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INTRODUCTION

As I see it, this critical introduction, as a required component of my dissertation, is to allow me the space to elucidate the techniques I bring to bear on my creative work, specifically, and, more generally, to address my overall conception of fiction.

There are three different genres of writing contained within this dissertation: a series of short stories, poetry, and a short novel. I have a two-fold reason for including this diversity of forms in the collection: one, they are reflective of the creative work I have done here at Oklahoma State, especially the poetry, which is personally a new foray into the form; two, I have a fictional reason for including the poetry, since the main character of the short stories writes poetry as well as fiction. I also contend that this character, David Meyns, is much like Hemingway's Nick Adams, but while there are close similarities to my own life, I resist the term *autobiographical*. While many "facts" are parallel to my own life I have heightened or toned down many of the instances when I see the needs of the fiction demand it. I am a fiction writer -- it is what I do. The old saw concerning fiction comes to mind: *I will lie to tell the truth.*

And therein lies a problem; while I may maintain that

this introduction is a non-fictional essay about my fiction, I *may* really mean it as an extension of that fiction. How can the reader truly trust what I have to say here? There are certainly precedents in fiction for using forewords, or appendices, or notes from the author, that are really integral parts of the fiction itself. *Lolita* has a foreword, penned by one John Ray, Sr., Ph.D. We can take this as a fictional character created by Nabokov, but are we entirely sure? Perhaps the text is really written by Humbert Humbert himself to establish a reason for reading his narrative. And what of the note attached to the end of the novel from Vladimir Nabokov entitled "On a Book Entitled Lolita"? Do we believe him when he writes, "After doing my impersonation of suave John Ray," (311) or when he states anything else strikes him "as an impersonation of Vladimir Nabokov talking about his own book" (311)? These are questions scholars can surely discuss without coming to any definitive conclusion.

I can tell you that I write this "essay" in a straightforward manner. Still, I might, like Nabokov, feel this is no more than an impersonation of Dennis F. Bormann, and that the "real" author is in the background, tongue-in-cheek. This brings into question the very reliability of my stance toward all this. Quite frankly, while I have enjoyed self-reflective works by Barth, O'Brien, and Barthleme, I have now gotten rather tired of the "joke", so I shall joke no further.

Writing fiction is something I do. I have tried to set out and learn my craft to the best of my ability, an on-going process. It is like trying to understand its construction in much the same way an architectural engineer might go about building a home, a bridge, or an office building. While he might be able to visualize the structure's facade just by looking at the sight of steel beams rising from the ground in so many right angles, he still has to bring the craftsman's pragmatic eye brought to bear on whether that structure will hold the weight of his total vision.

To continue the analogy, each building project will be similar to others, but also different. Surely he will not use the same type of foundation on a Florida site, given its sandy loam soil, as he would on a hard bedrock site in Colorado. A sky scraper in Los Angeles needs to be built with an earthquake in mind, whereas the same basic structure in an east coast city might not need these precautions. New space-age building materials might play a factor, or perhaps nostalgia, or just pure esthetics, will play a role in the choice of wide oak planking over a floor of linoleum. The point is, he must consider his choices and their effects, and the building itself will be a product of those choices. Fiction works much the same way.

I often explain to creative writing students that there is no one way to write a story. Very often I will use an analogy from physics: energy is not destroyed, only

changed. Heat loss equals heat gain. Every choice you make gains you something, but also loses something. You can tell the same story, depict the same basic events, but by using an extremely effaced third-person narrator that works much like a camera's eye, rather than using a first-person narrator very close to the action, the story will be different. The trick is to anticipate the effects and decide which will be more appropriate to the author's intended ends.

To better facilitate this discussion of fiction I will use Wayne C. Booth's principles and terminology from *The Rhetoric of Fiction.* I find his theories to be fundamentally sound, and that they go further in characterizing fiction than just identifying point of view. His theories also characterize the dynamics of how fiction is constructed: an author, or at least an idealized version of himself, creates a narrative persona to create the fiction. This narrative persona is the vehicle delivering the fiction to the reader, shaping the reader's response.

The above is a simplistic description of what Booth has to offer, but to begin to describe fiction, a complex entity holding to no single form or set of dogmatic principles, it is best to start simplistically. I have asked students when they have been emotionally moved by a story to explain how this happened. After listening to autobiographical analogies or explanations of how they found the very act of esthetic construction to affect them, I remind

them writing is just black squiggles on a page of paper -- an abstraction, nothing more. This will often elicit open-mouthed consternation, or a bold protest to the effect "wait a minute, I was moved, you can't take that away from me. Something was created!" And, of course, I absolutely agree.

And I explain: think of a magician's illusion. Do we really believe a woman is levitated three feet above the stage, even when the magician passes a metal hoop around her body? Probably not, but we do applaud the skill involved to create the illusion. Now, to earn the applause the practitioner of magic must learn his craft, perhaps adding his own deft turns of hand to the trick to set himself apart, but it is practice and study that allows him to do so. He must know how the illusion works for it to be effective. To complete the analogy, Booth gives us the tools to understand the craft; applying his principles to fiction we can better understand how and why good fiction works.

Fiction is made up of words, of language. William H. Gass calls this a "country-headed thing to say: that literature is language, that stories and the places and the people in them are merely made of words as chairs are made of smoothed sticks and sometimes of cloth or metal tubes" (27). But he adds, "we cannot be too simple at the start, since the obvious is often the unobserved" (27).

Now, some might say it is the fiction writer's task to

attend to the real world his fiction corresponds to. I was once in the audience of a doctoral defense that asked the candidate to respond to his use of Henry James in his introduction. The question put the candidate back on his heels, because he did not want to go against Henry James, icon of American fiction, but his fiction was very post-modern and seemed to be in direct opposition to James' observations toward his own work. Certainly James strived for a greater sense of realism and in his prefaces offered what may be construed as a dogmatic template that fiction should be mimetic. But Booth points out that James was speaking about his own methods and the "persistent enemy for James was intellectual and artistic sloth, not any particular way of telling or showing a story" (23). Booth further quotes a letter from James that while the novelist valued his methodology, above others, "the house of fiction has 'not one window, but a million,' that there are, in fact, 'five million' ways to tell a story, each of them justified if it provides a 'center' for the work" (24).

Gass states the "esthetic aim of fiction is the creation of a verbal world, or a significant part of such a world, alive through every order of its Being" (7). If the writer is any good he will "keep us kindly imprisoned in his language -- there is nothing beyond" (8). The writer must suspend our disbelief, but while he may attend to an objective realism, the product is still a mental construction. A story "must be told and its telling is

a record of the choices, inadvertent or deliberate, the author has made from all the possibilities of language" (7). Now these choices and the resulting construction do not have to be an "adequate philosophy, but a philosophically adequate world," and this creation only needs to be "imaginatively possible...not at all like any real one" (9).

How else are we involved with novels such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Hundred Years of Solitude*, where we have magic carpets and a young woman, once corporeal, becoming deliquescent, a vapor spirit? Or Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, where we are made to believe in the actual haunting of a house by a spirit killed as an infant by her mother, who felt murder was the only recourse to keep her children from the savagery of slavery? And what of William Kennedy's *Ironweed*, where the dead rise up to meet Francis Phelan in an act of regeneration and redemption? These worlds are created worlds, made of language, but by the power of metaphor they attend and inform the world the reader inhabits. As Gass writes, "all methods work, and none do. The nature of the novel will not be understood at all until this is: *from any given body of fictional text, nothing necessarily follows, and anything plausibly may*" (36). The ferris wheel in Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* operates, not just as object, but as a character, as does mescal, or the impending ravine. It operates as the symbol of *fortuna*, and yes, informs us of the very structure of the

novel, that begins at the finish of events and works much like Joyce's start and end of *Finnegan's Wake* -- the mobius strip, the world without end. As Gass concludes, "Fiction is life...it is incurably figurative and the world the novelist makes is always a metaphorical model of our own" (60).

Booth also sees the author revealed by his choices, that his presence, whether hiding behind a single narrator, or a multitude of points of view, or an effaced objective surface, his voice is never silenced (60). And while an author can "choose his disguises, he can never choose to disappear" (20).

It is perhaps important here to define a distinction Booth makes in his stratagem -- the implied author. In some ways this is just a matter of convenience, to be able to divorce the real-life human being, with all attendant foibles, to the idealized godhead who, for a greater end, manipulates and shapes the fiction. Booth writes:

> Our sense of the implied author includes not only the extractable meanings but also the moral and emotional content of each bit of action and suffering of all of the characters. It includes, in short, the intuitive apprehension of a completed artistic whole; the chief value to which *this* implied author is committed, regardless of what party his creator belongs to in real life, is that

which is expressed by the total form. (73-74)

We might see the need for this invention of implied author by looking at Hemingway or any number of other writers. Certainly one might condemn the actions of Hemingway the man as boorish behavior, even anti-Semitic, but still appreciate his fiction. What of Mark Twain, who smoked smelly cigars, had a propensity to tell off-color jokes in mixed company, and in his latter years was misanthropic? Is Dostoevsky to be discounted as a writer because he gambled to excess and was also anti-Semitic?

Booth furthers the distinction, stating an author has "various official versions of himself," that his "different works will imply different versions...so the writer sets himself out with a different air depending on the needs of particular works" (71).

I remember getting into a discussion as a student in Vermont College's M.F.A. program with someone who stated they had not found their "own style" yet. I argued "style" must fit the story you're telling and the overall intent you envision. But, it was argued, Hemingway had a style, distinctive from Faulkner's. I countered that perhaps these "styles" fit the stories they were telling. I also made distinctions between the multiple view points of *As I Lay Dying* and *Absalom, Absalom*. No, I just didn't understand. Perhaps I still don't, but because of Booth I am now better equipped to be more exacting in my descriptions of narratives and the resulting relationships between this

implied author and readers. To try to write in only "one style" (and I'm still not sure what this means) places far too many limitations on what can be envisioned.

Before getting into the technical aspects of the choices an implied author makes, it is important to note the relationship between this implied author and the reader.

Booth dismisses the notion that true art ignores the audience. Whether the work is dramatized or commented on directly, "one eye is always on the reader, even as he works to bring 'the novel itself' to perfection" (109). Booth divides values that interest us and "are available for technical manipulation in fiction" (125) into three parts: Intellectual (intellectual curiosity about the facts and how they are to be interpreted); Qualitative (the desire to see a form or pattern completed); Practical (the desire for the success or failure of characters we come to love or hate - or even hope for a change in the quality of a character). To manipulate these qualities the implied author must have an idea of how a reader is to react.

Take Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Hemingway once said the back of American fiction rests on one book, *Huckleberry Finn,* because it is about moral choice. Remember, the novel is narrated by Huck, who, because of his age and education, is to a degree unreliable. The crux of the novel is when Huck must choose between turning in the runaway slave Jim or continuing to protect him from

slave-catchers. Huck argues with himself: do I do the *right* thing and turn Jim in (it is the law and, he thinks, his moral obligation) or do the *wrong* thing and continue to hide my friend? Of course, Huck chooses the latter, and we as readers applaud his action. It is a case of Twain manipulating our sensibilities, leading us to the moral irony within his young narrator's thoughts.

For a writer to say I write only for myself, or that he pays little notion to the response of his audience is to misunderstand the dynamics of fiction. As Booth notes, "a great artist can create an implied author who is either detached or involved, depending on the needs of the work at hand" (83), but this is not his only creation. Continuing, Booth adds, "The author creates, in short, an image of himself and another of his reader; he makes his reader, as he makes his second self, and the most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement" (138).

Of course, there is a further creation in the dynamics of Booth's formula, the narrative persona. This is the rhetorical vehicle created by the implied author to deliver the fiction to the reader. Traditionally, classifications of "points of view" are variable only of the "person" and the degree of omniscience, which Booth refers to as an "embarrassing inadequacy" (149). He further characterizes this shortcoming: "To say that a story is told in the first or third-person will tell us nothing of importance

unless we become more precise and describe how the particular qualities of the narrators relate to specific effects" (150). Booth goes on to describe functional distinctions that apply to both third and first-person narrators. I will withhold a regurgitation of these distinctions, but will refer back to them as I characterize my own work. However, let me briefly state that much of what he has to offer concerns the variable types of distances in degree and kind separating the various elements that create fiction. As Booth writes:

> In any reading experience there is an implied dialogue among author, narrator, the other characters, and the reader. Each of the four can range, in relation to each of the others, from identification to complete opposition, on any axis of value, moral, intellectual, aesthetic, and even physical. (155)

For example, in J.P. Donleavy's *The Ginger Man*, the main character is called by *Time* magazine "one of the most outrageous scoundrels in contemporary fiction," but somehow Donleavy "turns the moral universe on its head by making the reader lover Danger field" (1). The question arises, how does this happen? Donleavy chooses an effaced third-person narration that presents the action without overt commentary, but if this was all Donleavy presented I believe the reader would not be drawn into any sort of sympathy for this young scoundrel who drinks to excess, sponges off friends, and beats his women. But Donleavy

also allows this effaced third person narrator the privilege of reflecting the direct sensibilities of this unscrupulous character, thus allowing the reader to walk along in his shoes.

In some ways this is the effect the first-person narrator Humbert Humbert has upon the reader of *Lolita*. I "saw through" Nabokov's technique, knowing he was going to try to manipulate me into some type of sympathy for Humbert. So I guardedly read the justifications Humbert presented, but even I was taken in. After Doris left Humbert, and was hugely pregnant when he finally caught up with her, I must admit the moment he shrunk from her attempted touch I was moved by his pain, then immediately realized: *This is a pedophile*! Nabokov got me.

These two examples are only a drop in the bucket and by no means offer a true clarification of the various types of distances created by authors in the dynamics of the implied dialogue Booth has suggested. In fact Booth, when writing about the full uses of third-person reflectors suggests, "We badly need thoroughgoing studies of the various forms that have resulted from this kind of shifting distance" (157). But that is not my task at hand here. As best I can, I would now like to switch my attention to the fiction compiled in this dissertation.

In general, the five short stories, and I strongly suggest, the poems, are concerned with David Meyns, a character I have previously noted as working in a similar

fashion to Hemingway's Nick Adams. I also reiterate that while there are parallels in circumstance to my own life, I resist the term *autobiographical*. I further suggest that my approach to the same character may vary in distance according to the effects I am trying to achieve. And as I quoted Booth earlier, my implied author will vary as "different works will imply different versions...so the writer sets himself out with a different air depending on the needs of particular works" (71).

"Fish Hawk" is a story with a narrative persona that is basically a third-person reflector. It makes little or no overt commentary on the two main characters, so can be therefore characterized as effaced. But as Booth suggests, the implied author can never disappear, because the very choices of what is shown reveal him. It is a story of adultery, and I have chosen to create a juxtaposition of internal reflections between the characters of Jenny and David Meyns. It was my plan to soften the irony I am trying to project toward David, but at the same time present a *warts and all* picture of the perfidious writer.

Hopefully, the overall portrait of David Meyns will continue to soften with the next story, "The Hand Plow and the Whetting Wheel". Here we have a naive first-person narrator. There is a degree of unreliability just because the boy, Davey, is only seven years old. This is coupled with the immediacy of present tense, thereby making any degree of reflective commentary virtually impossible. To

say that this narration is the inner working of a seven-year old mind is somewhat dubious. It is a rhetorical illusion of a young boy, much in the same way the Benjy section of *The Sound and the Fury* only appears to represent the mind of a retarded man-child. It is a type of initiation story in that it concerns a boy trying to fathom his first brush with mortality. While the boy himself cannot articulate what is happening to him, it is my intent to inform the reader by the very juxtaposition of the two sections.

"The Honeysuckle Vine" was an attempt by me to play with the short-short form. I picked the circumstances in the story of a man committing suicide by overdose to facilitate this form. It was a brief anecdote related to me by my mother about her father. It struck me as odd at the time because no one, with the exception of her older brother, knew of the suicide, and she mentioned it me so casually one day in a conversation some thirty years after the event. It uses a third-person narrator which allows itself the privilege of Hendrick Mueller's inner thoughts, but elevates them a degree of articulation he would not be able to supply. While this is about David Meyns' family, it is the only story that does not directly concern him as a main character.

"Grandma's Room" is a third-person reflection of David Meyns looking back from a sizable temporal distance. The narrative moment is close to the time of "The Hand Plow and

the Whetting Wheel"; in fact there is a repetition of his grandfather's death. Again, the difference is in the perspective of the narrator agent, that of the forty-year-old writer trying to understand the impetus of his art by understanding his younger self as character, emotionally attached while intellectually distant. In many ways this is just another side of a multi-faceted diamond, the shifting of perspective and angle of light changing what we perceive.

Another side and angle of this gem is the story "The Pistol In My Closet". Here is a first-person narrator temporally distant from the moment of narration. This narrator can be characterized as being self-conscious as a narrator, in other words, aware of himself as a writer. It is not the sort of gamesmanship we sometimes find in post-modern, self-reflexive works (i.e. Barth, Flan O'Brien), but it is there nonetheless. There is the mention of his first novel in the story, but there is also the italicized section that opens the story. Here is a man who can articulate intellectually the struggle he has gone through, but is still emotionally close to the loss that has occurred. As F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote, physical wounds heal and scar over, but emotional wounds bleed upon touch.

Once again, I wanted to include poetry in this manuscript because it reflects some of the creative work I have done here at Oklahoma State. Its also noted, there is a

fictional context for this poetry, since David Meyns is a poet, as well as a fiction writer. An original version of "Fish Hawk" had David as a poet, and in fact included one of his poems. At the time I did not write poetry very well and excised it from the story because I did not want the irony to be quite that devastating. I still consider myself a neophyte when it comes to poetry, though I have certainly studied poetry a great deal more than I had before I came here. Of course, most of my poems are narratively oriented, but I also pay attention to something Jack Meyers once told me. Jack said the most important part of a poem was its first word, the second most important, its last. He went on the say that it worked the same way for line-breaks.

I think of the way the writer's intent can be determined just by line-breaks when reading Terry Hummer's "The Rural Carrier Stops to Kill a Nine-foot Cottonmouth." Here is a narrative poem told in the vernacular of a rural mail carrier, but because of the concise form of the line-breaks we construe Hummer's ironic intent.

Like many of the stories, there are many distancing techniques I try to bring to bear on the poetry, but also on our total picture of who and what David Meyns is--an artist. I must admit I am playing a bit of a game when I include the last poem, "They Know," right before *Air Boat*. Do I mean this as one of David Meyns' poems? Is it some type of transitional element that might let the reader feel

Air Boat could be his creation? I'm sorry. I said I was going to write this straight, but I also said that I am a writer. Can you truly trust what I have to say concerning any of this? Remember, I do what I do.

Air Boat is a short novel broken up by the juxtaposition of two alternating styles. These alternating sections correspond to each other in a very important way. This is a story of an artist trying to discover who and what he is. In many ways this is a pure flight of imagination for me, with the exception that I lived for a time in the area described. Of course, there is another exception. The David Meyns stories are about an artist trying to discover who and what he is, so in some ways this novel is autobiographical. At least in metaphor.

The main sections of the novel employ a third-person reflector, essentially an effaced narrator that allows an internal reflection of the main character, Roland on occasion. The past perfect is meant as a literary convention of present time, and much of the exposition acts like a detective story in that we discover events and causes at the same time the main character does.

The second-person present tense narration acts much like a disembodied changeling. It is meant to be construed as Roland's rhetorical attempt to discover his past. Because of this rhetorical attempt, the novel is as much about writing and fictional worlds as it is about anything else. There is a logical connection to this changeling

motif; Roland is part Indian and this could be viewed as a linguistic equivalence of the trickster legend. I am not going to place too much importance on the actual legend itself in this document because I would rather it stand on its own (if it stands at all). I have often used a mytho-poeic structure in building a novel. It really makes little difference to me whether it is something specific, such as this, or a more generalized monomyth described by Joseph Campbell. It is a clothesline I hang the clothes on.

All of these descriptions of my fiction have been fairly technical, paying little attention to theme, and of course the question most often asked by students in a literature class is "What does it mean?" I must admit I have no desire to articulate an answer. In some ways I almost feel that this has been an intrusion into my artistic process, though it is certainly one I can live with. To me the nuts and bolts of writing are all one can confidently speak to. I do not deny that there are perhaps other forces--one could call it the muse, inspiration--that create art, but I can't pick them up, turn them in my hand, or truly feel their weight.

In Gordon Weaver's "The Parts of Speech" a self-conscious narrator addresses his job as a writer. He talks about craftsmanship, that he needs "skills to practice his craft successfully; the skills can be learned if he works hard. And he also needs something besides skills. Some

people call this talent" (92). The narrator goes on to say that he does not call it talent and does not know what to call it, only that *it* [italics mine] exists.

I must admit I don't know what to call *it* either. There is something that compels me to do what I do. Perhaps it is no more than the something Roland heard and felt whispering to him through the current of the St. John's. But it is something. I write.

FISH HAWK

> Whom do we love? I thought I knew the truth;
> Of grief I died, but no one knew my death.
>
> Theodore Roethke, *The Sequel*

He watched the osprey soar on the thermals. With a dip, its wings pulled tight into its body, the bird plunged toward the St. Johns River. As it reached the surface of the water it pulled up from the dive, deftly plucking a fish with its talons. The bird lifted its prey into the air with slow, powerful beatings of its wings, and headed towards the mangroves. Its aerie is probably there, he thought.

"David, did you see that?

"Yes."

"Gorgeous bird." Her eyes were wide with wonder.

"Poor fish."

She turned to him and stared. Then laughed. Her eyes returned to the brilliant flash of sunset the osprey disappeared into. The last light of the day played in her hair. Auburn. Red and golden highlights. Splaying over her shoulders onto her back.

"That's one thing you have to say about Florida."

"What?"

"The sunset."

"Right." He turned away from her and watched the river. A large fish struck the surface with a loud slap. He saw the concentric wave widen, then disappear quickly in the current. "Jennie," he started, "I don't know how to say this except straight out." He felt her attention and he swallowed with difficulty. Taking a deep breath, he sighed. It was a practiced gesture and he immediately felt shitty about it. Tensing with a rush of adrenaline, he tried to look her in the eye but couldn't hold the gaze. His eyes fell back to the water. "It just happened. I don't know how. I never meant to hurt you. I didn't even know it was going to happen. I thought it was just friendship. God, I'm a fuck up. Twelve years we've been married and I never. Shit. You don't know how fucking hard it's been these last four weeks. I've always told you everything. I wouldn't be now." He forced himself to look at her. Her large, brown eyes looked back at him but not in the way he expected. No anger, or even hurt, but curious. Her mouth was slightly parted. "I wouldn't now, but I have to. I have the clap. Gonorrhea. Not that serious, but you have to get on antibiotics too. I'm sorry, Jennie. You don't deserve this."

Her lips tightened. The brown eyes lost their focus on him as if looking at some object in the distance, then switched direction altogether, moving about as if she was watching a dragonfly in flight. Air expelled out of her mouth and with it a whisper, "Shit."

He continued his confession, his apology, his rationalization, pleading with himself as much as with her that he still loved her, their child, their marriage. He saw she listened, not knowing what she heard.

*

She called her gynecologist the next day, explaining to him that her husband was at a writers' conference and had gotten gonorrhea. That she needed a prescription. When finished with the call she went to him and said, "It's taken care of. At least medically. Just make sure you finish the whole prescription." They were the only harsh words she said to him all day. She even smiled after it. And later, on her way to bed, caressed his back when she passed him sitting at the desk. Goddamn you, he thought, seared by her understanding.

*

Jennie, Jennie, she kept hearing a voice call, not her own, yet not unfamiliar. It was rhythmic, but did not correspond with the beating of her heart. That rose from her chest, displaying itself in the undersides of her wrist, the soft flesh of her throat, her temples. No, the voice came from afar, buzzing from a distance, beating upon her eardrums, echoing faintly when it dissipated.

Hours before she heard him pacing the living room, and when he finally came to bed, falling heavily onto his side of the mattress, she waited, expecting him to realize she was not asleep. Long sighs rose and fell away into steady

breathing and then the slight gurgling in his throat. How can you sleep! her thoughts screamed. She wanted to pound on his chest, rake his cheeks raw, make him confront the pain she felt. But she did not. Tears came slowly, with an effort. They mingled with the anger, diluting it, finally making her drowsy. But the voice was insistent and did not allow her to sleep, repeating, Jennie, Jennie, Jennie.

*

All day he wanted to talk to her, call her at work, know what she was feeling. Even when he and his four-year old son played baseball, his mind ran over imaginary conversations between Jennie and himself.

"What's the matter, Daddy?" Jonathan asked, his face displaying concern.

"Nothing," he answered, looking at the child with pangs of guilt, forcing himself to smile as he threw the plastic ball back to his son.

"Then why you looking like that, Daddy? Daddy, why you mad?"

"Just being silly, Johno. I'm not mad at you. I'm thinking about something else." The boy stared at him, the ball at his feet. Brown eyes, her eyes, their shape, color, expression.

"That's okay," his son told him and promptly went back to their game. Setting the ball on top of the batting tee. He could see Jonathan's concentration, then his fluid

swing. Hours of time spent together developed that swing. Proper bat position, the step into the ball, transferring his weight, driving the ball with solid contact. David ran to the hit ball, and sprinted back toward Jonathan, who was rounding an imaginary base path, looking back over his shoulders at David coming at him. The boy lunged towards homeplate, just a bare spot on the ground, worn free of grass from use. It was a good slide and Jonathan sprang back up onto his feet, looking to his father with excited eyes, exclaiming, "Safe!" throwing his arms wide in the proper gesture. David started to laugh and fell to his knees in front of the boy and they embraced, then fell to the ground in a tangle of arms and legs. Jonathan grabbed David's face, holding it between his palms and said, "Did you see that, Daddy? I hit that one *far*!"

"Yes, you did."

"That make you happy?" David tried to hug his son again but was pushed away, the boy scrambling back to his feet, grabbing the ball, saying, "Let's do it again."

*

For that one moment of the day he had been happy, but as he glowered at the blank sheet of paper, the memory served only as a yardstick for the depths of his depression. Jennie had been curt to him after she arrived home from work and he retreated to his desk. But he could not work. Instead he listened to his wife and son in the other room. Giggles, whispers, compliments from Jennie about how

well Jonathan was doing with his letters. David thought, here I am, a writer, and the kid would grow up a fucking illiterate if it wasn't for her. Of course, this was not true.

He spent time with Jonathan, telling him stories. Mind-stories, Jonathan called them. And he read to him a great deal. The two of them would traipse around the local library, finding new books to take home for the week. But self-lacerating admonishments were common for him during times of depression.

In a fit of rage he jammed his black, felt tip pen into the middle of his empty paper, piercing not only the paper, but the soft pine beneath. Rumpling the white sheet, he stared at the mar in the desk. Stupid, he thought. Stupid asshole. And as if to verify this he stabbed at the desk again and again, pocking the wood with small, black-stained holes. He snapped the pen in disgust and flung it into the waste basket. Now the palm of his hand was colored with ink.

From Jonathan's bedroom he heard the melody of the music box they put on when either he or Jennie lay with their child to put him to sleep. A pang of melancholy hit him and he switched on the stereo, found a jazz station, and lit a cigarette. After taking two drags he crushed it out in the filled ashtray. Pulling another sheet of paper out of a drawer, he covered the damage he made with the pen and stared at the paper as he had done before. Starting to

uncap a pen, he thought better of it. His head swam with bitter revulsion. *Poet manque* floated from a cerebral depth, hanging upon his conscious thought like a strong taste on his palate. What shall I use to wash it away?

Fumbling within a bottom drawer he produced a wooden cigar box and placed it on the desk. A priest placing sacraments on the altar for communion. Opening the box, he checked several vials, each containing various types of Cannabis. Maui Wowie. Just the ticket. Placing the feathery bud on the whiteness of paper, he studied the hues of gold and green, a purplish vein, the crystalline quality of the resin. Index finger and thumb broke the bud into fine kernels and the aroma of earth and pine sap rose delicately into his nostrils. He took his time rolling the joint, spreading the dope evenly in the crease he made in the E-Z Wider, then, with a practiced finesse, worked his fingers in unison. After licking the cigarette into shape he placed it on the paper to dry.

A wave of nausea hit. Probably the antibiotic, he thought, wincing in discomfort. It passed. At least it was working, his underwear remaining free of stains. Stemmed the rising tide of discharge from my prick, he thought; too bad it won't intercede with the salacious nature of my soul. He lit the joint and inhaled deeply. If I'm going to think like that I'm in bigger trouble than I thought. He pushed the sheet of paper aside.

It only took a few minutes for the marijuana to act.

He took long, deep hits that seemed to swell in his lungs, and the light-headed high turned into a siege of rolling euphoric waves. What stories his head conjured up! Of the swaggering, beggarman king, the vagabond iconoclast, the tortured sage -- titles that depicted his moves about a private hell as a guide to the living for salvation. Writer martyr. Justification for his acts of perfidy. He rode upon these swells for almost an hour. The paper remained blank.

The only line he remembered was, *riding on the magic wave, in anticipation of the crash.* Depression intensified, and he sat, head in hands, treading water in open sea. He tried to cry, once even made his eyes water, but it was an act with actor's tears and he stopped trying. There was no reprieve from it, the ocean vast, no sign of land.

A screen door slammed, its noise just barely perceptible over the jazz. He turned off the stereo and listened. The house was quiet; then from the open window he heard shuffling feet upon the concrete driveway. After lighting a cigarette he got up and went outside.

She stood under the redbud tree, arms folded, shoulders hunched, as if fending off a chill. It was a swollen, humid night. Coming near, he stopped and watched her. Her eyes scanned the sky. A close Florida sky. Cloudless, it was a vast expanse of dark velvet, the stars bright. She did not acknowledge his presence, her only

movement the rise and fall of her chest and the arms cradled upon it, her face luminous with a sheen of oil and sweat. Without a change of expression she told him, "What bothers me most is you didn't think of us. Didn't think of me. You said it just happened." Her head turned to look at him. Eyes hidden in shadow. Mouth, lips, teeth form articulation, the words, "Nothing *just* happens." A brief holding glare, then back to her star gaze.

Curious, he thought, I feel relieved, but still cheated. "Jennie...

"I don't know, David. I'll try."

He waited for more. Silence. The hanging sky. Beautiful. Mysterious. Oppressive. He left her to it, sulking back to his room. Went to finish the joint. Shut off the light. Sitting alone. Wanting only a sympathy high. The darkness.

*

He was sitting on the bed when she finally came in. Her hand came across to him. He held it. She slid up next to him. They held each other without speaking. Then they made love.

*

He became more aware of the activity of birds. At first it was not a conscious act, but he realized its source. Julie, the woman he had the affair with, gave him a feather the day after the act. He became touched by the gesture, though his initial reaction was a blend of feeling

foolish and wondering if it was riddled with lice. I should trust my instincts, he thought. There was more to this: after an afternoon's swimming break from the conference, they explored an old abandoned church. Spring flood rains had cut a wash across a road, scarring a meadow and exposing the rock foundation of the church. They, Julie, David, and Larry traversed a plank across the created gorge, into the side entrance. The floor of this lower level was coated with a thick layer of dust. Julia's white, gauze skirt got soiled at the hem. There were three large windows on the western wall, shafts of light falling into the body of the room. Alive with agitated motes. A fluttering panic beat against one of the panes. A sparrow trapped inside. With quick response Julia went to the bird and with sure hands cupped it within her palms. Both Larry and David wanted to see it, but Julia had already walked swiftly to the open door, freeing the bird to the air.

The symbolic gift of the feather brought this back to him, but he was confused by it. Like an illiterate trying to decipher a printed page - staring at the words with such intensity, hoping their meaning would suddenly become clear, finding instead that the letters began to move, blur and blend together.

*

While Jonathan played on his swing set, and David read Roethke, a shrill call filled the air. David looked up and heard, then saw the wings. Just to the left of his son.

White and brown striped. As the hawk traveled off David noticed a flash of red in the bird's grasp. Later he looked it up in his bird book. Sharp-shinned Hawk. Preys on small birds. A cardinal, he thought. He read about the osprey and other birds of prey.

*

It was a Saturday and Jennie took Jonathan to Daytona Beach. David had a job putting on a roof and she wanted to be out of the house. Jonathan loved the ocean, so he was excited.

Once there she tried to read a magazine while her son played at the water's edge. But she could not concentrate, so watched Jonathan play. First he alternately ran after and retreated from the waves, then played a game of chase with the sandpipers. He reminded her of a kitten. Finally he settled into building a sand castle. Scooping a handful of wet sand, the child allowed it to run out of his fist, creating a miniature mountain range. It intrigued Jennie and she went to the boy's side and started to build her own.

Her mind reeled from the blows she had suffered the past four days. Some self-inflicted. She almost did not go the the beach because of the reflection she studied in the mirror on this morning. Running her hands over the slight roll of flabby flesh on her stomach. Childbirth. The feeling of panic receded, especially when she arrived at the beach and viewed the other bodies roaming around.

Her questions of what she had done to cause David to cheat on her receded as well. There were no answers.

Hell, she thought, I can't even sort out my feelings about all of this. She caught herself, on more than one occasion, seeing David's watchful eyes, attentive on her every reaction. And her silence. It made him suffer. And while it was not a conscious act, it gave her a certain satisfaction. Not enough though. Like sex without love. Was that it? Is that what it comes down to? This was not the answer, either. Was it the choice he made?

The only thing holding her together right now was the memory of Michael, when she and David lived in Los Angeles. Before Jonathan was born. An actor who was working as a waiter. Met him at the laundromat of all places. She told David about him at the time. David was suspicious, but she told him, no, Michael's not like that. He's a friend. Her friend. And when she found out Michael really wanted more than that she was hurt. She told him to stop calling. Her choice. But still there was a sense of loss. It could have easily gone further. But she made a choice. What if?

She threw a clump of sand, destroying what she had made. Jonathan stared at her. "Why'd you do that, Mommy?" She did not answer him right away and he became insistent.

"Tide's coming in anyway. Come on, we're going home."

Jonathan grew upset that all his work would be washed away by the tide. "I don't want it!" he spit out after tears welled up in his eyes.

"You can't stop nature, Jonathan." She freed him of his tears by making a game of destroying his own castle by pitching handfuls of sand at it. Jonathan liked that. And after cleaning off their towels, after Jonathan took a last swim, Jennie dried him off. She packed up their beach gear, brushed off Jonathan's feet, buckled him into his seat, then started the car. As she pulled out she saw the last of their castles fall into an on-rushing wave, leaving the surface smooth as it receded.

*

The physical labor freed him from thought. It was an emergency patch job. Doing a roof in Florida was January work. But the rainy season was coming, the leak had to be fixed, August sun or not.

"This flat should have been rolled, not shingled," Tom said. Tom was in his late fifties, a retired carpentry foreman from Pennsylvania. David liked working with him. He was taciturn, all business on the job. After work and a few Busch's, he told David stories. David respected, and more important to David, *liked* Tom.

Getting the old roof up was the rough part. A second set had been placed over the original shingles and the older were sodden. It was a bitch to get them off. Once down to the wood, after sweeping it clean and nailing the felt paper, they tarred the edge and laid down the first asphalt roll. Secured the edge with roofing nails, spacing each nail three inches apart. A lot of nails. The

monotony of the task, the heat, and his already tired body allowed David to float as if drugged. The only breaks were for water and when they set a new chalk line. More tar just above the line. Place the roll, squaring it with the line. Nail it down.

When he got home he was exhausted. "Today was a real bastard," he said to Jennie. She smiled and nodded as she fixed dinner. He went directly to shower. His back and shoulders stung with sunburn even though he was tanned brown. After he turned off the hot water he stood under the cold shower. Jennie had to call him twice before he shut it off.

They ate in silence except for Jonathan, who told David about the beach with great animation. "And then you know what, Daddy? The tide came. To eat up my castle. But I didn't let it." The mischief in Jonathan's face made David smile. David glanced at Jennie. She was sitting back from her plate, her hand covering her own smile.

"What, Johno? How did you stop it."

"*I* knocked it down." Jonathan was proud of himself. "You know what else, Daddy?"

"What."

"You can't stop nature."

David started to laugh.

"Enough, Jonathan. Eat your dinner." Jennie's voice was sharp. Jonathan looked at his father.

"Eat, Johno," David told him. David poked at his own

food. He wasn't hungry, only thirsty. "Pass the iced tea, please," he said to Jennie.

"Not much left," she said flatly, giving him the pitcher. The side of the pitcher was beaded with water.

"Dehydrated," David said, lifting his glass, chugging the tea.

"All right, Jonathan, enough! Time for your bath."

"Shower!"

"Bath!" She half dragged the boy to the bathroom. The door was briskly closed behind them. David heard them talking quietly. Then the sound of the shower.

