationary, pulled another sheet onto her lap, and wrote, as neatly as her hand could manage, Dear Jimmy.

She didn't write more, but thought through all the things she might tell him, especially that the children were fine, though Jenny was a little finicky about eating. Courtney gets louder, and Richey, she recently discovered, has his father's chin. She just noticed it today. He is stubborn, like his father and Grandad. He eats too fast, does everything too fast. Jack is on a job in Center County, making a new road for whoever wants out or in. It will last two months. She misses him already, although it has only been a day. She has been left to her own devices. The weather is changing, getting hotter, more humid. The county social worker says everything looks good for the kids. Jack makes enough money. There is stability in the

home. No one better suited for bringing up Courtney, Jennifer, and Richard. No one has heard from their mother, and no one really wants to. She is probably in New Mexico with her family. There she can stay. Her leaving the state makes everything easier, especially if it goes to a judge. They are in a stable home, with those most suited to raising them. Everything is going well, if only Jenny will eat more. Dear Jimmy, she accidentally wrote again, How are you? We are fine though it is hotter.

She put the letter aside. The ink pen rolled across the bed and clattered onto the floor before she could grab it. The children were outside her window. She caught brief glimpses through the green vines of Jenny's doll, wrapped in short, white arms, and Courtney's long brown hair, her braid unraveling across her back. Richey told Courtney to get his winter jacket. "I'm gonna shield myself from the thorns."

"Granny'll beat you if you mess up those roses," Jenny said, laughing.

"I'm goin under the roses, stupid."

"Bally-hooo!" Courtney spouted.

Lily leaned over the wrought-iron bedstead, resting the white undersides of her thick arms on the frame. She felt her damp skin suction to the top bar, arteries constricted by her own weight, hands already beginning to tingle. She kept one foot on the floor for balance, lifted her eyebrows

to break the grip on her forehead. One of the children stomped across the porch, threw open the screen door, ran to the hall closet. She heard the rattle of hangers, a door closed, another opened, boots on the porch, a fast walk outside through the dry grass. She knew it was Richey before he said, "Got it myself, you squirrels." He stood just outside the tangle of vines. She saw the blue coat raised in the air, slipped over his shoulders. "You go to that side," he demanded.

"I'm not doing any such thing."

"Me neither."

"I'll clobber both of ya'!"

Courtney answered, deliberate and slow, "Oh- no- you- won't- Richard."

"Leave us alone," Jenny said automatically.

"Do you want the cat or not?" he said finally. The girls hesitated, then moved slowly around the bush, whispering to each other, Courtney telling Jenny they would just stand there and that's all. He threatened to tell their Daddy what sissies they were if they didn't cooperate.

"I've got a dirt clod, so get ready."

"Kitty kitty kitty kitty kitty," Jenny called.

"Cover your eyes!"

Courtney shouted. "Let it fly!"

Lily heard Richey take a deep breath, drawing energy from the humid air that leaned against the house. He sucked

in like slurping thick soup, holding it in his mouth, then blew out hard. Something thudded, broke apart, sent fragments rattling through the vines and leaves, ricocheted off the screen. Before she saw it, she heard the cat spring suddenly against the window, bowing the screen inward, its claws curled through the enlarged holes, ears flat against its skull, yellow eyes wide. Lily flinched, heard her sticky arms tear like tape from the bed frame as Richey twisted his fingers into the neck fur. She saw, in that final second of confusion, the cat's eyes slant sharply under the pressure to let go of the screen.

And then, deep within her ears, further down than the children's voices could reach, she heard her pulse rising, like the sound of wind building in the treetops, growing, dying out, then gathering again. She attended to the sound as it came and went, and began to believe, with only an inkling of doubt, she could stay in that space, crouched and silent, until Jack came out of the pines, or Jimmy did his time, or until Darla stayed away just long enough to have to stay away forever.

And then Richey yelled: "Gotcha!"

"Bally-hooo!" Courtney sang.

"He's kickin'! He's kickin'!"

Lily opened her eyes, the heat in the room wrapped around her. She was surprised to find her hand pressed

against her face, fingers splayed across her nose and mouth, the odor of baloney still strong on her palm.

"Pet him," Jenny said. "Let me pet him!"

