THE MOTHER DUST

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by
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The Mother Dust is a novella that centers on a family's decline as the result of an emotionally and mentally absent mother figure. Through the mother's perspective, the reader will be led through one family's last days of grandeur. Though picaresque, it asks for reader empathy when the characters are not, on the surface, benevolent. Through their flaws, and the mother's eternal search for the reinstatement of her family, they will represent the overwhelming malaise plaguing the human condition.
Imel

Imel watches Dopey sit sideways on the couch in front of the casket and use his fingers to read the row of records in his red milk crate. Her sister’s family is cramped into the little house, and all the doors are open with light and cigarette smoke. Imel’s sister Did, daughter Nooney, and niece Silvey work in the kitchen scraping out plates and bagging garbage. After a while, Did can’t stand on her feet anymore, and she has to be helped to the couch. Her legs have swollen from all of the standing, and she needs the coffee table pulled up to the couch so she can prop them up. Dopey asks her, “Mommy, you got anything in particular you’d like to hear?”

“I don’t reckon so, Dopey. I’m just plumb wore out.”

Just as his face always does, Imel watches his eyes squint so small that the only light in them shines in a speck, and he says, “Now, Mommy. You’ll like this one here.” He thumbs thoughtfully through the records.

“What are you playing, Dopey?”

“I thought you’d like to hear ‘Would the Circle be Unbroken.’”

“Well, why don’t you just sing it for me? Your aunt Imel can’t stand too much noise.”

“Alright, Mommy. Alright.” He stands up, a tall man, lanky and awkward. The funeral was over hours ago, and the family is meeting in groups throughout the house to wait out the rain. When Dopey’s voice cracks over the noise of their
voices, everybody turns around to watch him sing. Some of the family comes to
the doorway from the bedroom, and Nooney and Silvey come inside the living
room and sit on table chairs by the casket. His voice warbles to the ceiling and
down into the slats in the floor. His version of the song mimics the music that
would be on the record to the very last note, and one of the men says “Bless him,
Lord, sweet Jesus.”

He finishes the song and is asked to sing another. Nooney returns to the
kitchen to finish washing the dishes. Imel thinks about how filthy Did is and how
she must not have cleaned house in weeks since there is dirt everywhere. Lying by
herself in her nephew’s roll-away bed, assumed to be asleep, Imel looks out the
opened bedroom door. She can see through the kitchen and into the living room.
She thinks to herself, the girls barely got the garbage out of the living room in time
for the church to put up the casket. There is still a lot to do in the way of cleaning
house, but Nooney is trying to at least get the kitchen done before tomorrow. The
table in the kitchen is piled up with pre-packaged pies and chicken, and underneath
it are boxes of canned food. She pulls them out from under the table to straighten
them, and a dozen fat roaches scatter across the floor.

In the living room, Silvey takes her camera out of her purse. She wants last
pictures of her uncle, and she asks the family to stand by the casket. Did gets up to
take Silvey’s picture and to have her own picture made, then she returns to the
couch to watch. When it comes Dopey’s turn, he grins from ear to ear in front of
the casket, having his picture made with his brother. He doesn’t mean harm
smiling that way. His brother took care of him for half of his life, so he’s mourning
like the rest of his family. It’s just natural for him to grin.

Staggering up the hill toward the house is Peafart. Imel falls asleep before
Peafart reaches the house. It is late, and Peafart has missed the funeral and swears
“You tell him, by God.” Her clothes are drenched, and her hair flaps madly against
her face. “You tell him, by God. You tell that motherfucker to come out here.”
She stumbles into the water bucket sitting against the kitchen door and knocks it
over onto its side. She doesn’t go up onto the tiny porch. Instead, she leans against
the steps and hollers through the door, “Where you at Jim Dog? I know you’re in
there.” Nooney knows Peafart is drunk, and she says “This ain’t a place for you to
be carrying on like this, Peafart.”

“You tell that little rapist that if he’s got enough shit in his britches, then he
can come on out here.”

“Who are you talking about, Peafart? We’re trying to have a funeral in
here.”

“I’m talking about fucking Jim Dog.”

“What’d he do now?” Nooney tries to make Peafart keep her voice down,
but Peafart keeps bawling.

“This is between me and him,” she says.

“Well, I can tell you he ain’t here,” Nooney says back.
“I know good and damn well he is. Now you can either go get him, or I’m a going to.”

“You listen here,” Nooney says, standing in front of the door, “you ain’t a messing up that funeral in there with Uncle Miller lying in his coffin and Did can’t hardly take it. You’re going to get your ass out of here before I have to kick it out of here.”

“Well, I’ll tell you what, if he’s in there, and I find out you’re hiding him, your ass is grass.” Peafart stumbles across the yard and down the little hill cussing to herself. She almost trips over the concrete sculpture of Jesus at the end of the sidewalk, but she doesn’t.

Silvey comes from the living room. “She gone yet?”

“Ah,” Nooney tells her, “I done the best I could to get her out of here. I don’t know what her problem is. She wanted to see Jim Dog.”

“What’s he done now?”

“Lord, it’s hard telling. Don’t wake up Mommy though, whatever you do.”

Dopey hears the commotion, and before his last song is finished, he follows the crowd to the kitchen. As everyone looks out the door and talks to Noonie and Silvey, Dopey turns back the tin foil and gets himself a slice of onion from a plate of tomatoes and onions. He smiles, satisfied, as he bites into the thick onion slice.

“That’s a mighty good onion,” he says.
The next morning, Did tries to get up early and cook breakfast for everybody since the rain didn’t stop and they had to stay all night. People are lying in pallets on the floor and some are three to a bed. Some of the family braved the rain after they got tired of waiting and spent the night at other houses. Nooney and Silvey slept in Did’s bed, and Did slept on the couch by the casket. Dopey has his small bed, and there is a roll-away bed set up in his room for Imel.

“Hey, Did,” Imel whimpers, but Did doesn’t hear her. Did is hacking sausage into slices through its plastic wrap. She already has a pan of biscuits in the oven baking, and there is flour still on the counter. She doesn’t have enough eggs to go around, so she’s warming up the leftovers from last night and frying some bologna to go with the sausage. She’ll make coffee, too. “Hey, Did,” Imel hollers, startling Did. She sounds urgent, so Did lays her knife down beside the sausage and hurries into Dopey’s room. Dopey is already awake and gone to the church house to pray, just as he does every morning.

“Lord, God, Did. My back’s so stiff. I can’t move!” Imel cries out sharply, pressing her right hand into her face as if baring it to the air is too painful.

“You want me to help you into the bathroom, Imel? I’ve got breakfast on.”

“I can’t get up. You’re going to have to get me Brother’s potty chair. I’m going to have to set here. I believe I’ve got that wax built up in my tail again.”

Did shuffles across the floor into her bedroom where Nooney and Silvey have awakened and are lying under the blankets talking quietly before their day.
begins. “What you doing, Aunt Did?” Nooney asks with exhaustion like a yawn in her throat.

“Imel needs Len’s chair in there. Her back’s hurting her.”

“I’ll get it for you. You don’t need to be lifting that big thing.” Nooney slides her legs off the side of the bed and throws back the oily green army blanket and white chenille bedspread. Her feet hit a cold floor, and she stretches long and hard. “I’ll get it,” she says.

When she gets it moved into Dopey’s room, Imel is naked from the waist down. “I’m going to have to go to the doctor,” she says. “Sweet Jesus!” Her agitation is downright hateful, and Nooney doesn’t want to stay, but she says, “Mommy, here’s Uncle Len’s potty chair. You going to be alright?”

Imel’s voice is scratchy. “Get me my cigarette pouch.”

Imel knows that the wax is normal with colostomies, but she believes it is especially troublesome with hers. She clears some of it from herself as Noonie raises the lid on the chair. As she does, Imel cries out, “Oh, God!”

“Mommy, please, Mommy, let me help you on here,” Nooney begs, eager to be out of the room.

Imel allows her daughter to help her onto the seat, but she is overcome with emotion. “I don’t think I can get all of that wax out of my tail.”

“Do you need me to get your bag of colostomy stuff, Mommy?” Nooney finally reaches Imel her cigarette pouch, and Imel lights one up.
“I guess you can.”

Imel begins to pee liquid that feels like hot vinegar to her, and, as she does, she smokes her cigarette and rubs the black eyeliner she has slept in out of her eyes. “Bring me my makeup bag if you would.” Noonie obediently gets up from the bed where she has sat down, complacent in the knowledge that her day will be rough.

When she brings it back to Imel with a wet warm washcloth and hand towel, Imogene raises her bottom up off the seat and drops the burning cigarette butt into the bucket where the flame dies out in a point and sizzles. She sits back down and unzips her makeup bag. From it, she trawls out a pair of toenail clippers. “You wouldn’t cut my toenails for me, would you?”

Nooney reluctantly pulls a pillow off the bed and sits down on it in front of the potty chair. She tries to avoid looking inside the white bucket and focuses on her mother’s ingrown toenails. Imel lights another cigarette and rests her left foot on Nooney’s right knee. She opens her bottle of beige foundation and pours it on the wet washcloth, where she rubs it over her face, removing the previous day’s makeup with the fresh. After she is satisfied, she dries her face with the hand towel and reapplies the foundation with her fingers.

_Mommy’s legs look so frail_, Nooney thinks as she drops the left leg from her knee and begins working on the other set of toes. They aren’t polished, but there’s crud underneath a few of them. “This big toenail’s thick,” she says. Imel is
silent. She holds the stick of eyeliner over the flame on her lighter, then blows on it and focuses on drawing on her kohl eyebrows.

Silvey knocks on the bedroom door. “Breakfast is ready,” she says.

“Bring Mommy some toilet paper in here,” Nooney says.

“There ain’t no more,” Silvey says back, trying to not make it obvious that she has realized Did’s lack of it. “Let me see what I can get.”

When Silvey comes back to the door, she says, “Did said to tell you just to use that wash rag and then throw it in the towel bucket when you’re done. She said she’ll take care of it after while.”

“Ewww, God,” Imel says out loud, loud enough for anyone outside the door to hear.

“Okay, Silvey. Let Mommy change her colostomy bag.”

After Imel is made up and ready for the day, she walks into the kitchen where the family is standing around drinking coffee and chewing their conversations. Dopey has made it home from church, and he stands in front of the sink like he’s looking out the kitchen window. “These biscuits are good, Sissy,” he says, and others grumble in approval with him.

“Today’s the day, I guess, ain’t it?” A couple folks look at Imel and wish they had stayed in their pallets. She doesn’t pay any attention to them. Her hair is still wild, and her cotton leggings are pulled up underneath her knees. She reaches
for a cup of coffee that Did is holding out to her, and she holds herself up against
the sink beside Dopey. She runs a dab of cold water into the mug, and Dopey says,
“That you, Imel?”