He usually helped Jennie clear off the dinner dishes, but he could hardly move. It was an effort to rise from the dinner table, grab a beer from the refrigerator, and stagger into the bedroom. He closed his eyes once he stretched out on the bed. The cold beer glided down his throat. The rhythmic percussion of hammers echoed inside his head, lulling him to sleep.

*

"Whoa!" he spit out, heart racing, breath short. His eyes were blinded in an attempt to adjust to the light in the bedroom. When he finally realized where he was, he found himself sitting up in bed, left leg on the floor. Looking to his right he saw Jennie sitting on the bed too, though she was on top the bedcovers. "What is it? Jonathan? What?"

"No. Jonathan's fine."

Then he saw her scowl. Set jaw. "What then?"

"You know."

"Shit." He flopped back down on the bed. His worn out body made it feel as if he were wearing wet clothes, anchoring him to the mattress. Anger rose in him, the only emotion he could show in times of stress. He tried to control it. "This couldn't wait until morning?" Measured words.

"I couldn't spend another sleepless night while you saw wood."

"Jesusfuckinchrist! Goddamn son of a bitch! For Godsake, I just worked ten fucking hours."

"To hell with that! I'm not going to suffer while you snore."

"And not pencil-pushing hours! Ten fucking hours in the hot sun! Ripping off a roof! What do you want from me?"

"I want to be done with this one way or another!"

"I almost passed the fuck out twice."

"You're acting like this is my fault, my doing!"

"What the hell difference does that make?"

"Will you let me finish!"

"Fine. Sure. Go ahead."

She sat in silence for a moment trying to collect her thoughts. Almost in reflex she found herself saying, "I know what I wanted to say, but you interrupted."

"Go ahead. Floor's yours. God knows you've got my attention."

"You bastard."

"That's right. That's what I am. Why don't you try for A-1 prick too. Lousy bastard that cheats on his wife. A wife that's given him everything. Sacrificed everything. For him. And what is he? Oh, he's a writer. Well, what does he do, really? My own fucking family can tell you that. *Bum* is what they'd tell you."

"Stop it. I hate it when you wallow in your self pity."

"And Jennie. Sweet Jennie. Everyone loves Jennie. Poor Jennie, they say. Perfect Jennie. Do you know what it's like to live with that? For Godsakes, I've had to live up to my perfect older brother. Oh yes, Carl's in the Air Force. A flight commander. David? He's still writing, but now he's at least going for a degree. At least he'll be able to teach. Perfect brother and now a perfect wife. I can't deal with it!"

"Don't lay that on me, David! You know I don't feel that way!"

"What do you want from me!" he screamed.

"I want you to think about me!"

"Goddamn it, Jennie, goddamn it. They're right. I can't work. I try, but no words come," he said, his voice suddenly quiet, almost whispers.

"I'm having a tough time, David. I don't know."

"Don't know what!" he was shouting again. "You want out? Go! Get the fuck out!" He was up now, stalking toward her. Grabbing her by the back of the neck, forcing her up off the bed, pushing her toward the door.

"Maybe I will!"

The fist flew past her head, burying itself in the wall.

Jennie ran into the night, away from him.

*

She heard the screen door open and close. Footfalls. "Jennie," came the soft voice of contrition. "I'm sorry. I know that's not enough, but I'll try, really try. But you've got to try, too. You're sitting with a pat hand, Jen. Hell, I don't have any cards at all, and maybe that's the way it should be. I need us to be whole again." Shuffling feet. "That's what I wanted to say." He turned to leave.

"Who the hell do you think you are? You blow up, spit out your guts. And now you say you're sorry. It doesn't make it, David. *I* have all the cards? If you had made the right choice we wouldn't be playing this game. And for your information it's not a game. It's our lives. Did you hear me? *Our* lives. Don't flatter yourself. Sacrifice for you? No, no. Do you remember when I wanted a baby? Did you go back to work just for me? It was for *us*. Don't be so egocentric. And don't look for pity, David.

"You hurt me. But you hurt yourself too. You want me to forgive you? You can't forgive yourself. I know you, David. For Godsake we've grown up together. We learned how to make love together. We learned how to trust.

"It was just a fuck for her. She gained a night of pleasure. You're the one who lost something, David.

"We all make choices." She looked away from his shadowed figure, out into the night, to the moonlight bouncing off the lake across the street. She still felt angry, hurt, but better. "I'll be in in a while," she told him.

*

He sat on the bed in the dark room, knees hunched up against his chest. A glaze of moonglow plastered the back of his shoulders a resplendent blue. He started to speak as soon as she settled under the covers. "When I was five, in the hospital, for my first operation..."

"On your eyes," she said, acknowledging a history she knew well. She remembered it was a hospital in New York City.

"Yes. The doctors and nurses told my parents when they came to visit me they had to wait out in the hall. That I made too much of a fuss when they left and it would be better to keep me calm. So they did. I remember looking out at the street every day. The crowds streaming by. I tried to find my parents' faces in the crowd, but I was up too high. I thought they left me. Forever."

They both fell silent for a time.

"You never told me that part of the story before."

"You keep that feeling away from me." He was crying now. She got out from beneath the blanket and took him in her arms. She felt her heart beat when she pressed against his flesh. Felt his tears strike her arm.

*

Three days later, in the early evening, she came home from work to find him at the desk.

"Where's Jonathan?"

"Late nap. We went to the movies." He nodded toward a pile of papers on the desk.

"What's this?"

"Finished it about an hour ago. Been working on it for the past couple of days."

He listened to music while she read, but could not stand it for long. He went outside and hit plastic golf balls with a nine iron. Hearing the screen door shut, he waited until she called out to him. He walked over to the carport where she stood. "Well?"

"It's good, David. I like it a lot." He smiled. "Except for the title. 'A Child's Prayer'?"

His smile turned sheepish. "I sort of feel the same way. But the story. You like the story?"

"Yes, David." She watched him think, his head down, staring intently at his feet. And then she noticed something she'd seen so many times, and it almost made her

laugh. David had a habit of running his fingertips across the tip of his thumbs when he was nervous or actively thinking. A frenzy of flight at first, as if he were trying to rub away some dirt, then the slow, thorough caress, as if to make sure he would have a true grip on whatever came into his hands. "Think about the title, David," she said, "but it's a good story."

He looked up at her. "Something to work on, right?"

On impulse she leaned over to kiss her husband on his lips. It wasn't a passionate kiss, but a serious, caring one. She then tweaked his nose and headed into the house, holding the papers in a tight grip by her side.

David turned and headed toward his practice balls. His golf swing suddenly felt fluid and right. His shots started to land closer to the target in his mind.

THE CUT AND CURVE OF AIR

Yesterday my ten-year old boy fell off
The Big Toy, he called it --
walking along the highest point,
the pipe meant for arm support,
over ten feet in the air
A. J. tightropes while pirouetting, balancing
on one foot until disaster strikes
in the cut and curve of her face,
I imagine her, even at ten
blue eyes stop A. J. for a moment,
enough, he falls, head long
into sand, cut lip, bloody scraped nose, a bruise
on the small of his back, a bruise requiring
ice and time in front of the T. V.

I want to tell him *its* okay,
a trip to take, everyone takes
this fall into air.
I want to be more specific, bringing him
popcorn and juice I want to tell him
even at six I knew the feeling too --

One early Saturday morning
full of test patterns I rose to run
through the woods, run barefoot up the trail
out of the apple orchard, the smell of rotting fruit

darkening the air, stop to walk
her backyard and stand there in my p.j.s,
cold, catatonic until she appeared
in the backdoor and we met in the middle
space, long dry grass whipping naked legs wet,
the orange-yellow light piercing this spot;
she stared at me with the glow
cutting the curve of her face and I
expose myself in the middle
of the yard, in sunlight.
She ducks behind the tree and shadow and I
follow and she shows me and I wonder --
but she pushes me back, away,
laughs and runs back to her house,
and I run to mine to build
my tent around the heating duct, the smell
of apples bruised into my bare feet.

I want to tell my son it will never be the same again,
but it will be alright, just different,
that we're meant to be pierced
by the cut and curve of light,
and only there find balance.

Instead we talk about how
to throw a cross-seam fastball, and stuff like that.

THE HAND PLOW AND THE WHETTING WHEEL

I'm sitting by the lilac bush between our house and Grandma and Grandpa's house. Waiting for the grown-ups to leave. They're going to visit Mommy at the hospital. Daddy says she's got some kind of woman trouble, but it's nothing to worry about. I wish I could go, but they say I'm too small. Grandpa's not going cause he's fighting with Grandma. He's suppose to watch out for me until Carl, my big brother, gets home. Grandma and Grandpa fight a lot. She starts yelling about who knows what and Grandpa just heads toward the barn to get away from her. That gets Grandma madder. Letting her steam in her own juices, I've heard Grandpa say. He's even got his medicines up there so he don't have to go back to the house.

My Daddy and Aunt Lucy and Uncle Jim are waiting for Grandma to get ready. Daddy keeps looking at his watch. Aunt Lucy is really Grandma's sister though she's closer to Daddy's age. Sort of like Carl and me. Carl's ten years older. He's a senior in high school. Aunt Lucy and Uncle Jim live on the other side of Grandma and Grandpa's house. There's a big field between them where Grandpa grows his vegetables. We live all in a row.

Daddy says to Uncle Jim, "Gonna be a hot one." It's

August. The bees are working already. I can hear them buzzing above my head.

"Daddy?" I ask. "What's wrong with Mommy?"

"I told you," she says. He looks away from me like he don't want to be bothered. All the other grown-ups are looking at me now. Then Daddy bends down. His face is smiling, like he changed his mind, but there's something else in his face too. A sorry in his smile. "Mommy's going to be fine. She's had an operation called a hysterectomy. It means she can't have any more children. Looks like you're always going to be the baby of this family."

"I'm no baby!" Daddy stands up. Now he's cross, looking at his watch again.

Grandma finally comes out of her house and Daddy yells at me to be good for Grandpa. Grandma's in the back seat with Aunt Lucy, waggling her arms in the close space. I see Daddy shaking his head back and forth as he pulls out of the driveway. Gravel spins under the tires. Now Grandma's got her big arms folded, her head cocked, looking through the back window. Glaring black eyes, staring up at the barn.

I see Grandpa heading toward the field, dragging the hand plow behind him. If he wants to plow something, why doesn't he use the tractor? He lets me ride on his lap sometimes. I run down to ask him if we could use the tractor, but I see he's using the hand plow because he's

still mad. He's just plowing some dirt. I don't even think he's gonna plant anything. Too late, isn't it?

The hand plow is old and Grandpa usually wears gloves to protect his hands. I ask him why he doesn't have his gloves on and he looks at his hands and shrugs. He tells me his hands are toughening up in his old age, he doesn't need gloves. He also doesn't have on his large-brimmed straw hat he always wears when he works in the sun. I don't ask him why.

The sun is beating directly down on us. I get an idea to get some cold water for Grandpa. I'm thirsty.

The top of the well by the house is all closed up with chicken wire and there's a roof on it. Not like the well by the barn. That has chicken wire, but no roof. I turn the wooden latch and open the well door. It smells mossy and damp as I reach for the bucket. The well's deep. Lowering the bucket slowly, then *zing*, the rope slips out of my hand. I try to catch it, but it burns. The pulley makes a high singing sound, then I hear the bucket hit the water and the sounds stops. I can see the water shine back the light from above. The water's dark and inky, except for the reflection.

As I pull at the rope, the bucket rises. It's very heavy and takes me a long time. But it's cool under the roof and I know I can drink some ice cold water. The bucket clangs dull as it hits the rocky side of the wall. It stops swaying so much as it gets closer to the top.

I hold onto the side of the frame that holds up the roof and step on the rope so I won't lose the water and I reach in and grab the pail. The metal's cold.

I take the tin dipper off its nail on the side of the well and scoop out some water. The water's cold and hurts when I drink too fast, so I take slow sips. When I lick my lips I can taste salt.

Taking a dipper full of water I walk down to the field. The field's shimmering from the heat, bending up up what I see. Almost like being under water. Grandpa is sitting on the ground. After I give him the water, I'll go get his hat. Maybe he'll want to eat. We haven't had lunch yet.

Grandpa's sitting on the ground, next to the plow. His face beet red, glasses lying in the dirt. "Davey," he says, "Davey, it's you."

"Yes Granpa," I answer, "I've got some water for you."

He takes the dipper, grabs ahold of my arm. Strong hands. Too strong, almost hurting me. He takes a drink, then pulls out his blue bandanna and pours the rest of the water on that and puts it on the back of his neck. Then he unfolds it and puts it on the top of his head. It looks funny, but I don't laugh.

With a hand on my shoulder Grandpa straightens himself up and his face gets all screwed up like he just tasted something bad. He grunts, but the sound's deeper in his throat than usual, like he's gotta clear it.

Leaning on me as we go up the hill, he sometimes grabs at his chest. I stop with him until he's ready. Something bad's happening. I know it.

We get up to the porch and Grandpa sits down on the bench. He asks me to bring him some Bromo, so I run into the house and into the bathroom. I stand on the toilet seat and lean over with one hand on the sink, opening the medicine cabinet above. The blue bottle is in the corner of the cabinet.

I run out into the kitchen and fix the medicine in a glass. It fizzes and some gets in my nose. It smells like salt water.

After given Grandpa the glass, watching him drink it, I ask him how he feels. He says, "I'll be fine, Davey, I just have to lie down for a while." He gets up from the bench, slow, like in the morning when he says his bones are still creaking, and walks slow into the house. Now it looks like when Grandpa has too many shots of whiskey with his beer. He's gotta hold on to things as he walks down the hallway.

When he gets to the bedroom he shuts the door without turning around. I put my ear up against the door. What I hears sounds like Grandpa is trying to catch his breath. All of a sudden I hear him call, "Davey, Davey, come here," and I run away from the door. I don't want Grandpa to think I'm spying on him. Then he calls again and I run to the door, stop, and pull it open slow.

Grandpa is holding his chest again and I can see the wrinkles in his face all squinched up. He asks me to call the hospital and ask for Mommy's room and I ask him the number, and he says ask the operator. She says, "Number please," and I ask for the hospital, and then I hear it buzz.

"Good Samaritan Hospital. May I help you?" It's a lady's voice. I don't like the way she sounds.

"I want to talk to Daddy!"

"Who is this?"

"I need to talk to Daddy! My name is Davey, I need to..."

"You shouldn't be playing with the phone, young man."

"Listen!" I'm shouting now, because she don't understand. Got to make her know. "My Grandpa, it's Grandpa."

"Is your grandfather there?" The lady's voice is fast and nasty.

"Yes. Grandpa is..."

"Let me talk to him."

"He can't...it's...can't...I got..." My mouth won't work. Can't talk what I think.

"You're going to get in trouble, young man. Now you just..."

"God damn you!" I shout. Phone clicks. She hung up on me. I've done bad. Didn't want to, couldn't help, she wouldn't listen. I'm scared.

I run to the bedroom and tell Grandpa. I help him up. His touch is cold, like he's been outside in the middle of winter. He gets to the phone and calls the hospital and finally talks to Daddy. He's talking low. Can't hear what he says. Then he hangs up the phone. He starts to wheeze again.

I help him get up and walk back into the bedroom. He lies back down on the bed and I sit at his feet.

Grandpa is now breathing all in one sound, sucking in air and blowing it out. There's long spaces in between. It sounds like he has to make a big effort just to breathe. I wait.

In the room are many statues and pictures of Jesus and some of the Virgin Mary. They're Grandma's. She's Catholic. Her babies, she calls them. Over the fireplace is a large white statue of Jesus with his arms stretched out. And over his arms are the palms I got Grandma on Palm Sunday. I pray to God and ask Him to forgive me for damning Him and ask Him to help my Grandpa. I'm crying now, though I don't cry loud, so I won't bother Grandpa.

I hear Grandpa call out, "Dear God, oh my God," and I grab onto his legs and hold on. I can feel him reach down and touch my head. He rubs my hair and says, "You're a good boy, Davey, you've been a real fine boy today." Then I hear a car pull up in the driveway, then another one. It's the crunching sound of gravel.

I see my Daddy and a man with a black bag. I guess

he's the doctor, but it isn't our doctor, and then Daddy makes me go out of the room. I don't understand why I can't stay. Then the women kick me out of the house. My Uncle Jim smiles at me and pats me on the shoulder. Then I go out the door.

Sitting on the bench, right under the kitchen window on the back porch, I hear Grandma wailing. Daddy tells her to be quiet. She's out in the kitchen now. I can hear her at the window right above me, banging at the breakfast dishes. She's cussing in French. I don't know French, but I know when someone's cussing.

I crouch down and sneak off the porch. Running around to where Grandpa and Grandma's bedroom window is. I hide underneath it.

I hear Grandpa clearly, his voice calling out, "It's getting dark, everything is getting dark, oh dear God it's all right, everything is gettin black, it's all right." And then I hear Grandma shriek. I stand and jump up and grab onto the window ledge. I pull myself up to look in the window, and I see the doctor with a hearing scope pressed to Grandpa's chest and he looks at Daddy and shakes his head no and I hear Daddy whispering to Grandpa, but I can't make it out and I see Daddy get up and I let myself down and push myself up close to the house. Daddy is by the window and I can hear him crying. I think I shouldn't listen, so I sneak from under the window and run around to the front.

I hide in the big bush there. Got a crawl space in the back. Don't know why I'm hiding. Hearing the crying sounds coming from inside the house. I see the red car, Carl's car coming, and I go out on the road waving my arms. Carl screeches the tires and I can see in his eyes he knows there's something wrong. I start to tell him Grandpa's sick, but he only half-hears what I'm saying, but he knows, spinning the tires and racing into the driveway. He disappears around the house, then he's there again, looking, can't see, scared, but I want Carl to see me, except I can't move, and then I am running and running as fast as I can, jumping into Carl's arms and he holds me tight and I'm crying and Carl says, "It's okay, monster, it's okay," and then I bury my face in his chest and he's crying too and I can hear a loud siren shriek real close and I hear a car stop, and then I hear, "It's all right, Davey, go ahead, let it out," and suddenly I'm in Daddy's arms not knowing how I got there and he's holding me tight too and he tells me Grandpa is dead, but it's all right and I calm down and I think about dead and wonder what it's like and I ask Daddy and he looks at me real strange and says it's like being asleep and I cry in his arms till he takes me home and puts me to bed, telling me I should take a nap, but I can't sleep and Aunt Lucy comes in and holds me and I tell her about the operator and she says I did just fine and that Grandpa is in heaven now because he was such a good man, and I cry again and Aunt Lucy cries too and I feel

myself drifting off to sleep, fighting it, wondering if you dream when you're dead and I'm afraid to go to sleep now, afraid I won't wake up again.

* * *

Today is the day. Grandpa died three Saturdays ago, or is it four? Can't remember. But today's the day.

Two men just came in a truck with metal cages in the back. They talk to Daddy and Uncle Jim down by the barn. I can see them through the leaves. I'm up in my tree. Daddy and the tall man shake hands and walk into the barn. The other man goes to the truck and backs it up to the side door.

I can hear the chickens now. Grandpa's chickens. It sounds like there's a weasel in their coop, they're fussing so.

One by one the men come out into the yard with a chicken in each hand. They have them by the legs. Uncle Jim comes down with four. He's big, a lot bigger than Daddy, and he's got a gruff voice, but soft laughing eyes.

A light breeze is blowing through the leaves. It feels cool and good in this shady spot, but I want to have a look.

It's a long drop from the fat limb I'm on, but I can jump it easy, but right before I jump I have a tight feeling in my stomach. I jump anyway. I crouch and I jump.

Hitting the ground I roll over head first. My knees have got grass stains on them now.

In the driveway, by her house, I can see Grandma peering up toward the barn, then walking back to the house. She's been doing it all morning. When my mommy was outside before, Grandma picked up her apron and made like she was drying her eyes--and now that Carl is walking toward the barn Grandma's dabbing at her eyes again. She stops as soon as Carl walks by, glaring at him. Carl doesn't even look at her. Carl doesn't like Grandma. I don't know why. Something about the way she used to treat Mommy.

Carl says, "Good morning, monster," and gives me a wink. He has knives and a hatchet in his hands, and walks around the truck towards the brooder house. It used to be a corn crib, but Grandpa put an incubator up in it.

On Easter morning, not the one we just had, but the one before, Grandpa and I got some fresh eggs for hard boiling and coloring. Before we cooked them Grandpa candled the eggs. One was fertilized and Grandpa showed it to me. It had a dark spot in the yolk. I asked Grandpa if this could become a chick like the ones in the brooder house, and he said it was possible. I asked him if we could see if it would hatch, and Grandpa narrowed his eyes at me, squinching up his face, as if he were trying to figure something out. He told me we could try, but if it did hatch I'd have to take care of it. I said sure, so after we gave Grandma the eggs to boil, Grandpa and I took

the fertilized egg up to the brooder house. It hatched. Grandpa said it was a miracle. I named him Hard-Boiled and he grew up to be the biggest and toughest rooster in the whole barn. I wonder if those men are going to buy my chicken?

Carl is using the whetting wheel, sharpening the knives and hatchet. Today's the day. I run down the hill to the brooder house and stand close to Carl, watching. Maybe they will sell all of the chickens. Maybe Carl's working for nothing.

The men and Daddy are saying goodbye. Uncle Jim is in the barn by the workbench doing something. I can't see what. I leave Carl and walk toward Daddy. As the truck leaves, dust flies and swirls like a cloud. It's very dry and the ground is covered with silky smooth dirt. I like to squinch it between my toes. Daddy yells at me to stop kicking up dust and I run to him to ask if there are any more chickens left. He says yes in a sharp way. He's mad about something. He was just smiling goodbye to those men. Now he is grumpy. Daddy's a lot like Grandma.

I run in the barn and watch Uncle Jim tying inch-long bolts to long pieces of cord. He smiles at me. "How you doing, Davey? he asks.

"Fine."

"You want to help me tie these bolts?"

"No." I'm not being nice, but I don't care. Like

Daddy. Uncle Jim still smiles at me, but my stomach feels like right before I jumped out of the tree. Tight.

Daddy is hammering nails into the cross beams right by the doorway of the barn.

I am in the blackness of the barn and I'm looking out into the light. Daddy walks over to Carl and looks at the knives. The dust rises as he walks and swirls and swirls around behind him. I feel a sneeze coming on, but I rub my nose real hard with my arm, wiping the snot off my arm, on my shorts.

I feel bad about saying no to Uncle Jim. I watch him tie the cord around the bolts and ask him if I could cut some string for him and he says sure. He shows me how to cut the cord, pushing the knife away from my body and I show him I can do it. When I cut it I make one too short, then I make one too long, but Uncle Jim fixes that one and then I make them pretty good.

I ask Uncle Jim if the big rooster is still up on the second floor, and he says, "Yes, I think so," and I ask him if this is enough and he just smiles and tells me thank you. I like Uncle Jim a lot, but I think he likes Carl better. Carl's a better boy than me. Does what he's told to.

Daddy's back hammering again and I ask Uncle Jim how many are left, he says, "Around a hundred. Those son of a bucks picked over what they wanted, mostly the white Plymouth Rock hens."

I go upstairs. On the bench is the old coffee grinder Grandpa used to meal corn for the chicks. Against the wall is his twenty-two. Grandpa never loaded it, but would beat the tar out of a rat with it.

I can hear the cackling and clucking of the chickens and I cross by the bench to the middle of the barn and climb the rest of the steps to the top floor, smelling the odor of the chickens grow stronger like their sound. There are two doors on the landing at the top of the stairs and I look through the dirty glass of the one on the left.

Hard-Boiled is strutting around. I open the door and shoo one of his hens back inside. I make sure the lock is on. Hard-Boiled is nervous, clucking away, walking back and forth eying me. I haven't come to feed him since Grandpa died.

I have that feeling in my stomach again and I leave. If I don't lock the door I could say it was a mistake and they could run away. I lock the door, and run downstairs.

Uncle Jim is talking to Daddy and when they see me Uncle Jim walks back to the workbench. They are tying the cords on the nails my Daddy has put up. The bolts dangle on the cords.

Daddy calls to me and I walk over. He doesn't look so angry anymore. He asks me how I'm doing and I say fine. He looks at me strangely. "If you can take care of your rooster you can keep him. But you think about it first. Be just like you to say yes, then..."

"Carl's got a horse," I say to Daddy.

"There's a big difference between you and Carl." Uncle Jim looks at Daddy like Daddy's right. "You think about it," Daddy says to me again. Then goes back to tying the cords.

I want to be outside in the light and I run past Daddy and up the hill to my tree. I can watch from here. I can see everything. I see Carl walking over with the knives and hatchet. It'll begin soon.

It's already late afternoon and the light is golden, playing through the leaves, the shadows on the ground jumping and twisting like they were excited.

Gusts of wind are blowing warm over my back and dust devils spin and hop in the barnyard, dying down then reappearing like they were ghosts.

Carl is rolling the big stump he cut from the tree Daddy, Grandpa, and he tore outta the ground last fall. He stands it up on end, wiping the sweat from his forehead with a bandanna like Grandpa used to carry.

Inside the barn I hear the chickens squawking again and my hands are cold and I can feel the sweat running down the side of my face and I think this is silly. I've seen chickens killed before, but not like this I tell myself. I see the first chicken and my Uncle Jim holding its legs with his left hand and holding the hatchet in the other and pulling up the hatchet in the air and placing the chicken's head on the block and *whoosh* the head is lying in the dirt

and the chicken is bleeding and Uncle Jim lets go of the chicken and it runs away without any head and falls on the ground, thrashing around, getting up and trying to run, but only twitching and then it's completely still and then Uncle Jim swings again and another one is running without its head and the whoosh and thud of the hatchet again until there's chickens running and dropping all over the yard, dust flying everywhere.

Carl and Daddy are picking up the still ones. Their shirts are off and their backs are glistening with sweat, their hands full of blood. The front of Uncle Jim's tee shirt is splattered with red. The dust is so bad they look like they're walking in a brown cloud, eyes squinting so they can see. Now the dirt is caking on their bare skin and I hear Daddy coughing and spitting.

I run down to see Daddy and Carl hanging the chickens up with the cords. The bolts have made it easier to tie around the chicken's legs and Carl hurries out for more and I run and help pick up the still ones. I start to cough and the wind is swirling. Daddy has gone up for more chickens and Uncle Jim helps Carl hang and I pick up more. They are heavy. And I think, yes they are dead and I feel the wet on my face and I think it's sweat and then I taste it and I feel the shadow twisting above me and I realize it's one of the chickens dripping on me.

I run out and watch as Daddy brings down the last and he walks to me and asks me what I want to do and my chicken

looks like all the others did in Daddy's hand, only bigger. And I think of Grandpa and my heart is beating faster and I say yes and Daddy asks me what I mean, do I want to keep him. I shake my head no, thinking yes, he should be dead like the others. I look over to my Uncle Jim and he motions me forward and I come up to him and he hands me the hatchet, blood all over his hands. I take the handle and it feels sticky and Uncle Jim tells Daddy to let me do what all the men of the family have done today. That I have a right to do it. Daddy holds my chicken and I aim, closing my eyes as I strike down with all my might. The yard is quiet, except for the flapping of wings and Daddy lets the chicken go. I watch as it travels up, then falls back to earth. Again it raises on its legs, staggers, then falls, twitching. Still. Like all the others.

I no longer feel tight inside and I walk over to the chicken. Its feathers are matted with blood and dirt. I grab the legs and feel a twitching, but I pick it up anyway. And I tell myself, this is really dead, this is what it's like, and I feel wetness dripping down my leg and I hold the chicken out farther from my body. Wind, whistling through the trees, squeaking metal, as Carl pulls up water from the well, and the quiet from the animals in the surrounding woods; all this I hear. And I see Daddy and Uncle Jim watching me and Carl is watching me as he grabs the bucket from the well.

I walk up to Daddy and look up at his face and into

his eyes and I ask him if I can bury my chicken and this time he doesn't look at me strange and he says yes. He tells me where the spade is in the barn. I go and come back out with it. Walking past him. I stoop by the chopping block and pick up the rooster's head, walking away into the woods.

CUTLER'S MANSION

I was fifteen when I first entered
its charred world, the smell of
charcoal still embodied in the shell
of space and time long forgotten
by anyone except the bums who lived
there, and teen-agers, like me,
who invaded their home, like
Peter Pan's lost boys on steroids.

Cutler's Mansion rose up
from the ground into the air,
a macabre fairy tale,
dimensions so large
it took my breath away;
over two dozen rooms, God,
it must have been something
all those years ago, before
the fire gutted its insides.

We called it Putty's mansion
in honor of the heir apparent;
bums have their own order of hierarchy.
We stole into dark corridors and rose
through the body, breaking walls
of sheetrock with our bare fists;

I remember how my blood tasted
when I sucked knuckles cut on whim.

The bums were seldom there in the day,
unless a bitter cold of upstate
New York winter forced them to seek
shelter within the rotting frame,
a wind-break from life outside, left
to their own devices and ingenuity,
often with the bright idea of building
a fire to heat chilled bones and flesh.
Too much wine and a foggy, half-conscious
sleep, and unattended flames scurried
on one occasion outside the borders
of rocks and ceramic floortile,
sirens waking them from death
into the warm notion they had
before wine took them over.

In summer we sat with the bums
up on the track beyond the water tower,
them with their Gallo port, us with Schaffer,
booze our money and their age bought,
listening to anecdotes in black air
punctuated by glowing periods of Marlboros
fresh from a new pack laid open in communion.
The boys were all there: T.K. and Jimmy,

Crunch and Turkey Townsend, Bart the Calluch,
and then there was Salzie, tattoos wrapped
around his body, demarcations of time
bordered by pasty skin worn translucent.
On the street we flogged them with abuse
but up here, in swollen midnight rising
above the sound of Putty's voice, we listened.
History rolled before us, packed between the present
coughing jag and a future expectant as the night,
still, born between these worlds we listened:
fathers and grandfathers, great uncles like Oxie
Marsh, sleeves cuffed over biceps taunt,
lifting the Model-A Ford into its parking
spot too tight for a parallel, but Oxie managed,
then Putty, taking a swig on Port
launches another story, and we tread
in this river of words, connecting
backwaters and whirlpools of our own
memories stolen from dusty attics, family picnics.

Standing in the middle
of the mansion, looking up
through the hole burned straight
to the sky I see wind
slanting May rain, the chill
in the air drafting upward too.
The raindrops making it to the center

of the roof fall straight
down to the floors below
and I feel curious about how
I can see rain traveling two
different ways, like I am,
now, in two different places:
Here, within this structure,
young again, but old
to the touch of cold May rain,
and here, within a fold
of memory, still I can
smell the charcoal locked within
this derelict flame.

THE HONEYSUCKLE VINE

In those last moments, before the pills took effect, Hendrick Mueller remembered. A flashing vista, a kaleidoscope, pinwheel collage of his family. His four children, now grown with families of their own, hovered before him. Hendrick held onto the facts, but allowed his mind to travel over distant memories--faces of his children at different stages of their lives flipped in his mind's eye in a random pattern without chronology or reason he could infer. With concentration, he found he could focus on a static vision of William, and his memory clarified. How many years, he thought, but felt the vision fade when he tried to be exact, so Hendrick just let the scene play out in his memory--smooth, no effort.

William, the oldest, a dreamer of a boy reading on the front porch, the honeysuckle vine dry and withered, a fresh October chill in the air. Dorothea, the oldest girl, only a year and a half younger than William. What was she, twelve? Yes, about that, beautiful and lithe, watchful over Ann and Louise, small, had to be what--three and five? Their ages became quite clear to him now. He felt Dorothea at his side, touch his arm, the soft, warm blush of her breath on his neck, near his ear.

"Papa," she said, "why are you so worried. You have

work. Uncle Lucius gives you plenty of work. Everything will be all right, Papa. You'll see. No matter what."

Hendrick heard himself *ach* aloud in the bedroom and felt the warmth of his own urine saturate his shorts, the bedclothes beneath him. The note on the night stand was still underneath his wire-rim glasses.

His head lolled back on the pillow and Hendrick forced his eyes to stay open. He could still hear his daughter's question, hovering in the air since 1936, and now, twenty-two years later, he pined to tell Dorothea the truth. Lucius was bankrupt, the land he owned mortgaged to buy new lots, new houses Hendrick did the masonry work for. That it was all gone--extended collateral. But Dorothea's unwavering faith, which he once took for naivete but discovered was really a wisdom beyond her years, was right. He got work, they survived. Lucius died in the poorhouse. Refused his offer of help. A proud man, Lucius.

The bittersweet survivor luck Hendrick felt spun into grateful pleasure, and his pleasure spun into his work. He could feel his hands in his memory, a lather of cement, but not too much, the brick or stone placed firmly in place. And he saw, eyes still open as he lay supine on his marital bed, the same bed on which he and Katrina conceived those four children, a vision as clear as any vision he ever saw, a vision distilled through the crack in the ceiling and the bedroom's curling wallpaper, a vision of Dorothea's house, a house he built along with Francis, her husband, and Karl,

his German father, and Jamie, Francis' Irish uncle by marriage.

The vision brought the feeling back, pride and love, eyes glazing over but not spoiling the pristine vision, even when he remembered Dorothea's oldest son, Carl, then only four but old enough to climb the ten-foot ladder and crawl out on a thin beam of house frame. It made Hendrick anxious, even in memory, but only for a second because he also remembered Francis talk smoothly to the child, keeping him still while he slowly climbed the ladder and crawled out to his son, bringing him to safety.

The anxious moment passed and his reverie continued--sitting out back after the dark caused them to quit, little Carl passing from one sitting man to the other, a beautiful, active child, his grandson. And the fireflies provoking Carl into a chatter of delight.

And Hendrick again felt the warm afterglow of physical labor, labor that would house this extension of his family, the comforting ache mingling with the effect of beer. Cold beer. So cold it hurt to drink it too fast. Hendrick came to love drinking beer ice cold. It was an American thing to do. And into this feeling, Hendrick, lying in his deathbed, felt Carl crawl up into his lap, melting into place as he did so many years before.

The child. The children. They all ran in front of his eyes now. Their children--his grandchildren--running into each other, out of place and time as his children ran in his

mind's eye before, a fast paced shuffle of little ones, a whirl of colored motion, until it slowed and there was Dorothea's youngest, David, ten years younger then the boy on the roof, this boy walking up from the athletic field in his Little League outfit. And with him was Louise's oldest, just two years older than David. He could see them from his vantage point on the porch, their images wavering in the heat, the crossed field like a shimmering lake, the noise of familiar young voices, excited, cres-cendoing in approach. Two hot Little Leaguers, knowing
in Grandma's and Grandpa's refrigerator was some ice cold *7-Up*, and could we *please* have some because we're dyin' of thirst, Grandpa. Bubbles that tickle. The honeysuckle in bloom, heavy in the air as they sat on the porch and talked about baseball, a game Hendrick grew to love by hearing about it in this way, though he never came to understand it.

The children. Many an afternoon he went down to the ballfield, but sitting in the small stands bothered him, especially some of the parents. Obnoxious people. It soiled it for Hendrick until he quit going. Still, he enjoyed the boys' talk of it, their *rehashing* the games for him a part of the ritual. And *then* Grandpa this, and *then* Grandpa that. Katrina kept a schedule of the games taped to the Fridgidaire, each game day circled in red.

He could not think of children without seeing Katrina's face. Katrina who never asked for anything except when she

asked to move from their retirement in Florida, back here to Suffern to be near "her babies". Hendrick was ashamed now of his anger towards his wife after they moved. Nothing was right, and she lapsed after dull, brief complaints into perfect, dutiful, suffered silence. Position taken, position understood. Coming home after a morning of surf fishing he would tell her about the tide changes, lure information exchanged on shore by other fishermen, some with their wives fishing right along with them. And he met a nice couple from Kansas, German heri-tage, Johnnie and Barbra Fisher, and was that funny, their names. But Katrina just cooked his midday dinner, sat with him until he was finished, listening without reaction. No, she didn't want anything to eat, her stomach was upset, and did he mind if she could do the dishes while he finished.

Hendrick wanted her to be happy, so he became angry with her refusal to give this life a try. In Florida for over ten weeks, Hendrick could take it no longer--this suffered silence. Fists gaveling the table, he shouted, *why,* to his wife. Why couldn't she try this life, one they worked for, deserved, wanted. *You* wanted, she spoke, still turned to the sink, though she did no more washing.