"Get away for a minute! I caught him!"

After a pause, long enough to draw one full breath and let it out, slowly, Lily got up from the bed and looked out the window through a break in the rose bush. They were moving away across the yard. She heard a low moan from the captured Tabby as Richey carried it to a shade tree near the road. The cat, all four feet spread into the air, twisting and squirming, was fast in Richey's grip. He carried it far away from his body, deliberately swinging it in the direction of his sisters, making them run with their faces covered.

Lily smoothed back her hair, parting it into damp rows with her fingers. She took up the letter she started to her son, then pulled the bed away from the wall and managed to scoot the pen out with her foot. She sat on the bed, pressed the sheet of paper against her broad lap and scribbled out Jimmy's name, erasing from her mind all the words of comfort she planned to write, knowing that he, of all people, could not believe her.

Instead, she began again, in the neatest handwriting she could manage, Dear Jack, though half-expecting the ink pen to run dry before she ever got to what she needed to say to him.

IF NOTHING HAPPENS LIKE IT SHOULD

When I was fourteen I thought I plugged one with a 20 gauge slug. She was only ten feet away. I was dreaming, building little houses, forts and corrals out of sticks. The rock I sat on was covered with moss, like a piece of green indoor/outdoor carpet. I tore little squares off and made green roofs. I was always messing around.

We saw each other at the same time, and she looked at me the same way I looked at her, only she looked for a good thirty seconds, then forgot what she was looking at. Deer will do that.

There was another with her. I heard it walking on the other side of a blackjack tangle. But you can't turn your head or blink an eye, swallow or breath too hard through your nose, otherwise it will know something is up and leave you shaking like you were having a seizure.

I thought maybe it was another hunter who just looked like a deer. That was how much of a haze I was looking through, that dreamy feeling you get when you go to bed too late and get up too early and your eyes ache from being open too long. She just appeared, and very close to me, even though I was playing around, moving my arms and head just like you aren't supposed to do.

Brother Ed sat in a tree fifty yards away. I saw his orange hat about halfway up. It was a stupid hat, with long earflaps and a strap to go around his chin, only his chin was too thick so the strap just hung down beside his cheek. His back was to me. Brother Ed hunted with us, with Daddy and me, since his son couldn't pull a trigger. It just about tore him up.

Even now, Ronnie, Ed's son, calls me up on the phone and asks how his dad is doing. I tell him fine, although I'd like to tell him Ed just can't get over him not being able to squeeze a trigger. But I always say goodbye, then hang up the phone. That's Ed's problem.

I could pull a trigger and Brother Ed couldn't face up to it because of Ronnie. I proved I could jerk a trigger the year before when a spike trotted into the middle of a winter wheat patch and I laid a bead on him. Instead of going for a safe lung shot, I tried for the heart and ended up hitting the ground under his belly. If I had another slug in the gun, he left me with plenty of time for a second try, since that buck just stood there shaking in a fit of nerves. That was the first season after Daddy bought my shotgun for \$36. The salesman sold it cheap because it was a floor model, scratched on the stock and butt. It was only a single shot, and I didn't think I'd get my hands into my vest for another shell without falling out of the tree. What got me was the thought of him running away about the time I managed to get

another shell in, so I didn't try. If I tried I probably would have pegged him.

I think Daddy finally scared him away when he climbed out of his tree a hundred yards or so to the east to see if I got one. The thing to do was for him to stay in the tree for at least thirty minutes. That way, if I made a good shot, which I didn't, the buck would lay down and bleed out. If you jump them when they are just about bled out, but have enough energy to run a good hundred yards or so, you end up with no trail to follow and the coyotes find them before you do.

The doe was closer than that buck, though. Any closer and she would have been on the other side. That close, I raised the gun to my cheek, even though the thought she might be a hunter, somebody out on a hike, a dog, coyote or nothing at all was still in my mind. You can't ever be sure, no matter what you believe you see. Sometimes cows are colored like deer. Sometimes squirrel hunters aren't smart enough to wear orange and they traipse around in brown vests and brown hats and brown boots. And because your brain is so scattered from excitement you never really know anything for sure. All I know was I didn't have to aim, she was so close. I leveled the barrel at her shoulder and pulled back the hammer. I know she heard the click because her ears flicked a little, like they would when nothing worse than a fly was about to land. All of the sudden,

every leaf on every limb on every tree shook. It was me getting kicked around. Those slugs shoot hard.