“You doing alright this morning, Dopey?”

“I sure am, Sissy. The Lord’s been good to me.”

“Jim Dog told me to tell you all that he’d help carry Brother up the hill this
evening if you need him to.”

“When did you talk to him?” Silvey asks hesitantly.

“The day before yesterday. He said them people were going to let
Geraldine see that little girl, so he was taking her over there, but he said he’d be
here.”

“I know Cornbread and them are going to try to be pall bearers,” Did joins
in.

“Peafart was over here last night looking for him.”

Nooney looks over at Silvey; her eyes letting Silvey know she shouldn’t
have said anything about it.

“What the hell did she want?”

“She was just looking for Jim Dog. She said she was going to whoop him.”

“Shit.” Imel snarled her lips apart. “That whore couldn’t whoop her way
out of a tater sack.
“She’d better not come up here starting nothing,” Did says. “We hain’t never done nothing to her, so she can leave us alone. Len was the best thing in the world to her when he was living. It’d break his heart to know she’s been up here acting like this and him laying in there at his funeral.”

“It looks like this sunshine’s going to hold out, Sissy,” Dopey says to Imel.

Later that day, Imel stands with the family at the end of the hollow in the rain. Jim Dog and Geraldine are arguing in their car because he has been drinking and doesn’t “feel right” hauling Len’s casket while drunk. “Who the hell else is going to do it, Jim Dog?” Geraldine says. “They ain’t nobody else here strong enough to pack that goddamned thing.” The pall bearers are all dressed in blue jeans and white t-shirts, just like Len. Occasionally, when he went to town, he’d wear a pull-over sweater, but it was so hot outside that it wasn’t really necessary to put him in a sweater. The men who had been friends with him the longest were standing to the left of everybody else, their heads like crooked like cranes curved toward the hill. They were what people called the “liar’s club.” They met every morning, and they’d drive over to the restaurant and have their coffee together. They were dreading the hike up the hill to the cemetery. If there was some reason one of them couldn’t come, the others would cut up and carry on, but they’d still miss that one. They were missing Len this morning.
“Just leave me the fuck alone. I said I wasn’t coming, and you’re the one drove over here. You get your fat ass out and pack it.” In the back seat, two dogs romp wildly together, and then one stops to gnaw on Geraldine’s pocket book. She turns around in her seat and thumps the dog on the top of his head. “Listen, Jim Dog,” Geraldine says, “you can either get out of this car right now and get out there and pack that goddamned thing, or you can get your shit and get the hell out of here.”

Jim Dog sits back in his seat and belches. He looks out the window at his mother, who is watching their argument intensely. Then he laughs. “You can take me to the fucking house.”

Did has been waiting nervously for Jim Dog to arrive. The rain has slacked off, but the hillside is steep. Imel is sitting on a metal chair the funeral home gave her to carry in case she had to sit down. Most of the rest of the family is standing around nervously, careful to avoid looking into the car. Finally, Imogene is tired of waiting, and she says to Did, “Young’uns, I’m going to have to get to the house. I can’t stay out here in this wet like I used to. I’m going to catch pneumonia if they don’t hurry the hell up.”

Did looks around before she answers. “You can go on to the house if you have to, Imel. I ain’t going to hold it against you if you’ve got to leave.”

“I hain’t leaving. I told him that I was going to be with him until he got put in the ground, and I mean to do it.”
“We’re waiting on Jim Dog, Imel,” Did tells her softly, ashamed that she can’t take care of the casket herself. About that time, Geraldine pulls out of the hollow quickly, and Imel says “Where they going to now?”

Instead of asking one of the family to haul the casket, Cornbread speaks up. “I don’t know if we can do it by ourselves,” he says to Did, “but we’re going to try it. Don’t worry, Did, honey, we’ll get it.”

“They’re going to start,” Noonie says beside Imel, holding her hand. Cornbread, Cookie-Man, and Turnip take turns around the casket, gauging the weight of it and where they’d best get a grip on it. Finally, Cornbread takes the front left corner, Cookie-Man takes the right, and Turnip takes the back, fishtailing between the sides.

“I don’t believe I can get it back here all by myself,” Turnip hollers up to Cookie-Man.

“Wait a minute,” he says, and slides back to the middle handle on it, providing a bolster for the middle of the box.

As they walk, Len’s sister’s girls start singing, and Dopey, who is walking on Nooney’s other side, stands up in front of his chair and joins in. Did sinks her face into Silvey’s chest, and Silvey pats her oily head. Behind the preacher the family follows, holding on to each other. Imel’s legs bend hard in her groin as she pushes herself on, and Did’s legs swell with water as she walks. She sees the pall-
bearers having a tough time, and she prays quietly to herself that they’ll be able to make it up the hill without too much of a problem.

Cornbread is struggling with his end of the box. Veins are popped out on his face, but he keeps on lugging with all his might. By the time the family makes it up the hollow and to the bottom of the cemetery hill, Cornbread’s feet are sliding in the mud, creating six and eight inch tracks that he has to keep re-treading up the hill. Cookie-Man has the same problem on the right side of the casket, but he lugs away, stretching the sinews in his left arm. Finally, he turns around to try and leverage it on the back of his shoulders, and as he turns his right foot around to holster the box, his legs give way, and he slips down in the mud. He hollers out loud as he falls hard onto his left hipbone. The casket slips down into the earth on one of the back corners, and Turnip jumps toward the casket so it doesn’t slide down the hill. Imel squalls out in terror, and Did cries harder. The casket is jolted, but the corner is dug so deep into the ground by the angle of the slip that it is temporarily wedged into it. Slowly, however, the box begins to slide. The girls stop singing, and the preacher moves in to help Cookie-Man. Some of the family members rush toward the casket to keep it from sliding down the hill.

Seeing that he will be alright, the preacher says. “Let me take over here. Can anybody else help?” Many of the family members come forward from under their umbrellas. “We could still use one more,” he says, “You reckon Dopey could do it, Turnip?”
“He might can if we could guide him. He’s strong.”

“Hey Silvey,” the Reverend yells down the hillside. “Get somebody to bring Dopey up here to help us with this. Len’s starting to slide.”

Hurriedly, Silvey gets Dopey out from under his umbrella. She says, “Now, Dopey, if you can’t do this, tell somebody, okay. One of the rest of us will come and do it, okay?”

Dopey grins proudly through the cold tears on his lashes. “I’ll do my best up here, Sissy. Just show me where to go, and I’ll do it.”

The family walks quietly behind Dopey up the hill, their heels digging clops of mud. He takes hold of one corner, the preacher takes hold of one, and Cornbread and Turnip take the front. “All we’ve got to do is get him right over there, Dopey,” Turnip says, “it’s about thirty big steps from where we’re at.”

Silvey helps Cookie-Man back down the hill by letting him rest his weight on his arm around her neck. When the casket is placed beside its final resting bed, the preacher wipes his face on his coat sleeve. His bible is moist from the air. “It sure is a wet one, ain’t it?” he says to Cornbread and Cookie-Man and Dopey.

“Let’s all gather around under this awning, here.”

The family slowly makes its way to the awning, some crying and sick to their stomachs. “Now, I know we’ve had a rough go of things,” he says, “but we need to remember that the Good Lord is with Mr. Miller this morning. We can’t always plan for these kinds of things, but we’ve all got a debt to pay.” Did shakes
her head in agreement. Nobody thinks twice about climbing the hill to lay Len to
rest, not even Imel who despises funerals, especially those of family members.
Since her mother’s funeral, she has shied away from funerals. She has even shied
away from weddings and birthday parties, scared that any celebration would
somehow result in devastation. Still, she is able now to pull on her decorum with
reverence to all the dead and remain silent and respectful. Later this day, with the
rest of her family, a pitiful congregation walks out of the hollow murmuring about
mortality and silently wondering about which one of them will be the next to go.
They solemnly follow Dopey in song.
This same evening, Imel watches Peafart get out of a car, warbling to herself as she winds her way home. In her puffy purple skirt, Imel thinks she looks like a grape too fat for its skin. She acts like she feels good, light, or indiscriminate. Her mouth is set in a tight oval, teeth gritted against her tongue in pleasure. She walks with her legs spread wide apart, letting the cool winds circulate between her thighs. Her lower back is permanently bent back, and she bends it back more as she walks, drawing up the night’s pleasure into it. She stops to sit on the cinder blocks at Hanner’s house to take off her shoes. Hanner lives right across the road from Imel, but Peafart doesn’t see Imel sitting on her front porch since it is screened in and dark outside. The lights at Hanner’s are turned off, so she sits for a while, legs open wide against the night air. When she finally gets up to walk home, Imel thinks about calling out to her to tell her she needs to leave her family alone, but it is so late, and she knows she will see her again.

Her mother hears her when she finally enters the house. “You stink.”

“Good God, Mommy, I thought you was sleeping!” Peafart says.

“I’m a good person, Peafart.”

“I know you are, Mommy.”

“I’m a good person, baby. What’s wrong with that?” Her mother rolls over on the pallet she has made on the floor.

“Mommy, you need to get some sleep.”
“I’m a good mommy, baby.”

She walks to the kitchen window and watches the night. She sees a hummingbird floating, as if hung from a string, underneath the branches of the poplar tree that hangs partly over the porch on the end by the kitchen. She thinks it looks magical, and she stands at the door nervously thinking about Jim Dog, wringing her long hands. Her mother grunts in the living room, and Peafart hears the clang of bottles against the floor. The alcohol is spilling onto the floor, and May grunts as if picking it up is a chore.

The house seems almost like theirs in the night—lit up with the night sky, quiet and comfortable. After dark, it usually feels this way, protected and safe. She’ll have to remember to get out early in the morning. Tomorrow is Saturday, and the owners of the house might be back. They own the place, but they don’t know anybody is living there. The girls who own it inherited it from their parents, and Peafart expects them to come home any day to find her and her mother squatting there. *It would be nice to watch T. V.* she thinks to herself.

“Hey Peafart!”

Peafart looks around the porch ledge for a face.

“Oh, howdy Avery.” Peafart walks down the steps of the porch. “What are you doing?”

“I got some fatties. Want to smoke up?”

“Damn, that sounds good. You got any cigarettes?”
She walks quickly next to her friend Avery. “Awww shit, Peafart, what’ve you been up to? I hain’t seen you all week. Mommy said Grandma was about to whoop you over Jim Dog.”

“It wasn’t my fault, Avery. You know how he is.”

“Ah, it’ll die down. I wouldn’t worry about her. She’s just crazy.”