Katrina, he pleaded, understand me now. We've been able to change, change to a new life. How hard it was to change, remember? Turning to him she spoke, the rung dish-cloth twisting in her hands. I remember, Hendrick, I remember. Do you? Whose dream is this, Hendrick? Is

it really yours? I remember when we quit going to church, Hendrick, do you? That man, *our* minister, speaking about German people that way. Were we Americans, or those Huns, other horrible names. You refused to go to church again! Do we really fit in, Hendrick? Old world, new world. You married an old world girl, Hendrick,--a German farmgirl. It is what I am, Hendrick. I was comfortable where I was. I miss my children, Hendrick. I miss my babies.

He remembered the heat of that night, so hot he could not sleep. And the smell in the air of things rotting. Close air. Suffocating air. A sickening rot to it, so unlike the honeysuckle vine at home.

The next day Hendrick Mueller went down to the beach and gave away his tackle and went back to their white stucco house and helped his wife pack for home. Five years ago, a request he didn't regret complying with.

Katrina. He saw her as she was at twenty, without forgetting how it was now. Skin like goose-down, as white as fresh snow. She still had a fair complexion, still soft to the touch, even though wrinkled. In the winter she always complained it was too dry. That new furnace Francis helped put in. The old one *kaput*, done. At least that is fixed, Hendrick thought. She does not have that to worry about. She will be warm.

Hendrick could feel the drug dragging him away. Regrets. He didn't regret doing this. The prostrate cancer was too far along. He didn't want Katrina to live out her

old age with him an invalid. He couldn't even hold his water. When he tried to walk the pain became too great, so he stayed in bed. Katrina tried to keep up, but he saw how old and tired she was. Shuffling feet on hard wood floors, her labored struggle to get up and down stairs, fix him meals, keep him clean. That was the worst of it. Can't even hold my water. A useless old man. A burden.

The slam of the screen door, though muffled, surprised Hendrick out of his thoughts. Dizzy from the narcotic, he forced himself to hear. Dorothea? Too soon. She's here too early. Struggling to prop himself up on his elbow, the old man tried to focus his vision on the night stand where the note was in open display. With a deep breath he lunged at the paper. Though his glasses went flying, he grabbed hold of the note, listening. Did they hear the glasses? It was quiet downstairs, so he surmised they heard some-thing, but when conversation resumed he relaxed and fell back against the pillow. Thinking about putting the note in the table drawer, Hendrick attempted to summon up one more surge of energy. It was no use. He felt sluggish, as if under water. A thick, warm water. It was all he could do to just raise the note to his face. No longer able read the words, he doubted he could even with his glasses on. But he remembered. *It is me that should be taking care of you.*

Hendrick Mueller called out his wife's name twice. In reply he heard Dorothea, from what seemed to be a great distance, though he felt the stroke of her hand on his

cheek. Papa, she said. It's me. Somehow Hendrick found the strength to turn away from his daughter, managing to hide the note beneath the pillow. He heard his own fatigued wheezing, the moist, warm exhales against the pillowsheet, his sour breath. He hoped she would not feel the bed, his mess. Could she smell it?

A cool breeze passed him. Sensing Dorothea by the nightstand he kept his eyes shut. Another breeze, and the receding of measured footfalls. Opening his eyes for the last time, Hendrick blinked, but everything remained a blur. The room spun with sound and light, the undertow of phenobarbital spinning him toward its vortex, but the perfume was heavy and distinct, so heavy he could taste the honeysuckle as he spun away.

ELECTRIC DESIRE: BEAR MOUNTAIN, 1967

I kissed Walt Whitman full on the lips,
a brief liaison overlooking a Hudson
swollen with summer rain.
What the hell, Uncle Walt deserves
a kiss from a boy with his girl
looking on, her mouth fixed in an O
the tip of her silent tongue forming *olive*,
but her throat gaggled, rattled, then belched
a relief of air: *Ahhh, don't put that*
in your mouth, it's dirty, and she looked
over Walt to the birds hovering above,
circling my head, waiting.
I loved her at that moment,
embraced Walt's bronze, tarnished shoulders.
I love you, I shouted, and she looked
into the aureola of sunlight,
squinting, *You're weird*,
I held Walt in eclipse,
watched her brisk walk away,
and looked to the river through
the trees of Bear Mountain,
then jumped pedestal, running full
long into her woods.

FORTY-FOOT

It's a long, lonely free fall
past quartz and layered time,
past the moment when Jimmy leapt
too far, all arms in a helicopter whirl
drawn back from a wall kiss.

At Forty-foot we went to the edge
of rock and air and found balance.
Balls caught in an upswing of fear,
my toes grasped a fossil surface,
a bloodwash punctuating my desire
to see the drop.

At twenty we're all immortal,
even when akimbo.
teetering on the edge, jumping,
I drop center, hitting the dark,
hard, forgiving surface lost
for a moment into its cold wet gullet,
exhumed and released the next,
gasping breath from a new world.

GRANDMA'S ROOM

He would think years later of this time, think of the woman, his grandmother, sitting in her double bed counting out prayers on her rosary. Hair mottled gray and black, short curls peeked from underneath her sleeping net, her glasses sitting on the table between them, he in his grandfather's bed. Grandpa dead three years. He was ten. Ten years old and he saw it all, taking in the room, washed in night shadows flickering upon the walls. Four candles sat on the mantle, two on either side of the Jesus statue, center-placed in prominence and benediction.

He would think years later of how he saw it all, a ten-year-old boy, placed in his grandmother's charge while his parents hit the town, listening, watching it all, learning family anecdotes, mythology. And more. Listen with rapt attention to this woman, his father's mother, weave stories together, singing, her voice high and rapid, dark eyes flashing, heavy arms flaying, suddenly sliding into whispers, her gnarled hands smoothing the sheets about her legs and hips, a sigh escaping when a memory touched her deep.

Yes, he would think, all this time later, his grandmother dead some thirty years now, how this room, filled with her Catholic icons, pictures of relatives he

never knew except from her remembering, this room smelling of liniment, dust, and time, this room which housed those two double beds with springs that creaked in harmony for every movement made on them--this was where he learned to tell stories.

"And that was the time Davey," she started, the boy in memory listening to her voice, but the man writing knowing its quality came from the French girl she was when she came to this country, only twelve, but by sixteen married to his German grandfather, this quality of speech reaching at him through time--knowing that while the lilt and music of her French accent was still there it was also made rough around its edges by the gutteral German she learned while working in the fields of Pennsylvania.

Hard, demanding farm work, she toiled side by side with his grandfather's people, all men, but she held her own keeping up with not only the work but their caustic tongues. Yes, he knew now, by piecing together the stories, analyzing them over and over in his mind where this quality of voice came from, but as a young boy it was just what he *knew*--this was Grandma's voice, and these were her stories, most heard before, but with an occasional surprise. And he accepted and listened to them, without time's judgment of motives, chronology, or even meaning.

If meaning came to him then it was like an ever-changing cloud in his mind, not solid and dead, but swirling and alive, and those stories rolled about his

head like his grandmother's finger rolled lightly over her beads, the secure touch of the familiar.

"Grandma, tell me about when you were in school, you know, when you first got over here." The old woman's head raised, her thoughts traveling to the words he wanted to hear, the rolls of flesh around her neck stretching a bit, then settling back into layered folds. He liked to watch how animated her face became in the process of telling, and at times from a certain angle he'd think how her face with its many lines created by age and plumpness would resemble Howdy Doody's. More often than not, though, he would settle back into the feathered pillow, the sharp smell of its starched case surrounding him, his head sinking into its luxury, muffling the words Grandma spoke just enough to seem as if they came only from *his* memory, which of course they were. A concert of memory and reality.

And now, as the man thought back to that time, memory and reality again intertwining, he settled his child's head back into the pillow, hearing the quality of the woman's voice, yet transformed by the years and his knowledge into an amalgam even he could not discern--but he didn't care, her story now his, her voice, his vocabulary, her experience, his memory, it didn't matter anymore to him.

"Davey, Davey," she would say, "you don't know what it was like. Mama and Papa, they wanted so to fit in, to be Americans, and I went to school. Thirteen I was, a young woman, but they put me in the grade school with all those

children who laughed at me. I didn't understand what they said, but I knew they were laughing. At *me*, at me, Davey. Think of it. You can't hold your head up, belittled. These children laugh--I can still hear, Davey."

And he felt the warmth around his cheeks, the pillow holding his flush and embarrassment for her. She was alone, and he knew how that felt. Oh yes, he knew well, listening to the words.

"Her, Davey. It was her I hated the most. She made them laugh. Teacher. You know what they looked like then? Prim. Yes, Miss Prim. With her high button shoes, polished, shuffling along. I see them headed to my desk, ruler behind her back. I know. That ruler meant for me, her nasty, nasty, high-faluting voice calling my name. Sharp, from her nose--Marguerite, Marguerite. I'd look up at her and tell her in French *cuchon*. Yes, Davey, you know the word, don't you. Pig, pig, I'd call her. I'd spit it at her in my mind, but say it sweet, but she wouldn't smile, her face like she just sucked a lemon. And her hair, Davey, they wore it drawn back tight, in a bun. Yes, that's right, my boy, Grandma used to wear it that way too, it was the style. Oh, Davey, you're right about that too. A hairpin stuck through the bun. And yes, I did stick someone with the pin once. In New York, yes, but what could I do? That man was bothering me. I used to be a beauty, Davey, not like now, but that's another story, don't interrupt."

But he knew she didn't mind, her laughter telling him that, but still, she wanted to get to the good part, the part that would cause her to stare at the memory, eyes narrowed and piercing, her smile a touch vindictive, measuring the proud, upturned chin.

"They all wore white blouses, shirts, Davey, a woman's shirt. Blouses starched like a board, pleated, all the pleats neat and pressed. And I'd try to answer, but the words wouldn't come, and I'd feel her standing behind me. Her breath, I could hear her breath, mingling with the starting snickers, those brats. Oh, but it wasn't their fault, but hers. Her breath, I felt it start to rise, feel its heat at my ear as she repeated the question, again, and again, until...."

Crack, her clapped hands startling the air, and the boy, sitting up from the folds of his nest, turned to show her he was paying attention. Her head nodded recognition and she turned back to the memory, and he would watch, watch the anger rise, fresh and new as the day it happened, her hands coming to her lips as if in prayer.

"Oh, Davey, I didn't allow her the satisfaction of showing her how much that ruler hurt, then she'd hit me again, with the metal edge this time, but still I wouldn't move. No, no, I do not give her that satisfaction. I bear it until the day I could bear it no more. When she ordered me to the dunce's corner, to wear the dunce's cap, I got up, her back turned to my rising. You know, we had desks

with ink wells, a hollowed out place for the bottle to sit. And I stood, staring at her retreat to the front of the room, picking up the ink bottle, but not taking my eyes from her, waiting, waiting for her to turn and then...."

He watched her, watched that stare fill the bedroom as she told how she threw the ink, splattering, ruining the starched, pleated, stark white blouse, watched his grandmother breath heavily with excitement, feeling his own heart pound too.

Collecting himself before she did, the boy asked, "And then you went back no more, right, Grandma?" And her body still caught up in the sight of the bottle flying through the air in triumph, did not respond right away to his question, but after a moment, still staring, would slowly nod her head until she turned and repeated his question as the fact. She never returned.

In his mind's eye the man saw the boy settle back into the pillow, his eyes taking in the room.

Saw the picture of the Virgin Mary on the wall by the bureau, the bleeding sacred heart in the middle of her chest, saw the photographs of the great-grandfather he never knew, the one with him and Grandma's Uncle Julius sitting on kids' toys, Julius on the old time tricycle with no handle-bars, the front wheel steered by what looked like an air-plane pilot control stick--and Grandpa Desoblin, cigarette hanging out under his handlebar mustache, him sitting on a rocking horse. Both of them wore three-piece

suits with watch chains, each a bowler derby, but it was his great-grandfather he concentrated on. Even from this distance the boy could see the jaunty angle of the hat. But, of course, it was more.

Stories told in this room, to be told again, of how the man would have his wife dress up as a man to join him in the bars in France--the pictures his Grandma created for him, of them dancing on the tables, her joy re-creating these events, allowing her explanation that women could not go into bars then, not proper ones anyway, to be accepted by the boy without question at first, but after time the *whys* would come and she'd patiently explain the social providence of the situation.

The boy locked onto another picture, Grandpa Desoblin on a motorcycle with a sidecar, his Aunt Lucy, really his Daddy's aunt, holding his father, on her lap, a small boy, no more than four or five. Yes, he could recognize the face of Aunt Lucy who lived in the house he could see from the vestibule where Grandpa Meyns used to keep his parakeets, raised them. And now he was dead and Grandma only kept a few, and the boy wanted to get up and go there to talk to the ones left, the way he and Grandpa used to, but it was late and Grandma would object, maybe even get angry, and he didn't want to risk the dark temper that seemed to well just beneath the surface. So he closed his eyes and placed himself in there, spoke to the parakeets, tried to

imagine the warmth of the afternoon sun that would flood the small room through its many windows.

The man allowed the boy to snuggle down in the covers, allow him to bask once more in the sunlight, but his distance and knowledge could not maintain the reverie. The forty-year old man, wanted to keep the ten-year old from being touched by the memories that now crept to the fore of his mind, knowing he was already touched by them and they'd always be there, creeping at least around the conscious periphery, so he gave the young boy the touchstone of Grandma's temper, jumping track from the vestibule and sunlight, away from the thought of how it was six strong throws of a stone between Aunt Lucy's and Grandma's, six strong throws of a baseball sized rock across the fields where Grandpa Meyns' garden used to be to the three-year-old memory of how he sat under the kitchen window the day his Grandpa died, listening to his Grandma's anger.

And he was mad too, mad they kicked him out of the house when it was him helped Grandpa up from the field, just him and Grandpa at home after everyone left to visit Mommy in the hospital. Grandpa got sick. Sat down on the ground, heard him call, "Davey, Davey, come here to me, child!" And he came, first getting water from the well, then acting like a cane, Grandpa's hand heavy and tight on his shoulder and he had to push hard with his legs just to keep from being pushed into the ground. Climbed the hill they did, climbed it into the house where he fixed Grandpa

a Bromo, listened to the fizz issue from the glass, still feeling/tasting the smell, the hairs in his nose seeming to vibrate to the pattern of fizz from the glass Grandpa tossed back. His glasses were off and the boy searched the gnarled, swollen hands, retraced their steps to the living room, then the kitchen. No glasses. About to step outside, thinking they could be near the handplow Grandpa was pushing when he fell down, the boy stopped when he heard the yell from the bedroom.

Bedroom. The boy's eyes opened and be turned with a start toward his Grandma, now crocheting instead of praying, her hands as quick and dexterous as they were with the beads. Then the boy thought, it was right there, right where Grandma lies now, that Grandpa was that day. There. He lay on Grandma's bed, not his, and the boy knew this was out of the ordinary.

"Davey, call them," he said. "Call them at the hospital. Get your daddy, tell him ...." His grandfather stopped, his breathing short, but deep and forced. He stared at the old man, felt himself stare, stared even as he backed away from the wave of the hand, listened to the punctuation of gulped air, focusing on the brown spots covering his grandfather's hand, most the size of quarters, waving him on into the living room and the phone.

Calling the hospital the boy found the receptionist did not believe his story, thought it was a prank.

Finally, his grandfather had to get up and come to the phone himself.

The ten-year old boy sat up and turned to his grandmother, feeling the panic he felt that day as intensely as its origin. The old woman stopped her crocheting and asked, "What's the matter, Davey? I thought you were sleeping, you were so quiet."

"I was thinking of Grandpa." He watched for her reaction. Sometimes it would go soft and sweet, others sad, but on this occasion her face puckered up, then slid into a scowl. "Grandma?" he asked, knowing he was treading on uncertain ground, "How come Grandpa Meyns didn't use his tractor the day he got the heart attack? It was real hot that day and..."

"Old fool," she barked out. "It still makes me mad, middle of July, a scorcher it was, Davey, hot as blazes and he's out there using the old handplow." He watched her shake her head, then turn away from him. At first the boy thought she was crying, but in a moment she picked up her crocheting and with intense, sullen concentration worked her hands in silence, her eyes clear and focused.

He realized this was not the night for a session of stories, so he drifted back to the pillow, smelled its case again, decided to get the full effect, billowed his sheets and bedcover with air, snapping the top edges downward, then up and down again, blankets and sheet rolling like an

ocean wave. He breathed in the stark smell, heard the crispness in the waffling sheet.

"You're not passing gas over there, are you, boy?"

"No, Grandma," he answered, pulling the top of the sheet up and over his nose.

"You better not be, just what I need, smelling boy farts all night long. Stop the foolishness."

So he settled back into quiet, his thoughts jumping, chaotic, Grandma at the sink in the kitchen, he outside under the window on an old rattan couch, smelling of mildew, now listening to her wash dishes and speak in French, hard biting sounds snapping at the air. He knew she was swearing but also knew how worried she was, her sound retreating toward the bedroom, then back to the dishes. She had been howling before. He heard her when he slipped around to the front of the house and the bedroom window, heard his father coax her out of the room, then order her to quiet down. She was kicked out too. He was mad when they came home and ordered him out. He was there, there when they weren't, helping Grandpa to the house, getting him medicine.

The ten-year-old in his grandfather's bed switched his thought to the barn where Grandpa used to keep chickens, saw the weathered, chipped chest his grandfather kept his medicine in, exact duplicates of everything he had in the house. Two kinds of pills, *Sloan's deep heating rub, Alka Seltzer, Cloverine Salve*, all so he'd have it if he had to

stay all day up in the barn. And she would ring the bell that sat on the back porch, glare hard up at the barn, pace the backyard sidewalk, stopping every few feet, hand on hips until she flayed away at the bell. It would stop after a time.

The boy thought about the mornings and afternoons he played around his grandfather, helped him with the chickens, tossing them feed or ground eggshells, but his mind kept skipping back to his grandmother, pacing the sidewalk, ringing the bell. He saw her in the distance through the barn's window, caked with dust, laced with cobwebs, her motion taking on a wave-like quality.

The boy woke that morning to the sound and smell of frying bacon. He heard his grandmother humming, talking to the dog. He lay back in bed, forgiving her for what he remembered the night before. Grandpa was using the hand-plow because of her. Mad at her again. Still, it wasn't her fault. He shouldn't have been using the handplow in that sun. The boy forgave his grandmother because it made him feel good to do so, and the smell of bacon filled the house. But he started when he heard her call him. It wasn't the call for breakfast, that would have been more sing-songy. This was a short call to attention, one that demanded immediate response.

He found her in the kitchen pantry, sitting on the step stool she used for retrieving the top shelves' can goods. "Davey, come here to Grandma. I want you to see

something." Tentatively, he came closer to her, seeing the syringe sticking into the vial of insulin. "Watch me, Davey, don't look away. It's time you started growing up to the world. Shush and come here. I know you're frightened of needles, but you just have to watch. I've got to do this every day, time you get over this foolishness." So he watched.

Watched her tap the glass of the syringe, listened to her explanation about air bubbles, watched her swab the blue and red veined thigh, saw her knead the flesh up into a swollen fold, plunging the needle in. "Stop that sniveling now, you see how Grandma has to suffer every day. You see how folks have to suffer things in this life. Not everything is easy." She pulled back on the plunger and a spiral of blood blossomed in the glass tube, then disappeared as she gave herself the injection.

And then they had breakfast, eating in silence except when she spoke to the dog, who waited for her to swipe up the toast crumbs and stray scraps of bacon, his grandmother scooping it all into her hand, offering the dog her palm. The boy only wanted to escape, run out into the day, away from her now. He waited until he was excused, made sure he walked slowly to the door, careful not to allow the wind to slam it shut, nothing to impede his escape towards the smell of lilacs blooming by the side of the barn.

And it's here the forty-year old man wanted to leave him, a fiction he needed to create, for the boy and for

himself. Wishing he could forgive it all, knowing the world he remembered was what made the ten-year old he imagined, wishing the fiction made everything turn out all right. But he could not keep the boy from remembering, remembering it all as he sprinted toward the barn, could not keep the boy from returning to that room over the years, keep him from hearing the stories weave together into a strange, vibrant harmony.

So the fiction was born, and the remembering continued, and the boy ran toward the heavy, sweet smell of lilacs.

HARVEST

I learned to give my father shots
for the pain cutting through
dilaudid, by practicing my art

with an orange picked from a tree
outside the backdoor, so fragrant
I tasted each plunge, saw a spray spring

into sunlight, closed my eyes to breath
in, swallow the moment, but I felt
strange, my hand quivered, so I stole

back what I gave, the only way
I could, and opened the orange skin
carefully, under control,

placing each section in a row,
neat and aesthetic on white
paper towels, offered one to my son,

one to my mother, one to my wife,
watched them suck the juices,
slowly chew in the most bitter parts,

all save my five-year old, A.J.,

who spit out the bitter flesh
on the white paper towel,

smiled, asked for another,
and I hesitated, wanting to hoard
the rest for my own,

but this was my son
so I gave him what he wanted
and I ate what tasted flesh he left.

THE PISTOL IN MY CLOSET

There is a pistol in my closet. Sometimes, when alone, I take it down, run my hand over the holster, feel the pit marks metal corrosion and time have created. Its once black color mottled white and green. The smell of leather and mildew.

*

It will be seven years this November: my brother and I sat at our parent's kitchen table in central Florida, coffee cups steaming before us. It was late, the house quiet except for the labored breathing of our father coming out of the radio monitor across the room. He coughed, and we both started, but relaxed when his breathing returned to its wheezing, but uniform pattern.

"That was a good idea," Carl said, motioning toward the monitor.

"I can hear him at this end of the house now. It helps. He can't talk above a whisper. The last stroke did that." But it wasn't a stroke that would kill him. It was the cancer that started in his colon, now spreading quickly through his vital organs.

"Those shots seem to help," my brother stated flatly, his chest rising in a swell, his breath expelling slowly, controlled.

"You coming back? After?" Carl lived near Mather Air Force base in Sacramento, where he was stationed. He had taken personal leave time to come to Florida. I watched him think, his brow and face contoured from the strain of those thoughts. He told me no, he thought it was more important to be here now, while there was still time.

"I think you're right, Carl. It's not going to be much longer. Keep him comfortable the doctor said."

"What you're doing, Davey, it's...."

"Hey. I'm here, and it's what he wants. Not to go into the hospital."

In a distracted voice he said, "It was a bitch to convince them I had to come out now." He looked up at me and continued in a more straightforward manner. "I insisted, at least as much as you can insist with the Air Force." It always amused me the way he spoke of the Air Force. I smiled and nodded with understanding. I think Carl now misses the Air Force, retired a Lt. Colonel some three years. When I think of this time, at our parents' home, I always remember I told Carl how I used a tape of him in an F-4 Phantom during the last days of the bombing in Cambodia. We were on the sun-porch, an afternoon squall, unusual for Florida in November, beating a steady percussion on the corrugated tin roof.

"You did what?" he asked me, and I laughed, explaining it would probably never be published anyway. I threw an old literary chestnut at him from Balzac saying, *All first*

novels should be written, then stored in a trunk. I was also curious. Did it really make a difference after all this time? I asked him.

"We shouldn't have been there. How did you get that tape?" Carl asked. I explained it was Dad's, and Carl remembered sending it to him. "Thought he'd get a kick out of it." Dad did, but when I first heard the tape in seventy-five, Dad proudly stated, "That's your brother there," and he was right, Carl's voice easily recognized as he tacted down on a target, running out grid numbers. I sat dumbfounded with the realization this computer read-out meant my brother, as weapons system officer, was dropping a load of napalm on live human beings. I was twenty-five, idealistic, and naive.

I didn't tell Carl this last part, only that Dad let me listen to it, and then finally borrow the tape. It was at this moment I started to wonder what it was like for him. Knowing he was killing another human being. Did he think about it at the time? I still wonder if he thinks about it now. But I did find out something about my brother that day.

I asked him about the grid numbers, and he went into a technical explanation. Carl laughed when he noticed my consternation. "Here," he said, "let me show you." His icetea became a target, his hand a facsimile of a F-4. "The grid numbers are map coordinates, so we can plot out the approach, launch, then roll out. Look, we come into

the target at a steep angle." Carl tried to compensate in his model by outstretching his arm over his head, but this did not satisfy his sense of realism. The ice tea glass swooped off the glasstop table, and Carl positioned it in the porch's corner. Backing away to the opposite side, he surveyed and estimated the approach angle. "It all sounds like geometry and physics, but becomes less academic when you know the reason. We come in with a great deal of speed, and at this sharp angle so our payload can be launched, and then we break sharply away into a seven, eight, sometimes a nine-G roll."

I see Carl turn his palm over and away from the ice tea. "So the bad guys can't get us with SAMS. Heat seekers."

I had seen a magazine with a photo of a pilot pulling four G's, the flesh of his face contorted and pressed against the skull. I told Carl and he became amused. "Once a pen fell out of my G-suit during one of those rolls. It literally broke my toe." I now find this anecdote amusing too, but I was focused at the time, pressing ahead with the line of questioning I saw the opening for.

"What I remember most from the tape is how things were clear and defined. Like a John Ford western. Good guys, bad guys. Hell, I even remember a guy playing *Turkey in the Straw* on a harmonica." I started to laugh, perhaps as much to break the tension, as to counter-effect any edge my

voice might have implied. I really wanted to know, without any hidden agenda. It was quiet for a time, Carl smiling at first, fading to a pensive stare off through the screen, focusing on some unknown object. This focus was so intent I searched the area he was directed toward, finding nothing out of the ordinary. "Did you ever think about what was down there?" I was careful of my voice's tone.

"Do you mean did I ever consider not releasing a pod of jellied gasoline on a fellow man before?" Carl was playing off my measured tone, but the irony flooded back at him, as it would for me. He thought about it--seriously. "I remember the first time. It was the toughest, of course. No matter how much they prepare you to operate in the *correct military fashion,* it still gets you. It did me. I almost didn't launch. But I remembered I was a pragmatist, and I never hesitated again."

During my adolescence I knocked Carl off the pedestal I had placed him on as a child. Football hero, track star, good student. It's still a family joke, always laughed at, the game against Clarkstown, Carl ran back a punt 83 yards. A broken field run, an event of beauty that would have been captured by Dad's eight-millimeter Kodak movie camera. Instead, on film were alterating views of the action, sky, and the backs of the people in front of us, because the eight-year-old me jumped up and down in ecstasy while holding Dad's arm. I knocked this real and mythic figure off that pedestal when I first heard the tape. Though I

still loved my brother, it was hard for me at the time to respect what he did. Time changed some of that, but this revelation of his internal struggle radically changed the way I thought of Carl. I'm now a bit ashamed of myself for not realizing sooner, without the explicit evidence. My brother became a human being again, without the measuring of his created fall from grace.

We talked all day, and we talked long into the night, in that shorthand way members of the same family have because of shared anecdotes. A half bottle of Bushmill's sat on the table, cracked open earlier, and the whiskey loosened our tongues out of polite, reserved conversation into areas of remembered hurt and happiness.

"Has Janie been over much?" he asked, referring to our forty-two-year old sister, seven years older than me, three years my brother's junior.

"Some. Says she can't stand seeing Dad this way."

"Right." His reply contained a sarcastic edge. "Mom told me about the other night." He was talking about a few nights prior to his arrival, when my father, panicked with fear, asked if Jesus would come to take him. My father was not a particularly religious man, but his fate, in all its present and harsh reality, caused him to question the presence and place of his soul. My mother and I spoke to him in soft, reassuring voices, but his hand gripped mine with such surprising pressure, pressure I thought not possible in his condition, that his fear transferred to me.

Finally he relaxed, then asked me if his pistol was still between the mattress and boxspring, where he kept it the last fifteen years after moving to Florida. I told him no, which was not the truth, but after giving him a shot of Demerol and waiting for him to nod off to sleep, I slipped the weapon carefully out without waking him. He never asked me for it again.

My mother told Janie of the incident, at least the part about Jesus. Many years before, nineteen to be precise, my sister became a Jehovah's Witness. When she learned about my father's fear she wanted to talk to him about the new age after the Apocalypse. It was to this my brother directed his sarcasm.

"If she only knew how he felt about this."

"Oh, she knows. She's just not thinking clearly, Carl." My brother's eyes narrowed, flashing their brilliant darkness, so much like my father's. The threat of quick, violent anger.

"He told me about this letter. He wrote it years ago," his voice hissed out of clenched teeth.

"You too?" I reached for the whiskey and poured my brother and I both a drink. I smiled and told him, "It's something I don't think she needs to see."

"I guess you're right."

I started to chuckle. "It's an ass-kicker of a letter."

Carl relaxed and snickered. "Doesn't mince words, does it?"

But our laughter died into a silent depression. Out of this depression I said, in the quiet tones of confidence, "He made me promise to give it to her."

Carl did not respond right away, but drank deeply from the coffee mug, then said, "What did you do with the gun?"

I did not answer him, but rose from my seat and retrieved it from my bedroom. With it I brought another gun, a shotgun. My brother's attention perked up. "Jesus, the twelve gauge."

"It was Granpa's, right?"

"Hell, it was Granpa Desoblin's," he said, referring to our great-grandfather.

"Really? I just remember Granpa Meyns never missed a rabbit with it. Or was that Dad?"

"That was Dad's claim. Hey, *I* hunted with that gun."

While the barrel was tarnished and in need of bluing, it was a pretty gun. Brought over from France when our great-grandfather emigrated. Belgian made, double barrel hammerlock, tooled stock. Though nicked and dulled, it was still good wood. I also knew the sentimental value it held for my brother.

"I think you should have this, Carl."

"I'd like that." He took the gun, hands playing down the stock, caressing the barrel, opening the chamber. He looked through the barrel into the overhead kitchen light.

"Dirty," he said, but continued to examine the gun in detail.

"If you don't mind I'd like to keep this pistol," I said as flatly as I could. Suddenly it had become extremely important to me. I saw him nod yes, though not emphatically, his attention still fixed on the shotgun.

I heard my father moan over the intercom. It was low in pitch, rising in tone, then fading into that regular wheeze. My hand reached for the holster and the leather creaked like a saddle as I drew it to me. I sat there, listening to the leather sing as my fingers slowly kneaded the cowhide. I popped the strap off the silver metal stud and opened the holster flap. Revealed was the extra clip, sheathed in its own leather pouch, and the pistol grip.

How long had it been since it was last fired? Perhaps it was that day. Long ago. Nineteen years. I slipped the gun from its resting place, heard it slide from the leather pocket.

It wasn't as heavy as I remembered it. It was, after all, only a 7.65 millimeter, the equivalent of a .32 caliber. It was blue-black, though parts were worn silver, and dust and dirt were caked brown within its many crevices and toolings. Engraved on the barrel was the name, *Walther*, an ornate signature. After that, in block lettering was: *Waffenfabrik Walther, Zella-Mehlis (Thur).* Below that was: *Walther's Patent Cal. 7.65m/m.* And to the side: *Mod. PP.*

I pressed the button to eject the clip. I picked up the gun with my right hand, held it firmly, then with my left pulled at the grip on the back of the barrel. The dual, harsh metal click broke the silence, and my brother looked at me suddenly.

I disengaged the safety and did it again. The first time was to make sure the chamber was empty. The second time, with the safety off, I engaged the hammer. Pointing it toward the wall I drew on the trigger. The hammer clicked down.

"Dad and I used to shoot raccoons and woodchucks with this," I said, as much to myself as my brother. Carl laughed through his nose, a snorting sound. "Shit," I continued, "we used to shoot at damn raccoons feasting at the trash cans. Put more holes in the trash cans than in the raccoons. They always came back, but we scared the garbage shitless."

My brother held out his hand for the gun and I gave it to him. I felt my pulse rise. I was suddenly very jealous of him just holding it. I said, "Did I ever tell you about the time we shot at a woodchuck? No? I was, what, fifteen? Woodchuck in the middle of the field, out by the barn. In New York? Dad wants the first shot, but I'm stubborn. Take two, three pops at it. The woodchuck stares at me. Grass and dirt are spitting in its face, he just stares. Dad finally gets the gun from me and just

then the woodchuck takes off in a dead run. Dad pulls off one shot. Through the head. On a dead run!"

Carl was amused, but continued to hold the gun, feeling and playing with its weight. "It has good balance," he said. "Light, but balanced."

"Right through the head. At forty yards. A pistol shot."

"Real nice gun."

"There's another reason why I'd like to keep it. Remember when Janie moved away? When she first turned into a Witness?" Carl looked at me, eyebrow raised -- a familiar gesture. "You know how it affected Mom, how she almost had a nervous breakdown?"

"Yes, and little brother got her a job as a clerk at the drug store he delivered prescriptions for." He smiled that half-smile of his, the left side of his mouth turning up, exposing a dimple, eyes crinkling up at the corners. I recall how, at that moment, I noted those eye-wrinkles were much deeper.

"Yeah," I said, "but I don't know if you heard how I stopped Dad from killing that guy who got her started with the Witnesses."

"No. No. What are you saying?"

"I'd like to think Dad wouldn't have done it, but..."

"I never heard this, David."

It surprised me, and I had to compose myself, formulate the order of the story. "Mom was having a tough day.

She went to visit Janie, visit her grandson, and Janie wouldn't see her. I forget the details, something about having to go to Kingdom Hall, something like that. Anyway, I just got home from school. Mom was crying and Dad was in a rage. Don't remember him being that far off, not like that. I think it had something to do with...." I hesitated, but continued when I saw there was no other way to explain it. "You know, the Witness stuff about how *they* were her family now, and if you're real family didn't accept it...." "I'm familiar with their bullshit. To cut off. Shun." My brother's voice was controlled. Too controlled.

"I went outside with the dog, then there was Dad, bursting out the side door. I saw the pistol. That pistol. He jumped into the car and started it up. He kept turning the starter even after the motor fired." I had been looking away from my brother, but now looked him in the eye. "He couldn't even get the car in gear. Kept jamming at the stick, tires chirping, stalling out. Start, chirp, stall." I looked away again.

"I ran, Carl. Ran toward him. Ripped open the car door and dragged him out. He couldn't even talk straight, just swearing, rambling. But I made out that guy's name. Martinson. Dad kept on repeating his name. I tried to get the gun away, but he held tight. I finally got him to walk away from the car. It was still running, door open, but we just left it there."

I found I was out of breath, tried to gain control. My brother reached out with his free hand and squeezed my arm, not hard, but firmly. I went on more calmly.

"Brought him out to the field, to the old, wooden ice box. Remember that? Beat up old ice box. We opened the door, and I painted a figure of a man on the door's inside. Must have gotten a spray can from the garage. Dad walked back to it though and sprayed J and W on opposite sides of the head I painted. Then we walked back and he started shooting. Went through two clips. I ran back to the house to get more shells. Didn't know what else to do. It was dusk. I remember how the barrel heated up. It glowed. And then it was over. He dropped down on the grass and sat there. He cried. It was the only time I saw him cry openly."

I looked away from Carl. It was strange, I wanted to go on, tell him what I realized years later when thinking about that time, but didn't. There was a *why* in my father's tears. He was crying over the loss he felt, but his tears turned into shame. I remembered. The shame I saw was a realization of a lack of control, the absence of reason - that passion sometimes blinds and makes us less of what we are. And though my father would never have said that, he knew.

We sat there, my brother and I, drinking our Irish whiskey and coffee, then my brother handed me back the pistol, which he kept in his hand all that time. He got up

and said he needed some sleep, I should get the same. As he passed by me on the way to his bed, he rubbed my shoulders, digging his thumbs into my tense muscles, then disappeared into the spare bedroom.

Carl left a few days after that. The day he left, my father whispered, when I was shaving him, "I'll never see him again." I cleaned his face of the shaving cream, then bent down and kissed his forehead. I started to leave, but his hand reached out and fumbled for my arm. "Davey?" he said. "You're my light now. Help me through this." I was never quite sure what he meant by the first part, but I did come to understand the second. I think he would have somehow explained the *light* business but I never asked, because the next day he had a series of strokes that left him speechless. We tried to use a typewriter one time, but the words would not form for him. But he struggled and tried. Now, I think he helped me more than I ever helped him. During the time of his illness I came to learn just how strong a man he was.

In a matter of five weeks my father died. I never gave my sister that letter I promised my father I would. I have ambivalent feelings about that, but I'm not ashamed of it. I think it's for the better. Ironically, about two months after I destroyed the letter, almost four since Dad died, Janie's oldest boy, Peter, nineteen years old, shows up at my parents' house at two o'clock in the morning. He knew his grandmother was in California visiting Carl.

There were some recent robberies in the neighborhood, mostly things taken from carports. Lawn mowers, fishing equipment, golf clubs. When I heard the noise outside I grabbed the Walther down from the closet. It was loaded, cocked, safety off, when I looked out the living room window.