My ears buzzed for a good five minutes. A real high pitched tone and a real low pitched tone, with a cushion of air in between. That was what I heard. I didn't hear my heart beat, but felt it, even over layers of hunting clothes; the long johns, the flannel shirt, the coat and the blaze orange vest. I felt the beats on the outside. It was beating that hard. I sat where I was for a minute. For some reason I thought she would fall right where she was. But she was gone, just like she showed up, right out of the air, then right back into it.

Brother Ed started out of his tree. I saw his orange hat moving down a little at a time. He sent some limbs down too, and it made him so nervous it took a good ten minutes for him to climb the eight or nine feet to the ground. Ed was too big to be in trees. The year before he skinned the hell out of his hands when a limb broke under him and he did a fireman's slide down the trunk. It was a cold day too, and Ed didn't make a sound his hands hurt so bad, because he knew how terrible a sound he would make.

Brother Ed walked up to my rock and looked down at the little stick houses with green moss for roofs. Then he pushed his orange cap back on his head. "Did a buck come out on your side?" he asked. I told him no. I only saw the doe, but I heard another one behind me. He fiddled with his

cap, taking it off to smooth back his black hair. He wore hair oil and Aqua Velva even when he went hunting. He stood by the tree, waiting until he saw Daddy coming across a little divide. Daddy looked along the ground while he walked, like he picked up a blood trail. Before he got to us, Brother Ed leaned toward me and said: "If you went to church more often you'd have better luck," then he leaned back against the tree and waited for Daddy.

I thought Brother Ed was mad because I got a shot not fifty yards from him, goofing off, breaking twigs and moving around. I did everything you aren't suppose to do to be a successful deer hunter. Brother Ed believed deer hunting was a science, and something worked out by the grace of God. I didn't fall under either category. I thought I figured him out, but when Daddy got to us Brother Ed said: "He shot a doe," without looking back over his shoulder at me, or using my name.

Daddy looked at Ed, at me still sitting on the rock, then back at Ed. "Probably a button buck," he said. "Did you see buttons?"

I told him it was a doe. When I told him how close she was I thought he would understand. They just don't come that close and still give you a shot. The whole thing was a freak. Nothing was like it should be, I said. The fact it was a doe fit right in with the whole queer thing. She

practically offered herself to me. I could have touched her with the barrel. She was that close.

Brother Ed said it was not a button buck, that he saw two does pass to his right. He was hoping a buck followed them out of the brush. Bucks do that. They let the does walk into the open first, and if nothing happens, they come out too. I thought Brother Ed was just being spiteful because his boy couldn't pull a trigger to save his life.

I told Daddy she came up the hill with another behind, but I didn't turn around, knowing what would happen if I did. He didn't smile or tell me it was the thing to do, but turned around and said we needed to look for some blood, and maybe I missed her. I told him I hit her square somewhere, but I didn't see her run off in any particular direction because of the shotgun's kick, but he was already walking around with his eyes on the leaves looking for something to track. "Most likely a gut shot," he said. "Did she hunch over?" I said I didn't see her, but I thought I made a good lung shot. "If you find blood with bubbles then we'll call it a lung shot. But if we find dark blood . . ." He didn't finish, but pulled out his red bandanna to blow his nose. At least he was looking.

If there was snow on the ground we probably would have picked up her trail right away, but the ground was covered with bone-dry oak leaves. You hear of hunters tracking deer in the snow, but where I come from it never snows as early

as rifle season, so you have to be a better tracker than usual. Dad told Brother Ed to look for shine and not color, but Brother Ed was meandering around like he dropped something out of his pocket he didn't care if he found or left to rot in the woods. That was how hard he tried to find a blood trail.

After a good twenty minutes Brother Ed walked up behind me and Daddy, saying it would be better if we didn't find her, since the ranger always patrolled the area so much during rifle season.