Avery rolls a joint. “I went out with James Earl this evening,” she says.

“I never did like that fucker.”

“Ah, me neither,” she says.

“Mommy set it up.”

“That’s deep, baby.” He avoids talking about how her mother prostitutes her, changing his tone. “Here, take a hit off this here. It’s a hybrid.”

“Is that red hair?”

“Shit yeah, and Northern Lights.”

“Damn, Av’, you’ve always got the hook-up.”

They smoke in relative quiet. Avery gets high first and caresses Peafart’s neck. Imel would be angry to know that her grandson is friends with Peafart. It is surprising that she does not know, and has not seen him follow Peafart up the road, but Avery knows she couldn’t care less about him. All she cares about, to him, is herself.
A few days after the burial, Geraldine calls Did to apologize for Jim Dog. She is eating a cold jar of kraut and crunches the cabbage loud in Did’s ear. Did is sitting lonely on her couch with her feet on the coffee table. Dopey is outside on the front porch swinging and eating a bologna sandwich. Did is not really listening to Geraldine. She is staring at the blank television screen where the casket had sat only days before. The windows in the house are open, and a large box fan is sitting in a kitchen chair pointed on her. It whizzes loudly, the dust bunnies in the hundreds of small squares on its face sticky and barely moving.

“I’ve got to go to work here in a little bit,” Geraldine says into the phone. “Jim Dog’s still in there in the bed.”

“You all getting along alright?”

“He’s just hateful, I guess. They said I might get one of my babies back.”

“That’s what Imel was saying.”

“I got to see her the other day.”

“Which one was it?”

“It was my littlest one.”

“I hope everything works out alright for you all. I believe I’m going to go lay down, Geraldine. I’m feeling plumb awful.”

They hang up the phones, and Did scoots down the couch a little ways, rolls over to face the back of the couch, and pulls an afghan off the back of it. She
doesn’t bother getting a pillow, and she rests her hips deep in the space between the
two couch cushions.

Outside, Dopey swings hard on the green swing, his legs long and boney. His shoes click in rhythm as his feet alternate pushing off the floor. Silvey walks toward the porch and hears Dopey singing. She has a plastic grocery store bag full of turnip and mustard greens. “How you doing up there, Dopey?” she hollers to him as she gets to the walkway.

“Who is that?” he asks, turning his ear toward where the voice comes from. “Wait a minute, I know who’s there. Say that again, Sissy.”

She repeats, “How you doing up there, Dopey?”

“I know who you are. Come on up here and sit a spell if you want to.”

The pump knot on his forehead stretches the skin around it as he grins in welcome.

“I brought you a bag of greens,” she says, sitting down on the top step of the porch.

“Is that right?” he asks.

“Sure is. I got a bunch of them off of Cornbread. Him and his wife put a
garden out every year.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know it.”

“Did home?”

“Yeah, she’s in there talking on the phone, I reckon.”
“She doing alright?”

“About like the rest of us, I suspect.”

“You eat today?”

“Yes’m,” he says, “We eat big, and Sissy made us bologna sandwiches not too long ago. Let me holler at her. Hey Sissy,” he yells through the living room window.

Did has heard Silvey come onto the porch, and, upset by the fact that she won’t be having a nap, she has raised herself up off the couch and is sitting on the edge of it wiping the tiredness from her eyes. “You all can come in if you want to.”

They talk until dusk cools down the house. When it is cool, Did flips on the light switch in the kitchen and walks to the sink. In the refrigerator, she has ham left over from the funeral. She takes it out and sits down at the table with a long knife and proceeds to trim the meat from the bone. She asks Silvey to clean the greens at the sink, and they talk while they work. The meat is cold and greasy on her fingers, and the serrations of the knife tear it, making swoosh-swoosh sounds. The ham is salty, but somehow to Did, the flavor is sweeter and milder than anything she would normally buy on her own. She has a heavy pot on the table next to the ham, and, as she frees the ham from the bone, she throws it into the pot directly.

“Yeah, they said Geraldine might get her youngest girl back.”
"I know it. That’s what she was saying. What’s her name, anyhow? I don’t think she said."

“Well,” Silvey says, shaking water off of the greens, “I think they said her name’s Shasta. She’s about eleven years old, I think.”

“You think she’ll stay once she gets here?”

“I reckon she’ll have to, won’t she?”

“I guess.”

Did wraps the naked ham bone back up in the aluminum foil and puts it back in the refrigerator. In the living room, Dopey is playing a record and singing along to it. He stands just as he stood at the funeral, in the same corner where he always stands, his back straight and his eyes squinted shut. Did is now at the stove, and she spoons a wad of cooled bacon grease into the pot with the ham and turns the stove on. As the ham sizzles in the grease, she stirs it around. Then she adds her water, the greens, and a spoonful of sugar. Silvey hunts the kettle lid out from underneath the stove, and covers the food.

In the living room, the telephone rings, and Dopey turns his record player off suddenly and answers the phone. “It’s Aunt Imel, Mommy. You want to talk?”

“Lord yeah, Dopey honey, bring the phone in here for me.”

On the telephone, Imel asks, “You hain’t heard nothing about Geraldine have you?”

“Well, no,” Did says, “Something wrong?”
“I reckon they was going to Food City, and Peafart seen them at the Chloe red light and started all kinds of hell.”

“I don’t reckon.”

“She’s trying to say Jim Dog’s fucking her.”

“I don’t reckon. Imel, honey, what happened with Geraldine?”

“She took off. She was the one driving, and he got out to shut Peafart up, and I guess when he did she drove off.”

“Where you think she’s at?”

While Did talks to her sister, she gets eggs and milk from the refrigerator and cornmeal from a nearby shelf. She preheats a large cast iron skillet with bacon grease in the bottom of it, mixes up her eggs and milk and meal and pours it in. It sizzles as it hits the grease and spreads itself toward the lip of the skillet, fat and viscous. After she puts it in the oven, she lifts the lid on the greens, and steam rises from the pot. They are cooking down quickly, and she throws another exaggerated pinch of sugar onto the top of them and reseals the lid.

“Well,” Did says, “you know she’s trying to get that little girl back. Maybe she’s afraid.”

“That’s bullshit,” Imel says through a whiny cough. “She ort to know better. Jim Dog ain’t fucked nobody since he married that old whore, and that Peafart’s fucked everything in Domer County, and I wouldn’t be surprised if she’d tried to fuck him too, but he ain’t raped nobody.”
“What’s he going to do?”

Silvey is sitting at the kitchen table with her left foot propped up on her chair. She is studying her toes, trying to pull out a tough spot on a cuticle. She looks up at Did, trying to figure out what is happening, and Did shakes her head as if to suggest she can’t say. Did keeps talking, and the conversation gradually slips away from Peafart. Imel tells Did about how Jim Dog is doped up and punching holes in the wall. She’s in her bedroom out of his way with the door closed. Did tells her that she can come stay with her, but Imel will not accept the offer.

After a while, Silvey smells the cornbread, washes her hands, and takes it out of the oven. Did has sat down in one of the chairs by the table. She looks up, “I’ll do that, Silvey honey,” she says. She sort of hopes Silvey will do it anyway, and she doesn’t get up. Silvey takes it out of the oven and turns off the front burner where the greens are sizzling down. She hollers for Dopey to come in to the kitchen to eat, but he is in the back of the house in his room, and he doesn’t hear her call. She walks down the hall a little ways and calls for him, and he hears her the second time and comes grinning toward the table.

Silvey places the hot cornbread skillet on a trivet directly on the table, and she says, “It’s hot, now Dopey. I put it right here on this corner. Watch where you put your hands.”

“Alright, Sissy,” he says. “You want me to pour us all a cup of milk?”

“Well, if you want to, go right ahead.”
He proceeds to take three glasses out of the cabinet, and he reaches for the milk, but Did hasn’t put it back into the fridge, so it isn’t in its place. “You know where the milk’s at, Sissy?”

“Oh, shit, I’m sorry, Brother. Did left it on the table.”

“Alright.” He moves to the table toward the milk. “Watch your hands!” Silvey says.

In her corner of the table, Did continues talking to Imel. Silvey fills three bowls full of ham and greens and takes them to the table. Did gets up and puts the bowl of butter on the table, and gets out three forks and a knife that she uses to slice the hot cornbread into triangles. She doesn’t eat any of her food. Instead, she stares vacantly over the table. Silvey and Dopey chomp their food, relishing the flavors of it. Silvey slathers cool butter over Did’s bread for her, but Did just shakes her head at it, not ready to eat anything.

After she hangs up with Imel, she looks at Silvey and says, “I’m sorry about that, Silvey, honey. That was Imel. I reckon Geraldine’s done and left Jim Dog, and he’s tearing the house down.”
Imel

In their trailer, Jim Dog and Imel do not see or speak to each other. Imel lies in her bed with one arm extended, holding a mirror. In her other, she has a pair of slant-tipped tweezers, and she is vigorously tweezing her eyebrows. She glides the mirror down through the air to get a better look at the pores in her nose, and she recognizes the familiar blackheads that she cleanses in a regular cycle. The hair above her upper lip is faint, but it makes her whole face feel dirty. One leg is thrown out from underneath her blankets, and the other is snug within. To her left is the wall that her bedroom shares with her son’s, and she can hear him cussing and rattling drawers. A dog seems to be yelping, but Imel can’t discern whether or not it is one of Jim Dog’s mutts or whether it is the stereo. She raises her right arm toward the lamp and adjusts the shade so the light can fall on her face in a different angle. She has hung up the phone from talking to Did, and she doesn’t have anybody else to call, so she feels worn out. She swallows an absent beverage in her throat, lays both arms down at her sides, and listens to her son’s tantrum through the wall.

After a while, she brings the mirror back up to her face and notices a whitehead along the hairline above her left temple. She brings her left hand toward it, crooks her thumb toward her palm and deftly slides the yellowed moon of her thumb nail underneath the white protrusion and removes it. She scrapes it from her thumb nail with her index finger nail and wipes it along the edge of her blankets.
She looks along the surface of her face but doesn’t see any other occurrences, so she lays her mirror back down. She wants to call somebody, anybody, but there is no one to call, so she dials the eleven digits faithfully to the horoscope hotline and listens. After a few options, she presses the number three button and listens. When she has heard her daily horoscope, she immediately calls back to hear Jim Dog’s.