Peter stood in the middle of the driveway, wrapped in a blanket. It was late April, a cold front had come in, and there was Peter, wrapped in a blanket full of grease and oil, a blanket he obviously used as a drop cloth when working on his car. He looked pathetic. Out of a Dickens' novel, a *Grapes of Wrath* character. I opened the front door, and stood in the screen door. "Uncle David?" His voice sounded pathetic, too. I almost laughed, but I could see he was feeling awkward enough.

"What's up, Peter? Come on in," I said, holding the pistol behind my back. I didn't want to frighten him.

He hesitated, and said, "I didn't know where else to go." I motioned him forward with a nod of my head, and he added as he came, "I know it's late. My mom kicked me out."

"Leave the blanket in the carport." Peter came in, and as he walked to the center of the room, I slid the pistol behind the ornate face of the grandfather clock. We sat down in the Florida room, and I found out he was dating a non-Jehovah Witness; his mom strongly disapproved so she gave him an ultimatum, which led to this. I mostly listened to Peter, answering with direct responses to his

questions, did I believe in God, evolution, subjects I could go on about, but I tried to redirect the conversation back to him. Peter was a smart young man, and I was flattered by his confidence in me. Still, I was fighting the impulse to take over the conversation, direct it in a manipulative way. I didn't, but I'd be less than honest if I didn't admit wanting to. Even to this day I think about it, second guess myself from a variety of angles, but I always come round to the fact that no amount of thinking is going to change it.

I told Peter his mom and dad were good people, and though I may not agree with their views, they were good people who loved their family. And that his mom was being the way she was because she cared so much. So much she was starting to suffocate him. But it was based on love, and she wanted to keep her family together. I convinced Peter to call home, and he did. He thanked me when he left.

I sat up that night. Thinking, holding the pistol in my lap. Wondering, about it all. What's right and wrong? I mean how basic can you get? And I don't know. Should I have left the pistol underneath his mattress? No, I think, because he never asked for it again. He just wanted the temptation out of reach, so the weak moments couldn't betray him. And he held onto life, I saw him do that. But, I still think about it. About it all.

And I kept the pistol. It resides in my closet, a reminder of the possibility that a good man can do the

wrong thing. On occasion I take it out to look at, to touch, remember the sight of it in the dusk, swollen red and incandescent. Remember the smell of singed cowhide as it rested in the holster, on the grass of that field.

But most of the time it resides in my closet--hidden, present, unused.

WHERE I PAINT A PERFECT LINE

I got this problem, see,
a one track mind
that switches track every so often
just enough to keep it interesting,
or when it gets too interesting,
like bordering on synoptic overload,
like when I'm trying to scream,
"Enough!",
and then I'm all right, and say,
"enough," and go on about my business.

So, I paint houses for a living,
get lost in cutting a line
of paint, straight on the perfect square,
lost in the repetition of breezing
this straight, perfect line,
a gray base to white eaves and trim--

I jump track and think
of things I need
to think about
                my father, alone
in bed, dying -- how far?
How far is it from
this place where I
paint a perfect line?

A difficult question I have
no real answer to--
only that he's alone, as his
cells explode geometrically,
quietly-- cancer is quiet;
this much I know
as I stir the gallon
to a uniform consistency.

Three miles, I measured it today,
watched each tenth tick off
and sure enough, it centers
itself to a perfect three,
and I think about three miles,
really try to measure its distance,
as I climb the ladder I think
of how it would be
to walk it,
slowly, with intent;
pedal on a bike, passing
houses in a blur;
to run backwards
using only peripheral vision
and memory to keep from
ending up in a heap;
to turn and run in a frenzy

over backyard fences,
away from sour dogs
just to see;
to crawl back
on hands and knees,
my painter's pants torn,
bloodied;
to drag myself along,
elbow to elbow, until small
pebbles and shards of discarded bottles
lodge in my flesh
just to see,
yes, to crawl back--
three miles would be a long way,
enough.

CROP DUSTER

Utter amazement leaks soft
from a dry throat, the flight
watched a ballet of will,
fool-hardy, yet absolute, a turn
and dive from an elevated stall
slides into speed, and fog
spits a frosting of poison
toward earth.

> At twenty-one I stood against
> my brother's shoulder, seeing
> for the first time what he
> pointed to. *The plane. There.*
> *On the horizon. In the glow.*
> And he was right, the sun gathered
> its light together, turned
> a dusty field into itself,
> glowing, moving, framed.

From this far perspective
I see a pattern
emerge in the open field.
the gathering free-fall
intersects high tension
wires and telephone lines,
perhaps passing a call home,

flattening into a parallel horizon,
while it drops its load.

Looking to the future
Charles pointed and drew
along the line until I saw,
watched his point feather
into a wing, hand flowing
in its studied pattern,
almost touching flight,
whispering, *Pilots.*
Ex-fighter jocks. Good.
Crazy. Good and Crazy.
His smile knew irony then.
This was before he retired
into insurance, selling himself
on the idea of walking the earth.

When flight runs out of field
the craft climbs sharp and spins
in a deft half-turn, peers over
an invisible wall, plunging
earthward, again
with a hand gripped tight,
trying to gain control.

I WASN'T THERE

Here I was
in Lindies' Bar
in my home town
for the first time in years,
a distant myth of a place,
or so it seemed after all,
though I fit
perfectly on the stool,
like it had memory.

Wammy was there,
an old friend
I didn't know
anymore, and he sipped
his beer, listening
to me go on about my idea:
A book, I said,
non-fiction, dealing
with the Nam, about
all the guys from here
that went over there,
Wammy one-eyeing me,
sipping his beer,
but I wasn't there.

Wammy grabbed my arm

with force, and I'm there,
his spilled beer that river,
cutting between the salt shaker
of first platoon, and the
pepper shaker of Wammy in
second, and his fingers bruise
their intensity, over
his hoarse whisper.

You want to know
what it was like? Here
I am, on this side
of the river,
and the gooks come
down the river
and start the fire fight.
Glowin' man, like
the Fourth of July,
and we start firin',
and First starts firin',
and its *boocoo* bullshit
rainin' on the parade.
Me and Lance are
rockin' and rollin'
to beat the band.
Gooks pull out
but we don't know,

and I hear the radioman
boppin' on adrenalin,
sayin', *We're gettin'*
fire, we're returnin'
fire, and they call
in the air strike,
and the Phantoms are
on their way, and I
feel the poundin' of
the mortars, and I
feel the warm wetness
runnin' down my face,
but I can still boggie
to the jam, and then
we get the call
to beat feet, and I'm
shoulder to shoulder
with Lance, only he's
not movin' and I
realize it's his blood
I feel, and I grab him
only he's not movin',
but bleedin' real bad,
so I carry him back
up to the LZ,
about three klicks
and we *diddymaow* up

into the air, bookin'
like cats from a dog.

Wammy let go and the
blood returned to my arm.
He lifted his beer
in a salute, pursing
his lips to kiss
the glass, but said:
Lance was dead and we were
back the next day,
by the river and the quiet
of that fuckin' jungle.

I left that night
into crisp winter air,
air so cold it hurt
to breathe it in,
and Wammy said good-night,
brushing away my hand,
hugging me instead,
caressing my cheek with
the hand that pressed
me into service.

THEY KNOW

One morning you see two men
in a skiff, fishing,
alone to themselves,
wordless,
and copper melts into cypress crowns.
You pass slowly,
causing the johnny-boat no wake,
passing eyes alert,
lonely, following
the waterline of your stern,
knowing.
They know.
You seek the airboat,
skipping over water, land, past;
you seek slow somnolent rides, glides,
anything to cut away moored baggage;
you need a bottom smooth as snake skin,
tough as a young woman's heart leaving
for good, tough as a dishonest emotion,
tough enough to bottom out yet still
whisper to water,
I'm almost touching you.
You seek the airboat that goes
where no other boat can go.
They know.

AIR BOAT

(A Short Novel)

If the world is real

the word is unreal

If the word is real

the world

is the cleft the splendor the whirl

No

disappearances and appearances

Yes

the tree of names

Real unreal

are words

they are air nothing

(From *Blanco* by Octavio Paz)

AIR BOAT

Travel across the river, its algae rich water coming up to meet you. Think of yourself on a boat now. Water hyacinths float in clumps. Small, flower-laced islands whose transient archipelago stretches from one end of this Florida inland waterway to the other. You are in the middle of the state, on the St. John's River, somewhere between Lake Monroe and Lake George.

Skip over the water. It is early morning and uncommonly calm. The St. John's reflects the dawn. Dark glasses would hardly help.

Turn and look behind. On the bank there are mud turtles, adjusting their cold-blooded systems in the sun. A rock is full of them. And there, on the protruding trunk of a lightning felled pine, are three more. They shrink in the growing distance.

Press ahead. Motion, velocity creates excitement. It rises from beneath your feet, the vibration in the fast pace. Knees bent, thighs tense to maintain balance. The wind rushes against the flesh. It will be one of those hot, oppressive Florida summer days. The air will hang on you like a sodden blanket. The type of day that seems to increase gravity.

The nearing shoreline looks fierce, primeval. Cypress

roots press out of dung colored loam, gnarled fingers in a panicked grasp. Palmetto palms thrust into the air like green bayonets. A darkness lurks behind.

At the entrance to a small inlet is a ganglion of hyacinth. Throttle back. The water becomes more defined. Look close. See the current carry the water. Small contours move the surface, like tendons beneath the skin of a flexing hand. Eddies break in swirls. The water is alive, defined, not just a slate of shadow and reflected light, when speed was the thing. Slow down. Pick your way through the hyacinths. There's a dock at hand, and a ram-shackle building. A sign above the door reads Pap's Bait and Tackle. *The letters are bold, block print, but faded into a many-hued pink color. On the right corner, in the yellowed margin of the sign, is a poorly written,* Marine Motor Repair. *Below, a curled and crumbling cardboard sign says,* Gas.

Look down, by one of the wooden posts of the dock. An alligator gar leers up at you with its awesome jaw and milky eye. Notice a gash on its back. Flesh torn away. Propeller victim.

Tie up the boat and head toward the screen door. See how it's hung slightly askew. The boards beneath you creak. Bounce on them. Try to find their notes, their pitch and tone. A young boy used to play these boards almost like a piano. And when the dock boards would change with the weather, current, and age, the boy changed with

them. He is now the nineteen-year-old welder in the backyard and work area. Around the corner of the building, you can see the young man, tall, his broad back hunched to a task. In one hand he holds a torch, in the other a brazing rod. An areola of sparks fly around him. Faint surges of the torch are heard sporadically over the lapping river.

Walk back toward the door. Draw your breath. The screen door opens with a gust of wind. Step inside as if you were this wind, unseen, but present.

Notice how your eyes did not have to adjust. Clear vision spied the movement in the corner of the room. A man at a desk turns to the opening of the door, which slams shut, rattles, then rests against the jamb. He has a long, angular face beneath the brim and shadow of his baseball hat. It's an old Brooklyn Dodger hat. A scalloping band of sweat stains, sections white with salt, runs along parts of the brim, through the B.

He draws himself off the seat, looking like he unfolds into standing. Age is apparent in the gaunt flesh. Broad, bony angles mark the frame. Folds and crosses of wrinkled skin blossom like spider webs at the joints, the turkey neck, the ravined face.

This frozen, silent moment dissolves into the activity of flies, until the man moves forward, speaking, "Simpleton. I tell him to use the hook. Can't 'member none of what I tell him." Though ungainly in his rise from

the chair, the man walks to the door with a sure, efficient grace.

The old man spits a brown cud of Day's Work *into the water. He has to stoop to shove his head out the door. He stares as he spits. Upriver, downriver. Steps back inside, latches the door and strides to his desk, folding back into the chair. Bending to a sheet of paper, the man mutters, "Fish done. Bastards. Get 'em. Come out in the wash." He grunts, sucks his teeth. In silence, his thin lips move to his thoughts. He grimaces, smiles, exposing tobacco stained teeth and bleeding gums.*

You become aware of the room's smell. Moss, cigarette smoke, something like cheese. Hear the flies again, a steady drone.

The old man jumps up, slamming his palms onto the desk. The slapping sound lingers in the ear until the man barks, "Blue birds. Stinkin Florida Jays." He is staring out of the back window. The bottom sash is quartered with a cross. At the joint is peeling paint and splintered wood. The lower right-hand quarter of the window has been replaced with a piece of plywood, sealed into the frame with duct tape. The gray tape has a metallic quality, and glistens with silver sparks.

The other panes are filmed with dust, the corners of each taking on the texture of peach fuzz. The old man breathes on the pane, rubs his elbow at the center.

Look out and see the boy, the welding mask flipped

back, making him look like a knight with his visor up. He's away from the acetylene tanks, squatting on the ground near a weathered fence post that runs along the edge of the wilderness.

The boy watches two birds, both blue, one hopping actively on the top strut of the fence. The other bird is motionless, except for a cocking of its head. He brings his hand slowly toward the stationary bird, until his finger is inches from it. The bird hops onto this perch.

"Sheet," the old man says. He bends to the window, reaching with his left hand for the eyehook latch. With a tug the hook breaks free of the ring screwed into the sill. He pushes at the wood to open the window, but it is swollen in the humidity of this day and the old man jams the heel of the hand into this bottom part of the frame. It opens with a pop. With his right arm on the desk, taking most of his weight, the old man lifts the window and shouts out, "Leave them fuckin jay birds go, do your goddamn work, boy!"

The birds flit away at the sound of the old man's voice. The boy cowers, sitting back from his haunches, onto his rump. Knees come up to meet his chest, his face presses against the top of the knees, and his arms wrap around the legs.

"If'n that don't beat all," the old man mutters, then shouts, "Y'all dumb shit, Stump! You think I can't see ya? Getta work!"

The boy rises without turning toward the window and goes back to the torch. Sparks begin again to fly.

The old man grunts, tries to shut the window, but it is too swollen, so he waves disgust at it, as he falls back into the chair. He draws a Lucky Strike *from its package, tamps one end against the table, then places the cigarette into the corner of his mouth. In one motion he lights a match, brings the flame to the end of his cigarette, then throws the match into a butt-stuffed ashtray. He eyes the thrown match with disdain as it continues to burn, stubs it out with his calloused thumb.*

Leaning back against the chair, whose springs sing with each bounce, the old man blows smoke into the slash of morning light. A slow, billowing, silver-webbed cloud. This stark light cuts through the window at such an angle that it points directly to the yellow-lined legal sheets on the battered desk top.

The old man's gaze travels with his smoke into the white light and its calm suspension of dust motes. At first lost within the silver, gray billow, the dust motes swirl into sight as the smoke dissipates. Watch the old man's eyes, the recognition of the penciled notes in the light before him.

Draw back as the old man draws near. You would not understand the scribbled notes anyway. But the old man does. See how he hunches over the work, looking like a praying mantis. Yes, you are that far back now. Up within

the rafters. From this perch the man's body is made up of insidious angles. Remember how he moved when he went to the door? Once in motion the body recaptured a remembered grace. Now, with a lack of motion to keep a balance, the body slacks and bends to the man's inner thoughts.

And now, notice something very peculiar. The old man's arm reaches across the desk to adjust a rearview mirror screwed to the desk and you wonder why you did not notice it before. Satisfied with his adjustment, the old man mutters, "I'll get ya yet. I'll get y'all." He points his finger, jabbing at the air in front of the mirror.

But from this vantage point you can not tell what reflection the man peers at. You want to see, but start to float upward again, through a hole in the roof, a hole once made by a squirrel the boy once befriended-tamed, a squirrel the old man shot with the 12 gauge Sheffield over a year before. Made the boy watch the killing, the skinning, the greasy-faced meal that the boy would have no part of. You perceive all this as you pass through the hole, seeing the marked wood, pocked from the scatter shot of the gun's blast. Do not worry how you know this, but rise, rise above the roof, shingles mottled gray-black from mildew, rising so the roof becomes a uniform color. See the boy now. At least the corner of him not hidden in the shadow of the lean-to work shed.

Hours pass. You can feel the crossing of the sun, its rays passing through you, the change of their angle of

descent. And see, the boy's work is revealed as the light falls into the shed, busy hands, shaving, chiseling into a block of wood. The boy works slowly, surely, like the sun, until he too reveals something. Out of the block of wood. It is a horse. You can tell, even from this far perspective, the shape of its haunch, its plumed tail.

The slamming sound of the screened door reaches up to you. The old man striding with purpose, around the building, towards the boy. The boy is lost in his work, not noticing the man's approach until he is upon him. He tries to hide his work by covering it with his body, but is pulled away by a violent tug of his hair. The old man picks up the block of wood that is almost a horse, and turns with it in his hand. The boy backs away.

"This," the old man shouts. The wood figure is thrown to the ground and the old man backhands the boy, who curls into a hunched, unmoving ball of flesh. The boy makes no sound you can hear, until the old man lifts a hatchet from its hidden place in the shadowed shed. The boy shouts out something that almost sounds like no, but it turns into an animal wail as the old man chops the wood into unrecognizable pieces.

Grabbing him by the hair again, the old man drags the boy across the ground between the work shed and the main building. Like a cur dog.

"Evil," the old man says. "It the curse a that union a evil. I gotta take out the evil in ya." He stands over

the kneeling boy like a priest ready to offer the sacrament of communion. With a deft motion, the standing figure produces a belt from around his waist, showing it to the boy. The boy bends his head to the old man's feet, in the same motion pulls his shirttails over his shoulders. The old man applies the strap to the boy's naked back. Slowly at first, with force, the force and tempo increasing with each blow.

Feel your vision start to fade, darkness build. Sound of the belt. Increasing. Sound overwhelming sight. A void brought on by a cacophony of leather and flesh.

*

Safely moored within the Sanford Harbor, the twenty-two foot cabin cruiser rose, fell, and listed in a steady rhythm. It was an old Chris Craft he spent the last year re-conditioning back to its original specifications, except for the Volvo inboard/outboard.

Sitting in his bunk, pillows propping his head and back, he closed his eyes and puffed on his pipe. He switched hands, so the bowl of the pipe would warm the other palm. And he placed the empty warm palm against the side of his cheek.

An early spring squall that thundered and spit lightning only an hour before had moved off into the East. He still heard its rumble above the light rain falling on the deck. But it was distant, diminishing.

The smoke of his pipe rose and filled the cabin, its

smell mingling with the faint odor of the marine varnish he had applied to the interior walls three days before. He liked the combination and sat trying to think only of the smells and the warmth he felt within the cabin's walls.

He did not realize when his pipe went out, and it surprised him to be without a halo of encompassing smoke. The cabin was damp and cold. Another surprise. He noticed the open hatch. After a moment of doubt he was sure it had been secured.

From overhead he heard the footsteps. He reacted by grabbing the bunk's cushion and curled up into a defensive ball. It was a momentary reaction, one which made him laugh aloud. He continued to laugh as he got up, walked to the small galley and started to make coffee. The footsteps stopped for a moment, but started again, crossing the deck. He followed the sound with his eyes, as well as his ears, until he saw a set of feet appear in the open hatch. He stared at the unmoving feet, then opened his mouth as if to say something. He turned his attention back to the coffee and measured out four scoops after he made sure the paper filter was seated in the brewer.

As he drew water from the galley's tap he heard the creak of the ladder entering the ship's hold, but did not turn. He brought the coffee pot to eye level, found he was over the six cup mark, poured a bit out, then carefully poured the water into the opening at the top of the Mr. Coffee.

He knew the man who stood at the bottom of the ladder, staring at him. A letter had come over a week ago and though he did not know how the man found his address, sending no reply, he expected this visit.

"Hello, Roland." Same soft voice.

"Ron. My name's Ron now."

"Oh? Sorry, I didn't realize." A touch of playfulness, but just a touch. He knew the good doctor would not want to appear condescending. He turned to look at the man. Same curly, salt and pepper hair. Perhaps a bit more bald. New glasses though. Auburn tortoise shell, as near as he could tell in this light. Yuppie, executive type. Made him look younger.

"Better than the wire rims. The glasses. You got new glasses, right?

"Yeah, that's right. I almost forgot how observant you were, Roland. I mean, Ron. *Are*, that is."

"What?"

"Are observant. Didn't mean to put it in the past tense. It's been a while is all."

"Don't have to call me that. Ron. You didn't have to call me Ron."

"Sort of like it. Ron."

"You don't have to. If you want to, sure. But you don't have to."

"I like it. Ron."

"I've just been going by it. That's all." He turned

back to the galley, placed the brewer inside the coffee pot, set it on the machine and plugged it in. He turned back to the man.

"May I?" the man said, gesturing toward the wooden spindle armchair shoved under the built-in desk.

"Shit, Dr. Turner, sorry. Please." His hand returned the gesture toward the chair. He watched him settle in the chair and a feeling of resentment and violation came like a passing wave of nausea. It left because he controlled it. Recognize, control, dissipate. A pattern he had mastered, with only an occasional breakdown. Dr. Turner knew about it, how Roland dealt with strong emotion. And he also knew the problem. Roland could not hold onto any emotion whether good, or ill. Turner told him it was a necessary defensive mental mechanism, one he should try to outgrow. He told Roland that, at their last meeting, close to a year ago. But they both knew this was only one of the problems left in Roland's life. Actually just a symptom of a major problem. Roland did not remember his past.

"So how's it going, Ron?"

"Wouldn't you like to know." He watched the doctor's kind eyes, wary of their non-committing nature.

"Yes, I would. I really would."

"What are you doing here? Why don't you just let me be."

"Because I care."

"You mean you lack control."

"No, I really...."

"Control you once had. Leave me in peace." He saw the eyes change, and he immediately felt powerful.

"Is that what you have now? Peace?"

"I have to start to live my own life. You said so yourself. Find yourself, you said."

"But I didn't say you had to do it all on your own. I want to help. Be your friend."

Roland smiled. "Friend? I'm still a case to you. Still a freak. An irony of nature. The idiot artist. Genius freak. A freak of nature. A random happening changed that. Brought me into your lap. You're still not sure what happened to me. Something in my brain was jarred loose in the explosion. That was one theory, right? A fine speculation. My whole damn life is a speculation." He looked away, the smile leaving his face.

"Roland, it's okay to be angry about this."

"That's it. I'm not really angry. Frustrated? A little. It passes. But not angry."

"Maybe you should be."

"That sounds distant, Dr. Turner. Not sure? More speculation?" Roland watched for disappointment, but Dr. Turner had gathered himself and now just looked sad.

"That's not fair, and you know it. I do care, Roland, and you know that too."

"Maybe. Duplicity though, doctor. Yeah, maybe you do

care. Just don't expect the same in kind. Cold as a fish, remember? All intellect now."

"I don't believe it. You've just rechanneled..."

"Redirected, reprocessed, reprogrammed. Blah, blah. Mumbo jumbo. You know what I've come to think of your psychological strategies and diction?"

Dr. Turner laughed quietly and watched Roland pour the coffee. An old familiar joke between them. Roland knew the terminology.

Dr. Turner accepted the mug of steaming coffee, burned his lips when he tried to take a sip, so he set it down on the desk to cool. He noticed the yellow legal pad. Half the sheets were torn out, and a group of them appeared to rest under the blank pad.

"Been writing?"

"Grocery lists."

Dr. Turner eyed the papers. His hands lifted from the desk into his lap. He leaned back, eyes still on the papers. "Lot of groceries."

Roland picked up his coffee mug, held it to his lips and blew gently. Then he sucked in some coffee. Like a bilge pump. It made Dr. Turner look up at him. "Wish list."

"What?"

"I don't buy them. Just make a list. Sometimes Twinkies, Devil Dogs, Moonpies. Sometimes pasta. You know, vermicelli, fettucini, shells, elbows. Gotta great

bean list. Navy, great northern, baby lima, kidney, black turtle, lentil bean, yellow split, green split. Blackeyed peas."

"I get the point. And?"

"Just lists, Dr. Turner. No hidden meanings. I just like making lists."

"Trying to find some order, Roland?"

"You see? All the time analyzing things. Can't they just be?"

Dr. Turner shrugged his shoulders and said, "You tell me."

"Now the *you tell me* routine." Roland smirked. "I get hungry. And I don't have that much cash. So I think about cooking. Or just get the munchies."

Looking perplexed, Dr. Turner asked, "What about your check? You get a check every month."

Roland waved his arms around the cabin. "You sometimes use money for other things."

"Roland."

"This month it was varnish." His voice lilted with amusement.

"We talked about this before you left. How to budget. How to...."

"You know what a good marine spur varnish goes for these days?"

"You can't forego eating. Jesus, Roland."

"Thirty and change a gallon. Makes it shine, doesn't

it? Like glass. Like the smell, too." Roland looked at the walls, the overhead ceiling. Ran his hand across the surface, as if touching a shy, skittish creature.

Dr. Turner rose slowly and moved to Roland, who was lost in reverie. His hand touched Roland's shoulder. Roland jumped, shrunk away from the touch. Eyes darting away, stealing snatches of a glance back at Dr. Turner. Turner let his hand drop. Stuck both hands in his pockets. Watched.

"How about some dinner, Ron? Will you have dinner with me?"

Roland said nothing, but Dr. Turner was patient. A nod finally came, but Roland waited until the doctor turned and started to climb the ladder. Then he followed.

*

Roland sat at the stern waiting for dawn, still a few hours away. Nightlife was active, especially the alligators, and he liked to hear them slash at prey, grunt out their territories. On a clear night and full moon he waited and watched for them moving in the water, heads cutting a wake, tails gracefully propelling. It amazed him how fast they were and sometimes he found himself wishing he could be one. Not an idle wish, but a true longing to belong to their world.

Shouting and laughter from a forty-foot cruiser anchored at the end of the marina made him turn away from the water. An all-night party had quieted down in the past

hour, but it sounded as if they had caught a second wind. Silhouettes lined the port deck, at first appearing like an active, dark amoeba, then stationary, fixed like a photograph. The noise quelled as the activity lessened and he started to turn away, but a thrashing at the water line of the large hull made him rise hypnotically toward the starboard rail. A figure was climbing into the bridge of the boat and disappeared under its canopy when he heard a male voice bark, "There, shine it right there." A spotlight appeared chaotically, then played over the figures on the deck and Roland saw their heads reaching over the side of the boat, some even hanging their bodies precariously half over the rail.

The light finally focused itself upon the water and slowly searched a ten-meter area, back and forth. The crowd that was silent, except for a few hushed whispers, exclaimed as a group. Roland made out a few, *holy shit's, fuck's,* but generally it was the sound of undefined awe. Though he could not clearly see, he heard some splashes. Occasionally he saw something fall through the light into the water, and realized the people were tossing some type of small debris overboard.

When the thrashing sound increased he knew what it was. They were feeding some of the alligators. Before he could control it he found himself panting into the dark air. He tried to force out the strong emotion by controlling the image, framing it until it was static,

a thing, but the image continued to move, swell and overwhelm. Lowered into the light a shadowed object stopped and hovered a foot above the waterline. Roland determined it was a roast of some kind, because out of the water and into the focused light came the jaws, snapping twice as the meat was jerked upward. The crowd roared, then became still again as the meat was lowered. A sudden rush of water accompanied a set of jaws locking onto the meat, wrenching it downward.

He heard a woman scream and only half noticed the man holding the rope almost fall overboard, but hands and arms grabbed at him and then the rope. Into the light, at the water's edge, the roast was lifted, and hanging on was an alligator, its head thrashing back and forth, then the whole body twisting in a frenzy until it tore away some flesh. As a group the crowd exclaimed again, and Roland tried to scream but nothing came. Then strangely, he realized he was gaining control again. His breathing became more regular and he was not sure whether he really tried to scream and could not, or if he kept himself from crying out.

When the remaining part of the roast was lowered back into the light and again hit by an alligator, Roland turned away, back toward the stern. He tried to sit down and listen to the night again, but all he heard were the people on the boat and everything felt spoiled and wrong.

Movement came from below and Dr. Turner's voice

tentatively called out to him. He answered by turning on an overhead light and Dr. Turner's blinking face appeared out of the dark hold. He moaned a bit as he climbed up onto the deck and Roland turned off the light once Turner was seated.

"What the hell time is it, Roland? Shit, I mean Ron. Good God, why did you let me finish that second bottle of wine?"

Roland could just make out the figure of Dr. Turner, his head cradled in a pair of hands. Hunched over, arms resting on knees. "It will be dawn soon. I think you should get back into your car. Go back. I don't want you holding my hand."

"I told you last night, I didn't come here to...."

"I don't need you." Roland's voice was low, but his crisp diction was emphatic.

Dr. Turner exhaled. His hands combed through his hair several times. "Roland, I thought we talked this out last night." His voice was weary, rasping. "I didn't come down here for you, I came down here for me."

"What does that mean, Dr. Turner? You were a little hazy on that. Oh, you do not have to repeat everything, I listened. I remember what you said." Roland kept himself focused on his anger, but Dr. Turner's drunken revelation carried over to this moment. Gave up his practice, lost his marriage. Yes, they expanded into an area once forbidden--Dr. Turner's personal life. It shocked Roland,

especially the part about him only being able to see his children one weekend a month. Dr. Turner was changing the rules.

"How lost you felt, about everything. Lost. You kept repeating that word. How you gave up the private practice, then the *charity* work." Dr. Turner's head raised as if in protest, but Roland continued in his firm, relaxed manner, speaking to the upturned face that reflected in what little light was present from the parking lot's street lamps. "And how you thought about me, your mind becoming...what was it? *Obsessed*. Yes, that was the word. Oh, that's okay Dr. Turner. I don't hold it against you. The wine left the professional unguarded. And when I asked you why..." Roland started to laugh softly.

"I'm sorry, Ron."

"My name is Roland. To you it's Roland. And what are you sorry about? Do you remember what else you said?"

"Yeah, I remember. I was sorry...upset with myself the moment I said it."

"To find the person you felt you failed the most. And here I am, your biggest failure." Roland's voice was light-hearted, but he knew it cut at Dr. Turner.

"I remember, *Roland*, and I didn't mean it that way."

"I repeat from last night, Dr. Turner. What do you want from me? You gave me words after that, but it was no answer. You opened up to me for the first time in our

relationship. About your wife, your kids. But the question was never answered. What do you *want* from me?"

Roland watched the head turn away and he felt a great deal of disappointment. He wondered if it was just a conditioned response he felt. After all, he had relied on Dr. Turner for many years; it was Turner who was largely responsible for him being able to function at all in the *real* world. At one time he did place all his trust in the man seated before him. And it was Turner who weaned him away from any dependence, insisting he at last strike out on his own. It was Turner who set up the trust fund years before from the sale of the art work the police found at the place he supposedly lived with his grandfather. How many hours did he and the doctor spend over that? The place. A place he only knew from the photographs taken after the accident. At least until the day before yesterday.

"Roland!"

"What?"

"I asked you if you had any aspirin."

"In the galley. I'll get some for you." Roland started past Dr. Turner but was stopped by a gentle, but firm grasp on his arm.

"Wait. What is it, Roland? You're trembling."

"What do you want from me?"

"I don't know." The grip lessened, but remained. Roland did not pull away. "Something. Nothing. I'm not

truly sure myself, but I had to see you. Not as your doctor. I don't know."

Dr. Turner's hand fell away from Roland's arm. He found himself wanting to tell Dr. Turner all he knew, felt, speculated, about what he found out. He felt it rise up in him like the scream before, but like the scream it just would not come. And again, he could not figure out if it was really himself suppressing it. He felt frightened and alone. Again.

An explosion like a gunshot came from the party boat's vicinity and both Roland and Dr. Turner jumped with a start. Roland heard Dr. Turner exclaim, "What the hell is that?"

"They're throwing cherry bombs, ashcans, M-80's overboard, wrapped in bread, meat." Roland started down the stairs to retrieve Turner's aspirins. He did it in the dark. He liked the dark of the boat's interior. It was warm in the hold, the air containing the varnish's smell, but he could also smell the stale, acrid odor of Turner's drunken sleep. Wine sweat, something. Something, Roland thought, like the something waiting out in the wilderness, upriver. Something undefined, but real and calling. He knew its pull as soon as he was on the river, traveling up and down its winding green borders. A vague notion.

He first got the idea for it when thinking about leaving the Institute. The river made it real, substantive, but illusive. *Something.*

The thuds of the small charges were dull within the hold of the galley and Roland briefly wanted to remain, but he found the aspirin in the cabinet and drew a glass of water in the galley. He climbed the stairs into the outside air. The sky was starting to lighten, but dawn was still some time off. He handed the aspirin and water over to Dr. Turner.

"Why are they doing this?" Dr. Turner asked as another pop sounded off.

"They were feeding the alligators, and now they're having some sport."

"Assholes."

"No, they were assholes when they were just feeding them. This at least scares them away."

"For Godsake though, they're hurting the damn creatures."

"I asked you last night if you wanted to take a trip on the river."

Dr. Turner's features were becoming plainer, though cast in a bluish light. "I didn't know if you were just being polite. Listen, Roland, maybe I was wrong coming down here, wrong about...."

"I want to show you something, something I found," Roland forced out. There, he thought, I said it. I want him to be here.

"What, Roland?"

"You know, alligators are not really that dangerous as

long as they have their natural fear of man. When these tourists feed them they become half-tame. Just three weeks ago a father was fishing with his two sons. It was a week-end and they were down by the water on a little sandbar not far from here. The youngest was a five-year old. The older boy caught a fish and the father went to help him unhook it. He turned when he heard a splash. The five-year old was gone."

"That's horrible, Roland."

"Yeah. It's when they're half-tame they're dangerous. Why don't you make yourself useful and take your aspirin, then cast off those lines."

Roland went to the bridge and fired up the engine. It sputtered at first, then broke into a smooth baritone. The air filled with the smell of fuel and marine oil. As Dr. Turner swallowed his pills and started to head toward the aft moorline he turned to Roland and shouted above the engine, "Isn't it still a bit dark?"

"It will be light soon enough. Beside, I learned the water. I know the way.

*

By the time they were moving the sun was an orange orb over the horizon to their right. The eastern shoreline of Lake Monroe was still a couple of miles away as they approached the channel markers leading toward the river. Though wide and long, Monroe was shallow, only three to four feet deep in many parts, but the channel was deep

enough to handle the large tourist day liners. The Chris Craft did not need the deep water, but Roland used the current as he pointed the boat northward to save gas.

Dr. Turner stood to the side of Roland, holding onto the cockpit dash for balance as they bounced over the choppy water. He started to relax once he got the rhythm and opened the container of coffee he bought when Roland fueled the boat. Out of the corner of his eye Roland could see him try to time his drinking with the boat's movement. He pointed to the electrical power plant on their right and shouted above the engine noise and wind, "Is that what's lit up at night? The thing I thought was a paddle-wheeler?"

Roland shook his head yes and smiled, because the plant did look like that at night, with its two towering stacks. It was amusing to see Dr. Turner's excitement, his eyes darting about. Sunlight bathed the tops of the trees with its strong orange cast, but the bulk of the forest was still deeply shadowed. Roland leaned over and said, "This is one of the few rivers of the world that travels north." Dr. Turner nodded, then continued to scan the eastern shoreline.

Travels the wrong way, Roland heard the voice speak in his mind. Pap's voice had come back to him after a few weeks of traveling the river. It was a piece of information Dr. Turner would be surprised and curious about. At first it confused him, then he grew into accepting it, but

was encouraged and frightened by it at the same time. *Travels backwards.* Roland also thought he remembered Pap saying the river was damned because of it, but that was not the voice speaking to him, so he was not sure.

There were times, even before Dr. Turner showed up, that he rehearsed how he would explain it to him. The quality of the remembrance was like a subliminal message, a brief flashing of sounds and snapshots. He had no control over them, could not concentrate hard enough to frame them. He was not sure what this meant, but it was far different than the struggles in Dr. Turner's office when there was nothing but silence within his mind, a silence wrapped around something, a something he could now feel. Form, forming; *something.* What he did know, did discover, was not to be explained just in words. He needed the place to make the words come, to make an explanation possible.

A fine philosophy, he thought. It amused him to think of Hemingway's *Sun Also Rises,* especially with Dr. Turner next to him. Reading was one of the few things he talked about with some animation in the past sessions with Dr. Turner. *Past.* It was a word with little meaning to him. So brief and static. And empty. But it was all he had. He became lost in its reconstruction and the boat's staccato pounding.

*

Darkness surrounds you. The crack of leather

crescendos, then explodes into silence and you are left within a swirling black void. It pushes and tugs. An undertow of random and violent force, beneath, over, yes, even through you. Traveling for what could be epochs, eons, or only a minute, a second -- the only real meaning is the time it takes to travel from one moment to another. Yet, it is the silence that seems far more harsh.

And it is into this silence you burst forth. A room, brightly lit, takes form and presence. Look around you. Its walls, ceiling, floor are white, almost pristine. You feel its sterility. And then the smell of antiseptic pervades your senses, overwhelming all but the silence.