Daddy acted like he didn't hear him, but I could tell by the way he was acting he thought Ed was right. Then he said: "I think he missed anyway." I started to say Brother Ed wasn't covering the ground very good, but I didn't. I said we should make a bigger circle since she might not drop any blood for a good fifty yards. They both looked at me; Daddy like he felt sorry for me but was mad at me for taking aim at a doe, Brother Ed like I was a nuisance and didn't understand anything about the ways of nature or how a shot deer acted. After a minute, Daddy said she might walk over the ridge and lay down to die. He talked Ed into going to the right for a hundred yards, then doubling back while he went to the left and circled. I was to walk straight through the middle until I got to the bottom of the ravine, where we all should meet up. Brother Ed pulled his hat down over his eyes and left without saying a word. I knew he

wasn't going to look because I saw him looking up in the trees instead of on the ground. If I plugged a squirrel he might have found something.

I put my gloves on and loaded another shell into the chamber. Before we left home that morning I picked out three shells to call lucky. The luckiest I already used, since they say the first shot counts the most. The second didn't have to be so lucky, and the third didn't matter much at all. But I had them marked one, two, and three, just to keep things orderly like it is supposed to be. I cradled the gun in a way I could get a quick shot if I needed to take one. I opened the chamber again just to make sure I reloaded. My mind was not really clear. I thought my eyes were probably red from being awake so long.

The wind was blowing hard into my face. It was cold, but under all my clothes I was sweating from nerves and walking. I knew the valley ended in a dry stream bed about a hundred and fifty yards down the hill. I thought maybe she ran the length of the valley instead of trying to climb out on the other side. If that was the case, we were all going in the wrong direction. I decided to walk to the bottom, cross the dry bed, then go parallel on the other side. I might pick up her trail no matter which direction she took.

I did some stalking, covering only a hundred yards or so in a long hour. Take two steps and stop. Wait. Wait

some more. Take two steps and stop. All the while, I kept my eyes on the ground. The thing about tracking is you spend all your time looking down, and you might as well have blinders on when it comes to direction. I looked around after I stalked a while and couldn't figure out exactly where I was. Even if you turn around and look for a tree you just passed, you never can figure out which one it was, since you are looking at it from the other side, and trees have entirely different personalities from one side to the other. You wouldn't think somebody could get lost in a hundred yards. You think of a football field being a hundred yards and nobody ever gets lost on a football field. But a hundred yards of blackjack and briar is a different story.

So there I was, not wanting to yell out because they would know I was turned around. But I think I was more afraid nobody would answer and I might know I was lost for sure. I thought about the direction of the sun, but since I didn't know where the sun was before I was lost it didn't do any good to know where it was after. I stood in one spot for twenty minutes, afraid to move one way or the other, afraid Brother Ed was watching me and laughing, the way some deacons do, or if I moved one step in either direction, that one step might take me out of somebody's line of sight. I figured I walked more than a hundred yards because I was nervous. I probably walked two hundred since I crossed the

dry stream bed a half hour back. I did a one-eighty and found the stream bed again, only there it was wet and puddled in places. I was way off line and might wander all day thinking I was heading for the road when I was really running at an angle and might not find it at all.

So I stood against a tree, wondering how long it would be before they started worrying. It was still only about one o'clock, but before long the sky would turn orange and I would have to think about it getting dark. I was tired from no sleep and no lunch.

Then I saw her, like she came out of the air again. Her head almost dragged the ground. Her legs shook under her, her whole body quivered and jerked around. It was like she needed to sneeze or throw up or have a fawn. I thought I saw a dark patch of blood just behind her shoulder, but my mind was scattered again and she might have been half covered in shadow, which made her look splotched. She was not breathing so much as snorting, making the leaves and dirt move with her nose close to the ground. There were even some old leaves stuck to her. I thought maybe she was going to fall down, but before it was clear I needed to finish her off, she raised her head straight up and turned to look at me.

It was not like before where she forgot about me. She didn't move her head at all, and her body didn't shake anymore and I didn't hear her breathing. In fact, I know

she wasn't breathing anymore, but was perfectly still, like hunters are suppose to be when they wait for deer. That was the way she was being still, like I'd forget and go about my business. Right then I knew the whole thing was a freak, because I did exactly what you aren't suppose to do: I took my eyes off her and looked down at my feet, at my boot laces, at the round little eye holes where the laces passed through, and at the double knot I tied to keep the laces from flopping around. I had the strangest feeling in my legs and I couldn't make my feet fit into those boots. I felt like I was shrinking.