“I reckon I’ll eat a bite,” she says out loud to herself. She doesn’t believe she can walk to the kitchen because to get there, she will have to walk all of the way through the living room, and by the time she gets there, she thinks she will be too worn out to walk back. Now isn’t a good time to ask Jim Dog for help back, even if she can get to the kitchen herself. She lifts the heap of blankets from on top of her and folds them down on her left side. Her colostomy bag is swollen with a keen oil, and she feels its weight as she rises onto her hips. There is a beat up walker by her bed, and she reaches for it helplessly, standing up with a crooked back into a box shape with her body equaling two sides and the walker and floor making up for the other two. She leans on the handles of the walker with her elbows and folds her hands out in front of her chest to balance her weight. She takes two full steps before she leans her head over in frustration onto some boxes she has stored against the wall.

Walking from the bedroom to the kitchen would take Jim Dog about twelve big steps, but it takes Imel fifty four small ones with the first foot met completely on the floor with the second one before the next step is taken. In the kitchen, she
looks over the piled up dirty dishes and opens the refrigerator door before Jim Dog comes busting out of his bedroom wild-eyed. He is wearing a pair of Geraldine’s bloomers, underneath his torn jeans, and a dirty t-shirt with a pocket on it. “What the fuck you d-d-doing up, you old whore?” he asks, stuttering and drunk.

“I’m hungry, Jim Dog,” Imel tells him.

“I don’t see how you’re fucking hungry.”

“Now, don’t start on me because you’re mad at Geraldine,” Imel says back to him, closing the refrigerator door empty handed. _There are some onion rings in the cabinet_, she thinks. _That will do._

“I ort to just knock the piss out of you,” Jim Dog tells her, sucking in his upper lip so that he snarls his nose at the same time. Imel is used to his threats, so she reaches toward the cabinet for the onion rings. As she does, Jim Dog leans in toward her quickly and knocks them out of her hand and into the floor. Imel lets out a whelp, and she tells him, “I’m about to faint, Jim Dog. I can feel it right now, Jim Dog.”

He ignores her and steps past her to reach the new bottle of whiskey. She looks at him longingly, the way someone stares into the air after they’ve dreamt of a man loving them who really doesn’t and they’ve realized it was just a dream. She lets her hands go of the walker handles and slides them slowly down the legs of the thing, pulling it closer to her face as she pretends to faint on the dirty linoleum. She lays on the floor until Jim Dog lets his dogs out of their bedroom and they run
directly to her. One of them roots in her hair, furiously growling at some unseen enemy, some of them take turns biting at her clothes around the colostomy bag, and another hikes its leg to pee on her outstretched legs. She whines desperately for help, but Jim Dog stands back with his pot belly masking most of his view and laughs at her on the floor.

She slaps away the dogs, but they continue their attack. She is crying now and covered in urine. As if by some divine intervention, Geraldine comes wall-eyed through the front door. Right away, the dogs leave Imel lying on the floor and run toward Geraldine to smell her. Jim Dog cusses at her, “What the fuck you doing here?” At the same time, Imel cries out to her from the kitchen floor, and Geraldine sees her sprawled out, her face a caricature of life.

“You look here, Jim Dog. I just come out here to get my stuff. I’m getting my baby, and I’m getting the hell out of Dodge.” She points toward their bedroom. “You get back in there while I get my shit and get your mommy out of the floor. What the hell’s she doing like this anyhow?”

Pitifully, Imel says, “I got in here trying to get me a bite to eat, Geraldine, and I passed plumb out.”

Geraldine looks toward Jim Dog, who still stands with whiskey in his hand. “You couldn’t help her up?”

As Geraldine gets Imel a clean, wet wash cloth and towel and fresh clothes to change into, Jim Dog follows her, and they quarrel violently. Geraldine tells
Imel to have a good night’s sleep, which Imel will indeed have, and she closes her bedroom door with the inside lock twisted closed. Inside her room, Imel haphazardly cleans herself up, changes her colostomy bag, and takes a plentiful cocktail of painkillers and nerve pills to get her through the night. She slurps a long drink of water from the ukulele straw of an ancient hospital water mug and lies back against her pillows to rest.
Geraldine leaves Imel’s room throwing one leg across the other, the tops of her legs like wide grapefruits rolling in mutinous waters. She revolves her body around the couch arm at the entrance of Imel’s room and heaves toward Jim Dog. In their bedroom doorway, Jim Dog’s hard stomach blocks Geraldine from entering the room. She looks at him. “You can get out of my way, Jim Dog,” she says, geared to ram through him. “I’m here to get my shit, and you ain’t stopping me.”

“I’ll knock your fucking lights out.” Jim Dog’s voice drags and he slurs, eyes starting to roll into his forehead. “You ain’t going no goddamned where.”

“Now I told you, Jim Dog.” She pushes against him, and he spins around into the room and knocks her onto the bed. The room is a little larger than a gas station bathroom, and there is a dresser against a partially busted closet door, the bed, and a night stand, which is covered by cigarettes and ashes, a plastic ashtray, and rolling papers. On the dresser, a boom box takes up most of the room. He knocks her onto the bed, and she bounces back against him cussing. They shove each other, and Jim Dog staggers out into the living room and against the front door. He stumbles over one of the dogs but manages to stay on his feet.

“Who else you been fucking?” Geraldine asks him, following him.

“I ain’t fucked nobody, especially that mangy whore.”

“What’s she saying you raped her for if you ain’t fucking her?”
His tone changes. “You get your shit.” As if he has found the energy he needs to continue the fight, he stomps into their room pulling clothes out of drawers and flinging them at her.

“I ain’t done nothing to you Jim Dog for you to be treating me like this. You’re the one going out and fucking Peafart and who knows whoever else.” She starts to pick up her clothes, and as she does, he draws his knee up to kick her, but she sees him from the corner of her eye and throws her right arm with all her might into his groin. “You goddamned bitch!” he cries as he drops his fifth of whiskey and moves both of his hands there. “Fuck. What the hell you think you’re doing?”

“Something I should have done a long time ago.” He is partially lying on his side rubbing himself, and Geraldine pulls the rest of her clothes out of the drawers and from the closet. They are all in a heap in the floor, and she grabs what she can in one armload and gets out the door, leaving it open for the dogs to get out. Jim Dog passes out with the door open and his hands down on his crotch.

When he wakes up, he is still drunk, and he looks around the floor for his whiskey. There aren’t any lights on in the house, and it’s so dark and late outside that there is blankness in the air despite the sounds of crickets and dew sizzling on pavement that’s still warm. As if trained to reach for his gun, he fumbles around for the dresser, and his hand rests quickly on the cold power of it. He can’t see to look for his whiskey beyond the stream of light from the one street light, so he knocks his feet around the floor until he feels the familiar clank of the bottle. He
mutters gibberish to himself. He is incoherent. After he has time to rile himself up, he is loud and obscene. He calls for his dog Coco, but the dog is with the rest of the pack too far away to hear him. Barefooted, he staggers onto the screened-in porch and down its steps into the gravel yard. From there, as if pinioned by some ghastly constellation, he looks toward the sky and shoots three rounds from the gun, blaspheming the sky and any entities in it. Startled, Hanner peers from behind her living room curtains and listens. She quietly calls the police, and, after a short confrontation, he agrees to sleep his drunk off for the night and gets into the police car.
In her partially asleep, half-lucid state, Imel dreams of her mother. Slouching like a dilapidated figure on an altar, her ex-husband Big Avery is passed out with his head on the bar and his wooden leg propped up on a bar stool. Somehow, she can feel her heart, and it feels magenta, but it smells like wieners and onions mixed together frying, and she is reminded of her mother frying bacon first thing in the morning. She can’t see herself in her dream, but she knows she is crying. Her face feels wet. Then, she thinks of her mother lying there in her coffin. Her voice speaks to her through her dream, and she remembers burying her with a whole pack of cigarettes and a can of pop. She tells herself, “I just come to thinking about her,” and through the haze of reverie, she sees her dress hiked up on her legs, and she feels naked.

Somehow, she sees her mother standing in the mirrors behind the bar, and there’s no reason why the bar is so empty, but her mother’s belly is stuck out like she is pregnant, or Imel thinks it’s full of ants, and she imagines her mother wearing long johns and a t-shirt, not that dress she never wanted to be buried in. Imel tells herself, “She don’t have that old ugly wig on neither. She’s baldheaded.” She keeps thinking, “I’ve got your hair, Mommy. Let me go get it for you” because when it had to be cut off, Imel kept it in her mother’s big plait in a baggie. Imel sees her mother glowing, and she strains to see her more clearly, but this time, her mother is leaning pathetically on her cane looking at her, and she seems to be
crying too, then she turns grey or a sort of blue, and she disappears. Imel’s mind crafts her into a morning dove.

The partially awake part of her mind talks her into returning to the bar in her dream where she really could have been before. Her eyes burn and she knows she is staring at a neon beer sign. She knows she should go turn the lights off as if she has some responsibility to the place. Her mouth is parched and somehow lonely, and she knocks the crook out of her neck and walks over to the sink behind the bar and fills up a whiskey cup with water. She thinks again about turning off the lights. When she was a child, her mother was baptized in the creek in the middle of winter with the whole church shouting and praying on the riverbank. She wants to feel what the water felt like, what God must have felt like for her mother, and she imagines a viscous knot rolling down her throat to some hot glory land waiting just for her.

Imel’s stomach pitches in the bed, and she lurches upwards from it, her hands holding on to her abdomen. The house is quiet, and she knows automatically that Jim Dog isn’t home. She comes out of the bed swiftly, her feet adroit against the linoleum, and she takes herself into the bathroom and sits on the toilet under the fluorescent light until she realizes she has been dozing. She stops in the kitchen, where she holds herself against the refrigerator until she decides what to take back to her bedroom. She empties a box of macaroni and cheese and three cans of meat from a plastic bag, which she refills with other more appetizing edibles, and she
makes her way back to her bedroom with it. She is thirsty, but she doesn’t bring any fresh water back with her. In the bed, she clears her throat and spits the gruel into a wad of toilet paper. She rifles through the bag of food and picks out a pack of nabs, then she hides the bag underneath the blankets at her side.
Did

Did and Dopey sit together in the long afternoon of the next day, two plumes rising out of a shameful afghan, heads cocked permanently towards each other. They only splice the static quiet of their faulty bodies as roosters, wild for feed, clucking and jerking and all of a sudden. A program on the television roars with laughter at some joke that has gone unrealized by the two, still they laugh along with the laughter. Their house is cooler than usual in a melancholy sort of way.

“I think I got an aneurysm in my stomach,” Imel informs Did over the phone. “I know it ain’t broke loose yet, or I’d be dead, but I believe I’ve got one.”

“Well, Imel, honey, I ain’t never heard tell of nobody getting an aneurysm in the belly before.”

“Well, I know I got one. It feels just like a ball of fire rolling around my insides.”