There is a door and you walk to it, but it will not open. Your hand reaches for the knob, tries to turn it but it will not open. And then you feel him. Behind you, in the corner. He becomes the only thing you can discern through the silence. His measured breathing. A heartbeat.

Turn and look. He is on his haunches, a familiar position, yet different. Something is different. Yes, it's the boy, but then you realize when you see the eyes. Vacant, catatonic.

Survey the room. Suddenly it is filled with something other than the blinding whiteness of a moment before. Or was it a moment? It does not matter, only that the room is now filled. Notice a couch. A green couch. But the boy remains in the corner, back pressed against the wall.

And the shapes, the room is filled with shapes taking

form. Hazy dark shapes that start to take focus until you recognize one. It was what the boy was working on when you first saw him, only now the broken propeller he was working on has become a fold in a wing. And you recognize other parts, spark plugs, drive shafts, pistons, but they too become parts of the bird until they are no longer parts, but the bird itself. A heron, surprised, still perched on a log, about to take flight, frozen in a moment.

Your sight traverses the room. It is filled with more wondrous creatures. Osprey, talons out-stretched, plucking a fish from the surface of the water, and another feeding its chicks in an aerie, or an alligator on a riverbank, yawning to adjust its temperature. Some are made of metal parts, some out of wood, but all metamorphosed from material to flesh, until...

Alive, they become alive, mixing with breath and heartbeat into a flutter of wings, splash of water, shrill bird cries, until the room is awash with sound and then movement. First from the animals and then you see him rise and walk toward the center of the room, which is still like the eye of a storm, the creatures swirling around its periphery. The boy enters the calm and picks up a chisel and hammer, staring at a block of wood. He starts to chip away and you realize the creatures noise is urging him on as he caresses the wood, then chips away. But you notice his hands are not steady and the deft strokes you once saw him make are now awkward, forced, but still he works away.

Sound decreases, movement stops. The boy sets down the chisel and hammer, kneeling before the block of wood which has become a crudely hewn horse. Out of proportion, static, incomplete.

Turn and look at the mirror set into the wall. Through its reflection you see the boy caress the wood. His hands are shaking, his face contorting with confusion and anguish. Draw toward the mirror, toward the reflection, which diminishes as you approach. Glance back and take one last look at the eyes, no longer vacant, but empty and alone.

Now pass through the mirror, into the room and the stare of a bearded man. He is watching the boy with interest, jotting notes on a memo pad. There are beads of perspiration on his forehead and he wipes them off with the back of his hand. He takes off his wire-rim glasses and rubs his eyes with his index finger and thumb, then massages the bridge of his nose. He returns to his observation and note taking.

Read the notes. It is in the clinical language of psychiatry:

> It is the first time the patient has responded to any outside stimulus. The sculpture I received from the Blue Springs, Florida, police impound has been effective, though it has taken the better part of two weeks.

The man puts down his pen. He stares, at first his face blank, then straining for control. Reaching out his hand touches the glass and the distant image of the boy. Suddenly you understand, knowing as you knew about the shotgun blast and the squirrel, that the boy has been here for months. The police found him wandering in the woods after the explosion at the marina, the explosion the boy's grandfather caused. The police could not find the grandfather after that. Gone for good.

You come to understand how this man struggled to piece together what little he could of the boy's life to make this small triumph possible. How he found the sculpture through a paper trail and finally convinced the police to release it into his custody. And how he almost gave up on the boy, except the artwork made him believe there was hope.

The man smiles and mutters, "Okay, maybe now we can start." *You know more. Progress will come quickly. Within six months the boy will start to follow verbal directions, and in six more months he will speak. For the first time in his life he will speak. And in time it will be found that the boy's intelligence is quite above normal. But you also know, even when seeing this intelligence in the boy's eyes, seeing his active mind at work, behind it is the active search for the something he lost. Look into those dark, active eyes and feel the void. It sucks you in with force -- dissolving, deliquescent void.*

*

As they approached the bridges at the mouth of the St. John's Roland throttled back and Dr. Turner surged forward, almost striking his nose on the windscreen. Roland apologized as the boat dropped a foot from its hydroplane. He was thinking of what brought him here, to this moment and place. The past he knew was like reciting a memorized history lesson. Pure rote memorization learned from Dr. Turner during their many sessions together. There were even snatches of it he could remember, and they were not flashes, but a real hold on a living part of his past. The only past he knew for a long time. He thought he could even remember the feel of the block of wood, rough on two planes, smooth on the rest--he definitely remembered the feeling. He used to call it the *Empty*, or the *hole in the well*. Dr. Turner and he even joked about it, but he never felt good about the joke because the *Empty* was always there. Here, he thought, it's still here, but it was also something different, changing. Something.

As they came to the shadow of the bridge for Interstate 4 the noise of the passing cars sucked down from above, but as they passed beneath the huge concrete structure the noise compressed and reverberated off the sides. The water opened up again into a wide inlet with a private boat dock and trailer park on the right and a public access launch on the left.

"Why you going so slow?" Dr. Turner asked.

Roland smiled. The good doctor liked the feeling of speed. He pointed to the ramp and dock on the left where two black men were about to cast off in an old wooden Johnny boat. "Wake," he told Dr. Turner. The two black men briefly saluted them, but were too busy straightening out their tackle boxes and poles.

"I guess this is good fishing?" Turner's eyes were fixed on the Johnny and the men.

"Is now." When Dr. Turner looked puzzled Roland added, "Used to be great, then years ago the Army Corps of Engineers came in and sprayed the hyacinths, like those over there." Roland pointed out the green floating patch that dominated either side of the docks.

"The spray killed them? The fish?"

"No. The plants died and sunk to the bottom of the river, where they rotted. But they destroyed the natural spawning ground of a variety of fish."

Dr. Turner shook his head slowly, asked suspiciously, "How do you know all of this."

Roland chuckled, "I don't remember it, Dr. Turner. People tell me. Fisherman, like them."

Roland piloted the boat toward the Johnny and then reversed the engine to keep from drifting into them. The younger of the two men smiled at Roland, but the older man, bald except for the white hair around his temples, just nodded his head and continued to work on a tangled reel.

"Morning," Roland called out. "Have you seen Thomas?"

"He be up at Hontoon. Leastwise before he was," the younger man said. "You looking for him? If'n you try Snake Creek you might right find him."

Roland waved his thanks, then pulled away slowly, feathering the gas. They passed under the other two smaller bridges, the first one for the local road, the second a railroad bridge.

"Who's Thomas?"

"He's got an airboat. It can go where no other boat can go," Roland answered, plunging the throttle forward.

*

As the Chris-Craft approached the Hontoon Marina, Roland scanned the docks for Thomas' Boston Whaler. He was not there. Roland shaded his eyes and tried the shore across river. A group of canoers were right by Hontoon Island, and the canopied pontoon raft that ferried tourists to and from the small island was at the dock. No Thomas.

Roland guided the boat into docking position quickly, reversing the propeller and feathering the engine for a moment, controlling the glide into dock, then gunning the throttle to brake the boat's forward momentum. Dr. Turner stared at Roland, then smiled. Roland's only reaction was to point toward the bowline. As he secured the aft he watched Turner's unsure legs traverse the bow-deck. By the time the older man reached the mooring rope the bow had drifted and he could no longer reach the dock. Roland pulled his knot taunt, then reached under the gunwale for

the boathook. Correcting the drift of the boat by grappling the hook to one of the mooring posts, Roland drew the boat in easily, then watched Dr. Turner secure the line. For a moment Roland was amused with the proud grin of Turner as he looked down at his knot, then to Roland for approval. It wasn't just the role reversal, though that was surely part of it, but in larger measure it was the honesty he felt from Turner. As Turner approached him, the grin still in place, Roland turned away and headed toward the marina's bar and package store, the Mermaid's Inn. It was just past nine o'clock, but five of the dozen bar stools were occupied. Except for the woman at the end of the bar who was drinking a highball, the rest were men, nursing a beer and periodically shot-gunning whiskey. All eyes turned to Roland and Turner's entrance. Conversation stopped for a moment, then resumed in a lower tone. About the time it took for their eyes to adjust to the darkness of the bar the noise level returned to normal and Roland approached the woman. Her hair was short, somewhat dis-heveled, mottled with gray. As she smiled at Roland her eyes squinted and the tracks of surrounding wrinkles deepened.

"So," she said, "how's by you today, Mr. Roland?" Though her voice was like a foghorn it had no rough edges to it, but was rather smooth and flowing.

"Looking for Thomas, Miss Sadie."

Miss Sadie's smile disappeared and she took a swallow

of her highball. Clearing her throat twice, she set the drink back on the bar, keeping her right hand wrapped around the glass. "Ain't seen him today," she said under her breath.

A man sitting two stools down from Miss Sadie raised his head out of a stupor and said, "Been here and gone." The effort of his statement, which blurted out, words sticking to spittle, seemed too much for him and his head flopped back down and bobbed for a moment until his chin came to rest on his chest. Three days of gray stubble grew on his puffy jowls. His bulbous nose was an angry crimson, a network of purple veins. His eyes, when they blinked open, glazed and vacant.

"What say, Arnell?" Roland asked, turning slightly away from the woman.

"Pay no attention, boy!" Miss Sadie announced with the authority that was hers. Her dark eyes bore at the man, then she snorted, "Arnell don't know last week from last year, let alone what happened this morning."

Arnell's chin came slightly off his chest and he squeaked out, "Do too," then dropped back into his rest position.

Roland put his hand on the man's shoulder and bent down to speak to Arnell, but Arnell just turned his eye up sheepishly at Roland, then flashed a dour look toward Miss Sadie. "Maybe she's right, maybe it was last week," smile appearing, "then maybe it really was this morning."

Looking past the jar of pickled pigs feet into the dusty bar mirror, Arnell straightened himself up and said, "I know a lot more than I let on."

Miss Sadie spit out a laugh, casting both eyes on Arnell, staring for a moment in disbelief, then breaking into a rolling cackle. The cackle turned into a coughing fit and Sadie lit another Pall Mall, inhaling deeply. Turning back to Roland, she said, "Been at least since yesterday. I opened up this morning and Bright Eyes here didn't come in until I woke him up in the back of my Fairlane, bout hour or so ago." Sadie's eyes left Roland and surveyed Dr. Turner, her cigarette coming to her mouth with a sweep. Fingers splayed, except for the tight grip of her index and middle on her Pall Mall, she inhaled deeply. Smoke escaped her lips as the hand and cigarette left her mouth in a practiced salute -- smoke only to be recaptured by an inhale of her nostrils. A burst of smoke then jettisoned toward Dr. Turner, but Sadie redirected the stream out the side of her pouted lips. "Who's your friend there, Mr. Roland?

Turner extended his hand and said, "Turner, Michael Turner." Miss Sadie replaced the cigarette in her mouth, freeing her right hand for two hearty shakes, then she placed her hands at her hips and asked, "Get you boys something to drink?" When Turner smiled and shook his head no, Miss Sadie added, "Got a tomato juice, or a V-8. Good for what ails ya."

At the other end of the bar a customer raised a forefinger, then pointed to his beer. Miss Sadie nodded and slid open the cooler door, bending to retrieve a longneck Bud. As she reached down for the beer Roland tapped Dr. Turner on the shoulder and said, "Be seeing you, Miss Sadie," then walked toward the door. As Turner started to follow Roland, he gestured goodbye to the old woman as she opened the beer bottle with a snap of her wrist.

"Better watch out," she said to Turner, smoke encircling her face, "It gets hot out there this time of year, and you look like you ain't use to the Florida sun." Turner nodded politely at her, then Sadie said into the cooler as she shut its door, "Mighty hot. Yessir, mighty hot." Without looking up Miss Sadie placed the beer in front of her customer, then went back to her seat and took a long swallow of her highball. Turner hurried to the swinging door and followed Roland out into the bright sunlight and the building heat.

*

There was some traffic on the river, mostly fishermen, but also a few early morning skiers. As they passed over wakes the Chris-Craft rose and fell, then leveled out, cutting through the small waves the rising wind rippled up.

Dr. Turner had been content to ask about Thomas only once, was now content to sit to the left of Roland and watch the river. When he pointed to an osprey, Roland

nodded to where it was headed, an aerie around the next bend in the river. Roland even slowed down to let the hawk catch up, its progress impeded by the fish in its talons. They trolled long enough to see the bird ripping off some flesh to feed to its young.

As they idled, Dr. Turner took the opportunity to say to Roland, "You've been gone eight months. Seems longer." He kept his eyes on the aerie as he spoke, but Roland watched him, as he had all morning. Side glances, trying to read what Turner was thinking. It was still a new feeling for Roland, wanting to include Turner in his discoveries. What is it, he thought? A net in case I fall? And from what height? Still, there was an overriding sense of self-preservation that inhibited Roland from telling all he knew -- because it was so little. Yes, the time seemed longer, because each recaptured moment was an effort, a struggle. And pain.

As they drifted toward the left bank, toward the rookery, Dr. Turner wheeled around on the swiveling chair and looked at Roland, whose eyes and head turned upward and remained fixed on the hawks. Dr. Turner replaced his glasses with dark aviators.

"I didn't come here because I was worried about you, Roland. Even when I didn't hear from you for so long."

The light dig brought Roland's gaze down and he smiled at the man's insistence, then started to doubt the honesty he felt before. He forced the smile to remain in place.

"So you've said. You also told me everyone at one time or another doesn't really know their motivation for doing certain things."

Turner pushed back the frame of the aviators with his finger. He was sweating profusely, a drip about to fall off his nose. Wiping the bead of sweat with the back of his hand, he said, "I think I'm right about this. I didn't *just* come down here to check on you. I was curious. And now even more with this mystery you've enveloped yourself in. But not in the clinical sense. I'm real sure about that, Roland. I'm not here as your doctor."

Roland thought, I can't tell about you. Whether or not you're being honest with me isn't the question. But how honest are you with yourself? Now. At this moment. Does it matter? Roland wanted it to.

He wanted to bring Dr. Turner to an understanding about all he discovered so far, not speculate on what to do about it, but to be a witness. That was the important part. But he wanted that understanding to come about slowly because part of it was the mystery, the foreboding quality of place and situation. Yes, he thought, I want a witness.

"Still, you'd like to know about Thomas. I told you, he's got an airboat. And he knew me -- from before. Yeah, that's right. Knew me when I was a kid living on this river. Miss Sadie knew me too. Oh no, I don't remember them. Not really. It was like someone you see in a crowd

and something seems familiar about them, but for the life of you, you can't fathom why. Yet that familiarity is the only thing that doesn't keep them from absorbing back into the crowd. And now you find yourself following them. Bumping through strange arms and legs. But you keep pace and follow, hoping something will come to you. That some angle, turn of the profile, will spark your memory. At times you lose them, the crowd jostling you around, but you still search. Search the sea of faces. Hoping."

Roland looked back at the aerie, then bent to the ignition key and cranked up the engine. He eased the boat into gear, throttling up slowly, and said, "It's actually sort of spooky, Michael." The engine started to drown him out and he pointed to the bend they drifted around. There was an opening off the main channel of the St. John's. A boat, with a man standing as if he were an official sentinel, floated near the back side of the inlet. A puff of blue-gray smoke shot out of the outboard motor and the boat headed toward them, then veered, looping back into the tributary.

Roland started to stand on the captain's chair so he could wave at the man, but now threw the throttle open and headed after the outboard. Roland could see, out of the corner of his eye, Dr. Turner had questions, so many questions his head alternated between the mouth of the tributary and Roland. Forehead rutted with concern. Or was it just a scowl? Disapproval. Roland couldn't tell,

but he had other matters to worry about. The boat in front of them disappeared around a tight curve. He knew there was a fork in the tributary and checked to make sure the engine was at full throttle. The smaller boat was one-hundred and fifty yards ahead and pulling away when it rounded the bend.

Roland's cruiser cut smoothly through the turn at a sharp angle. As they approached the fork the outboard was nowhere in sight, but Roland thought he could discern the last remnants of a wake in the smaller opening on the right and he steered the boat for it. After five hundred yards into its mouth, the channel narrowed to fifty feet and the trees on both sides bent over the water. Roland kept the boat at full speed for a short time, but the channel kept closing and the canopy of trees became dense and low, so he eased back on the throttle to a troll. Spanish moss hung down from the lower branches, brushing the windscreen. There was a boulder in the middle of the funnelling water and Roland gingerly maneuvered around it. A slight scraping sound reverberated from beneath the hull.

Turner asked, "Can we make it?" He was standing up looking ahead at the water.

"Don't know. Made it two weeks ago. We've had some rain, but it's also been hot." Roland saw the panic in Dr. Turner's expression and laughed. "I scraped a bit the last time too." The hull squealed again and Roland winced,

continuing in a much lower voice, "But not here so much." Another squeal elicited a *Goddamn* from Roland.

As they went around a ninety-degree turn the branch widened a bit for a stretch and both of them relaxed, though Roland remained watchful. He lit up a cigarette from the pack on the cockpit dash. Turner started to laugh. "When did you start smoking?" A bemused smile played up the corner of his lips. Roland saw the same smile just a few minutes before, when he called Turner, Michael. First times for everything, Roland though, then said, "Luckies." He knew Turner wouldn't have a clue to the allusion, and he liked that. First times. As Thomas would say, *Dig it.* Games. Games to be understood, worked out. All the games. The one he was working on the good doctor. The one Thomas was laying on him. And maybe the most intricate one of all, the one he was laying on himself.

Roland brushed aside the Spanish moss that slipped over the windscreen towards his face, then grapped hold of the wheel and maneuvered them around another series of rocks. "Better take your seat," he shouted at Turner as he thrust the throttle forward. Though he didn't show it, he was again amused by the reaction. As the Chris-Craft shot down the narrow passage, that no doubt to Turner looked the same as the low stretch before, Roland knew how deep this part of the channel was cut. Narrow, but deep enough. And he knew the Boston Whaler was just ahead too.

Waiting. Waiting to lead him along through the labyrinth of backwater. Teasing him with choices, testing his memory. And each time he got better. Remembered more. Signs. A fallen tree. A clearing. An old alligator pool, now just a dry depression off the starboard. He was starting to learn to read the signs. And remember.

*

They broke out of the canopy of tree branches into an open spot of river, sunlight bright, oppressive. As they approached the median point of the opening, Roland eased back to an idle and drifted with the current. After a moment he shut off the motor and picked up his head, watching, listening. He could feel Turner's attention, held up his hand to waylay any comment that would disturb his search.

Sometimes Thomas' people only led him so far, left the choices open. He knew one larger causeway southward was back to the main channel. The only opening to the north, likewise, was a longer route. The other three alternatives were more complicated. One led directly, and fairly quickly, to the part of the river he used to live on, but it was narrow and far more shallow than what they just passed through, impossible in the cruiser. Of the other two, Roland could not decide which to take. The easiest going was directly west and serpentined for miles with many smaller branches that covered the land like a network of

nerves. Some were choked with hyacinths, though on a few occasions he explored some mysteriously freed of the weeds.

Mostly the results of the efforts did not pan out, ending in a too-narrowed funnel or sometimes a small open body of water. Once, though, he came on another abandoned shack perched high on timbers some twenty yards off the nearest shoreline. It was two weeks ago he discovered it, on stilts in the distance, image of a blue heron feeding in shallow water.

Roland was about to turn over the ignition key when a distant rumble broke the calm. As before, a puff of blue-gray smoke shot into the air by the mouth of the narrows, and out of the deep blanket of hyacinths and low cypress overhang sped a boat. A thin green dart, the long narrow boat of a Land and Wildlife warden. He wondered if it was Terry Brock.

"That's a different boat!" Turner called up to Roland, his eyes never leaving the approaching craft. Roland smiled and thought, pretty good, Doctor, you see well. The blonde flat-top came into view. Brock was about Thomas' age, mid-thirties, maybe a few years older Roland judged, but part of that was the brusque, succinct demeanor.

"Who is it? You know?" Turner shields his eyes backhanded, squints to see.

"It's the *Pole-ees*," he exaggerated the way he heard

Thomas exclaim a week ago when Brock came upon Thomas and Roland together by the stilted riverhouse.

As he glided into them at a sharp angle, the engine roared, another belch of blue-gray smoke as Brock reversed his prop and gunned the engine, then deftly feathered the control, positioning himself off their aft.

Brock turned on a head full of teeth, a practiced flash of white, a stark contrast to the tanned hide of his face. It was also in contrast, or at least competed with the fluorescent green sunscreen surrounding his lips. He looked full-long the length of Roland's boat, sucking in, then expelling an admiration of breath into whistle. "A fine work, Mister Roland." The flash reappearing, "A fine work, yessir." Roland could see the guise -- while the head rode steady along the length of the boat in a measured gaze, the facial muscles twitched a bit. There was a noticeable relaxing when Turner stood up to tie on the line the warden was holding out to him. "Beautiful boat indeed. Y'all really gonna sell what you built here? Don't believe it, not one moment."

"You got a better offer for me there, Brock?" Roland watched the response--Ray-Ban's off, wipe of the face, that strained grimace, the blue eyes, stark, almost clear blue eyes, how they zeroed in on a person. Active, reading.

"What offer might that be?" Brock flashed open a Zippo and lit a smoke. He looked up and down river. "Word is you're gonna bargain yourself into the old homestead,

that right, Mister Roland? Paying for your own birthright? Don't hardly seem right."

"Other sundry items."

"Oh, sundry items. Like one of them there hopped up Whaler's of the Chief's. Probably got a few to spare. Get one with that new big Merc on it. A screamer, Mister Roland, that's a fact."

"Faster than Brock?" Roland's question was touched with the familiar and the game warden took note of it with a smile.

"Well, that remains to be seen. Brock's gotta few secrets hisself." Roland did not have to acknowledge Brock's flat black, unmarked engine case. Big Johnson modified with specific instructions by Brock's cousin Peter, middle-aged frequenter of Sadie's Floating Bar and Tap Room. Brock turned the ignition off and the throaty bark stopped to silence. Then the lap of water on both vessels hulls.

"Short ways been choked -- somebody cut loose a buncha water weeds. Don't know why. Best to go the long way, maybe. Especially if y'all want to see that stilt house, that's one of them "sundry" items, ain't that right, Mister Roland?"

Roland had to laugh, Brock with his ear to the ground, nose to the wind. That was the way Thomas described it. "Just taking my friend here for a tour of the river," Roland said, his head motioning over to Dr. Turner.

Taking the cue, hand extended, "Michael Turner." The boats were starting to drift apart and Brock just flashed his smile and held up his hand in greeting, quickly turned back to Roland, replaced his sunglasses and started his engine, revving it to a roar, then a throaty idle. "Be seein' ya, Mister Roland. Careful of that short way, ya hear? Choked bad, real bad."

The thin green boat was gone in a moment, disappearing around the far bend north. Roland waited to start the cruiser until Brock's engine was lost in the sounds of the river. Dr. Turner sat there watching him, hands pressed on thighs, leaning forward.

"Interesting character, Roland."

"He is that. He and Thomas knew each other while they were growing up. Played Little League baseball together." Roland smiled as he remembered how Thomas told him he struck out Brock three straight times in a game, how Brock vowed revenge, then in the championship game in Deland how he beaned him two straight times, then struck him out again. It was only the beginning of their rivalry. "Get used to it, Michael, there's nothing *but* characters here. Some of them down right dangerous. Still game?" He didn't wait for an answer, heading toward the longer route home. *Home?* Maybe. There was certainly something there he felt. Made him feel tight, excited. But he was also curious about the riverhouse. Brock was right -- it was part of Thomas and his deal, just as he was right about the Whaler,

though Brock didn't mention the other boat. The air boat. Maybe he didn't know, but Roland doubted it. No matter, he piloted a smooth turn in the middle of the wide channel, the excitement playing at him. But it wasn't just showing Turner the home place, it was also the stilt house. Hadn't explored that, not yet. And he wasn't quite sure why, but it was somehow important, that place. A key? Like he knew Thomas was important the first time he saw him. An important place. Somehow.

*

In the distance you can hear it. Sharp, swift. The crack and pop of wood, the zing in the air, the skip and final plop of a rock on water. Slowly the scene focuses into view, but the sound was immediate, strong. As vision clarifies, you see the old man stand by the edge of the river, the ball cap brim still low over his eyes though sunset is twenty minutes past. There is a rock pile off to his side. See him dip down, pick up a few rocks in his hand. They roll in his palm. He drops two, keeps two rolling to his touch, then slips one in his jeans pocket, sets his stance, holds the wooden bat in right hand, soft measured toss with the left. The tall old man was awkward when he stooped to the rock pile, but the muscle memory of his swing is flawless, the eyes fixed on the rock's short flight, the hand connected to the cocked bat, the smooth, solid mechanics of his swing. Good stride into the hit, the hip turn a perfectly timed swivel, the graceful sweep

of the bat in the air, top hand strongly snapping over at the point of impact, powerful follow through. Crack, zing, skip, plop. And again, same swing, same sound.

Your eyes closed in a focused listen, now open, find the old man watching the flight of rock in air, bending forward onto the bat, cane-like, then a weight shift and the bat falls at his side and he gently rocks a hip to the end of the bat-handle, leaning in the practiced gesture, an ex-ballplayer's unself-conscious poise.

You want to move closer, under the brim, see and read the eyes now hidden in crepuscular shadow, so close as to feel the warm draft of his breath, smell the Four Roses, *the pint half gone and waiting, ready in the back pocket of his bib-overalls. Yes, you want to be close enough to see if it's just self-satisfaction, or maybe pure joy that plays in the eyes now. Or does the delight turn bitter, does it rack and rail into desperate irony, or was it always utter anguish? Hard to tell, so you creep closer now, like the Great Blue Heron making its way up the shoreline, its slow progress of fishing undetected by the old man who reaches into his back pocket, opens the bottle with the help of his teeth, clasps the cap between ring finger and pinkie, and turning up the pint takes a long pull. The heron wades closer, slowly in its rhythmic pattern, its long bill occasionally darting into the shallow water, a shake of its plumed head to swallow the*

fly or tadpole. The bird seems unwary of the old man, yet keeps a cautious eye on him.

But wait, you are distracted. A lone figure in the shadows, off to the left of the man, a tall figure as erect as the stand of Australian pine it's cloaked in. You can make out the direction of its focus, steady, an old ballplayers' actions.

Suddenly it steps backward, deeper into shadow but you can still see the head turn toward the approach of a person appearing through a path cut into the dense underbrush that surrounds this small clearing.

Lifting its head the heron also turns its eye on the boy, younger then when you first saw him -- what, twelve, thirteen? A gangly adolescent, all arms and legs, his head almost too large for the stem of neck it's perched on. But the eyes, the eyes move with activity, searching as he slowly moves out into the clearing. In his hand is a galvanized bucket with a long metal handle protruding. The boy stops, bends to the ground and you see the dry, yellow grass at his feet move until the head of the snake appears in the bare patch of ground off to the boy's left. He moves like a crab to the snake, his hand reaching in front of the reptile whose tongue tastes the air, but then continues its progress, lifting itself over the hand's palm, resting for a moment, but slithers from the spot toward the figure in the shadows.

The boy watches the snake disappear under a palmetto,

smiles and lifts his head to the figure in the shadows -- strong, steady look, the smile broader, full. A smile that remains in place even when the quiet is broken by the old man's harsh command, "Git over here with that water, you..." The voice sounds disgusted and decreases in volume to incoherent mutterings.

Rising, the boy walks to the old man, but continues to look toward the hidden figure, which moves deeper now into the shadows. Standing alongside the old man's reaching hand which jerks the ladle away, water spilling to the ground.

"Take a half hour to do five minutes of work, sheet." Without looking at the boy, he hands back the ladle, snaps his fingers for more, takes the offered water, a slow noisy slurp, his lips puffed out as he swirls the water in his mouth, turns and spits the water into the boy's upturned face. He laughs, "You don't even give a cool good goddamn. Don't care what I do to ya." The man's countenance turns to a grimace, his hand holding the ladle, rising as if to backhand the boy, whose head turns only slightly downward, eyes closing, waiting for the blow.

The figure in the woods starts forward, but stops suddenly when the air is filled with a sharp feminine voice shouting, "Jake!"

The hand rises further in threat, a greater arc now to enhance the force of the blow, but stops, frozen in mid-swing until the hand starts to tremble, the remnants of

water dropping to the ground. "Jake," the voice calls, less sharp now, almost to a caress, but still carrying the hint of stern meaning, "Jake ya'll don't have to behave like that, not to this boy who does no one no harm." The voice moves closer and the woman, seemingly neither old nor young, a long gossamer gown that makes her appear to float nearer, comes to the boy, her outstretched arms enveloping his shoulders, shielding him from the still upturned arm.

She gently leads him away, then coaxes the boy to proceed on his own toward the cut trail. Her back to the man, notice how she recognized the boy's attention to the stand of pine -- and she holds her left hand up to the lurking shadow, her gesture hidden from the old man who's still a statue of threat, but that melts into round-shouldered defeat, hands at his side, the ladle slipping from fingers, dully striking the ground. And when she turns to him, the old man turns away, fumbling for the pint in his back pocket, lifting the bottle to gulp the last swallow of whiskey, producing a throaty exhale, a phlegm filled snort which he expels forcefully into the river. Watch this expectorant bob in the river, slowly travel down stream, hit by perch, their hungry mouths chirping, breaking the surface of the water.

The woman starts to follow the boy, but stops, peers into the wooded area. Shadows have gathered into a swollen darkness that now intrudes on the clearing, the woman, the old man, until all is embraced by its hot,

moist black coat. You hear her shuffle off in the grass until her footballs blend into wind, its breath a constant-counter theme to your awareness of croaking bull frogs, an inter-mittent drone of insects that beat like a wave of blood pulse, punctuated by the territorial grunt of a bull alligator. You want to continue but can not, sound fading as the light did to night, a void of impossible recall.

*

Roland beached the cruiser after instructing Dr. Turner to lift and lock the prop. The boat dislodged itself as it rocked in its own wake. He hurried to the bow, jumped into the silt, his feet bogging momentarily, then dragged and lifted the boat onto the gradual slope of beach. Tieing the line to a stump of cypress, he yelled to Turner to secure the aft line anchor.

"How come?" Turner asked, motioning with his head toward the dock, fifty-some feet away.

"Rotten. About ready to come down." Turner nodded, continuing his knot tying.

Roland surveyed the site--shack the same--no, wait--the screen door now completely off the hinges instead of hanging haphazardly, resting alongside the frame. Someone had set it there, no question. He looked past the run-down building to the lean-to frame -- under it was a flat of lumber set up on cinder blocks, tarped and secured with ropes and stakes. Thomas, definitely. Part of their deal.

Feeling Turner at his back Roland spread his arms, smiled and said, "Home sweet home. The mansion," then stepped up onto the bank and walked toward the building without waiting for a reply.

Though stepping gingerly up the steps to the porch, the wooden slats creaked out a low warning. Roland smiled at his own tentativeness -- if Thomas was here there was no way he'd be surprised. Still, Roland knocked on the door frame, watched weathered paint fall to the ground. Some flecks stuck to his knuckles and he wiped them on his jeans while stepping through the dark opening.

Through the holes in the roof, beams of sunlight broke the dark interior. Roland noticed the window's frayed curtains were closed and he knew he left them open only a few days before. The floor was also swept clean and he spied the broom and dustpan leaning against the desk. Hearing Turner's creak--sing of approach, Roland crossed the room, picked up the cleaning tools and turned, leaning against the desk.

"What do you think, Doc?" he asked flatly, looking at the Wal-Mart price stickers still on the broom and pan.

"This is it," Turner said, his voice containing a bit of wonder, his eyes searching over the walls, the metal framed beds with their mattress rolled up and tied with cord, one in each far corner of the room, the rusted old iron stove near the back door. "Just from your description of it. I think I'd know this room."

"One of the only *real* memories I had, right?"

"Is it?" Turner walked into a beam of light and his eyes squinted suspiciously. "At least one of the few you told me." He stepped closer to Roland, as if to confront him, but seemed to think better of it, turned to the bed. "That one was yours, right?" Roland didn't answer. "And the big, black iron stove. Not so black anymore, is it?" He took a deep breath, then measured his voice. "Do you remember anything else?"

Roland tossed the pan on the desk and walked around to peer out the back window, his hand brushing aside the curtain. A break of light fell on the desk. "Someone's been here. I didn't clean this up. Left this broom." He looked at the lumber, saw some squares of shingles and what he surmised was a box of roofing nails.

"What *do* you remember, Roland?" Turner's voice was odd -- not a demand but an insistent want, almost echoing Roland's own inner voice, spoke to its silence: *Something*.

"I," Roland started, but then he saw it -- poking out of the tall grass growing by the concrete slabs of back door steps. Glistening, green, label all but gone. One of Pap's pints, tossed aside so many years before. Roland bit the inner parts of his cheeks, not hard, but enough. He looked back toward the lumber, tried to focus, guess how many bundles of shingles were under the tarp.

Both of them suddenly turned to the river and the slow build of sound, at first a buzz, growing, swelling to a

roar. Turner moved quickly to the door, started out, but then shrank back into the room, his head tentatively peering out. "Jesus," he muttered.

"No," Roland said, easing past him to stand on the porch, "It's just Thomas." He turned back to Turner, a playful look on his face, nodding to the man to join him on the porch.

In the brilliance of early afternoon the expanse before them took on operatic pageantry. From the two smaller openings, one to the north, the other south, poured at least a dozen, small close-to-the water speedy craft, cutting over the choppy water. The spray of water picked up the radiance of the high sun now just slightly behind the men on the shack's porch. To Roland they appeared as if on jeweled wings, but his eyes focused on the larger opening just slightly left of direct center in the east. The flanking boats started to slow some hundred and fifty yards from shore, throttling down to a hum. Three other craft, the same as the others shot from this larger traverse in the river, at first only definable by the rooster tails they splayed behind them. As with the others, like military crafts, they were camouflaged. The boats powered to the left of Roland's vision, a tight line formation that broke suddenly and formed a triad toward shore. In back of them came the air boats, one also camouflaged, but the other a gleam of silver and reflected light.

"Does he always make this big an entrance?" Turner asked, his left eyebrow askew.

"Either he's alone or with an entourage," Roland told him, the brief glance catching the nervous appearance of Turner's face. He laughed, then found himself wondering what Thomas was up to with this display -- especially with Brock being so close.

When the air boats drew near the Boston Whalers, Roland saw Thomas sitting high, piloting the silver boat, gun the throttle, then when some hundred feet from shore, cut the motor, gliding up onto the beach. With a turn of his head to his right, he gestured to the boats on his flank and one of the Whalers fired up its engine, belching smoke and shot back toward the northern entrance. Repeating the gesture to the other side two boats peeled off, one to the south, the other back to the main entrance. Two men with him in the boat climbed out and stood on either side. Roland saw out of the corner of his eye Turner's stare. Both of the men were armed, but they cradled the weapons with their forearm, stocks resting in a crook of armpit. One then knelt by the lapping water, splashed his face, rested his M-16 on his knees, and lit a cigarette.

Thomas hopped off the boat, bounded onto the bank and strode briskly toward the shack. Dressed in faded jeans, jungle boots, a black tank top with white lettering spelling out *Shakespeare in the Park '86*, a weathered green

beret with a 82nd Airborne insignia, he came up half of the steps, his hand extended in Turner's direction. "Thomas Fishhawk, sir," he brightly announced, broad smile under his aviator Ray-Bans.

"Michael Turner," the doctor answered, taking Thomas' hand.

Releasing the handshake, Thomas backed off the steps, legs astride, hands to hips. His head leaned back, as if in assessment at first of Roland and Turner, then the shack. "Needs a lot of work. The roof first off. You know how to put on a roof there, Michael? Ah, no matter. Get you started mañana. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, it creeps, right, baby?"

His hands clapped together and he did a crisp about-face, nodding to the two sentinels. One was scratching his head and examining the nails of his other hand. The other, still squatting, reluctantly rose and gave a half-hearted gesture to the boats to come forward. One by one the Whalers ambled into shore and the crew of men who were only minutes before so precise in their entrance seemed to take on the demeanor of adolescents in a school yard -- some prankish and demonstrative, others sullen and withdrawn, a few just plain disinterested.

Thomas took off his beret, wiping his forehead with it, then sat down on the steps. Roland watched Thomas shake his head at his men. The long braid of jet black hair swayed to and fro when he leaned back, his face

pointing to the sky. Turner tapped Roland on the arm and quickly pointed to the pistol tucked into the back of Thomas' pants. Roland shrugged. He had not told Turner of the talk he heard concerning Thomas as smuggler, chief of thieves, or hero of his people, prophet of the dispossessed. Maybe it was all true, he did not know, was not sure, so he had kept silent about it. Or maybe it was just to see Turner's reaction to it all. Just for your own amusement, Roland? The question bothered him, but he was too curious to dwell on it.