When I finally looked up again it was almost dark. I was sitting on the ground, with my legs crossed under me and dead to the world of touch. The skin on my face was numb from the wind. I must have banged against my knees when I fell because my nose bled and the blood dried out around my mouth. The breech was open on my shotgun, but instead of my second or third lucky shell I found a wad of grass and leaves in the chamber.

I yelled as loud as I could, bawled out like Ed would sound if he let loose after sliding bare-handed down a tree trunk on a freezing cold day. I let out like Ronnie might have let out if he pulled a trigger against any living thing on the planet. Every leaf on every limb on every tree shook I yelled so loud. I don't think I threw out the last good

one until I was sitting on the hood of Brother Ed's blue stationwagon with Daddy trying to feed me an aspirin.

Brother Ed told me in the car, on the way home, I must have missed the doe. But sometimes deer come back to see who shot at them, he said. They are such curious creatures. He said it happened to him one morning after a revival meeting. He said I probably should go to church on Sunday and then try again the next Saturday with a different attitude. I told him I messed around too much and couldn't be still or quiet. I turned my head every time I heard a leaf rattle. I needed to learn how to shift my eyes from side to side without moving my whole head. On top of that, I needed practice with the shotgun, or even save up for a rifle like his.

I said a person can't be successful if nothing happens like it should. He said he was happy I thought so.

CATBIRDS

Great Grandpa Phillips, eyes closed, resting on his back, wearing round, gold-rimmed glasses, white cheeks ending in folds at the corners of his mouth like a bulldog's, lay in a casket in Grandma's living room. Grandma wore milky rubber gloves while she dressed him in his brown corduroy jacket and thin, black tie. She leaned over the casket like a mother over a bassinet. She was his only daughter, broad-nosed and stern.

My cousin Royce sat on the high bed in Grandma's bedroom. He was pale and excited. "Grandpa Phillips is dead," he drawled, pronouncing dead as if saying it backwards. I sat in the big rocker in the corner and watched Royce flick his long, blonde hair out of his eyes. I had blonde hair then too, dishwater blonde they called it, but it was cut short and even across my forehead. We both had blue, German eyes but my face was round from my mother's side of the family; his was pointed at the chin, like my father's. And though we were both only ten years old, his body was already thickening while mine was determined to stay thin and angular.

Royce lived in a house with a tin roof and a wooden porch, built long before indoor plumbing made it to the pine thickets of East Texas. When Uncle Wayne finally decided to

add a toilet, and later a bathtub, the kind that stood on white lion's feet, the flooring in Royce's bedroom was judged sturdiest. A yellow shower curtain hung from one wall to the next for privacy, but when the moon was full and shining through the tall window I stared hard at the dark, seated silhouette of my Aunt Paddy. She left a sharp, oniony odor in the room that kept me awake.

Royce owned a pellet gun and identified every bird he picked off the high-line wires: mockingbirds, finches, English sparrows, red-winged blackbirds, starlings. He sent a catbird tumbling down to the ground just to show me the tiny whiskers growing from the sides of its beak. Afterwards, he unceremoniously tossed the warm, gray body into the sunflowers and dusty black-eyed susans that grew thick beside the dirt road. Within hours, the carcass flowed red with ants. But when Grandpa Phillips lay in the living room of Grandma's house, Royce grabbed the bars of the bedstead and rocked the bed so violently Aunt Paddy came in and slapped him on the thigh.

It was the last time my family dressed a body, scented it with after-shave, kept it with us while we talked and ate and listened to the radio broadcast out of Tyler. My mother made it the last time, took it away from us like a toy we had outgrown. But I do remember how it was, sitting in the rocker, listening to the shoes scuff across the wooden

floor, men coming in from outside, knocking mud from their boots. My father came into the bedroom and led us to the kitchen. He gripped my arm with thick fingers and hurried Royce along in front of us. He seemed much stronger then, before the desk jobs, toughened by the winter he spent in Korea more than a decade earlier. When I brushed against him on that day it seemed he had never quite shaken the scent of wet, woolen army blankets and Pall Mall cigarettes.