“You think it might be gas or maybe you got a little bit of indigestion?”

“No. I’m telling you now, it’s an aneurysm.” Imel is always calm on the telephone when she believes she is dying. Today, she is calm, collected, and has determined that she will die soon. “Jim Dog called me from the jailhouse this morning and got me all tore up.”

“The jailhouse? What for?”
“Him and Geraldine was quarreling, and he went outside shooting last night, and somebody called the law on him.”

“I didn’t have my scanner on. He wasn’t shooting at her, was he?”

“No, I don’t reckon. She’d done and left before then.”

“He going to get out?”

“He had some kind of hearing this morning. I reckon Nooney went over there to be with him, but I ain’t heard nothing from neither one of them.”

“Well, well.” Did doesn’t have anything else to say, so she waits for Imel to bring up something else. When she doesn’t, Did says, “Well, sissy, I reckon I’m going to get off of here.”

“You all doing alright?” Imel asks as a way of staying on the line.

“We’re doing, and that’s good enough for us. It ain’t the same without poor old Len being here, but we’re doing.”

They continue to talk through the end of the afternoon and well into evening. By the time they get off the phone, Did is worn out and nearly ready for bed. Dopey is still listening to the television set, twisting his fingers together at their tips like someone building a Jacob’s Ladder without a rubber band. Did cries silently on her side of the couch, using the corner of the worn flannel blanket as a tissue.
Imel

In one of Imel’s dreams, her mother is a group of miniature bluebirds flying around her shoulders, and in another one, she’s eating oranges and laughing open-mouthed in a way in which her mother never laughed. Imel has the sensation of peeling tangelos even though she is dreaming of oranges, and her nose twitches as if some mist of citrus has broken apart from the tangelo and sprayed into her face. Imel’s whole body jerks because the third dream has her mother riding bareback on a ferret in the desert, and Imel’s body is trotting in time to the rhythm of the ferret feet digging into the lonely ground. Sometimes, she is awake during her dreams, and she stares out into the tiny room before her like she’s looking into eternity.

Jim Dog slams the door on his way into the house, and he goes straight into the dogs’ room. Only a few of his dogs have returned, and he is nervous about their absence. He throws open the back door and looks both ways along the trailer. “Coco, Gypsy…” He calls for two of the dogs. Neither of them comes at his beckoning, and he throws his weight fully down on the concrete blocks leading down to the ground. There are used plastic bags and empty shampoo bottles and discarded bleach containers littering it on either side of the steps and Jim Dog shoves his feet through them, moving stealthily towards the right. Underneath Imel’s bedroom window, he looks through a narrow slit in the drapes and sees her sitting upright in her bed moving her mouth as if she’s talking to somebody. Out of pure spite, he raps his knuckles loudly on her window then circles on around the
trailer. He hollers loudly for the dogs, and, throughout the afternoon, they return to
him one by one. As they come home, he corrals them into the back bedroom,
which belonged to his grandmother before her death.
Peafart

Peafart squints into the mirror in the bathroom. Her lips are sore, and the house is so dim that she can hardly see in front of her. She presses the lower part of her stomach against the sink and leans in for a closer look. There are cold sores on her lips, flowering like kudzu. Her cigarette hangs out of the corner of her mouth, and it hurts to draw off of it. Her mother comes through the front door with numerous bags of groceries and hollers out immediately for her. “What you want, Mommy?” Peafart hollers back, rubbing her fingers over her lips.

“I went to the store.”

“I didn’t think you had any money.”

“I didn’t.”

“Mommy, did you take somebody’s grocery bags again?”

“She could afford it. I looked through them on the way home. It don’t look like there’s nothing in them except for candy bars anyhow.”

“Candy bars?”

Peafart moves into the living room and sits down with her mother on her mother’s pallet where they pull the contents of the bags out and spread them into piles. “I don’t know what in the hell anybody would want with all these bags of candy,” she says.

Instead of answering her daughter’s question, May squalls out “Lord God, Peafart, what in the hell did you do to your hair?”
“You don’t like it?”

“What in the hell did you do to it? You’ve ruined yourself. You look like you got captured by some wild banshee and got away halfway through the scalping!”

“It ain’t that bad, Mommy.”

“Go in there and get them scissors out of that drawer.” She points toward the kitchen where most of their belongings are either divided into garbage bags or stored in the cabinets.

“What for?”

“Baby, I’ve got to fix that hair. Please let me fix it, Peafart. You can’t go around looking like that.”

“I think I done a good job.”

“Just go in there and get me them scissors.”

Peafart does as she is told, and her and her mother move outside onto the porch where she sits on the bottom step and her mother sits on the top one. “What the hell are we going to do with them candy bars, Mommy? You know they’ll melt.”

“Ah, give them to somebody, I reckon.” After a few minutes, she continues, “I know what. You can take them down there to Hanner and her girls. They’re bound to be able to do something with them.”

“Mommy, I can’t take them down there.”
“Yeah, now you can do it.”

“I’d rather not if I didn’t have to.”

Her mother persists, and she packs up a couple bags apiece of the candy bars and walks out toward Did’s. Hanner’s trailer is across from Jim Dog and Imel’s, and she is afraid he’ll be there. Her empty hand cautiously feels the top of her head, and her eyes sting as she knows without looking that her hair has been destroyed. She remembers haircuts when she was a child and how other kids laughed at her. She also remembers going grocery shopping with her mother. They would look at the contents of people’s carts, and then they would pretend that Peafart was playing arcade games while her mother waited for people to leave. If they pushed their carts to their car, they would have to wait for someone else to leave, but if they left their cart in front of the store while they went to retrieve their car, they would either push the cart over to the side of the store where they could push it on home, or they would make it seem like the groceries belonged to them, and they would take them out of the cart and walk home with them. She shakes her head a little to put those thoughts out of her memory, and she divides the bags into both hands and walks. Her lips hurt worse than ever in the sun. She rounds the curb in the road that leads down to Hanner’s and Jim Dog’s, and she prays she can get in and out of there before he realizes she’s around.

She doesn’t have to knock on Hanner’s door, as it is swung wide open and propped against the wall with a carton of pop. One of Hanner’s girls is sitting on
the floor of the trailer with her legs straddling her younger sister, and they are
taking turns braiding each other’s hair. As she walks the road toward their trailer,
the oldest one hollers out to Peafart, “What you got there Peafart?”

“Shhh,” she signals. “Hold on a minute.”

She comes up to the steps and says “Where’s your mommy at?”

“In there,” the youngest daughter says. “What you got in the bag?”

“Well, let me tell your mommy first, then she can tell you.”

Hanner hollers for Peafart to come on in. She’s sitting Indian-style with her
ankles buckled underneath her hips, crocheting stars for an American flag afghan,
cigarette dropped precariously from her lips. “Howdy, Peafart.”

“Hey, Hanner. How you doing?”

“I’m a home-wrecker, I reckon.”

“Lord, God, Peafart, what’s the matter?”

“Jim Dog.”

The girls come in through the opened doorway and ask ardently about the
grocery sacks. “I brought you all some candy bars Mommy got at the store. We
won’t eat all these. I don’t know why she got so many for. They’re just going to
melt.”

“Lord, these young ones of mine will have them gone in no time.”

“I hope you all can enjoy them.” Peafart looks anxiously out the door.

“You ain’t seen Jim Dog here lately have you?”
Not offering any more information, "I sure hain’t. He was out there shooting the other night and got the law called on him."

"What was he shooting at?"

Hanner finishes a star and ties it off. "You all get one candy bar apiece, and I'll put the rest up."

The girls haggle with their mother for two and go back outside to sit by the white-top, an antiquated slab of concrete poured with the intention of parking a car on it but overcome with what could pass as weeds interspersed with gravel warts. Hanner cleans off the lid of her deep freeze and situates the candy bars to one side of it. "I don’t rightly know. I ain’t talked to Imel in a couple of days. I reckon she’s been sick."

"I just don’t know, Hanner. Me and this feller Mommy knows was going uptown to the restaurant the other night, and I run into Jim Dog. He was drinking real hard, and I knowed he was about to get arrested. I don’t know where Geraldine was, but I couldn’t get a hold of nobody, and me and James Earl told him we’d take him home if he wanted us to, but he was all tore up and groping around on me, and James Earl got mad and told me I was picking Jim Dog over him."

"I don’t reckon."

"Well, it’s the truth, and I tried to walk Jim Dog home by myself, and we got clear to the mouth of the holler and he started up all this mean talking about how I’m this and I’m that and how he’s going to have what he wants and all, and I
was trying to keep his hands off me by walking away from him, but he kept on and kept on and I told him I was going to have to just let him go on by his self."

"Peafart, honey, its untelling what might have happened if you’d have got him to his house."

"We didn’t get that far. He took his knuckles and jammed them right into my belly and knocked me down in the creek, and you know how big that creek gets." Peafart looks out the door to see if she can see the girls. Her eyes flit towards Jim Dog’s trailer. “I don’t know what to do, Hanner.”

"Did he... you know?"

“Hanner, I laid there on that ground until the next day, and I went up to Len Miller’s house looking for him because I wanted him to see what he’d done, and Silvey and them wouldn’t let me in.”

“Lord, have mercy, Baby. What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.”
Peafart stays at Hanner’s long into the night and helps her mop her plywood floors. They talk about the Bible, and Hanner makes Peafart a pot of homemade macaroni and cheese, and they sit in the quiet night with the windows and front door wide opened. “I’m afraid to go out there,” Peafart says, reaching over the counter to put their bowls and spoons in the sink. “You reckon he’s home?”

“I don’t know. I heard him out there hollering for his dogs a little while ago, but I ain’t seen hide nor hair of him since.”

“Hanner, how am I going to get out of here?”

“You’re welcome to stay here. You can go in there and get in the bed with one of the girls, or you can sleep in Daddy’s chair over there. It lets out.” She points to the chair where her elderly father sits throughout the day.

“I’m going to have to get home to Mommy sometime.”

“Are you afraid to go out the back door? Them weeds back there is high, but I’ll unlock it and let you out.”

“You think he’ll see me going up the creek?”

“It’s pretty dark, and he won’t be expecting you to be around here.”

“What if he does?”

“I don’t know if it’ll work or not, but you can use a garbage bag on your top part. Surely to God he won’t see you then.” Hanner gets up and walks into the kitchen and roots underneath the sink for the roll of garbage bags. “It’s pitiful you
having to sneak out of here like this. Thank your mommy for all them candy bars. Them girls will eat them up in no time. I might even get in there and have one myself in a little while.”

“You going to be up?”

“Yeah, I’ll read a little bit before I go to bed.”

“You wouldn’t watch for me would you?”