Slowly, the men formed into work groups and unloaded what the boats carried. Gallons of paint, sheets of plywood, eight foot 2 X 6's, a propane grill with extra tanks, other boxes Roland could not identify. "What's all this, Thomas?" he asked, voice flat as he could manage.

Thomas' attention perked up and he leaned even further back, eyes rolling comically. "Deal sweetener?" He swiveled around, pulled off the sunglasses, revealing his dark eyes blistering with delight. "Maybe real payment? Or is it just favors, what matter? And what will you accept? My generosity or my contrition?" He turned back to his working men and said, the playfulness gone from his voice, "You choose. It's about time you started making some choices. Some *real* choices." Kipping himself up to a standing position, Thomas replaced the sunglasses, index finger securing them flush to his face, and in a grand gesture shouted for all to hear, "But first, lunch!" Then

with an aside staged whisper, "No one should think on an empty stomach, unless of course one is seeking the mystical verities of fasting."

The more playful members of Thomas' band repeated the shout of lunch and produced large coolers from the cargo they brought. It became a chaotic circus. An expensive boombox was brought to the porch and Thomas directed the carrier to play, "A little Allman Brothers," and a large black case was produced. Picking out the CD, the small mouse-like man smiled at Turner and Roland with a mouth full of gold caps. As the music played, he walked toward them and pulled out a cigarette from the one of the many pockets of his sleeveless fatigue vest, the kind fishermen or camera buffs wore. It took the man three or four tries of fumbling for the right pocket to find the cigarette, which Roland saw was hand-rolled, obviously a joint. A click of a Zippo and the joint was lit. The mouse man with the greasy, tangled shoulder-length hair moved his eyes comically as he sucked, then offered it to Roland. Roland held his hand up, shrugged his shoulders when the man pursed his lips and screwed up his face in stern admonishment.

Speaking while trying to hold the pot in his lungs the dope smoker managed, "Some of the best shit you could ever have -- grown right here, my man. Buds of wonder."

"Buds of wonder," Thomas repeated without taking his eyes off his men at work. His arm reached back to the

scrawny man, who handed him the cigarette. Roland noted the intricate pass off. Index finger held straight out, the joint placed to it, then index finger to index finger, until Thomas' thumb pinched hold. Quick, deft move.

Thomas took a long windy inhale, then two short, strong hits, turned, and after a moment blew out a cloud and offered the joint to Turner. Roland watched the hesitation, what almost bordered on befuddlement. What happened next surprised him. Turner accepted. Tentative inhale at first, bit stronger the second. He handed the joint back to Thomas, coughing a bit as he exhaled. Smiling nod, then to Thomas, "Nice taste, fresh." Glancing at Roland he quickly looked sheepishly away.

Handing the pot back to the mouse-man, Thomas waved him away and the man walked toward the men firing up the Weber grill, but not before casting his disapproval again at Roland, his slight overbite pressing down on the lower lip. Roland stared back and stated flatly, "He looks like a mouse." Turner snorted back a laugh and Thomas turned to Roland, a curious cock to his head.

"We call him Rat. Too belligerent to be named Mouse, just didn't seem right. But good guess." Thomas look to Turner, then back at Roland. "Perhaps I should say observation, you were always good at that."

Roland felt the word's intent, without truly understanding. Games.

"How well did you know him, when..." Turner let his

question drift away, his eyes searching Thomas' stoic expression.

"I saw him around," Thomas stated lowly, glaring back.

And so far that was basically all Roland had gotten from Thomas. No direct statements or remembrances -- only innuendoes, slivers of connections. Part of that is my fault, Roland thought. I've asked no direct questions. But Thomas allowed himself to be found by Roland, suggested this "arrangement" when he expressed interest about moving back here to Pap's shack. And it wasn't just on Roland's need -- he knew *that* just by the way Thomas would *show* up during Roland's waterway wanderings. And at other times, when he felt he was being watched, followed, even when he could find no trace of evidence to support the feeling. Of course, Roland also wondered if it wasn't just his imagination -- still, the feeling was too strong for him to disregard it.

Roland saw Thomas' glare soften, almost to the point he seemed weary. He turned away once again, watched his men setting up a tarp near the grill. Keeping his eyes on the proceedings he said over his shoulder, "The past does not necessarily decide the future." He paused, but Roland knew he wasn't done, saw his hand raise and chop emphatically in the air in punctuation, "Unless you let it do so." Turning his head back to Turner, "Facts, history -- how often are they made up? What's the percentage, Michael? What would you say?"

He did not allow Turner to answer, but strode toward the tarp and the chairs being set up by Rat. Rat saw his approach and held up another joint he fished from one of his pockets. Thomas nodded, accepted, and allowed the man to light it. Rat scurried to a cooler and brought Thomas a beer. Roland saw the man's manic actions, arms, hands gesticulating, head bobbing up toward the shack. Thomas waved him away and he backed off with a sullen, cowed stance, slumping down on the cooler.

"Roland?" Turner was at his side and he could sense the doctor's concern. "What is all this?"

"Thomas runs a type of business, some might call it a family, a clan, a tribe."

"These are not all Indians."

"No, but many are. But you're right, still, Thomas is called their chief, by many of them." Roland sighed and looked at Turner. "If you want out, Michael, I can get you back to Sanford and your car. According to Brock, Thomas is a pot farmer, the head of a local drug gang. Someone to loathe and fear. He also thinks Thomas is ready to branch out, start dealing with some truly dangerous people."

"Jesus, Roland. This is no good. We've got to...."

"No. You might, but I've got to."

"To what? What's there? What's the connection?"

Roland leaned into Turner, his voice low, though no one was within earshot. "One night last week when I was in Sadie's I heard something. I was waiting for Thomas. Said

he would meet me there. I sat in the corner booth and I heard Arnell, you know, the drunk at the bar today. Anyway, he was mad at Sadie for cutting him off, called her a few names. Of course Sadie shut him down. Quick. But when he was leaving he staggered over to my table and blurted out something. Sadie screamed at him to leave me alone. Even came out from behind the bar with a bat."

Roland smiled at Turner, but his companion just stared back, body braced. "What?" he asked excited, eyes demanding.

"Sadie asked me the same thing after she poked him out of the bar. Looked like a person moving a steer along with a cattle prod. But she came back to the booth. She was like you are now, wanting to know what Arnell said. Told her I couldn't fathom his drunken drawl. She didn't believe me."

"Sort of like me right now. What did he say?"

"Told me my ass was 'Gonna git blisters waiting for that half-breed.'" Roland looked away. Turner moved to look him in the eye. Roland saw he knew there was more, and he continued slowly. "Said I must be no count because my seed was bad. Thought he meant Pap at first. See, I found out Pap and Arnell were good friends once. But he wasn't talking about Pap."

"Thomas is...."

"According to Arnell, Thomas is my half-brother. You believe that? I've got a brother."

*

They left almost as quickly as they came. After burgers, canned baked beans, coleslaw that came in styrofoam containers with a Publix logo, the men started to play football. In the remaining light of dusk Roland sat on the porch and watched. The ball they threw was foam, the kind with a whistle, and the air shrieked each time it was propelled. It was the type of play Roland never enjoyed. Turner tried to encourage him in group work, but Roland always resisted. At first he had been just plain afraid, but it quickly progressed to disdain. And he always resisted Turner's questions about it, which he countered into a game of vicious retreat. He knew the doctor thought he was just being difficult and it was easier to allow that belief to be fostered. Truth was he did not know why, only that it caused an overwhelming anxiety.

He shut his eyes and listened to the shrill call, imagining it was birds. But his imagination did not override his curiosity about what Turner and Thomas were talking about down by the beached boats.

Thomas seemed to be holding court, arms creating broad gestures, and he paced to and fro in front of his audience. Turner stood still, hands either resting comfortably by his side or clasped in back. Occasionally Roland saw the head bob in acknowledgment. But right before Thomas made his group disperse into the mad scramble of departure he saw Turner hold up his hand, demand Thomas' attention until the

two were inches away from one another with Turner jabbing his finger toward Thomas in the small space between them. He then did an about-face and walked away.

It was too dark at that point to see Thomas' facial expression, but the silhouette held fixed on the retreating figure of Dr. Turner. Then the air was filled with activity as Thomas' men loaded onto their boats. From his position on the porch Roland heard Thomas call out, "Bright and early!"

A flare shot out over the lagoon, a high burst of red that drifted on the wind once it reached its apex -- a slow descent that did not reach the water and its end until every boat was under way. Moments later the air was dark and silent. When Turner reached the porch it seemed to Roland he brought with him the sounds of night creatures slowly taking their places.

Some fireflies broached the porch area, flittering here and there, pulsing the darkness. It was heavy, dank, receiving an occasional reprieve from a colder breath off the lake -- but only a brief interlude making it almost more oppressive. They sat in silence except for Turner slapping at his flesh. Roland felt the mosquitoes too, but allowed them to feed, repressing the urge to rub the welts forming on his bare arms, neck, and face.

Turner rose and stood for a moment behind Roland, finally telling him he was going to fix the beds. Hearing the man work inside caused him to shift around so he could

peer in through the doorway. He saw the shadowed figure break into and out of his line of sight several times. The bed springs creaked and a lapping sound of sheets being spread came to him. He thought of helping but did not move. A flickering light came from the room and with it a wonder of where the candle came from. And how about the sheets? Part of Thomas' goodies. He said generosity or contrition. Roland considered Thomas' choice of words. More play.

The light started to come towards the door and Roland turned back toward the lagoon. Night was in full bloom: frogs, insects, the lone hooting of an owl -- and light playing off the water. No moon, only starlight, but bright enough to cast an eerie glow on this world.

Sitting on the same step, Turner placed a small bucket between them. The lit candle inside threw a warm yellow glaze on the porch -- an animated light defined by movement, shadow. "Seems your friend has our welfare in mind. Citronella. Found it in one of the boxes." There was a slight sarcastic edge to his voice and Roland wondered to what extent. Perhaps Turner would leave. Perhaps he should.

"What did you and Thomas talk about? Down by the water."

Turner shifted his eyes from Roland to the lagoon. In a gesture Roland watched many times before, the doctor stroked his mustache and beard as if he were combing out

knots. Long deliberate pulls that ended with his extending past his beard, massaging his Adam' apple. "I'm not avoiding your question," Turner said, then turned back to him and smiled. "Well, maybe I am. I wanted to be cavalier for a second and just say, 'Things'."

Roland smiled back, "Probably had it coming."

"Yeah, you do. But I know this is also...difficult for you."

"To trust you? Don't look so concerned, Michael. I actually do. Really. Maybe it's me I don't trust."

"What does that mean? No, now don't turn away from me, Ron. That's only partly a therapist's question. You know you're being vague. And that's not a game you learned from Thomas."

Roland got to his feet, seemed to want to rush out into the night, but then sat back down, arms cradled around his knees. "Truth?" The question, though altered in a whisper, hung in the air, gathered force, until he continued, repeating, "Truth, truth is I'm not rightly sure what the truth is. That's what I don't trust." He looked at Turner, face lit golden, flickering in light and shadow. "That's it. Even when I really *feel* that something I've learned happened to me, I'm not sure. This afternoon, I saw one of Pap's whiskey bottles by the back door stoop. Every part of me recognizes that damned bottle. The way the sun played off of it. So familiar. Real. But...." When he saw the smile turn up under Turner's mustache, the

warm consoling smile he used to strive for because for a brief moment he did not feel so all alone, Roland turned away. As he always did. As if he did not deserve it.

"Ron," the voice spoke so dulcet it jangled his nerves, "what do you expect? Revelation? Immediate wish fulfillment?"

"What are you going to tell me now, Dr. Turner, that it will take time? You've never had time stolen from you."

"No? You think this makes you different? That's only part of it, Ron. Don't you see, it's something everyone feels, that they're different. You want to believe, believe in some discernible truth. So, believe. Maybe that's what makes it so. You want to know what I believe? I know you care, at least marginally. You asked me here, right? I believe that the genius, that something that made you special before, that something you think you can't remember, is still with you. So what if you can't sculpt anymore. Whatever was there is still there, inside."

"I have nothing inside."

"Inside," Turner repeated, his voice insistent, constant, "inside of you waiting to take whatever form it will take."

"Isn't it pretty to think so."

"I've read Hemingway, Ron. Come on, I gave you that book. You want to know what's ironic? In a nutshell, here you are, a person that grew up without language, for

reasons perhaps never to be known. But now language is what you have."

Roland studied the face. What was he saying, what did he know? "The lists, Ron. Bean lists? I don't think so."

"Those are my," he stopped then with a measured tone, pronounced carefully, "lists."

"I'm right." Turner looked pleased with himself. Roland realized it was a guess. Turner had his own intuition.

"I haven't *peeked* at them." Turner looked away, toward the lagoon, starlight giving the water a sheen of articulated movement. "If and when you're ready to show them to me, I'd...."

"They're just lists."

"If you say so."

Why am I guarding this part of it, Roland thought. If I trust him why not share this too? It was another question he had no answer to, only that it was necessary, at least for now. Turner's smile opened into a tired yawn. Roland wanted to be alone now, wished it was so, immediate, without the formality of saying good night. Without having to insure he was okay, only wanting to blow out the candle and sit in the night.

"Had a patient once," Turner said, his voice carrying away from Roland as he stood and walked to the far end of the porch. "Nam vet." Leaning now against the corner post, arms folded, facing out toward the water. "Lost his

right arm in a mortar attack. Native American, not that it makes any difference to this story. Navaho. He was a painter, a right-handed painter. Well, long story made short, he learned to paint with his left hand, and I remember how he described it. Told me the artist inside was still there. Just had to learn to adjust."

"You think that's the same?"

Turner pushed away from the post, walking slowly toward him, hands buried into pockets. For a moment he stood before him, then walked to the door. Hesitating before stepping into the shack, over his shoulder he answered, "No, Ron, I don't see it as the same, but it is something to think about."

Roland listened to Turner settle into his bed. He knew he was being stubborn, his anger self-absorbed, but his realization didn't make it go away. It wasn't the same. How could it be? The man had an arm taken away, but what made him a person was still there. He still knew who he was. The analogy was flawed. How can anything flawed have value?

Roland's head swam in argument until drawn into its own momentum. He felt a mosquito biting his forearm. Watching it fill, engorge, legs propped in a manner that reminded him of benediction. He itched and the sensation of itching seemed too much for him. With a quick right-hand slap he crushed the feeding insect, wiping the

remnants on the wooden flooring. His forearm had a small blood smear.

Remembering the witch hazel stowed away on the cruiser, Roland walked down to the beach. Water lapped gently with his weight when he came aboard. Grabbing a flashlight that hung just inside the hold, he turned it on and climbed down. Shining the beam of light forward to the galley, he walked toward the cupboard that contained the first-aid supplies.

A flash of pain jumped through him, and he realized he was on the floor, having tripped over something hard, sharp. The flashlight was a foot away, pointing into his eyes and he grabbed at it. It took a second for him to orient himself and shine the light to where he tripped. There in the middle of the floor was a three-foot high object. He guided the search until he recognized what it was. A piece of sculpture. He assumed one of his, though the assumption was based on context, not familiarity. A Great Blue Heron, wings outstretched in an attempt of flight. As he got up, changing perspective, he saw the bird was caught from behind by the jaws of an alligator.

Carefully he moved past the sculpture, not wanting to touch it again. Finding the witch hazel he also took the band-aids, knowing there was a slight laceration on his leg from the contact with the metal. He aimed the beam of light to the side of the sculpture, shuffle stepping past

it again, and climbed out of the boat's interior into the night air.

Part of him wanted to climb back down into the galley, retrieve the object for another closer examination. There was also the mixed message of a desire to fling it deep into the lagoon, but he realized it wouldn't make any difference. The image of the bird's wide-eyed wonder, a wonder that contained the flight it almost achieved and the wonder of the crushing pressure upon its legs that would forever make it part of the earth, the last moments of its life defined by death, was in his mind's eye. And there it would stay.

He sat on the pilot chair, the cushion expelling air as he ministered to his wound, drying it with a towel taken from beneath the seat, blotting away the blood one last time before applying the band-aid. He then poured some witch hazel onto his hand. As he rubbed the liquid over his arms, legs and face, the sensation a delighting mixture of braising, slight sting, and evaporating coolness, he stood up on the seat and looked full long into the sky. It seemed so close. Florida sky. For a time he imagined himself to be the Great Blue Heron, tried to imagine the feel of flight beneath the thrust of wings. It was a futile gesture. He realized that at this moment he had no affinity with the bird, but rather with its counterpart. A creature bound to earth, its land, its water. A creature of primeval needs. A creature of hunger.

He walked to the aft, beach towel now wrapped around his shoulders. From a storage compartment he took one of the life vests and used it as a pillow, looking up at the stars, listening to the territorial call of the night.

*

He woke to the sound of shingles being ripped off the roof, the nails making a short, high pitched wheeze when torn from wood. When he pulled himself up into a seated position he winced in pain, finding his neck hard to swivel. Turning his shoulders to the cabin he saw two men atop its roof using spades to lift up the old shingles. They already had four rows done, working their way down from the top. Thomas' voice called to the other man, "Paper's shot. We should have enough though. Figured as much." Though clear and easily heard Roland noticed the increase in volume when Thomas saw him stand up in the boat. "Whoa, lookee here! Another world heard from!"

Judging from the position of the sun Roland surmised it was at least an hour past daybreak. There was still dew on the shadowed ground, but the sun had already burned off the rest. Roland walked toward the shack slowly, watching them work. It was Turner on the roof with Thomas, and Roland wondered why they were alone. He looked around and saw no evidence of anyone else. Curious, he thought, not a boat here either. Surely he would have heard someone drop Thomas off.

"Biscuits and ham on the stove. Probably not too cold

yet. Stick to your ribs." When Roland did not move, Thomas, though continuing to work, prodded, "Fuel up. We'll leave plenty of work for you." Turner looked down at Roland and comically shrugged his shoulders, then bent his back to the shovel pulling up a large section of shingles.

Roland called up, "Where you going to put the old shingles?"

"On the ground man, on the ground." He could see Thomas was having fun with him so he shook his head and went inside. The ham and biscuits were cold, but he made a sandwich and greedily tore into it. After he finished two he realized he hardly even tasted them, only the salty taste of the ham lingering. The coffee he poured was at least lukewarm, and he drank it black though he saw Coffee Mate and a bag of cane sugar. It was bitter so he gulped it down, hoping the caffeine would rouse the dull ache he felt from sleeping on the hard deck of the boat.

When he climbed the ladder, Thomas handed him another spade. Roland quickly got the hang of the process, sliding the blade underneath the shingles until a section broke loose, flipping it forward onto the growing pile. Every few minutes they had to push the debris down the roof, exposing another few rows of shingles.

Roland lost himself in the work and before he realized it the last rows of shingles were almost up. Thomas actually told the truth, pushing the roofing material down to the right-hand corner of the roof, pitching them on the

ground. As Turner and Roland took off the last section, Thomas was making his way methodically across from the top left-hand corner toward them on the bottom right, pulling up any errant nails with a claw hammer. When close to the two men who now just watched him, both resting their weight on the spade, Thomas gestured to the push broom lying in the middle of the roof. He pantomimed a sweeping motion and pointed to the upper left-hand corner. The message was for someone to sweep the roof clean and Turner was the first to jump.

Roland sat down and watched Thomas finish his job. The sweat on his bare back made his dark skin glisten in the sun. Thomas was in good shape for a man in his early forties, back muscles and deltoids defined and striated by his work. His long braided hair occasionally seemed to bother him and Roland took note of the way he casually tossed it back over his shoulder with a deft flip of his head and neck.

"What now?" Turner called out as he brushed the last of the bottom section. His face was flushed and the tee shirt he wore was soaked with perspiration.

"Water. Some rest after lunch." Thomas saw both Roland and Turner look at one another and laugh. "There's some cold fried chicken and cold slaw and beans left over from yesterday." He motioned for them to climb down the ladder; from above as they made their way down to the ground, added, "Does either of you know how to cook?"

As Thomas made his way down he continued to chuckle, even after Roland curtly countered, "I do all right for myself."

"Yeah, that's right," Thomas answered as he hopped off the last rung, brushing his hands on his jeans. "Peanut butter and marshmallow fluff is a hell of a staple."

Roland felt his face hot with embarrassment. How did he know, he thought. It was something Roland ate close to every day for the last two weeks, with the occasional supplemental Slim Jim and packet of string cheese. He knew Thomas had plenty of contacts, that if he wanted to know something he was like Brock, always an ear close to the ground. But this little piece of information was more than that, and Roland felt the same way as he did when he figured out the one-way mirrored window Turner and his colleagues used to observe him. That was a long time ago, a feeling Roland did not care for experiencing again. He wanted to question Thomas on how he knew, but kept silent about the peanut butter and fluff because he sensed Thomas trying to bait him.

They ate in silence under the shade of the front porch. Turner looked truly exhausted and Roland still felt sore, but he saw Thomas, though still a glossy sheen of sweat coating his upper torso was more serene than tired -- squatting, hands on his knees, back erect, chin upturned, eyes closed. Roland would have called it a trance, but Thomas responded to various things -- opening his eyes and

nodding as Turner picked up the water jug; when the shrill cry of a hawk sounded out over the lagoon his eyes took a moment to search the sky until they closed again.

When they got back to work Thomas directed them, first how to lay down the tar paper, then figuring out the chalk lines to guide the shingle application. Roland was chosen to haul the stacks of paper rolls and then the bundles of shingles up the ladder. The weight cut into his shoulders as he carried them to the roof. The procedure reminded him of Sisyphus, the pallet of shingles he was supplying them from seemed not to diminish. But he liked the reprieve of unloading and taking his time down the ladder, walking back to the lean-to.

Kicking at the ground, overgrown with weeds, he listened to the swish his walk made and thought of how he anticipated coming back here but now felt let down. As if everything would have come together, but didn't. He told the truth to Turner -- he didn't remember much, and what he thought he remembered was tainted by doubt. And he expected more from Thomas, but what he couldn't fathom. Even if Thomas told him *things*, what could he believe even if they were true?

His mind also fluttered with the invasion of his privacy. What was Thomas doing, snooping around the boat's galley? What difference was it to him if he ate junk food? Why would he take the trouble? And yet some part of him was glad for the intrusion, as he was glad Turner came, as

he was glad too for the ache in his muscles and the work before him, the struggle of weight, lifting the bundle of shingles to his shoulder, the cut into his flesh he had to adjust as he made his way back around to the ladder, the precarious balance and awkward dance off the ladder onto the roof, the careful procedure of neat piles of shingles accumulating in incremental patterns on the roof, the stare he gave to the two men working before climbing back down to the ground to repeat his effort.

There was still a few hours of daylight when they quit, one full side of the roof done. As they sat on the porch drinking some water, both Turner and Thomas looked at each other, smiled and nodded.

"Good day's work," Thomas pronounced. Turner continued his smiling nod. "We'll finish tomorrow. And then..." Thomas was looking off into the woods, a stare that seemed to try to penetrate the dense foliage. His look changed into a curious tilt of the head, then doubt furrowed his brow, turning his ear to where he had been staring. He shook his head as if it were nothing, then said to them both, "Did anyone bring down the hammers? I also think we left the roofing aprons up there."

"Is it going to rain tonight?" Turner asked, looking up at the sky.

Thomas stood as if in assessment, measuring the air. "Shouldn't," he told them with authority, then smiled at Turner. "Not an Indian thing. Heard the news this morning.

Willard said, No." Thomas' amused face turned serious and he spoke directly to Roland, "How about fetching those hammers and aprons. Doesn't hurt to be safe."

Roland judged there was something else behind this request, but he got up and walked to the ladder. The sun, low in the west, cast his elongated shadow on the ground. He stood for a moment looking at his silhouette, then saw a dark head and torso appear in the shadow of the ladder. It was Thomas. "I can handle it," Roland told him over his shoulder and moved to the hammers and aprons sitting atop a stack of shingles. He reached down to pick them up, but Thomas' voice made him stop.

"On second thought, it's not really necessary." Thomas walked toward him. Stopping only inches away, face to face, Roland saw his own eyes reflect off Thomas' dark iris. Face to face. Eye to eye. A long moment that Thomas broke, walking past him to squat by the corner peak. Roland changed his perspective, a step lower and toward the roof's edge. Thomas was staring into the woods again, actively searching.

"Who's there?" Roland asked softly.

Thomas' eyes stopped dancing and Roland could see them focus downward at the ground below. "Who?" Thomas said, then sighed and brushed his hands free of the asphalt granules. He was examining the palms of his hands and spoke into them, "What?" He turned his head to Roland, "Who? What?" Head back to the woods, then to sky. There

were two turkey buzzards circling in a long pattern. Thomas pointed at them and said, "There they are, both of them."

Standing up Roland thought Thomas was going to walk away at first and was surprised when he sat down on a stack of shingles, motioning for Roland to join him. Roland did so and both looked out over the water and the last light of afternoon. The far shoreline of trees radiated in the golden-orange glow. Roland could feel this light on his back, the sun's heat a warm balm instead of piercing, as it was only a few hours earlier. Thomas was about to say something but suddenly became transfixed on Roland's leg and the wound. The band-aid he was wearing was almost off, dangling aside the dried blood.

"That's nasty looking. You do that today?"

"Last night," Roland told him flatly, waiting for a reaction, then added, "On the present you left me." Thomas did not seem to understand the reference. "In the boat. The galley." Still nothing, the head cocking further. "The sculpture, Thomas." Roland looked away from what he felt was a new game, or at least a variation of the constant game of cat and mouse. At first he wanted to freeze Thomas out this time, but could not resist adding, "I suppose it was one of mine. From before."

He flinched when he felt Thomas' hand on his shoulder. He tried to pull away, but Thomas held on with enough

force, then relaxed his grip when Roland eased up. "I left you no *present*, Roland. Truly, it wasn't me."

Thomas dropped his hand from Roland's shoulder, taking up the hammer resting between them on the stack of shingles. He lightly juggled the tool in his palm until he found a balance, holding it up before them on two fingers. "This is a good tool," he said, "one which serves its purpose well. I know because I've held it in my hand so often. Turner complimented me when we were finishing up the last stretch of shingles. Said, 'That hammer seems to be a part of you, Thomas. You control it so well.' I smiled at him and let it slide. I didn't want to contradict him. It wouldn't have been polite. See he was on track to the truth of it, but I don't really control it. It doesn't seem to be a part of me. I understand its balance and therefore it understands me."

Roland took his eyes off the hammer and looked up at Thomas. There was no play in his eyes, certainly no sarcasm, but he still doubted his sincerity. Then he realized it wasn't Thomas he doubted but his own judgment. "It's just a hammer, Thomas."

It took a moment, Thomas' face a hard line of inquiry, but he relaxed into a brief smile. "You're right," he said and put the hammer down at their feet on the finished part of the roof.

"If you didn't leave it, who did?

Thomas stood up and turned to the other side of the

roof. "There's some rotten beams and plywood to replace tomorrow so we should get started early." He looked down at Roland. The tone of his voice was far more distant and formal. So was the look. Roland wanted to be able to take back what he said, at least the way he said it. Thomas looked away, back out to the north woods. "Tomorrow we work, finish this job." He started toward the ladder, but stopped before turning his body around to descend. "What was it?"

Roland rose to his feet, tentatively started forward, but stopped. "What?"

"Yes. The sculpture."

"It was a gator attacking a Blue Heron."

Thomas nodded his head, then turned to look again to the north woods. Roland followed his line of sight and thought he saw some shadowed movement in a small break in the tree tops. He started to ask Thomas what he was looking for, but he was already off the roof. Roland walked quickly to the roof edge, heard an exchange between Thomas and Turner, then saw Thomas head to the trees.

Turner called out to him, "Where you going?"

Thomas, without looking back, raised his arm in salutation and called back, "From where I came." Roland listened to the brief rustling of his leaving, tried to pick up a flash of him through the tree branches, but he was gone. He looked up over the canopy of tree tops now burned with the bright orange of last, intense daylight.

The shadows were increasing and the two vultures he saw before hovered low above the woods.

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The day and its work went quickly. Roland helped in the removal of the old roof. He and Turner finished this task as Thomas went directly to work on the rotten beams and plywood as soon as they were exposed. Roland noticed Turner was far more watchful though it did not slow down his work. At odd moments Roland saw him study Thomas even while lifting the old shingles and pushing them toward the pile of accumulating material at the roof edge. And there were times Roland knew he was staring at him, though he was hard pressed to catch him.

They had talked a bit after Thomas left, mostly about the sculpture Turner retrieved from the boat as soon as Roland told him about it. He was quite excited about the piece. In the years they knew each other Turner acted as executor of Roland's art work. When they made the decision to sell much of the collection, Turner directed the agents and administered the trust fund set up on Roland's behalf. While the wood carvings sold well, at a good price, the metal work was considered far more unique and powerful. A few of the major pieces sold for more than fifty thousand. Because of this work, Turner developed a knowledgeable eye for Roland's art and knew this would be considered a major find.

"I don't know whose it is," Roland told him.

"It's definitely yours, Ron," Turner said, walking around it, studying details. "No question."

"I don't know who left it at the boat."

Turner, squatting before the sculpture, looked over the sculpture to Roland sitting on the cot. The cabin was lit with candle light and Roland noticed the way the shadows of Turner and the piece mingled together on the floorboards. Roland felt a strange recognition in the way the elongated figures stretched out to him. "Who else?" Turner said.

"He told me it wasn't him. I think he's telling me the truth."

Turner got up, hands held out in an expression of backing off, but there was a touch of exasperation. This was emphasized when he plopped down on the other cot. When the shadows broke from each other Roland felt a mixed sensation of relief and longing. He couldn't call the recognition he felt a memory. There was no context for it. But it was something. *Something*.

When he heard Thomas' voice call out, "Quit day dreaming," Roland lifted the shingles his spade loosened. Turner was looking at him in a strange way, partly concern but also confused. The look turned to one of stern defiance as he switched his stare to Thomas. Briefly, Thomas returned the look, but fell back to work, his hammer adjusting the position of a stud by tapping it gently into place, then driving a two-penny nail home.

When the roof was off Roland went back to his job of supplying the other two materials. He got back to the rhythm he felt the day before; the only exception he noticed was the source pile progressively smaller. When he carried the last bundle to the roof, he was surprised to see the men two-thirds of the way done. The sun was well past noon as they worked through lunch, but it was not as oppressive as the day before because of the sporadic cloud cover.

Thomas set Roland up on the job of creating tabs for the cap, cutting the three tab shingles into three separate parts. He showed him how to trim back at an angle with the roofing shears and after a few tries Roland got the hang of it and Thomas went back down to Turner to finish applying the last of the roof.

It was late afternoon when they gathered up the tools and Roland swept the roof clean of stray nails and loosened granules of asphalt. Finished, he tossed the broom down to Thomas and climbed down the ladder. There the three men looked up to their handiwork and Thomas pronounced it a fine job. "Good clean lines, no bent tabs, except for the one the good doctor kicked up there on the right side." Thomas cast a playful glance over at Turner who was squinting toward the direction Thomas pointed. He frowned and started towards the ladder, but Thomas laughed and held him back. "It's okay. The sun will lay that down tomorrow."

Clapping Turner on the back, Thomas then pushed him around and said, "How about a trip around the world?"

Thomas walked to the woods and from a spot not far from the cabin's clearing pulled a cooler hidden in the shade. His arms were splayed wide with the breadth of it, holding it out in front of him so his legs could take bigger strides. Setting it on the porch he blew out heartily and said, "Damn thing's heavier than it was this morning."

Thomas reached in and produced three bottles of beer. He held them up for examination. "Let's see here, a *Watney's*, that's England, a *Cervaiza se Yama Dos Equis*, and some bulldog stout from Ireland."

"Guiness will be fine for me." Turner said, taking the beer Thomas popped open with a Swiss army knife. From the ring on the knife dangled an array of keys, to which Turner commented, "You could kill someone swinging that."

Thomas opened up the other two beers offering both as a choice to Roland and laughed, "Bout kills me carrying them. If I was a woman I'd be called a chatelaine." He winked at Roland, adding, "Got that from reading Faulkner, means mistress of the household. Also can refer to the clasp of keys she wore to fit all the locks on the plantation." Thomas took a long swig of beer, expelling, "God that's good. First long pull of cold beer after a long day in the sun. Good. Plain, flat out good." He raised his eyebrows at Turner and got a confirming nod. Doing the

same to Roland, all the response he received was a hard stare, though Roland downed a third of his bottle in one swig. "Ever read Faulkner, Mister Roland?"

Roland remembered it was the same expression used by Brock--*Mister Roland*. "Yes," was all he answered.

"Roland...Ron, actually has read a great deal of Faulkner. I tried to keep up with the pace of his reading, but I couldn't quite do it. Could I, Ron?"

Roland continued to look directly at Thomas, replying, "Dr. Turner...Michael wanted to have a frame of reference for his talks with me. And you did read most of the major stuff. I had nothing else to do."

"And what did you learn from Uncle Willy, Mister Roland? What did you learn?"

"Words. Like miasmic, effluviumatic, even chatelaine." Roland smiled for a moment, took another long drink, adding, "Peripatetic, propinquity." Another drink, finishing the bottle, Roland walked up the porch steps and sat down, back propped against the cabin's wall.

Thomas and Turner joined him on the porch, Thomas opening up three more beers, handing them around. Turner said, settling down across from Roland, leaning against the porch rail. "What was the last word again?"

"Propinquity," Thomas answered. "Means in close proximity. A nearness of place or time." He then spoke directly toward Roland, finishing, "A close relationship. Kinship." His eyes measured Roland, but he broke the stare

by wiping his forehead with the beer bottle. To Turner he said, "In *Absalom, Absalom*. Like Quentin and Shreve ride along the story Quentin tells, along on horseback with Charles Bonn and his half-brother. *Pro-pin-quity*." He pronounced the word like he was finishing a spelling bee.

The music of the word hung in the air while they sat in a wonderful silence--wonderful because of the body's rest after hard work, the beer floating a balm over muscle ache, the body relaxing, a peace from the mind. Roland sat and listened to the repeat of the word, syllable by syllable, its resonance and pattern continuing even in this silence.

It was into this chanting peace he heard Thomas' words, at first only discordant sounds piercing a perfect rhythm, but then shaped into meaning, "I know who brought you the sculpture."

Roland looked over to Thomas who was wiping the beads of condensation from the amber beer bottle. He wiped his face with the cool water coating his fingertips and spoke again. "She's cooking black beans and rice for us. Mary makes a fine dish of beans and rice. Take another beer for the walk."

Thomas went to the cooler, opened up three new bottles, left two sitting on the cooler's top. He walked down the porch steps, heading to the south woods. Roland saw Turner's expectant look and he went to the bottles, picked them up and handed one to Turner. They stood for a

moment at the top of the porch steps staring at one another until Roland broke off the porch in a long stride.

*

Behind him, Roland heard Turner thrashing in the brush to keep up; Thomas was setting a brisk pace. It took five minutes to catch back up with him the first time -- when Roland pushed past a series of palmetto palms in a fifty yard open area he saw Thomas, squatting Indian-style on a large tree stump, smoking. He was looking down, fingers touching the wood, brushing ever so lightly over its surface. Without looking up at Roland, he started to speak, "This tree was very old when it was cut down, scientists say before the birth of the Christian God." He looked up a Roland and said, "You believe that? Regardless, an old and very special tree."

Thomas stood and acknowledged Turner's out of breath approach. He reached down and offered his hand to Turner for a boost to this perch. Turner had to climb for a moment just to reach up to Thomas' hand. Once Thomas had him, Turner seemed to float up the four-foot high stump. Roland turned his head down to Thomas' offer of help, scrambling up the right-hand facade, pieces breaking away from dry rot, but finally on top. Roland wondered if this large opening in the forest was due to the cast of shade this tree once gave off.

"How long has it been cut down?" Turner asked, surveying the ten yard diameter.

Thomas had to think for a moment, his face calculating. "It's going on, what, eighteen years now." His head shook in affirmation and he looked at Turner. "Eighteen years this summer. I was twenty-five. You were not quite nine, Roland."

Roland watched Thomas' eyes in steady search. Am I suppose to know this place, he thought, feeling his pulse, a thumping resonance in his throat. He broke from Thomas' stare, scanned the fallen tree, its long, diminishing perspective piercing the bordering piney woods. Nothing seemed vaguely familiar. He wanted the discordant jangle he felt when he saw Pap's green whiskey bottle.

Turner too was looking the length of the tree's corpse. Great plumbs of Spanish moss still hung off branches rising into the air. "Tree like this," he said. "Seems sinful."