My mother sat on the edge of the tan couch. Her hair was stiff and full from a recent perm, and she seemed wary of leaning back against anything for fear her hair might break. She wore a short, dark dress that come up too high on her legs, revealing a band of her white slip. Her skin was flushed and thickened around her eyes from crying silent, difficult tears. I looked ahead into the kitchen. Uncle Wayne was adding a leaf to the table. Aunt Paddy stood close to him with a stack of blue plates in her hands. I glanced at the dark casket. The lid was closed, and though I could not see his face, I knew Grandpa Phillips was lying there, like a white bulldog in a submarine.

It was early morning. We sat around the kitchen table. My father and Uncle Wayne drank black, chicory coffee and smoked Luckies. Aunt Paddy talked to my mother about allergies and how the pine pollen was carried north by the winds, all the way from East Texas to Kansas City and that we were somehow linked by this pollen, though she couldn't

say how exactly. Grandma took off her rubber gloves and cooked big powdery biscuits in a Dutch oven. Royce tried to kick me under the table but found his legs weren't long enough after the leaf was added.

From where I sat, I viewed the end of the casket. The handles were roughly cut. Places to get a good grip, and nothing more. I was not thinking about him rising up, looking at me through spectacles, moaning and pointing, floating around the ceiling, hovering over the breakfast table while we sopped puddles of syrup from our plates. I wondered instead, only because he was in the very next room, if Grandpa Phillips was wearing his shoes.

Then Uncle Jesse burst through the front door with his girlfriend riding on his back. At least I think of them coming in at that moment, me staring at the end of the casket. I cannot ever think of Uncle Jesse without seeing that brown box in the corner of my eye. Sometimes, I cannot distinguish, through the haze of twenty years, if it belongs to him or Grandpa Phillips. Their deaths are mixed together in my memory.

Jesse was the youngest of the three brothers, his face always red from the sun and wind, his body hardened by the work he did for the county highway department, spreading gravel and driving a road-grader. He held a guitar by the neck, out from his body, away from the kicking feet of the girl he carried. Uncle Jesse could play anything with

strings. Grandma once said he could play "Little Brown Jug" on a pair of shoelaces. "Under the Double Eagle" was his specialty, and no matter how close I sat to him when he played, some strings seemed to sound without ever being touched.

Her name was Eudora and she had short, red hair held close to her head by a green bandanna. Her father was a missionary in South America and hadn't been seen since 1959. She told me once, years later, he had been eaten, but most certainly prayed over beforehand. She walked into the kitchen and kissed my Grandma on the temple. In a moment she was making her way around the table, kissing everyone on the cheek. My father leaned his head down to get his on the back of his neck. My mother held out her hand instead. She never liked Eudora and it wasn't until after Grandma died and Uncle Jesse was listed as missing in action in 1968 that she finally told her so.

I waited for Eudora and finally felt something warm on the side of my face and a pleasant ache in my lower back.

We ate thick syrup over our biscuits and talked about the cold air outside, about how much Great Grandpa Phillips hated winter. Uncle Wayne was trying to get out of the hog business. Things had been good for a while, but Vietnam was not generating the demand for pork Korea had. "I don't know what they feed them," he said.

"Substitutes," my father said.

Grandma sat down to her own breakfast. Her upper lip wrinkled harshly as she sipped at the hot coffee. "Hogs or no hogs, that is the question." Aunt Paddy laughed out loud, sloshing coffee onto the table.

"I can't believe you still have him here," Mother said out of the side of her mouth, as if carrying on a conversation with an invisible partner. She took her empty plate from the table and dropped it into a tub of water by the sink.

"Where else would he be?" Eudora asked, looking at Uncle Jesse, though saying it loud enough for everyone to hear.

It was quiet but for Grandma's smacking, then Uncle Wayne said he knew someone who owned a backhoe and would dig a clean hole for thirty dollars.

"That's steep," Uncle Jesse said. Mother dropped a plate into the soapy water to let everyone know she didn't care what got broken.