“Yeah. Let me let you out, and I’ll go out on the steps, and if you need anything you just come back and knock on this window here,” She points to the living room window on the back of the trailer, “and you just say Daddy’s name real loud a couple of times, and if I’m asleep, I’ll get up and let you in. That sound alright?”

Peafart hugs Hanner tightly. “Thank you so much Hanner. I don’t know what I’d do without you.” She smiles at Hanner and jumps the three and a half to four feet down onto the ground. At the front living room window, Jim Dog says, in his paltry drawl, “You up, Hanner?” Hanner puts her finger to her lips urgently and shoos Peafart away with her other hand. She hollers back, “I’ll be right there, Brother. Just let me get out of the bathroom.” Quickly and quietly, she shuts and locks the back door and makes it into the living room before Jim Dog makes it onto the middle of the floor.

“You hear about what happened with me and Geraldine?”

“You and Geraldine?”
“Yeah, she’s left me again.”

“I don’t reckon. What for this time?”

“Ah, that fucking Peafart’s going around telling people we’re f-f-fucking.”

“What? Geraldine doesn’t believe her, does she?”

“That’s what she’s done and gone for.”

Jim Dog is not drunk, but he has a marijuana cigarette behind his ear. “You don’t mind if I smoke this in here do you?” Before Hanner can tell him no, he takes it from behind his ear and reaches over to take Hanner’s lighter off the coffee table.

Hanner rubs the cross necklace hanging underneath her t-shirt. “I’m sorry to hear that, Brother. How’s your mommy doing?”

“Ah, she’s alright I reckon.”

“I know I hain’t talked to her since Len died.”

“She’s over there if you want to call her. She might be up.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to bother her this late. I was getting ready to go to bed myself.”

Jim Dog smokes his joint methodically, sucking the smoke through the cigarette paper. “I’ll tell you what,” he begins, “you just let her show her fucking face over here. I’ll string her fucking guts up all over that banister over there.”

“You wouldn’t do that, now would you, Brother?”
"Like hell I would! I’d just like to get that bitch out to where the good Lord can’t hear her squall, and I’d rip her all to pieces."

"You don’t reckon?"

He continues his tirade long after his joint is gone. "You know, Hanner, I always wondered how come you never had any men over here."

"Ah, you know, I got them girls in there."

"That don’t mean you ain’t a woman yet."

"Well, I’d be best not to go looking for anybody."

Jim Dog stands up and stretches his back. Hanner stands up behind him and says, "You know, I’d probably get ready for bed. Them young ones will be up early in the morning."

Before she can finish her defense, Jim Dog throws his arm around her neck and jerks her towards him, clamping his mustachioed mouth hard against her, grinding his stubbly chin against hers. She screams for one of her girls to wake up, to get somebody to come help her, and Jim Dog leaves cursing her, taking her lighter with him. Shaky clear down to her feet, Hanner takes her cigarette pouch and wobbles into the kitchen. She pushes down the lever of the toaster until the grills turn red, rotates the tip of her cigarette against them until it turns reddish black, and sits down on top of the deep freeze. After she doesn’t hear Jim Dog anymore, she closes the front door and all the windows.
When he stumbles into the house, he wakes his mother from her drugged state. Her room is so cold from the air conditioner in the window and the fan at the foot of her bed that she isn’t sure if her sheets are that cold or if they’re wet. She wiggles around in them for a moment getting a feel for her situation. Jim Dog comes in her room, wooly-eyed, as someone might look who has suffered the night before but has slept off the shock only to reawaken to it with more intensity. “Mommy, you up?”

“Yeah,” she yells through the door. “Come on in here.”

As he comes through the door, she turns on her florist green-colored lamp and asks him “You got any more of them Percocets?”

“I believe I got a couple. What? You want to trade me something for them?”

“I got three Lortabs left I’ll give you for one.”

“Shit, three Lortabs wouldn’t buy me a piece of pussy.”

“Well, give me one of them Percocets, and I’ll give you them Lortabs, and when I get Somas next week, I’ll give you two of them.”

Jim Dog goes to his bedroom to retrieve the pills, and Imel props herself up in the bed, reaches into her dresser drawer for her pill crusher, and looks at the phone to see if anybody has called while she was asleep. She winces as she smells the urine that is like so much sulfur or the wood chips from a paper mill, where
drops have escaped her bladder through the night. She looks in her hand mirror quickly. The pits in her face look rusty with the makeup slept off in spots. Jim Dog returns with the pill in his hand and throws it down on Imel’s blanket. “There you go,” he says.

“Sit down here a minute,” she tells him. “You heard anything about Geraldine?”

He shakes his head in the negative, and she looks up at him, struck now by his complexion. “I reckon she don’t want me no more, Mominy.”

Imel says “Look over here this way,” examining his face further. “You’ve worried yourself so much you’ve got Roseola again.”

“Do I?”

“Well, I’ll tell you one thing, and I’ll tell you one thing for sure, I’ll be dead and gone before that snaggled-toothed whore comes back in this house again.”

Awkwardly as his mother talks to him, Jim Dog lies backwards, his back lying at a crossroads to his mother’s legs. Imel lies backwards, too, in a fashion similar. She thinks she feels her heart in arrhythmia. It could be something occluded, too, she isn’t sure, but she moves the Percocet to her dresser drawer, storing it snug in the pill crusher. Instead of taking it now, she opts for the bottle of Aspirin and takes a handful, downing them with a swig from her hospital mug.

With Jim Dog on her legs and the light fully blazing, her arms twitch, oddly sore, she realizes, as she recalls an image from the dream she was having. She
towers on a cross above her mother’s coffin, in between two porch banisters, each painted milky green and glossy. Jim Dog cusses her, “She’s been dead long enough. Come on, Mommy. Get off of that cross and come on. We ain’t got all day.” All of a sudden, as if guided by a primal latitudinal urge, her mother rises up from her casket and stands on the edges of the casket near where her shoulders were just moments before, and she gouges at Imel with a spear, but there is a wadded sponge on the end. Her mother jabs it at her mouth, and she sucks the unclean water from the shaft only to find it restoring itself with more liquid, vinegar slipping down her body, holes opening in its place, revealing her innards, pulpy tuna colored yellow and blue on a desert floor. She gurgles the air like her head is underwater, kicking her flabby fin feet. She blinks her eyes awake to see Jim Dog rummaging through her frog skin purse. “What are you doing, Honey?”

“I was just thinking about that seven diamond cluster you got. You still have that?”

Imel knows he will find it since it’s too late to hide it, and she tells him she does have it and asks why he wants to know.

“I was talking to Hot Shot a few minutes ago, and he said he’d give me a bottle of Xanaxes for it.”

“Jim Dog, Honey, you don’t need no Xanaxes.”

“Shi-i-it,” he slurs, having somehow gained a machismo sense of clout, “You can’t pass up a bottle of Xanaxes.” He continues searching through her purse
until he comes to a pill bottle with the label torn partially off. As he shakes it, he feels its weight and recognizes that its contents are the thing he's after.

“Give me that here, Jim Dog, and I’ll go through it,” Imel tells him, nervous about what is in the container but frightful of the consequences if he goes through it himself. He throws it at her, telling her to hurry up, that his friend is on his way over to get him. Imel spreads her blankets out over her lap, smoothing the nubs and branches of yarn where the quilt top has been tacked. She pushes down on the lid with its faded pharmacy logo and dumps the jewelry onto her lap. She looks at each piece with disgust, remembering quickly and disinterestedly who pawned what piece to her husband at their pawn shop in Alabama. She picks up the seven diamond cluster, which still has so much browned yarn wound around it. Then, she selects a horseshoe ring and an antiquated gold chain. “That’s all I got,” she tells her son, putting some of the other, slightly more sentimental, pieces back in the bottle.

Satisfied with what his mother has given him, he thanks her dutifully, promising to give her a portion of the pills, which she will never see. As she hears him leaving, dogs barking wildly at the front door behind him, she quickly climbs out of bed, holding on to her walker. She moves some of her boxes around, reshuffling them and evaluating their contents, until she sees the one she wants, tucked behind a box that says it used to contain dozens of animal crackers. The box is too heavy for her to lift, so she sits on the edge of the bed and pulls it off its
spot just enough to tip it towards her. She recognizes the dull suitcase that’s slightly smaller than the one underneath it and strains to pull it free of the clothes and towels she has used to pad the box, relieved to find it where it should be. She pulls it roughly and eventually places it to her side and turns to face it, the light stinging her eyes, the cold and heavy metal of the lock digging into her hip.

Inside the suitcase, arranged by metal, stone, and all other manners of distinction, are her jewels. The suitcase has kept dust off them, and they glisten. She lifts out the top tray and removes a clear baggie from beneath it. In the bag is the brown, matted hair of her mother, still in its plait from before it had to be cut from the cancer treatments. She squeezes it and imagines how it would feel against her teeth if she bit into it, if it would be cold and fibrous or if it would separate under the weight of her gums and fall away into some paste. She remembers how her mother’s hair was her pride and the symbol of her faith. Of a sudden, as if she’s had some poisonous memory, she drops the bag of hair back into her jewelry box. She pours the pill bottle back out on the bed where she can inspect each piece. She puts a few insignificant pieces back in the bottle and puts it back in her purse. Then, she stands up, reaching as far as her lanky legs and arms will allow and pushes the door to her bedroom shut and is left alone, momentarily, to clean her rings and necklaces and earrings and anklets and baby jewelry and charm bracelet amulets in sole serenity before she has to hide them all away again, which she does
just before Noonie bursts through the front door, hollering “Mommy, you up? Mommy, you’ve got to get up!”

Imel yells back to her and staggers as quick as she can through the narrow space between her bed and the cardboard boxes stacked against the wall. Before she reaches the door, she sees Nooney and immediately recognizes the look of anguish. “What’s wrong?” Imel asks her, making her way through the doorway and onto the dingy couch in the dark, dogs barking against the screen door towards the car in the middle of the road. “Mommy, it’s Jim Dog. They think he ain’t going to make it.”

“Oh, Lord God!” Imel screams out, “What’s wrong with him?”

“We was all out there at Hot Shot’s, and he got a script for some of them Xanaxes and he give Jim Dog some of them, and we was all drinking and shooting the shit, and all of a sudden, Jim Dog fell over in the floor, and we just figured he was goofing off like he always does, but he started turning blue, Mommy, and we called the ambulance for him, but I think he quit breathing before they got there!”

The car in the road honks its horn impatiently, and Noonie tells Imel she has to go. Hot Shot is waiting to take her to the hospital.

“Mommy, you’ve got to come on.”

“I can’t go like this, Noonie. I ain’t even got my clothes on.”