Thomas smiled. "Whole story behind it. Near here is another legend. Ole Graybeard. We'll pass his hole on the way to Mary's place." He drew thoughtfully on the Marlboro, jettisoning the smoke in a steady stream. "Back in '75. I was still an angry young man doing my cliche of a Nam vet, drinking too much, too much of everything. Drugs, fights, your general anti-social behavior. Out here was the only place I felt any peace. A couple years before Brock and I were still friends. We had mutual boyhood pals, Pablo Martinez and Tony Miller. Pablo was a good soul. The four of us went through boot camp together.

Tony and I went to the, Nam, and Pablo and Brock were stationed in Okinawa in reserve. Tony wanted us all to go AWOL--Canada. Pablo talked us out of it. Said here we'd be - back drinking in Sanford again. Well, Tony was killed."

Thomas snubbed out the cigarette and put the filter in his jeans pocket. He was squatted on the tree's stump, looking at neither one of them, and Roland at first thought Thomas was going to end the story there, as if he was thinking it better untold. "I re-upped and did another tour. When I got back to Sanford, both Pablo and Brock held a little celebration in my honor. We were all quite drunk, and Pablo brought up Canada and Tony again. I didn't know what to say to them and I left. Just looked at them both and left. Actually came out here. Well, Brock and Pablo went out looking for me. There's a railroad bridge some six miles from here. They stopped to take a piss and Pablo," Thomas bit his lower lip, collecting himself. "Pablo just started ranting at Brock. Then he jumped. Jumped off that bridge. Brock didn't talk to me much after that, would hardly look at me at the funeral." He paused and looked up at his audience, regarding them both with a sadness in his eyes Roland tried to comprehend, but couldn't. He watched Thomas' eyes switch direction, their focus turning inward to the past he was recalling.

"I heard Brock was bragging about coming out here for Graybeard. Said he was going to kill and stuff the biggest

alligator ever on the St. John's. He knew I'd try and stop him. Long story short. I did stop him. Spent two years on a work crew for what I did to him. During that time he came back out for Graybeard, but that old gator was nowhere to be found, so Brock came here and chainsawed *this* old man," gesturing at the remains of the cypress.

Thomas stood. "Mary will be waiting for us. She's real anxious to see you, Mister Roland." Jumping onto the trunk of the huge cypress, Thomas' arms flayed out for balance as he traversed to a stop ten yards away, climbing down a natural stairway of limbs, hopping down the last few feet to the forest floor. He gestured with his head for them to follow and said, "There's not much light left and it's still a good hike left."

There was a semblance of a trail for brief periods but became sporadically dense with growth. Roland could see Thomas was going at a slower rate for their benefit. In the more open spots he would pick up the pace, but then slow, even hold branches for their passing. It was twenty minutes or so when they came upon a pond some forty meters in dia-meter. Thomas held up his hand and stood for a moment in keen examination. He held this gesture until it feathered into an exacting point of direction. It was now all but dark, and Roland strained to where Thomas was pointing.

At the far end of the pool was a barren bank except for a fallen tree, but suddenly the tree seemed to move. Roland

blinked his eyes, then saw it move again, this time an assured movement. The fallen log raised a foot off the ground, moving to the water, at first slowly, then with great speed, disappearing silently into the water with almost no ripple. In a low voice Thomas said, "The Old Man is awake. Usually by this time he's out on the river hunting." Roland watched the still water, saw a ripple, then nothing until the crown and eyes of the gator reappeared toward the middle of the pond.

"What was that?" Turner quietly asked. "I saw something slide into the water.

"Come on," Thomas said in a normal tone of voice that seemed more a shout. "Let's not get too close to the water. The Old Man doesn't like strangers." As Turner followed Thomas' lead, Roland remained for a moment, still struck by what he wanted when he was at the tree stump, the familiar sense of visitation. But unlike when he saw Pap's whiskey bottle he felt a calm here, a mesmerizing calm that seemed to want him to draw closer. He took a step toward the water, wanting to feel what he knew would be its warm bath. Another step, only two more, and he'd feel its caress, a few more steps into its unctuous body. The sudden pressure of Thomas' hand on his shoulder made him stop his movement, but the pain of its denial was immediate, almost over-whelming.

"Not now," Thomas whispered. "Not now, Roland." Roland wanted to ask *when*, felt the question form within

his mouth, tongue forming the word without uttering it. Thomas led his body away, head turned to the water, the small concentric ripple as the eyes at its center submerged from view.

*

By the time they reached the river again the moon had risen, the night air cool from the slight breeze blowing off the water. Roland recognized the opening they walked into, a recognition that seemed not of memory but of creation, the way he imagined it when he was writing one of his *lists*. He could almost hear the crack of rock on wood. Without looking he knew they would walk to the opening in the woods off to the left, away from the water, and headed there without Thomas and Turner, who at first watched him, then followed.

When he first heard the music he thought this too was of his own creation, then realized as he drew near it was real. He recognized Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*, the oboe laying out its hypnotic theme.

When the path broke out into the open area of the river, he saw the lights of the house hovering above the water. In the moonlight he could see the silhouette stanchions the house was built on, black legs that held up a silver body with a multitude of golden eyes. A group of these eyes cast a luminescence upon a porch which contained a row of rocking chairs. He looked for some sort of dock that would lead to the house, but there was none.

Thomas came up alongside, a silvery light reflecting off him too. He put two fingers to his mouth and blew a distinctive two-tone whistle, then walked down to the water. A large opening of golden light appeared and with it a shadow of a person who stepped out onto the porch right before the light disappeared. Roland could see the figure move to the left, then disappear around a corner of the building. In a few minutes he saw the boat making its way toward them, the standing figure poling across the water.

As she drew near, Roland knew who she was, at least the part of her he thought he only imagined, but was now standing in the middle of the wooden flat bed Johnny-boat. And in this light she seemed no different than the image of her that floated along with the words he had written, an image now before him of flesh and hair and cloth. Her hair, a shock of flowing white curling around her shoulders, the ankle length dress hiding her shape except for rolled up sleeves and thin, dark arms poling resolutely onto the bank's landing. Her eyes and most of her face were in shadow from the tent of her hair except for the protrusion of the strong, hawk-like nose. She turned her head curiously to the side, measuring this group of men.

Thomas went down to the boat, steadying the bow. The woman smiled briefly at him and tossed the pole which Thomas caught in his free hand. She then turned and moved

to the back of the boat, sat down, her legs splayed beneath her dress, bare forearms pressed upon knees.

With Thomas motioning them forward, Roland and Turner climbed aboard the boat, rocking precariously with their weight. While both of them struggled with balance, the woman moved with the motion of the boat, her stance unperturbed with the exchange. Turner started to utter a greeting, but the woman gestured for him to remain quiet, finger to lips, then further communicated for them to listen by cupping her hand to the side of her hair and its hidden ear.

With a strong push Thomas freed them of land and they glided forward. Thomas moved the pole from port to starboard, correcting their direction in line to the stilt house. Roland took heed of the woman's silent commands, listening intently as they crossed. It was obvious the woman's stare was directed at him, occasionally the flash of her eyes peering from beneath the canopy of hair. He read her stare as more inquisitive than anything else until midway. The strong, low grunt called out over the strains of the music. It was then she picked up her head, turning slightly as if to hear the direction of the gator's call, but keeping a steady, unblinking eye on him. Thomas said, "The Old Man has followed."

The woman lifted her chin and her hair parted its curtain, revealing high cheekbones and an open mouth. Then she spoke. "You saw him?"

"Briefly," Thomas answered. "When we passed his place."

"He made good time to catch up," the woman said, her voice containing a bit of amusement. This voice, so formal and crisp, surprised Roland. It reminded him of Thomas when he was trying to be precise. Same cadence and lilt. "He, too, is interested in this *homecoming* it would seem." She then turned her back to them as they approached the house. Thomas poled around the far side to an elevated dock looming a few feet above his eye level. The woman moored the stern of the boat, Thomas poling them parallel with the dock, tying off his bow end. There was a wooden ladder the woman slowly ascended. Turner was the first to follow, and by the time Roland joined him on the dock the woman had already climbed another ladder to the deck above, disappearing around the corner of the building. She traversed the deck's planking with almost no weight as Roland heard only the slightest of creaking in contrast to the squeals Turner and he made.

Roland looked down to Thomas and the boat and saw him casting off the lines again. Thomas called up, "Be back in a while." He saw Roland's consternation because he laughed and added, "Go on. I'll be there momentarily."

Roland watched him glide to shore, his arms working more strongly then the trip over, a figure of reflected silver and shadow moving over the glistening water in steady rhythm.

When he reached the top of the ladder and the deck, Turner asked him, "Where's he off to?"

Roland shrugged his shoulders, "Didn't say."

Turner tried to see through the curtained window in front of them, but it was a darkened part of the house. He sniffed the air and Roland recognized the smell of garlic, onions and spices. He smiled and said, "Does smell good."

"So this is Mary," Turner stated, as he leaned back trying to peer around the corner. The angle wasn't acute enough, and he turned back to Roland for confirmation.

Yes, he thought, of course it is, the recognition a comfort to him, but he felt a desire to hold back. Perhaps I want to wait for Thomas. Is that it? Roland saw the boat and man reach the shoreline, Thomas deftly hopping out. Quickly Thomas' form slid into the shadows on the edge of the clearing.

"Well, should we?" Turner gesturing for Roland to precede him and Roland tentatively moved past him around the building. The porch was wide and Roland walked through the slants of light catching the woman at the huge wood stove. She was bent over a pot, tasting its contents with a large spoon. When he walked through the next light he saw her bent to open the oven, a towel protecting her hand from the heat of the stove's handle. As he stood in front of the screen door he heard her call without turning around, "Bread's not quite ready, come in if you want."

As Roland opened the door she added, "Check your feet! Traipsing in that woods probably left you filthy."

Both Roland and Turner looked at the bottoms of their shoes. They were indeed soiled, and they looked at each other like ten-year olds wondering what to do about it. They were answered with, "Leave them right outside the door."

The room was large and lit with oil lamps, warm from the stove, the air mixed with the odor of the beans and bread, a heavy scent of cumin. Before he realized why, he heard Turner exclaim, then muffle, "Jesus." Around the walls, on shelves and table were a dozen or more sculptures -- turtles on a log; egrets; a large mouthed bass in flight toward a meal of dragonfly; an alligator gar, piercing its perch prey; a mother gator from whose jaw peeked the heads of infant gators. Most of the menagerie were small in scale, but a few were of larger proportion, like the bull alligator and heron left on the cruiser the previous night.

Roland did not want to blink, afraid they would all disappear -- submerge or take flight in that black hole of memory he had only begun to recognize, to form not only a mental construct, but something more -- *Something*.

When Turner spoke he did not break the spell the room had on him, but Roland did feel a lessening of its affect. What was there remained, but diminished. "You've had these? All this time?"

"But of course, Dr. Turner. The boy gave them to me."

Her tone was not protective, rather matter of fact. She smiled at Turner. "Do you remember giving them to Mary, Mister Roland?"

Roland shook his head no, but said, "Not the giving, but...."

"You *do* remember something about them. Good. That's good."

Turner asked him, "Do you really? Truly, Roland. You remember?"

"Yes."

"What, what do you remember?" Turner was almost breathless, and also seemed a bit perturbed.

Roland looked at him, his forehead a bit folded into curiosity. "That they're mine, Michael. I know they're mine."

Turner pulled a cane-backed chair to him and sat down with a great weight. His head rolled back and forth. "This almost...." He looked up at Mary for help.

"Make any sense? Of course it makes sense. Think. This is where they live. This is where he brought them to life. It makes perfect sense."

Turner looked down at his stocking feet, nodded his head. "Of course it does." He laughed. "It's my arrogance that's...."

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Dr. Turner. But it does make all the difference in the world just what world you put them in. I know about what you tried to do from

what you told Thomas. He just wasn't ready back then to know. Even now he's not completely ready." She was now watching Roland.

Feeling her scrutiny, then Turner's, Roland walked to the screen door and scanned the shoreline, hoping to see Thomas, but all he could make out was the shadow of the Johnny boat. The stranger of familiarity, a burden at this point rather than relief, laid its heavy gravity onto his slumped shoulders and he leaned against the doorjamb from its strain.

"So," he heard Mary's voice play out behind him, "You're Dr. Michael Turner. I am Mary Fishhawk, Thomas' mother." Roland turned a bit so he could catch a perif-heral view of them. He saw the flash of her gesture for Turner to sit at the table and chairs in the far corner of the room. Turner obliged and Mary sat across from him.

"Michael, please."

"I've always liked the name Michael. Michael it is."

There was an awkward silence where the only sound in the room was the now muted music and the sound of the stove's fire. It was warm in the room, and Roland tried to center himself by concentrating on this warmth, without success.

Turner broke the silence. "I'm sorry, I'm not trying to be rude, it's just I'm a bit flabbergasted at the amount of Roland's, Ron's work here." He paused then added, "Do

you know, forgive me again, but do you know how much this all is worth?"

"Oh yes, Michael. I know its worth. It's worth a great deal." Roland turned and saw the playfulness in the woman's countenance. Again, much like Thomas. Her hair was indeed almost white, though there were still highlights of what was left of her dark hair. Long and straight, with a still youthful sheen to it. Now, in this light, Roland could see her age, the skin around her eyes, crinkled folds. The skin beneath her strong chin was also a bit loose and Roland judged her to be sixty or so, perhaps late fifties given her obvious time in the sun. But she would have been dark anyway and Roland could tell her beauty must have been once breathtaking. He smiled when he noticed Turner's mesmerized gaze, mouth slightly agape. It seemed her full effect was not lost on Michael, who suddenly laughed.

"Yes," he said, "of course you know its worth. Being the curator of Roland's estate, as it were, I was thinking dollar signs."

"Michael, you have been a good friend to Roland, obviously more than that. You've even impressed Thomas in those regards. Not an easy task," She looked over to Roland, sweeping her white mane behind her ear, revealing her face fully. Her arm rose and her hand opened toward him. "Please join us, Mister Roland," she offered, the tone of her voice like a mistress coaxing a skittish colt,

without a trace of condensation. A part of him tried to resist her pull, but was overwhelmed, and he drew near the still out-stretched hand until seated across from her, hands in his lap, staring at the hand and arm that feathered its outreach even further across the table, and his own arms rose, his hands meeting her hand, fingers now lightly searching over his knuckles, the bones, the protrusion of veins under his skin, touching his pulse. She smiled.

Roland knew, without seeing, that Turner was amazed at this, as a part of himself was amazed without being surprised that he allowed, no, welcomed her touch. The dichotomy of the foreign and familiar, experienced intermittently since the inception of this journey on the river, now made flesh. The warmth of flesh, of the room, of fondness in the dark reflection of her eyes.

Too much. Roland broke her hold, her gaze, and concentrated on the grains of walnut in the table, hands back in his lap. A confusion he thought he never felt before reigned in him. After a moment Mary said flatly, "How you've changed." Roland flashed a glance at her. "A handsome young man. Intelligent too, you can't hide that from me."

"Instead of the idiot savant everyone seems to want me to re-evolve back into."

"Idiot?" He saw her anger -- it disarmed him. "You were never an idiot!" Her bottom lip jutted out a bit,

eyes narrowed. "What you were was no fault of yours. He was a bitter old fool." Her anger left her, replaced by what appeared sorrow. She continued more slowly, with great effort, "But not as much a fool as me." Pushing away from the table Mary retreated to her pot on the stove, stirring the beans. She then picked up the towel, opened the oven, and drew out the bread with a large wooden spatula, sliding it deftly on the counter top adjoining the sink. With her back turned she spoke again. "I've no doubt you'd like some answers, answers I'll provide, but you must grant me the time for the telling. Trust me with a trust I don't truly deserve. I once deserved it, perhaps."

"I know," Roland said, meaning it without truly understanding what or why he was saying this.

"Do you?" Mary raised her head without turning around, fidgeting with the bread. "I wonder. I will tell you this. You were the purest soul I've ever known, and I regret you ever changed. You're right about that, Mister Roland." She faced him, the curtain of her hair again veiling much of her face. "And for that I offer no apology." Out of a drawer she produced a knife and cutting board, working away at the bread before her. "There is a basin and water in the other room. Wash up. Thomas will show you."

Both Roland and Turner looked at one another, both turning to the opening of the screen door. In the doorway

stood Thomas holding an armful of quartered wood. "Storm's coming. Temperature is dropping already." For the first time Roland noticed the sound of the rising wind. The screen door clattered behind Thomas until he reached behind him, balancing his load with a knee while securing the eyehook latch. He shut the interior wooden door with his foot. "I wouldn't be surprised if the river rises a few inches before it's done."

"Good," Mary said. "I'm getting tired of climbing that ladder. By this time next month it will be a shorter trip. She coming?"

"No. Dropped off the supplies you asked for." Thomas had crossed the room and deposited the wood in a crate by the stove. He brushed off his hand, dusted the haunches and thighs of his jeans, leaned over and kissed the woman on the top of the head, said, "How are we, Mother?"

"I'll be better once you've all washed and eaten. So she's not coming."

"Sadie sends her love."

"Of course she does." Mary started to chuckle, muttered, "Coward."

*

The beans and rice were delicious but Roland ate little, even after being cajoled by Mary for being too thin. Both Thomas and Turner did their part, having seconds and polishing off the loaf of bread. The storm did indeed hit, pelting the tin roof with an alarming

percussion Mary and Thomas took little notice of. At one point during dinner, the windows on the porch sang with the rain's rhythm, the wind so strong it blew the rain horizontaly.

Mary asked Thomas if Sadie remembered her medicine, and he produced a bottle of Chardonay. She asked him to open it while she went to a cabinet and asked who would join her. Thomas held up his beer, Roland shook his head no, but Turner told her he'd be delighted. Gusts of wind still lashed the rain with force, but the precipitation was now just steady instead of the previous torrent. She asked them all to sit on the group of couches and chair lining the middle wall of the house and Roland sat on the large wooden rocker. Mary took a healthy sip of wine, closed her lips and sighed, sinking back into the thick cushions of the couch.

"I have thought long and hard how to begin this. Not just since I knew of your return, but a long time." Mary looked over at Turner sitting next to her and patted his knee. "Actually since I started to read your findings. You're quite an interesting writer for a psychiatrist, Michael."

Thomas, who was leaning against a bookcase offered his hand toward some diplomas on the wall. "Ph.D. in Comparative Literature," he said.

Turner looked at the diplomas and bowed his head. "University of Chicago? Impressive, Dr. Fishhawk."

Mary waved them away. "Another incarnation. Actually most of my work is in mythology, Native American especially. What my father's people came by naturally -- they were shamans -- and practical. Well, I turned to the theoretical. More a recorder of our heritage. Of course, I consider Freud a mythologist, the whole business of collective unconscious." She seemed to again be playing with Turner. There was also a challenge in her voice, a challenge Turner did not pick up, but conceded with a nod.

"Myth and history are interesting partners. It's always been amusing to me how our history and beliefs have been so easily dismissed as fairy tale. Are you a believer, Michael?"

Turner's mouth dropped open a bit, but he recovered with a smile. "I was brought up a Methodist, but my mother was Jewish. In any case we were a secular family, though we observed both my parents' holidays. Frankly it's only since I've turned fifty that I've given it any serious thought. If pressed, I only admit to being a secular humanist."

Mary turned to Roland. "I like your friend, Mister Roland." She took another sip of wine, wincing as she swallowed. Thomas broke his lean on the bookcase, taking a step forward. "No, son, I'm all right. Give me a moment." Her forehead wrinkled in concentration, but she collected herself. "No secret here gentlemen. I'm a sick woman.

Cancer actually. I was in remission, but...." Again she waved away the thought. "Not important, only a fact."

"Mother looks at cancer as an inconvenience," said Thomas.

"And what else it? Life tends to admonish us with our own frailties. Mind over matter -- if you don't mind it don't matter." She was obviously pleased with herself, and Thomas chuckled, leaning back against the bookcase.

Mary pushed herself up to sit on the edge of the couch, in much the same position she was in when crossing in the boat, a solid balance to her body, hands on knees. She rocked a bit, as if keeping time with the percussion of the tin roof. "There are also advantages. Like you, Michael, I once was more secular in my outlook. Being sick has allowed me to see beyond into what I used to only be able to intellectualize. I've come to know the realms beyond this world, something all our people once knew to be true." Her eyes picked up and focused on Roland. "You, Mister Roland. You once knew exactly what I'm speaking about. That is what you've lost, though it's never lost to you. Facts. You want facts, but facts have little to do with knowledge -- the truth."

Mary closed her eyes. The pain she felt was physical, that was obvious, but Roland wondered what other pain she felt; then he asked the question. "Mary, are you my mother?"

She clucked her tongue on the roof of her mouth, and

smiled, "No, my dear boy. I'm your grandmother. What that drunken old fool at the bar told you is only one of the rumors this river has lived with for years. Thomas is not your brother, he's your father. A boy of sixteen when you were born in your grandfather's cabin. And your grandfather's daughter is now dead. Your mother was a beautiful child, but you never knew her. Your grandfather threw her out after you were born. It's a complicated story, one I'm too tired to tell right now." Mary looked up at him and he saw the well of tears that formed, but held back, abated by her inner strength. "Easy boy. Remember, these are just facts. Be patient with me."

Holding up her hand, she waited for Thomas to come to her and she rose up on his helping arm. "Get them settled in your room, boy. I must rest." As he led her through the side door, Thomas held up his finger for them to wait for his return.

In the interim they did not speak. Roland noticed Turner's circumspection, his eyes in an un-focused flutter, and he turned away to the wall of books. He only caught a few titles, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Notes from the Underground*. There were even some contemporary writers he knew: Kennedy's *Ironweed*; Morrison's *Beloved* and *The Song of Solomon*; Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. His mind started to play with the irony of what he'd inherited from Mary, and even Thomas, but the notion of it befuddled him at this moment. A part of him wanted his connection to reading and

literature to be only his own conception. It angered him a bit to feel it was something in his genes, a part of his DNA make-up that pushed him in that direction after he discovered language. It was as if he now wanted to deny what he thought he longed for.

Roland forced his mind to the immediate. The wind pitching a high tone through a small gap. In what, the door? Windowsill? The fall of a burning piece of wood in the stove, its searing hiss, the pop of resin. The drone of rain on tin. It worked for a moment, but an overwhelming image emerged within his consciousness, an image far different than the reality he had witnessed only hours before. A mist hovering above a pool of water. Patches of orange sunset light filtering through the surrounding trees. It was summer. Of this he was sure. He felt himself float like the mist, hovering at water's edge. Slow immersion. The glide, slide into liquid.

His reverie was interrupted by Thomas' entry. He walked quickly to the kitchen cabinets, opening one of its doors. Roland watched him produce a small vial, heard the sound of paper being torn open, saw the syringe in Thomas' hand. Injecting the needle into the bottle, Thomas held it aloft and upside down, slowly drawing the plunger. He then broke open a small glass ampule and combined whatever was in that with the syringe's contents.

"Demerol," he heard Turner say.

"Yes. And a bit of Dramamine," Thomas said.

"For the nausea," Turner responded, a sigh escaping. "She really doesn't look that far along."

Thomas looked away from his task of flicking out air bubbles from the syringe with his fingertip, toward Turner. "So far it's only on occasion it's bad enough for this. She really prefers to have a few glasses of wine. Or a joint." Thomas eyes showed a certain amusement. "I often join her in that. Then she tells me stories. I love to hear that woman weave the magic of her fancy." He frowned a bit and refocused on the syringe, finally edging the plunger up until it fountained a small stream into the sink. "Anyway, she's good most days, at least she bears it well. Tonight, well, tonight put a bit of a strain on her." Thomas gave Turner a long look, then glanced at Roland as he passed by into the other room.

Roland got up as if to follow Thomas, eyes on the closed door, then walked to the porch windows and stared outside. It stopped raining, but the cloud cover that moved in made it a dark night, the far shoreline hardly perceivable. He was trying to examine his feelings but could only manage a confused, mixed muddle, nothing definitive. Hazy borders. Nothing centered.

Turner joined him and their reflections took on the quality of old photographs, grainy not fully distinct. "How are you doing, Roland?"

Roland picked up his head and saw that Turner too was watching the reflections, reading. "Have we dropped the

Ron now, Doctor?" Roland smiled and shook his head at the dark image. "I'm sorry. Thomas is right. So's Mary. You have been a good friend to me, Michael." Roland stared past the images now and thought he could see some shadowed movement on shore, then decided it was nothing. "I don't even like *Ron*."

"Good."

They stood together in silence for some time until Turner spoke. "You know, you've found out a great deal already, and it appears there's more to come. I'm not quite sure what it will all mean to you." Roland could see the struggle in Turner's face as he paused. "I guess what I want to say is don't expect it to all come together, at least right away. Mary's right. Facts are one thing, but truth, well, truth can have a way of evolving slowly. At its own pace. The important thing is what you do with what you learn." Turner's hand came to rest on his shoulder, tentatively, then with a kneading resolution. "One thing I've always known about you Roland. You're a survivor. You've always been."

"I'll agree with that," Thomas said from the door he closed behind him. "She's asleep now. Please, join me at the table." He gestured toward the kitchen and waited for them to pass. Roland sat across from Thomas, Turner to his immediate right. Thomas had taken an Indian pipe from the wall and placed it in front of them on the table. From a pouch he produced from his pocket he fished out two

cellophane packets. One held a type of pipe tobacco, the other a large bag of marijuana. He mixed the two together and packed the pipe. Deftly lighting a Zippo he drew on the pipe, then blew the smoke up in the air, sight following smoke. Then he spoke.

"Our dreams are important. There we walk with what has been, what is, and what will be." He handed the pipe to Turner, who at first held up his hand, then accepted when it was obvious Thomas was insistent. He too blew his exhale of smoke toward the rafters of the house. Thomas nodded affirmation. He took the pipe from Turner and handed it to Roland.

When Roland drew on the mouthpiece the smoke tasted at once sweet and harsh. It seemed to expand inside his lungs, so unlike the occasional cigarette and pipe he smoked. It was a relief to expel into the air, and the billow of gray mingled with the other gray threads hanging within the rafters. They repeated this ritual three times and Roland felt himself drift upward like the smoke until Thomas' voice grounded him, again in his chair. The sensation was eerie, but only unfamiliar in context. He had traveled like this before -- this he knew. Thomas started to speak and he rose with the words, traveling on their music and dance, a vapor of substance, traveling on currents, eddies and swirls, a vehicle of swift air.

* * *

And now you will travel past the sound of words, past

sound itself into light and its uncanny speed. Linger for a moment. The triad of men beneath you at the table try to make sense with their limitations, and you are amused at their fumbling attempt. But you must leave them now and go where they can only pretend to go. Leave the mix of sweet, acrid smoke by the way of pure, synoptic energy, past the structure of wood and tin which only an instant ago was solid and stable, now an ocean of molecules and great space, upward on your arc of light, shooting past the stratosphere into the ionosphere, an oblique reference to what you once were.

But you can go no further -- a strand of energy holds you fast. A gravamen of earthly desire. Possessive. Resolute. Spy down on the azure misted sphere. You can not escape its centripetal force. So relax. Allow the fall to happen. And watch. Listen. Feel.

And you are there. Now. From this far height you reach back, falling into a past that is real. Take stock of this reality. Smell the rich humus. Taste the rich soil. Look. The heron is back, but you are not drawn to its center. You observe it from a slip of muddy bank. Yes, feel the slippery texture as you glide, slide from this perch of ground into water. Transparent eyelids close, but keep watch on the heron as your eyes re-emerge from beneath the algae laden pond.

But there is other movement. The heron is startled. Its head cocks toward the two figures making their way

around the far edge of this pond. Leave the heron for another day. There are other prey to feed the desire deep inside you, desire that is based on need, a desire that grumbles within your intestinal tract, a desire that fuels your propulsion forward, close now, so you hear the old man in the baseball cap cower the boy with his spitting noise.

Submerge. This noise you do not have to hear. And these two you know. The old one has come here once before. To kill you, yes. This you know. But he was clumsy. Inept. Now he has come to kill again, though this time to feed you, to place an easy meal of young flesh on your ancient palate. But the boy, you know the boy better. This one comes to you. Often. Speaks to you with eyes that watch -- and yes, even penetrates your thick hide. How can that be? You have thought this before, but knew it was a part of things, a reason to it, just as you knew there was a reason to wallow in this hole, a reason as primeval as your place here.

So here you wait. And watch. The old man pushes the boy forward. Need stirs, then settles around the white flesh. You can see these two young saplings shine in the water, see the old man sit on the rock by the water's edge.

You back away, guiding yourself down beyond the submerged log under which is shoved a fawn, an aged meat most tender. But now watch from this vantage, their figures cast green silhouettes. The old man has little respect for your patience. See him gesture the boy

forward. He has a shotgun in one hand, but with his free arm flaps at the air. You can tell by the way his shadow head bobs and you hear the slight muffled sound, feel its vibration in the water. Harsh, rhythmic barks.

And the boy moves. First appears the top of thighs, torso, belly, now only the head above water, four delightful limbs thrashing about, their sensuous sound so compelling you feel yourself move forward. Involuntary twitch. Abated now. You are patient. It is one of the virtues of being ancient.

And you have known this man, little more than the age of the boy. He fished the water properly when he was young. Once, when he caught the largest lunker in the area you made yourself known to him, and he stood in his flatboat and waved the brown grandfather lunker whose mouth is full of bright ornamentation, battle banners of long past confrontations. Then he stopped the taunts and doffed his hat.

You did not see him again for a long while. His return brought slaughter. He poached your children. Sometimes the river would spasm with the weighted sticks he dropped. He left skinned carcasses the perch and turtles fed on in the water. Crows and turkey vultures feasted on the banks.

But even with his harvested bounty your children survived. Though this one learned many of your ways, finding the sanctuary of backwater, it was not until the

fish went away that your people were all but wiped clean of the river. Still, you waited.

You will wait now. Wait, while arresting the urge of the hunt. See the old man stand up on his perch, two hands on the gun he has tried countless past times to penetrate your hide, raising now toward the boy. Surge forward, past instinct of self preservation, past the white, wobbling form, gliding into emergence.

He is startled. Tottering backward. You can see his fear turn to realization that even you cannot reach him on his rock throne. The gun, leveled to your hiss slowly switches direction. Back to the boy.

The old man speaks to you what you already know. You will not allow the flesh to be wasted once the boy stops the songs he can sing.

Hear the double clicking, eye drawing along shaft. See cheek press against wood.

The crack and burst of the old man's skull even takes you by surprise. Feel the brief rain as he drifts toward you, his face no longer an expression but a bloody gape. Then the quick slap of body on the water. The resulting waves lapping over your stare in diminishing intensity. Eye this fallen flesh, its nectar seeping so close it can be tasted.

But retreat now. You sense the cause here. And there, appearing to the rock's side is the man that follows. And even though you are submerged except for eyes

hidden by a shadow of mangrove, he sees you. He keeps his eyes direction fixed even as he wades waist deep, retrieving the boy back to land. Keeps his watch until you resume forward, accepting the weight of death, dragging it down next to the carcass once a fawn, soon all to be carrion in this hidden place.

*

He had led them through revelation and confession, then led them back through the night, past Graybeard's lair, past the fallen ancient tree, back to Pap's shack. And he left them on the porch in the gray light before the advent of dawn. When Roland called out to him as he walked away, "See you tomorrow," he answered, "It is tomorrow," breaking into a lope, then full run into the woods.

Roland fell to his bed after passing quickly by Turner into the building. He wanted no questions, no discussion. There he forced the swollen feeling that had started to overwhelm, forced all contention into a single image and sensation -- the feel of Mary's stroke upon his head.

When he woke it was mid-morning and Turner was pacing on the porch. He saw him peer into the front door screen from time to time. Roland kept himself still until his thoughts collected their inventory. And he made his decision -- he knew what he must do.

Joining Turner on the porch he listened to this man who in some ways was more a father to him than Thomas. He talked of legal ramifications at first, then settled down

and tried to probe Roland on what he thought about all this. Roland was taciturn and non-committal in response, then finally told him, "I'm going to see Mary again. Alone."

Turner took it rather well, though the disappointment was apparent. "How about I fix you some breakfast first?" he said.

Roland thought about it. His stomach seemed to spasm at the idea of food, as if the hunger he felt was a driving, clarifying force. He declined.

"Can you find your way?"

"I'll take the air boat. There's a few choked channels I can travel. Much shorter." Turner looked toward the water and Roland started to pass by him, but hesitated. He wanted to touch Michael on the shoulder. The need passed and Roland hurried away to the river bank.

*

He saw the smoke before he made the last turn into the channel. It was a long shoot of water that narrowed, then broadened quickly into the inlet of the stilt house.

He tied the air boat to the dock pylons, climbing the wooden ladder to the main decking. He was still humming to the vibration of the air boat, still charged with the adrenalin rush from flying over water. Taking a few deep breaths, he moved around to the porch chairs, sat on one of the arm rests and tried to collect himself. The breathing finally slowed, but he could still feel the surge of heart-

beat from his chest to the main vein in his neck.

The screen door was slightly ajar. He heard her call out, "Come in, boy, come on in now." The house was very dark and he could hardly make her out sitting at the table. He opened the door, remembering to wipe his feet, stepping back out to brush his soles on the mat, stepping back in, shutting the door quietly.

Her hair was braided, and he saw the strong cheekbones, the wisps of wrinkles like fine spider webs at the corners of her eyes. A large cup sat before her on the table, forearms pressed on either side. "This is my third cup of java. No decaf. High octane stuff. I'm still operating in slow gear. Like I'm running in quick sand." She smiled at him, tried to straighten for a moment, but again sagged her weight onto the splayed forearms. "Get yourself some coffee, and please warm mine for me."

Roland walked to the stove, used a dish towel to dampen the heat from the handle of the cast iron pot. He walked back to the table and poured her cup full. There was another cup waiting on the counter top next to the stove he filled, then went back to the table and sat at the corner across from her.

Her face hovered over the coffee and with a slight part of her lips, breathed deeply. She took a drink and pronounced, "That's better." The playful smile left and Mary pushed her arms off the table, shifting her weight to face him, hands now together palm to palm, the tips of her

index fingers pressed to lips. And then she started.

"You were born with a caul, the membrane of afterbirth, choking you it seemed, you struggled so for such a small one, but you wanted that first drink of life. You did not cry. You wanted to see." Mary shook her head in affirmation. "You've been born more than once though, haven't you, Roland? And into this world you did not come willingly."

"I don't remember this 'other world' you say I was born from. So why should I miss it?"

Mary laughed at him. "You're here aren't you, son?"

"And I'm still waiting."

"For what? What *are* you waiting for? A change? You've been changed since the moment you came back on this river. I know. The river speaks to me. But, of course, I know how to listen." Mary's eyes danced with amusement, waiting for him to acknowledge the admonishment.

"What if I concede that?"

Mary cut him short. "I haven't much time to fritter away, young man. Play these games with Michael or Thomas. I am a tired woman."

And Roland could see the wear on her. "Maybe I should come back. When you're feeling...."

"Thomas has a tremendous task in front of him. And he must do it soon. He's waited for you. His choice, though I agreed with it."

Mary sat back, held her hands in the same manner as

before, her eyes now searching some inward air. She sat back, her hands breaking apart, palms facing Roland in a gesture of patience. Yes, Roland thought, she asked me to be patient. As Mary held her face up, she fell into a cast of light and Roland saw the dark circles under her eyes.

"I was still a young woman when I left Thomas and his father. He was a good man when he didn't drink, and he drank too often. He and your grandfather worked together, getting troublesome gators out of the developments, a free-and-catch if at all possible. If they had to kill it they would split the profit of the hide and meat. Your grandfather was not always a bad man, Roland. Life beat him down and he turned bitter.

"He was a baseball player, right?"

"Yes. He played in the minor leagues for many years. Dodger organization. Felt he never got his fair shake because baseball became integrated. In truth his heart was broken because he knew he wasn't good enough."

"I remember him hitting," Roland said when Mary paused, taking a sip of coffee. She took a long drink after he said this, then set the cup down and pushed it away from her. Roland was surprised when she said, "See, you do remember," then squinched up her face in a girlish tease.

"Sadie was Pap's wife. Yes, a complicated web I'm weaving here, but we sometimes lead complicated lives. Sadie and I became friendly, though our husbands only

tolerated each other. I left Thomas' father for Sadie. How's that for a complication? I was to stay with Sadie until I could get a place of my own. Oh, we had a real plan, but Pap sensed something from the start."

Mary shivered and Roland asked if she wanted another piece of wood in the stove. She smiled and signaled two pieces and pulled up a shawl draped over the back of the chair. When Roland sat back down she proceeded.

"I spent three nights there. Big Thomas came to ask me back, but I refused. I knew he would never hurt our son, and Little Thomas was now old enough to idolize his father. I was not going to break that bond. I told them both that." Mary hesitated a moment, then seemed to come to a definitive resolve.