I was told she went back home to Houston several times to get away from pine sap and gritty floors and tobacco. My father met her there when he was seventeen and she was sixteen. His father died of cancer in 1945, sitting on the couch, two weeks after the war in Europe ended. That was why Dad was in Houston, working for the railroad, sweeping boxcars, sending half his check home. Shortly after they were married, he lost his job to a returning soldier who was

missing part of his chin. But with the war over, with the housing boom that followed, a local saw mill agreed to hire him and they moved in with Grandma. Years later, long after we moved away for good, after my father's heart finally gave into cigarettes and strong black coffee, Mother told me she begged him to stay in Houston and attend night school. "It wasn't that I didn't like your grandmother," she said. "I just wanted to move the family forward, but she held them," showing me both fists, "held them all like posts driven into hard ground."

But it wasn't just Grandma. There were woodcutters, bean farmers, cotton farmers, loggers and preachers. There were the bounty hunters, those who killed off the red wolves for a pair of ears worth thirty five dollars at the co-op. There were moonshiners and stock thieves. Some were musicians, banjo and mandolin players who learned music from the chipped, water-damaged keys of a Baptist Church piano. It was their presence, though diffused and hidden, she fought against. They hung in the corners like spiderwebs, and she swept them out with a broom, only to find them rebuilding the next morning with my father expecting breakfast or Uncle Wayne bringing a raccoon home to smoke for dinner.

Mother disappeared after washing the dishes and went to Aunt Paddy's, leaving me to play Gin Rummy with my father, Uncle Wayne, Uncle Jesse, and Eudora. Royce stayed in the

living room to keep Grandpa Phillips company. Uncle Wayne slipped cards in and out of his sock, but no one said anything.

Late in the afternoon, two men appeared at Grandma's house. I recognized Brother Bean by his deep voice. He was the pastor of Saints Rest Baptist Church, a skinny man with a powerful handshake. Eudora sat beside me on the couch and whispered into my ear that preachers could sense death miles from the body. I felt an ache in my lower back again and leaned closer to her, letting my elbow rest against her thigh.

"This is Mr. Cassill," Mother said. "He has agreed to handle the ceremony."

"A scam," Eudora whispered, soft enough that only I heard her. Someone lit the stove in the kitchen to heat the house. I felt as if I were wearing a hot iron mask.

Mr. Cassill was a young man then, short and dark-skinned with a high forehead and eyes set low in his face. He wore a dark tweed suit and a thin red tie. I saw him many times after that day, to bury my grandmother, my father, Uncle Jesse. I even invited him to dinner after my father died. His delicate, wrinkled hands circled the plate in slow, deliberate movements, and I wasn't able to eat, thinking of those same hands carefully buttoning my father's wool trousers and gray herring-bone jacket.

"Hello, Eugene," Uncle Wayne said. He sat with his arm around Aunt Paddy. "How's the wife?"

Mr. Cassill nodded and said: "Fine." He carried a thin sheen of perspiration over his upper lip.

Uncle Wayne nodded back at him as if to say he was pleased by the news. My father slid in the front door and went quietly into the kitchen, clutching the car keys in his hand, bent over with indigestion. Mother stood in the middle of the room with her arms crossed. Her permed and sprayed hair softened a little since morning, though she still moved her head stiffly, as if wearing a heavy crown she feared might tumble off with any sudden movement or lapse in concentration.

Mr. Cassill examined the casket, ran his fingers along the seams, tested the handles, flattened his palms against the sides, moving first with, then against the grain. I wanted to tell him I had faith in the handles. "Of course, we can add some trim to soften the edges before placing it in the viewing room," he said, in a soft, feminine voice.

Eudora fidgeted beside me on the couch. She smelled of soap that evening.

Mother nodded to Mr. Cassill. "That would be fine," she said. "And I have secured Mrs. Beasley as an organist."

"Jesse should play the guitar," Grandma said. She grew sadder as the day wore on, with nothing left on Grandpa Phillips to dress up.

"Mrs. Beasley is a fine organist," Mr. Cassill insisted.

"And none of us doubt that," Uncle Wayne said, nodding.

"A fine organist," Mother added.

"I've heard her," Uncle Jesse said consolingly to Grandma, shooting a glance in Eudora's direction, but it was too late.