“Mommy, we’ve got to go!”
Imel yelps out to God, then grits her gums hard, grinding them back and forth. “Oh, God,” she screams, “What am I going to do if he don’t make it?” She pulls her hair in her hands, then beats her legs and scalp and face with her fists. The car horn blows outside, and Noonie tells her mother that she has to leave. “Will you call me when you hear something, Noonie? I don’t know what I’m going to do.” Imel sinks into the couch, tears causing the makeup to run from her eyes.

“I’ll call you when I know something. You got any nerve pills, Mommy?”

“I don’t know,” Imel screams, “just go!”

Jim Dog’s mutts escape as Noonie leaves, and Imel can hear them chasing Hot Shot’s rattletrap down the hollow. It sounds to her like they are howling, a sure sign of death. She rocks back and forth, hands pressed against the back of the couch, her intestines feeling as hard as concrete. In her steep nasal whine, she bowls over like a scud, pale in the face. She feels filled up like her mother’s hair the same way it was rolled into that ball, tickling her insides as punishment, tightening up inside of her. Her face feels turgid with its oils, and she moves her hands from behind her as if she’s fed up with sorrow and sinks them onto her lap. “Lord, God, what am I going to do?” she asks out loud. Somehow she feels the need to pee, and she squeezes her legs tightly together to avoid having to get off the couch, but she can imagine the feeling of warm urine sliding from her body, and she stands haphazardly against her walker and makes the long trek down the
hallway, past the what-nots who are staring furtively towards her, past the washing machine and dryer piled up with their own burdens, and past the kitchen table that has been built between adjoining walls separating the kitchen from the hallway.

The telephone rings as she sits down on the commode, and she calls to it, “Hold on, I’m coming! Hold on, Noonie, I’m coming! Before she has finished, she thrusts a long wad of toilet paper against herself and rises hurriedly. “Ohhh, God, please let it be good, Lord,” she calls out, “Ohhh!” She hobbles towards the couch as the phone stops ringing momentarily then resumes. It is Noonie on the other end. “Mommy, he’s gone, Mommy.”

Imel’s body jerks into what would be a seizure were she truly epileptic, and her faculties suspend themselves in the surrealization of her son’s death. “Mommy, Mommy, please say something. I’m going to call Hamburger and see if he’ll come over there and get you. Imel lies hard against the linoleum that’s rank with from dog odors. She does not hear the voice on the telephone. Her face is vacant, smeared with cheap makeup and disbelief.
Geraldine

In a modest funeral home with ruby tulip-shaped lamps on either side of an open casket, Jim Dog lies in state before his family. There are various pitiable floral arrangements. Imel and Noonie sit in the foyer beside a collage of various photographs of Jim Dog. In the chapel, musicians tune their instruments—guitars, a fiddle, and an upright bass. The pastor, Brother Bobby, trawls slowly towards them, a grimace wrinkling his lips. "Sister Imel, you want me to walk you in there to see Little Jim Dog?"

"I just don't know if I can take it, Brother Bobby." Imel is aptly prepared for the funeral in her finest jewelry and costume. Brother Bobby can smell beer all around her, and Noonie answers for her mother: "Bobby, won't you let Mommy sit here for a few more minutes. We'll be right there."

"Alright, then. They're going to get started here pretty soon." He turns away from the women and speaks to Did, who has been standing quietly behind Noonie and Imel, waiting to speak to one of them. Either of them. Her legs are swollen, and her face is tinged purple, but she smiles sadly up at Brother Bobby and responds to him appropriately.

At the front door of the funeral home, Geraldine comes through the door with her daughter in tow. Noonie sees her enter and cries out "Ohhh, Geraldine!" The women embrace in shared understanding of a similar grief. Imel screams out,
"I thought you didn't want nothing to do with Jim Dog. They ain't no sense in wanting nothing to do with him now."

"Mommy!" Noonie reprimands. She looks at Geraldine. "It's sure good to see you. I feel like I ain't seen you in coon's ages." She points to Shasta. "That one yours?"

"Yeah."

"Mommy's still in shock, I think."

"You holding up alright?"

"Not really."

"I don't know what I'm going to do without him." Geraldine is genuinely morose.

"You staying out of trouble?"

"No, I don't know. I got them two warrants still out for my arrest where they come in and raided me that time, and I might not get to keep Shasta. Right now, she's on overnight visits. If I can get out of all that, I might get to."

Noonie leans in close to Geraldine and asks if she wants to share a pill. She tells Imel "Mommy, I'll be right back, and then we're going to have to go on in there." While she is in the bathroom, Geraldine apologizes to Imel for leaving Jim Dog. She says she knows Peafart was lying. Imel tells her, "Shit. It's going to be me laying in there next, just you wait and see. It was supposed to be me this time. I swear to God. They're telling me they can't reconnect this colostomy bag right
now, and they’re going to have to do another hysterectomy sooner or later because they think they didn’t get it all.” Geraldine finally takes a seat to listen, and Brother Bobby comes back around.

“Sister Imel, we’re going to have to start here in about five minutes. They’re getting their instruments tuned up right now, but they’re going to start the singing, and then I’ll give the eulogy. They want to know if there’s anything in particular you all would like to hear.”

“I don’t reckon.”

Imel emerges from the bathroom sniffing and rubbing her nose. Geraldine sees her and walks towards her, but before she can stop her Noonie sashays up to the pastor. “Brother Bobby, you know what?” She chews her jaw, “I always said that you’re going to be the last one to lay me down.”

“Sister Noonie, I hadn’t ever thought about it that way. They were wanting to know if there’s anything special you all want to hear, you know, to remember Jim Dog by.”

“I don’t know anything about that, Bobby. Just tell them not to play ‘Amazing Graze.’” I can’t stand hearing that song.”

The preacher walks towards the chapel door then stops, realizing Noonie’s change of personality, turns, and enters the bathroom where he sits on the commode with his face in his hands, breathing long and slow. He stands to cool his face, and his eyes settle on the toilet tank. Someone must have forgot to peel this
off, he thinks, seeing the brand label sticker, and after he has dried his face with paper towels, he reaches down to remove it. Back in the foyer, Noonie announces to her mother and Geraldine that she has left a little bit of pill in there for her on the back of the commode. Imel asks, “Did you leave me any?”

“I didn’t know you wanted any. Geraldine will save you some, won’t you Geraldine?”

Geraldine offers, “Come on in here with me, Imel. We can split it.”

“Well,” she says.

As she helps Imel out of her chair, they hear the bathroom door closing, and all three women look at each other. Noonie mouths the word Shit, and after a moment, Bobby emerges from the bathroom wiping his hands on a paper towel, which he tosses into a small trash can at the entrance of the chapel. “You girls ready?” he asks.

“I’ve got to go to the bathroom first, Brother Bobby, but I’ll be right in there behind you all” Geraldine tells him. Imel agrees, “I do too, Brother Bobby. Geraldine will walk me in.”

Bobby looks knowingly and somehow stern. “They ain’t anything in there but porcelain and dirt, now, let’s get ready and read the word of God over this young man, and I’m going to expect you all to come on with me.”

The music begins to play as Imel, Geraldine, and Noonie walk slightly behind Brother Bobby into the chapel. Somehow the entire room is red and muted
pink. Noonie holds on to her mother’s arm, and the reality of Jim Dog’s death is visible in their faces. Halfway up the aisle, the lights and the music and the people overtake Noonie, and she collapses onto her knees on the floor. Noonie cries out for her mother, and Geraldine moves her over to a chair and stands behind her as people rush towards Imel. “Let them do it,” she says, and they watch as various family members help Imel to her feet and then to a sofa at the front of the chapel that has been covered with an erroneous floral pattern.
Peafart

Peafart is in the drug store when she hears about Jim Dog’s death. Did and Dopey are inside filling prescriptions when they see her looking for pregnancy tests. “Peafart, is that you?” Did asks. “You heard what happened to Jim Dog, didn’t you?”

“I ain’t heard nothing, except Geraldine left his sorry ass.”

“Oh, Peafart, Honey he died.”

“You’re shitting me.” Peafart makes her way to the blood pressure meter and sits on the chair. “I know he’s been an asshole, but I didn’t want him to die. You’re honest to God not shitting me?”

“He overdosed.”

“Oh, God, everybody know?”

“Yeah, they had his funeral last night, and they’re having it tonight and tomorrow’s the burial.”

“How’s everybody holding up?”

“Well, Imel’s blaming herself, and Noonie’s blaming you, and the whole family is just tore apart. Imel ain’t walking right now. She’s said she can’t. I don’t know who’s going to take care of her.”

“Yeah, she can’t take care of herself.”

After leaving the pharmacy, Peafart takes herself to Hanner’s house, across the road from Jim Dog’s. Hanner’s windows and door are wide open, and
Hanner calls to Peafart before she reaches the door: “Come on in!” Hanner sits crocheting on her couch, legs crossed again, Indian-style. She asks if Peafart is doing alright, but Peafart sits in the doorway with her feet on the steps. “You heard what happened to Jim Dog?”

“I sure did. You doing alright?”

Peafart shrugs her shoulders and stares into Jim Dog’s trailer. His dogs are in the windows, howling. “You reckon them dogs need tending to?”

“Honey, they’ve howled all night like that. I ain’t had a lick of sleep. Imel said for nobody to bother them. She said they’re Jim Dog’s.”

“Well, yeah, but she can’t take care of them.”

“I know it. Who’s going to take care of her?”

Hanner’s eyebrows lift. “I don’t know.”

Avery walks down the road falling heavily each time one of his legs kicks in front of him in a sort of heel, toe back-step. He swerves toward Hanner’s trailer where he recognizes Peafart’s legs hanging out the door. He asks how she is doing before she sees him, and she leans her head out to answer. He has dirty jeans and skate shoes on. “Come on in, Avery,” Hanner calls out to him.

“I was just watching those dogs over there at Imel’s. They’re crowded around the windows pining for Jim Dog like they’re orphans. Watch them. They look so lonesome. How’s your grandma doing?”
“She’s in the bed right now, I reckon. Mommy ain’t doing too good neither. You think you ought to be over here this close right now?”