"On the third night, the night before Sadie and I were going to leave together the very next day, Pap came to me. I was sleeping on the hammock of this place. Being torn between the excitement of going to Chicago and the regret of leaving Thomas kept me awake. I was in a T-shirt. It was a hot night, but there was a slight breeze. I remember the smell of honeysuckle. Odd how some things keep with you." Mary turned her head in a curious manner, then shrugged it off.

"Your grandfather put his hand on my leg. I quietly told him no. He took what he called his Tennessee tooth-pick out of its sheath and stuck it into the floor. He then unbuckled his belt, exposed himself, and climbed on

top of me. I did not struggle. I did not cry out. Sadie was asleep in the cabin, but I could have woken her. I did not.

"Your grandfather gave me five thousand dollars. A lot of money in those days. I threw it back at him. The next day I told Sadie about the money, but nothing else. She told me to take it, that she would follow in three or four months. She came in nine and saw me pregnant, and when she broke down at the sight of me, I knew she knew."

Mary shook her head as if she had bitten down on a bitter nut. But she swallowed it and continued, "When Sadie found out I did not want to keep it she begged me to allow her to take it. I was a foolish, proud and still naive young woman at the time, Mister Roland. I have plenty excuses for what I did, but no good ones. Sadie stayed to mid-wife, then left at my instruction. Eight years later I came back, here, to this place. Over those years I sent money, at first to repay the five thousand dollars, gave it to Sadie to put away so Pap would not know, then I sent more. I didn't know it, but Sadie used that money later on to buy the bar."

Roland stopped her with his confused look. "Later on?" he asked.

"Sadie attacked Pap in his sleep. Stuck him with his own Tennessee toothpick. Shame of it, she didn't kill him. Lucky too. The state of Florida would have hung her if she did. Everyone on the river knew the type of abuse Pap was

handing out, but it was directed at Sadie, not the girl, so she bore it. The first time he hit that girl she stabbed him. There was no spousal abuse defense then, no battered wife syndrome. So they put her away.

"I came back before this happened. Was living here. Sadie deeded it to me. The place you're in now was Sadie's folks'. She told Pap what she was doing and he didn't object. Not one peep.

"Pap had started poaching, just selling the hides. See, Big Thomas and Pap had that deal, but most often Thomas took the meat, Pap the hide. The summer after I moved back Pap and Thomas, Big and Little, your father was on this job, they got a job to catch a twelve-footer in one of the lakes in DeBary. It had already taken two dogs. They had just pulled up when it scared the bejesus out of an old man who was down by the water's edge feeding coots. Most of the coots scattered, but one greedy one was still feeding on the stale bread the man was throwing out in the water. That gator saw an easy opportunity and snatched that coot. The man had a walker. Well, you can imagine the sight of that poor old fellow whooping in fright. Your father told me he sounded like one of the coots, only louder, struggling so hard with that walker, panicking and falling. Big Thomas sent him to help the man, but the men knew there was no real danger. The gator had what he wanted."

Mary sat back, "You know," she said, "maybe Thomas

should tell you this part of the story. He's the one that was there."

When Roland said, "No," Mary turned to him. "Unless you're too tired," he added.

Mary took another drink and, holding up her cup said, "It's finally kicking in." She continued. "This particular gator was missing a back foot."

"Which one?"

She stopped as if to truly consider this question. Her eyes turned on him again. She was obviously amused but faked disdain. She looked away with a *tsk*. "Thomas never told me that, but it doesn't matter. What's important about that is that's how Thomas, actually both of them, came to know Pap killed that gator. They released it all right, under the supervision of a Fish and Wildlife warden in a backwater not all that far from here. Pap must have come back, after dark. Killed it. Skinned it. Left it up on the bank, but also half in the water. Your father and his daddy found it that way. Noon. Already the flies thick as honeybees on a comb. Thomas said, Daddy knew right away. Probably just from the size. He had to see the mangled leg." Mary thrust her finger in the air, shook it to make a point, and said, "Thomas was always a pragmatist, he had to see something to make it true. And then he saw too much."

Roland knew her last remark was not directed toward Thomas during this event. And the way she spoke it was far

more to herself than to Roland. She lapsed into a brief silence, but then collected herself again.

"They never worked together again. Thomas' Daddy refused. He was a proud man and became a sober one. Had been dry since a month after I left him. That's one good thing about my leaving them.

"Anyway," Mary said, her hand waving as if chasing off the flies of that corpse, "that's when Pap started a real slaughter. Big Thomas got off the river, mostly working at the Alligator Farm his uncle ran. A real tourist trap. By the time he was thirteen your father was running air boat rides. He still fished the river, saw Pap quite a bit."

Mary stopped. Roland could tell she was trying to figure out dates because she counted in the air with her fingers, lips mouthing the number. "Let's see, I believe it was, five, six? No, that's right, six years after I arrived here. A year after Sadie was thrown in the hoosgow." Mary dotted the air with a period. She nodded her head and glanced up at Roland as if to see whether he was paying attention, but then she leaned forward on the table and examined him closely before turning away.

"I never told Thomas about your mother until after they were seeing each other. By then it was too late. I was afraid of Pap's temper, what he might do to Nicole when she started showing." Mary started to laugh, then got serious again. "That man used it as an opportunity to *come callin'* on me. The audacity. But oddly enough, he was

right. I was distant but I told him he could come see me if he brought the girl. After that I let him come visit me alone. Deal was Nicole could come alone to visit too. During one of these times she told me he yelled a good deal more at her, but he only cuffed her once, and that was actually an improvement. Your mother was a bright young girl. She was thirteen.

"I could not bear to let her live under the possibility of harm. I broke a promise to Sadie. I told her who I was. I filed an injunction on Pap for receivership. But then Pap threatened me. I told him I didn't care if he exposed me as a lesbian -- it was quite well known where I worked as a professor. But then he reminded me of Sadie's petition for parole. To add this spice to the brew, he said, would ruin your stew, won't it? Pap then suggested a way I could keep an eye on the girl."

Mary rolled her eyes, and her head moved to and fro. "Do you know I went as far as to seriously entertain that possibility? But your mother never came back to visit. So I went there. She didn't want that arrangement. Said she already had a mother. I deserved that, and I told her so. She then looked up at me with those raven eyes, dark, unfathomable eyes she had. They were a bit spooky when she really zeroed in on something. She told me she'd start to come around again when the time got close, or if she had any other problems like that."

Leaning forward Mary grabbed hold of Roland's hands,

held them in hers. "I have a lifetime of regrets, son, but none the worst of which is not keeping your mother. She left right after you were born. I took care of you until you could walk, then Pap came and took you. But he'd drop you off again at odd hours. Sometimes when he was poaching, others when he was going into town for a drunk.

"Odd," Mary said, "something your mother said to me, in her eighth month. She was stroking her stomach while I massaged her feet. Said out loud, but as if talking to you, there in her womb, said, I'll be as good a mother to you as mine was to me. It's funny the things you remember, Roland. And far more queer are the things you forget."

"So," she said, lifting her hands from his, placing them emphatically in her lap, "here we are, Mister Roland. The two of us." And then Mary waited. Waited for him to come to the questions he came to ask.

"I never talked. That's what I was told."

"You understood. Sometimes I'd ask you to put your plate and glass in the sink after you ate lunch. You wouldn't budge. You'd be watching the dust motes in a beam of sunlight. I'd find the dishes in the sink a half hour later."

"When did I start?"

"Start? You mean the sculpture. That was after. When you got old enough you showed an aptitude for motors. Pap, of course told everyone, *he done taught you all you knowed*." Mary's voice broke into a lower register when she

broadened out her dialect. "Said, *it like a monkey, monkey see monkey do*. Funny thing, you could fix them faster, better than he ever could. Then he taught you to whittle. That's when it truly started. And you started whittling too much. Let the work pile up. And that's when he started to really abuse you."

Mary looked at him and gently shook her head, amused by her next thought, but there was also a bit of wonder. Still. "Thomas stopped him one time. Your father kept close tabs on you. Especially after he got back from Viet Nam. It was after Sadie was released. She stayed here, which surprised me. Anyway, Thomas brought you here one time, your back a mass of welts. Some of these were scabbed. Some fresh. Thomas told Pap he'd kill him."

Again Mary's head shook. "Here's the odd thing. Two days later you went back. Just like that. When Thomas went to get you he saw you out by the shed, working with the arc welder. Pap was watching. Thomas said he walked back to the shack, sat on the back stoop and drank whiskey, watching.

"Thomas sat there through the night. It was the night you made your first piece of sculpture. In the dark Thomas couldn't really make out what you were doing, only that it was no routine welding job. When you stopped it was false dawn, and in the partial light he could see it was a heron. You put down your tools and walked over to Pap, got him up in a drunken stupor, but guided him into the house. Thomas

stole down and saw you both through the window. You had gotten Pap to bed and were removing his shoes. You stopped, looked up at Thomas staring through the window. One of the few times he ever said you looked him in the eyes. Then you finished undressing Pap, went to your own bed and fell sound asleep.

"Thomas went to the piece of work. Out of discarded motor parts, bolts, propeller blades you had made a heron. A Great Blue Heron. In that light Thomas said if you backed away from it only a few feet you'd have thought it would take flight.

"Pap let you do it. He must have had an idea from the start. Took them to swap meets, sold them as novelty items. But he basically left you alone after that. Let you wander the woods. You'd always come back to the welding shed."

It was almost noon and Mary stretched the kinks out of her back and took a deep breath. "You know what I'd like, Mister Roland? I'd like to stretch my legs. At least get out in the air. Surely it's warmed up by now." She clapped her hands together and stood up. As she walked to the door she said, "I just hate that damned Demerol. It does its job when I need it, but I have a hard time getting over its effects." When they got to the door she blew out hard and grabbed Roland's arm for support. "And I seem to need it more lately. Ah, well, no matter, here we are," she said, and picked up a cane resting against the door-

jamb, and made her way out the door. She went to the railing and scanned the view.

Roland saw, when she pointed to the sky, an osprey gliding in the air stream high above the river. It remained almost in the same place, bobbing occasionally, its wings adjusting. Then it dove for a moment, turned and soared into the crown of trees on the small peninsula jutting out to the left of the cabin, some one hundred or so yards away. To the right was more open and you could see some distance down the main channel. Roland watched a recreational boat charge up the river, veering past one of the channel markers -- gray, weathered wooden structures resembling the old scaffolds built for oil wells. As the boat went by, it scattered a group of perched crows into the air, appearing for a second like a halo-cloud of dark vapor over the markers. They quickly settled back down on the wooden beams.

"What about my mother?" Roland asked. Mary looked down at her hands resting on the rail, her eyebrows pressing together, creating a furrowed brow.

"She was in Alaska. Fairbanks, then Homer. First she worked in a cannery. Later she saved enough to buy her own fishing boat." Looking up at Roland with a tender, but sad face, she added, "She was killed in car wreck. Drunk driver."

"Did she ever...?"

"Both Sadie and I visited her one summer. She was

glad to see Sadie. She was pleasant, but all too politely tolerant of me. She asked about you once, but avoided any details. I'm sorry, Roland." Mary touched his arm for a moment. "She did seem genuinely happy then."

The crows on the channel marker burst from their perch, raucous caws splitting the air. Roland looked for some discernible disturbance but saw nothing. They flew out of view into the adjoining wilderness.

"And Thomas? You spoke of Thomas having a task. That he waited for me. I don't understand."

"No? Well, perhaps you don't. We all must discover our roles in life. You will discover yours, Mister Roland."

"And if I don't?"

Opening her hands like a morning flower, slowly blooming with the first touch of sunlight, Mary said, "Then it will be a great loss I think." Her hands then came together, clasping tightly. "Night and day, Mister Roland. They seem so different. When I spoke of the other world you came from I spoke of something that is just appearance. We have learned to shield our eyes from the signs of this life all around us. You, you walked in both worlds once. Actually, you were just able to see."

"What? See what?"

"That those two worlds are really one." Mary smiled. "You did not speak, but you could read. You read the signs of this natural world, read their connection. People used

to pity you, but we knew you were exalted. Roland, it is the spirit inside you that brought you back here."

Mary pointed suddenly into the air. "Look, look there Roland!" The crows were back, their screeches searing as they swarmed around a larger bird. A piercing cry sounded out, a cry that brought Roland to the edge of the railing. The group came closer to the stilt house and the crows forced the bird downward. It came to rest and refuge on the porch's far railing. Its head moved in brisk quarter turns, searching the sky for its tormentors. The crows hovered, dipped and charged the bird a few times, but it held its position. They then disappeared from sight, but Roland heard their feet tapping at the tin roof.

"It's some type of hawk, eagle," Roland whispered.

"Bald Eagle. Immature. See the way it's molting? It will have its white crown soon."

The great bird turned its eye to their soft sounds, then drew out its wings, displaying its impressive span.

"It's still unsure of itself. The crows sense that. Of course, that will change." He felt Mary's eyes upon him but he continued to stare at the eagle. Again, it cried out, this time the shriek seemed to bore straight in his brain, resounding there even after the eagle took flight. It quickly passed out of view, around the bend of peninsula, crows in frenzied pursuit.

"Do you know your father's business?"

"I've heard things."

"Before the Trail of Tears, when the government forced our people into the Southwest, we were farmers. We husbanded the land, and were quite successful. Because of our success we were banished from here. Thomas is a direct descendant of a great warrior named Chowachea. Much like Geronimo in some ways, eluding the army for many years. He was a colorful character. Once they raided a Shakespearean troupe. Chowachea became known for the purple robe he wore. Othello's robe. In some ways Thomas is just carrying on the tradition. He's bought up much of the land around here that's still wilderness. He wants to build a place for all our people, not just Seminoles, but *all* our people. Of course authorities like Brock would like to seize back this land. It's a very dangerous game, Roland."

"Drug money."

"Pot, Roland. Thomas has resisted the avarice some of his band is now wanting to pursue. He's in a power struggle. Some of them see his position as weakness. Columbians have made an offer. They want to use this as a drop zone for their white poison. The offer is very lucrative, but Thomas has flatly refused. Now, all that he's worked for is endangered."

"They want him dead."

"Yes. And they have accomplices."

"Rat."

Mary sighed and nodded. "Thomas made a grievous mistake with that one. And there are others. But he does

have a core of support, ones who would hold to the old ways. You see, Roland, Thomas has never declared himself chief. He never felt he was worthy. That is the task before him."

Roland did not hide his confusion. He could not fathom how he was important to this *task*. Mary understood his grimace and continued. "In our tradition a warrior must prove himself. There are very few panthers left in Florida. They are an endangered species. Thomas must seek out our brother panther, and if he is worthy, what he needs to know will be revealed to him.

"The Lakota call it *wakan*. The mystery. But first Thomas must purify himself. *Inipi*. The breath of man. The sweat lodge is a spiritual purification, a rebirth. He wants you to help guide his vision. And it is there you will both find out who you are. All this will come to pass. I have seen it. I know."

*

When they settled back inside Mary explained a great deal more about the evolution of her beliefs, from her days as a student in Chicago, to her scholarly activities in comparative mythology. She had traveled the country, gathering oral traditions into written text, making her *academic bones*, as she put it. It wasn't until she came back to this place for good that it all became more than a secular, intellectual exercise for her -- when she made her peace with Thomas. She told Roland of the years when

Thomas sat across from her like he was now, hungry for the stories she recounted. He became her best student, and from him she learned to believe.

At dusk she told Roland she was tired, told him to come back tomorrow, before sunrise, told him Thomas would be waiting. Before he went out the door, she said, "You do not have to come Roland, but it would be good if you did."

He took his time going back to Pap's shack. The river was quiet, few other boats out even on the main channel. When he ventured down a narrow tributary he knew he was headed toward the place where Graybeard was. He shut down the motor and drifted along for a time. The cold front had moved off and he could tell it would be a pleasant night. He listened to a solitary owl, a chorus of frogs. When he drifted toward the bank he saw a raccoon washing some morsel of food, though the light was now so diminished he couldn't tell what. And then he saw it. The rare creature Mary spoke of. Slinking along in silent progress, as if it were keeping pace with his drift. It stopped and eyed him, close enough now to hear its low, guttural purr. It then hissed and bounded off into the night wilderness. He drifted for a good long while, then started the engine and sped off toward the shack.

* * *

During the night he explained to Turner as best he could what had transpired between Mary and himself, but he left out seeing the panther. Turner was disappointed

Roland told him he had to meet Thomas alone. When he added Mary asked for Turner to wait with her, his doctor and friend nodded.

Roland spent the night in fretful sleep. Over and over again images raced before him -- the panther, moving through the blue-gray shadows, its coat a silver sheen - Graybeard, silent, patient and watchful -- and most confusing of all, the bald eagle. In this last vision Roland felt himself metamorphose into the eagle's body, but try as he might he could not fly, a great bird of sodden wings, trying to take flight, forgetting what flight was like, only remembering what the wind whispered in muted tones. Vain, hopeless gestures, his wings flapped frantically but talons dug deep into the earth, as if trying to take root.

It was to this anxiety he woke, tee shirt clinging to skin, the foreign sound of his own panting. He swallowed, taking firm hold of himself until the shaking stopped. But the tingling weakness of anxiety lingered.

He refused the breakfast of country sausage and hash browns Turner fried, drinking only a cup of water according to Mary's instruction. When he told Turner the reason for his refusal the man ate the meal himself. Roland was amused by just how guilty he looked as he forked in each morsel.

After wiping his face with a paper napkin Turner said, "There's one thing I don't like," hesitated, adding,

"Well, there's a few things I don't like. But the drug business, Roland. Thomas and I talked about this. Before the roof. Talk? Argue is more like it. I have ambivalent feelings toward Thomas because of it. Still do. Even though I believe he's," Turner stopped to search for the correct word.

"Honorable?"

"Yes. I have come to feel that. Still, it's...."

"You took a toke or two, Michael."

"Politeness? Nostalgia? I was sorry for it that first time. The other night at Mary's. It seemed different. But that's not growing it. And enough to buy all this land you said he has?"

"Thomas calls it a means to an end."

"Yes, an end. A devastating irony could be contained in that statement." Turner pulled his chair closer to Roland. "You could make an end to this. We could leave right now."

"Back to the Institute?"

"Sure, if you want." Turner realized Roland's baiting, then back pedaled. "Well, anywhere you say. Jesus, Roland, this is dangerous business."

"I'm staying, doctor. You can take the Whaler if you want. Back to Sanford. Your car. Back to the world."

Turner was genuinely hurt, and he looked away, heels digging in. The chair legs screeched on the flooring. "That's not fair, Roland." He got up and walked toward the

door, stopped, turned. It was the first time Roland ever saw him truly angry. His hand chopped at the air, punctuating his unvoiced anger. Slowly Turner got himself under control and forced both of his hands into his front jeans pockets, slump-shouldered, head pointed toward the floor.

Roland got up and walked past Turner to the door, and said, "Come on if you're going," then headed outside. He heard Turner's reluctant feet shuffle after him.

In the air boat Roland retraced his previous route to the stilt house. He tried to be coy about his search for the panther. He assumed it would be long gone or at least unseen in the daylight. He could tell Turner noticed something awry as he too started to scan the bank, occasionally looking back to Roland. When he got to the main channel he pushed the boat to full throttle and they slapped along the river in white-knuckled flight.

Venturing into the cove Roland saw the camouflaged air boat moored to the stilt house dock and he feathered his speed and turned into a graceful stop and drifted alongside. He noted the provisions in the hull. Two sleeping bags, a large metal canister of water, canteen, a leather rifle case.

Thomas appeared at the top of the ladder and descended. He looked fondly at Turner and nodded upward. When Turner looked back to Roland, Roland smiled and mouthed, thank you. As he followed Turner's progress up the ladder he saw Mary at the railing. She watched him

with grave intent, then closed her eyes, touching the tips of both hands to her eyelids, opening her sight in a line toward the wilderness, gesturing toward it, then clasping her hands in fists to her chest. She gave both Thomas and Roland a brief smile, but nodded only to Thomas.

When they shoved off in the camouflaged boat, Thomas sitting high as pilot, Roland saw the figures of Mary and Turner diminish, though steadfast in watch until Thomas turned into the backwater and they disappeared from sight.

*

Above the engine noise Roland shouted out to Thomas that he saw the panther and Thomas immediately cut the motor.

"Where?" he asked, his tone hard and a bit incredulous.

"Close to Graybeard. Really. Last night. At dusk."

Thomas lifted his head, eyes more thoughtful then searching. "Highly unusual. Too close to people, the main part of the river." He cocked his head and called down, "Let's check it out."

After Roland pointed out the spot Thomas banked the boat and walked the river's edge. He disappeared while Roland waited at the boat. Upon returning he squatted and wiped his brow with the back of his arm. "There are no tracks."

"I saw it."

"I didn't say I didn't believe you. I just said there

are no tracks. No rain to wash them away." Roland was about to protest when Thomas added, "It's good you're with me." His head nodded and he pushed off the bank again, climbing back into the pilot seat. "We have a long trip to make," he said looking up to the sun, then firing up the motor. They shot off down the channel.

*

It was late afternoon when Thomas shut off the motor and drifted into a group of mangroves, motioning Roland to tie them off. He threw the sleeping bags at Roland and brought the canteens ashore. Roland thought it curious Thomas left the gun case and water canister, but did not question it. Thomas grabbed one of the sleeping bags and set off into the underbrush and Roland quickly followed.

When they came to the clearing the setting sun was burnishing the treetops orange. A thatched hut of palm fronds was built in the center of this circular opening. The fronds had only begun to yellow.

Thomas pointed to the west. "It is said by our brothers and sisters to the north that the Yucki were born from menstrual blood dropped by mother sun as she traveled across the sky." He shifted his eyes to Roland and wiggled his eyebrows. "There is another legend among the Cherokee. The people of ancient times tried to kill the sun because her rays burned too brightly. Instead they killed her daughter by mistake and mother sun stayed in her house, wailing for her loss. There was only darkness. A few

braves hoped to restore her warmth and light by traveling to the land of the dead and finding Sun's daughter. And when they did, they closed her up in a box. Their vision told them to pay no attention to her cries until they were back home. But she lamented to them, her cries so melodic and compelling they could not resist. When they opened the box out flew a cardinal. It is said that if they followed instructions there would be no permanent death now."

Thomas squatted and Roland followed suit. They remained in this position for quite some time. Roland noticed the shadows of the treeline creeping toward them, but the sky was still resplendent with sunset.

"Mother told me what you saw yesterday. Seeing the eagle is a good thing."

"What did it mean?"

Thomas shrugged his shoulders. "Not sure. But I think it's a good thing."

"You mean it could be a bad thing?"

"Let's prepare the *inipi*." Thomas rose and went to the hut, pulling back a side. Roland saw how the inside of this opening was framed with three-inch diameter branches. Thomas motioned for him to bring in the bundles of wood stacked by the hut's side.

Upon entering Roland saw the inside was a hole in the ground. Crudely fashioned seats of wood were placed on either side of a place to build a fire. A pile of rocks was in the center of this place.

"You heat the rocks, pour water. Steam," Roland commented.

"Indian sauna. But we won't drink beer or flagellate ourselves before jumping into a cold lake. Have you ever done that? It's quite refreshing." Thomas' eyes were playful as he picked up what looked like a small bow. He placed this bow and its loose leather string around a long stick, the point of which he placed in a small block of wood blackened at its center. Roland watched the deft procedure which Thomas performed, lighting the dried tinder grass by friction. Thomas blew at the ember and the grass burst into flame. In this way he started the fire.

Fire heated the rocks, seven in all, glowing as one, and then the water was poured onto the stones, and the steam rose in the lodge, surrounding them both. Fire, earth, water, now one again.

*

Twin of night, awake and behold, your diurnal brother must rest and it is up to you to take witness. Fly on moon rays, a reflection of your mother sun, and await. While your brother, ever hopeful, has pushed these two on, father and son, ever hopeful for their worthiness to transpire and transform, you are the skeptic. See them now, huddled in that thatched womb, hoping to burst forth with warm, moist skin, naked to the cold night you preside over.

The creatures of earth, water, sky have whispered to you a message of renewal. They have kept a vigilance and

you have listened to their patient voices. Listen now. One creeps close to the clearing, the pads of her paws a silent sentinel, hoping for your permission to reveal herself to them as she revealed herself to the young one. That was your brother's doing. But you did not object. Yes, this young one who once walked the darkness of your world with eyes that could see.

But things change. This you know. Just as you know there are some things that never change. How many times must they be taught the same message? Granted, the messenger and voice have been different for different times, but always the same. And to what end? They are always deceived. And by themselves. Correctly taught one thousand times before, incorrectly learned one thousand times before. The reducto ad absurdum. *Still, what else do you have to do? It comes down to that, so you take watch, witness.*

Look. There they emerge, flinging back the flap of green weave, into a night you have blown a cold breath on just to see the spectacle of their skin sheen in silver light, the rise of steam off floating limbs and torsos, a sight that at least brings an illusion of granduer to these acts. And you cry to your brother, "See, I am not above at least a modicum of compassion," and you know he is far less amused by this than you are.

Though you have given no permission, the big cat cries its lament, starts to slink off in guarded steps, but

stops, turn a glance over shoulder blades like sharp knives trying to poke through its taunt, closely cropped coat. The man is silent, frozen in steady sight while the young one points, his eyes wide and white in exclaim.

When the cat bolts into night shadow the man is unhurried but busy. He produces a thong and notches the ends of a long stick, already honed and prepared for this moment. Here too he holds forth three arrows and starts off into the thicket of sawgrass and scrub, a steady pace the young one catches up with, the two, now stride for stride, a machine of motion, and you nod, yes, this is right.

The flight is not long. An eagerness licks at the air. Taste it. The taste of the hunt. Sweat. Adrenaline. Feel what they feel. The sting and slash of branches and thorns. And then the pounding of their hearts, the two, the one, joined now as the flight of arrow, poised, eye to leather and target, the fierce zing punctuating the air, the sound of rock into flesh, the panther's cry of ecstacy in giving its life.

The man stands over the kill, not yet quite complete, as the cat jiggles its leg, the rise and fall of its diaphragm. And the man speaks softly to it. Words of promise and respect.

Notice how the young one hangs back, hugging a pine sapling, watching as the man pulls the knife from its sheath and opens to the heart, severing its slow pumping

from the sacred body, holding it high, blood running down his arm. He turns to the young one, asks him to come forward and accept the first bite, but he shakes his head no, and the man, with a look of sorrow turns and eats of the flesh.

It is almost time for you to leave, time for you to pass the night to your brother's day, when you can call out and the remnants of your words will carry to him a whispering message. His light, a gift from your mother to her favorite son, signals your passing, the gold and copper of a peacock's plume -- whispering, once again, once again.

*

Roland was in the air boat when Thomas came carrying his burden of skin, claws, and teeth. He put them in a knapsack and loaded the rest of the gear aboard. Roland could not look at him. He felt a mixture of shame, revulsion, and rage, and it was unclear to him what this meant. Mary had told him he would find out what he needed, but he felt more alone now than ever. Was this unfair? Was this necessary? He did not know. When Thomas tried to touch his shoulder he pulled away and the man did not press the issue.

Thomas washed the blood from his body and Roland watched the tint of the water turn rust. He looked away.

Once started, he fell into the rhythm of the boat and water, but the noise of the engine tainted any pleasure he

got from the motion. His thoughts kept drifting back to the panther. Its eyes. The panther had looked at him, not Thomas. When it stopped and turned in the clearing, the moonlight was resplendent and it was as if the cat was telling him, you, *you* could save me. But he did nothing but follow, caught up in the chase. When they came upon it again it was panting, then a low guttural curl of sound played out. Thomas looked back at him as he drew on the bow, as if he needed his permission. And he nodded, yes. Now, as he thought about it, he wondered to whom he had nodded. A pang of regret pulled his breath up short.

Midway home Thomas slowed to a troll and asked him if he was all right. Roland did not answer, staring out over the cove they were in. "Roland, there was nothing wrong in what you did."

"Doing nothing was wrong."

"You knew why I went. You knew what I had to do."

"Yes."

"Roland. She gave herself to me. That was a sign."

"Was it?" Roland flashed a look up at Thomas but quickly turned away. His chest felt constricted, his fingertips numb. In his mind those two cat eyes seared him. Suddenly a shrill call pierced the air and both of them searched an empty sky.

"What will happen now? With you?"

"There will be a meeting of counsel. I believe the elements that have been causing problems will be expelled."

"That's good, right? For you."

Thomas sighed. "It has always been my intention to have a place for everyone. A naive notion. Maybe at forty-three I'm finally growing up." He looked down at Roland. "I was moving too fast, wanting too much, too soon. Patience. Patience is the key." He turned off the motor. "And what are you going to do?" When Roland did not answer, Thomas told him, "There's always a place for you here, Roland. You know it took a long while for Mary and I to come to terms. But we did. I'd like to have that chance with you. Maybe I don't deserve it. But I'd be grateful for the chance."

"It's not you, Thomas. I didn't know what I wanted. I'm not even sure what I expected. I feel like I've let you down, let Mary down, let..."

"No. No, that's not what this was about."

"Then what? What is it all about, Thomas? You want me to have a place here. Mary does. I thought I did too. But it's as if the proof I needed is still out there. Somewhere."

"It's always out there, Roland." Thomas turned over the engine, then said over its noise, "Whatever you do I'll back you. Whatever it is...son."

Thomas cut the boat around in a sweeping arc then guided them toward the tributary that would take them back to Mary's. Both of them spent the rest of the trip staring

dead ahead of the bowline, the water a sleek, glistening green.

*

A pressed whisper of intent has murmured along the river's current, running from backwater to tributary to here upon your throne of packed, cool mud. Urgent. Hopeful. So you wait, wait and listen. Listen now. A cardinal brings a sweet song. He is coming.

But this song also contains a cautionary note. The footfalls that rustle along through their cut path have been tentative, back-tracking at times. Still, the progression is ever forward, and you realize it is the slow progress of decision. You have already heard the story of the two, father and son, and though he does not realize it you know the latter's trial is with you. You have not filled your belly in a fortnight, a fast of volition, a fast you would break, because after all, he who was once the one has not sung to you since that day. And you have missed the soothing notes. But your memory is long, as are your days, so you wait.

Now, hear the call of the young eagle, the clear-eyed monitor, his shrill haunt of sound banking down out of cloud cover, his signal in prelude. All is in place. The time at hand. Still, you are the guardian the night twin has placed in his charge. As it's always been. Yes, you think, as it's always been.

Feel the sun beat its rhythm upon your armored shell,

its heat causing you to stir, a deep need to slip into the cooler water. The twin of light has his tricks too. But you hold in abeyance though the primal urge is strong. You want the one to see you in all your glory. The long magnificence of your hide, baked pale in calcium lime, see your long, harsh claws, your broad regal snout, the jut of ivory mouth, the strength of your stare.

*

Running in pure sensation of flight Roland thought of the exhilaration of need pushing him forward. At Mary's a half hour before he listened in non-response to Thomas tell his audience of Turner and Mary what had transpired during the night. When he came to its end he said it was because of Roland the panther came, and though he drew the bow and targeted her heart, it was for Roland she stood fast. When Turner asked him how he knew that, his skeptical tone a panoply for Roland's regard, Thomas said quietly, but with strength, that he was never more sure of anything in this life.

Mary came to him then, knelt before his hunch-shouldered stance, tried to get him to respond. He heard her. The soft whisper. He heard her as he remembered he heard her so many times before. Yes, he remembered. And the flood of remembering drowned him in silence so that the noise they all made toward him was just that, noise with no meaning, and the only meaning he felt was the sorrow of it all. It all.

When he withdrew from their attempted touch they left him alone, backed away into the house. It was then, alone, there on the porch that he knew. Roland walked to the dock, descended the ladder, and cast off the air boat. He watched it drift slowly away. Then he climbed into the flat boat and poled across to the bank, grounded the boat, and walked into the woods. Seven times, when he felt the argument of words form in his mind he turned back to them, until he realized the words were only confusion. It was then he started to run.

Breathless, panting, he came to rest by the crown of rock at the pond's edge. With his forearm pressed against the grainy texture, he saw Graybeard lying at the far edge, sunlight basking upon his whole length, saw his head rear and tilt, the cold reptilian eye shooting through him as cleanly at Thomas' arrow pierced the panther's flesh. The short, muscular legs flexed in tension and the headed torso raised up off the bed of mud. Graybeard slipped gracefully into the water, a drifting glide toward him, disappearing beneath the emerald texture.

Roland felt himself move forward, removing his clothing as he went. Naked, he too slipped into the water, the silky smoothness beneath his feet until he was chest deep and pushed off, the cool slide of water caressing his skin.

Ten yards away he saw the snout and crowned skull emerge, saw the brief whirlpool of the water fifteen feet

behind the yellow eyes, saw the thin transparent lids open, saw the black slits within the yellow widen a bit, the close of the membrane over the eyes again, the disappearance under water, a verdant vanish.

Treading water Roland felt the current sweep beneath, soon after a passing to his right. His breath was quick and he gulped a mouthful of water, causing him to briefly choke. His head moved on a swivel trying to pick up where Graybeard was when he heard the slight ripple from behind. Turning, he saw the gator, now only five yards away, silent, still, staring. He instinctively drew his arms forward in a sweep, propelling him a few feet back, but he stopped himself from further retreat and returned the gator's stare.

The slap of the tail was like a gun shot and its propulsion forward was greater than he could have ever imagined. The huge jaws yawed open, turning slightly so it was like a pair of shears ready to cut the bloom of a rose. It veered off at the last instant, the short shoulder striking him soundly, pulling him a foot or two under the water. He felt the force of the blow upon his pectoral muscle, but he continued to hold his ground even when the creature quickly turned back and hovered in the water, appearing to ready himself for another strike.

Then, without regard, Roland found himself slowly swimming forward, passing the snout which he caressed as he passed. He glided along the length of the creature,

hand feeling the contours of its skin. Swimming back along the other side of its length he repeated his feather-like touch, feeling the life within though it remained motionless. The head turned a bit and the eye followed until he was back in front again. Again, both suspended in water for the other's examination.

Behind him Roland heard Thomas' voice. "Don't move, Roland! Stay still!" In a glance he saw the shouldered rifle pointed directly toward them, heard Thomas add quietly, "Move just to your left, son. Slow."

With a downward surge of his splayed arms, Roland came out of the water belly high. He threw his arms into the air and with force slapped the water briskly. Once, twice, a third time. The creature submerged and Roland followed, eyes open. He saw its murky shadow pass beneath him, the turn flashing the whiteness of the belly momentarily, the shadow then disappearing into the brown-black depth.

He stayed under as long as he could, but the urge to breathe became strong so he closed his eyes and swam for the surface. As he swam toward the dark outline of the man, the sunlight filtering through the western stand of pine, Roland knew at that moment he would never leave this river again. When he emerged from the water he walked slowly to Thomas, then saw Mary and Turner. Mary had her hands to her mouth, but when he smiled, she did too. Turner's expression was one of awe.

When Roland came to Thomas he stood before him.

Thomas tentatively reached out to his shoulder and Roland fell into his arms.

*

The warm air beneath your flight presses you onward. Ride on this caressing current. Peer down with your keen sight. See the play of water slide under your wing, a dull green strand you pass over. Night is coming and it's been a good day, your belly sated, your heart full of existence and pleasure. Your destination is at hand. See it grow in the distance.

From your far height you perceive the flock of crows that start to venture toward you from the brace of cypress by the river's edge, but they veer off. You are no longer plumed in youth, but are richly umber, crowned in pure white.

When you see the shack and out-building you dive, wings folded inward, the wind a rushing force you easily penetrate. Brake now, your outstretched wings using this force to gently, silently glide you to a perch of southern oak, talons hooking into its bark.

Close now, you watch the door of the shack open and two men appear, the one dark skinned with a jet black tail of hair running to the middle of his back. The other, with hair on his face a bit whiter than his crown stands with him on the porch. Both stand, arms folded looking west to the lean-to shed.

Their object of study is your objective too. Watch

with them as you feel the last rays of warmth. See crepuscular shadows grow, elongating over the man at work near the shed. It is he who has returned. He who bears witness to the wilderness. He who once sang the songs of the wood.

Look, he sings again, sparks ablaze, a shower of light burning in shadow, forming the likeness of your wings in flight. But he has other tools now too, you have heard the whisper in the air, the rhythm of their language scrolled on paper so others of his kind can hear the songs. This, this you know is good.

Heed the call to flight, lift your wings in triumph and ecstasy, high, high into the air, casting a brief glance back to this knight who lifts his visor in salute, dip your wings in response, but fly, fly higher into the night catching the last warm thermals toward home.

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VITA 2

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