"Extremely droll," Eudora said. "Utterly droll." She got up slowly as if to leave, but turned in the doorway. "We will all be something quite different," she said dramatically, "and there will be no living or dying for any of us from now on. We'll all fidget in our seats and hope nothing ever hurts us. From now on we will simply pass away."

When Eudora closed the door behind her, Mother turned to Mr. Cassill and offered him some coffee. "Yes," he said. "It's been cold all day."

They took him early the next morning. I heard them grunting, straining to get the box through the narrow front door. "Turn it sideways," one of the said. I think it was Uncle Jesse.

The thing I could identify, put my finger on, pinpoint with absolute accuracy, I saw only inside the blue-shingled house, in Grandma's bedroom, in the kitchen, in the room with the tan couch and the maple-colored casket, not when I

wore my new suit from the J.C. Penny boys collection and sat in Monroe's Funeral Home. Royce sat beside me in a navy-blue suit my mother bought for him, though his pant legs were much too short. Aunt Paddy and Uncle Wayne sat in the pew with my mother, grandmother, and father, all of them dressed in dark colors except for the pink nylon scarf Aunt Paddy tied around her neck. Uncle Jesse sat in the section designated for friends of the family, hoping Eudora would show.

Organ music droned from behind a stiff curtain. I sat low in the pew and watched Mrs. Beasley's thick foot move across the black pedals, pressing out background chords for "Amazing Grace" and "I Shall Not Be Moved." They kept the casket closed until the service began and I thought about what Eudora said, about funeral homes being a rip-off and considered the possibility Great Grandpa Phillips might not be in the box. But with the lid open, I saw the tip of his nose, powdered white to improve its appearance.

When we passed by, I thought how beautiful he looked, how tight and youthful his skin, down to the skin of his finger joints, normally rough from working without gloves, now beige and taut. He might have been a bookkeeper, or a store clerk, rather than a farmer.

Mother leaned over and removed his spectacles, tucking them into her tiny purse. Grandma passed by without looking down, staring instead at the pictures on the wall of Christ

and the Resurrection, and Christ as a shepherd, surrounded by thick, flawless sheep.

Saints Rest Baptist Church was the family burial ground and only a quarter of a mile up the road from where my grandmother lived. Spanish moss hung from the limbs of the great pines. The cemetery was full of old Prussian immigrants from Oderburg and Dahlhausen, Tubbe's and Kolb's, with first names like Johann, Alexander, Martin. There was a corner in the cemetery for us, marked by a single pine tree, extending past the tree to the chain-link fence.

Mr. Cassill delivered the body in a long black hearse. They slid the casket along a series of aluminum rollers. I think of two things now: T.V. dinners being loaded on a commercial airplane and Eudora waiting for Uncle Jesse's body to come rolling from a C-140.

The box came to rest above a green tarp that covered the hole. The mound of dirt beside the grave was draped with a green rug. I overheard Mr. Cassill telling Uncle Jesse he invented the roller system and it would revolutionize the funeral business like Ford's assembly line changed heavy industry. Mother wore a black veil and bought Grandma a big black hat to cover her grey hair. The hat had a long drawstring, tied too tightly, that bunched her face into deep wrinkles and made her look like an old man. Uncle Wayne, Uncle Jesse, and my father wore white corsages provided by the funeral home. Pastor Bean volunteered to be

the fourth pall bearer, just to even things out, and he wore a corsage as well. Eudora sat cross-legged on the ground outside the cemetery gate and strummed on Uncle Jesse's guitar. I heard her faint humming between chords. Pastor Bean quoted from the Bible while Mother scattered daisies over the casket, giving the last few to Royce and me to press in books.

When it was over, we walked back to my grandmother's house, with the exception of Uncle Wayne and my father, who stayed behind to help "clean up." Grandma walked arm in arm with Aunt Paddy telling her that she, Grandma, would be the next to go, but at least when the time came she wouldn't have to walk back home.

Royce ran ahead and tried to get my attention by throwing a rocks at my feet. They bounced off my shins and left white marks on my shiny black shoes. But all I thought about was Grandpa Phillips, surrounded by bright, yellow flowers, like the catbirds in the bar ditch.

I am reluctant to bury him, or the time in which he existed, to make him more than what he really was.

VITA

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