“I don’t know what I need to be doing right now, Av’.”
Imel

Imel lies flat on her bed with her head raised only enough to permit her smoking. She talks out loud to Jim Dog and her mother, blending sentiments and curses. Her bedroom door is wide open, and the dogs come through it, jumping onto her bed terrorizing her. In the living room, Noonie and Silvey sit on the couch, while Did and Geraldine sit at the table. Occasionally, one of them gets up to look in the doorway at her. In her bed, alone in the dark, she raises her arms and brings them down in fists hard on her legs. She strains her neck to make sure nobody is looking through the door, and when nobody is there, she claws her stomach and beats herself silently, squinting her eyes together to keep from crying out. If she doesn’t make any noises, she thinks, no one will realize the pain she is in. She often breathes heavily, quickly. When she does sleep, she dreams of a woodpecker hulling out her heart in equal sized hunks of flesh, and she feels a burning against her throat that closes her up, and she’s pinned against her bed the way the bark is pinned against the tree. The woodpecker throws the chips of her heart into a pile that reminds her, in her sleeping consciousness, of the heap of dirt beside her mother’s grave before she was buried, and she stares at the dirt, watching for the wind to move every speck of it back into place. What she wants now is to be settled back into herself, but somehow her dream resists. Her hands move themselves to her face out of habit and her fingers sort through her pores until she feels a pustule to pop. After she has squeezed the mucus from it, and is
satisfied that it is dry, she crooks her thumb into her forefinger and begins the expedition across her nose.

In the living room and kitchen, more shaken by what not to do than by what they should do, Imel knows the women are smoking and shaking their heads. Someone has the television turned on with the volume down, and Noonie and Silvey look blankly at it. Jim Dog's bedroom door is open—ominously vacant. Neither person in the room looks at it except for Geraldine who walks over and closes it deftly. Did shuffles some cards from a basket off the table but thinks her action might somehow be sinful, so she puts them away back where she found them. As Geraldine makes her way back through the living room, she stops mid-center and looks toward Imel's room. Noonie tells her that she's in her light, and Geraldine curses out loud towards her.

"Listen, Geraldine, this ain't my fault."

"No, and it ain't mine neither."

Did intervenes by telling them both that they're not thinking clearly.

"There ain't no sense in you two acting like this! We ain't going to get through this if we don't all get through it together. You all can fight after Bubby's in the ground, but there's too many people depending on you for you two to act like this right now."

Noonie says, "I know it. If she'd quit running her mouth, we'd be alright."
“What have I been running my mouth about, Noonie?”

“Telling everybody that me and Mommy is the one killed him.”

“You know what, Noonie? It was. You all feeding him full of them pills.”

“We never done nothing you never done.”

“I quit taking pills.”

Did interrupts again. “It’s not none of our faults. This ain’t really my place to say nothing, but you all ought to realize that there’s more at stake here than there was before. We’ve got to figure out who’s going to take care of Imel and who’s going to take all these dogs.” Silvey speaks up in a quieter voice.

“We need to make sure we don’t wake her up.”

In her bed, Imel hears their quarrel and internalizes their concerns. Late into the night, her sheets are so cold they feel wet, and the fan blows against her skin as she hallucinates. “Hold your head over here,” she hears her mother say. “Hold it over here right now, or I’ll quit fooling with it.” It seems that her mother is fixing her hair up in braids, and it seems like she is eating a popsicle. Looking out from under her mother’s adept hands, she sees the fomented mouth of a dog looking straight at her. “I’ll bust your face in a minute” she hears her son saying to her. “I’ll bust your face in a minute. You bend over right here, Coco.” She knows he cannot see her face, and her kinky black hair wiggles in front of her as wild grass, fresh and silky and shiny. There’s something raunchy about the image that
she can't put out of her mind, so she tries to look around her and realizes she is looking at the interior of her bedroom. There is no sweating son or authoritative mother. It is her, alone, with her possessions. She twists around on her mattress discerning whether or not it is really just cold or whether she has again wet herself. The house is a quiet as stillness after a shootout. She is lonely, but she does not cry. She tries to think rationally about her life. Images come to her. She sees herself as others might have seen her, not as she remembers being. There is the time she danced in a cage after a rooster fight and the time she sat drinking with her legs crossed waiting for her husband to come home to her. The time he never came home. She looks at the walls in the dark and finds patterns in the brown paneling. She looks for faces and discovers patterns that could pass as faces in an ordinary world. She lies hard on the bed, feeling her blood flow through her heart. She wonders why there are no clots, why she can feel no obstructions when she knows she is dying. The stone in her throat could be a tumor. She knows her back is cancerous.

She returns in her mind to her mother standing in the kitchen, yellowed white hair and the waistband of her skirt pulled up to her breasts. In front of her, her mother stands with her feet pointed to four and eight o'clock. There is no conversation, but she sees her mother staring, as if she can intuit Imel looking at her. Her mother lifts her heavy-framed glasses up to look through the bifocals, and when she still can't see Imel, she squints, and Imel's mind takes her to an imagined
place with her mother and her husband, and there isn’t room for her anymore in her husband’s house, and her mother has remarried and has a baby son and isn’t pleased to see Imel even though it seems like years since she was in that house.

The bedroom that was hers is now vacant, and there are other rooms in the house vacant, but there’s still no place for her. She climbs out of a window and falls into a garden that she knows she’s never been in before, but in this dream she takes a fruit and cuts into it, and as she cuts, colors reveal themselves, exotic and out of place. Their intensity intensifies Imel’s desire for her mother’s contact and represent her feelings, and warm tears come out of her eyes, and she awakens in the pre-morning light still grappling for her mother. Her mother was happy in the dream, and young. Imel doesn’t know the boy in the dream, but she wonders if it symbolizes Jim Dog. She thinks to herself that Jim Dog must be with her mother, and this thought comforts her, but she still strains to feel her mother in a pathetic hunt for a connection.

In the morning, Imel forces herself to believe that she can walk, and she makes her way to the porch, where Noonie has her feet propped on the railing and is bent backwards in a chair. In her lap is a Crown Royal bag that has been opened. The gold string is untied. “You want any eggs” she asks Noonie. Startled, Noonie rights herself and looks quickly at her mother, who stands slumped on her walker, makeup smeared all over her face, hair like snakes. Her pajamas are barely
hanging on her body. There is an otherness in her face that is still with her mother in the kitchen.

“What’d you say, Mommy?”

“I said ‘Do you want some eggs?’”

“What are you talking about?”

“I said, ‘Do you want some eggs?’” Imel turns around dejected and returns to the living room that has been vacated. In the dark kitchen, at the yellow Formica table, in a torn brown chair, she puts her head in her hands and cries for everything she has lost. She wants to cook Noonie breakfast the way her mother used to do. She wants to cook her breakfast and Jim Dog breakfast and sit down at the table with them, on the phone with her mother, in the warm room. She looks across the table into the hallway at her mother’s collection of what-nots, and her eyes settle on a ceramic leprechaun. They move further down onto a trio of cats chasing a ball of yarn. There are bells of all kinds, clowns and elephants, the three “hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil” monkeys, religious figurines, and a replica of the praying hands covered in bronze and black paint. Imel realizes her mind is wandering, and she inhales quickly, lifts the walker, and threads one of the walker legs through the handle of the refrigerator. Successfully opening it, she stares at the contents of it. She sees eggs, but she realizes that Noonie hasn’t yet come into the house to check on her. After she looks the refrigerator over, she stands up in front of it and removes the egg carton, a plastic tub of butter, and a
gallon of milk. If Noonie was going to come in here, she thinks, she would have already done so by now. I ain't nothing more to her than dirt. She places the items on the counter beside the sink, closes the door to the fridge, takes a bowl slowly from a cabinet, and retrieves a fork from its drawer. She sits with the bowl in the crook of her left arm, cracks four eggs on its rim, and tosses the eggshells in the sink. She pours the milk into the bowl without measuring it. It smells. She smells it. It'll be alright, she thinks to herself, and she beats the mixture with the fork.

Scooting the chair close to the stove while sitting in it, Imel reaches into the oven for the skillet. She has temporarily placed the bowl of beaten egg on the stovetop, and the skillet is too heavy for her to lift. It is cast iron, and heavy. She pushes her chair back a bit with her feet to open the door to the oven wider. She leans in toward the oven racks. As she gets a handle on the skillet, it is too heavy, and she drops it onto the opened oven door. As the door falls further open, the chair slides out from underneath her, and she falls to the floor. Her hand somehow catches the bowl of egg, and it comes down on top of her and the oven door. She lets out a cry, a loud cry, panicked and sincere.

“What in the hell you trying to do, Mommy?” Noonie squalls as she enters the house.

“I don’t know,” Imel replies. “I can’t get up.”

Noonie attempts to lift Imel off the floor, but Imel gives up and decides to stay on the floor. Noonie sits down in the chair that has been upturned.
“You can’t sit there all day, Mommy.”

“I know I can’t. I was trying to fix you some breakfast.”

“Mommy, you didn’t have to do that. You ought to be resting. You know you can’t get in here and cook.”

“I’m going to have to do it now, ain’t I?”

“Look, Mommy, Did is going to let Dopey come over here and help you some.”

“Help me do what? He can’t help me do nothing. What’s he going to do—listen to see if anything’s wrong?”

“He’ll do what he can.”

“Well, why can’t you come over here every now and then?”

“I’ve got to take care of Avery, and you know I ain’t home long enough to take care of myself.”

“Avery’s a grown man, now Noonie. No, you ain’t home long enough, are you, but you don’t care to come over here when you want a pill, do you?”

“Mommy, you know my back hurts.”

“Does it?”

There is silence as Imel sits on the floor with her back against the cabinetry under the sink. She presses hard against her right arm hoping to pull herself up by leveraging her weight on one arm and pulling herself up by pulling on the edge of the sink, but she is unable to do so, and she slumps back down in the
floor. She tries again, and this time Noonie grasps her from behind underneath her arms and moves her over onto the chair. “Can you walk at all, Mommy?”

“I’ve hurt my tailbone.”

“That ain’t got nothing to do with your legs.”

“It does too. Who’s going to clean up this mess I’ve made, Noonie?”

“I’ll get it, Mommy, but you have to get in there to the bed first.”

“I don’t do it.”

“I’m going to holler for Hanner, Mommy, wait a minute.”

“What are you hollering at her for?”

“She’s going to have to come over here and help me get you in the bed.”

“She don’t.”

Noonie makes her way to the end of the porch and yells across the road for Hanner, but Peafart is there again, and she leans her head out the door: “She’s in the bathroom.”

“Peafart, I hate to ask you this, but I’ve got to get somebody to help me get Mommy back in the bed. She’s fell, and I can’t get her in there by herself!”

“I’m coming!”

When she gets to the porch, she asks “You reckon it’s alright with her for me to come in?”

“It’s going to have to be.”
Looking up at the doorway, Imel sees her. “Get out of my fucking house right now, you gangly fucking whore!”

“Noonie,” Peafart says, “I’d better go.”

“Noon Mommy,” Noonie says, “She’s not done a thing to you.”

“Not done nothing to me, hell! She’s the one that caused all this, saying Jim Dog raped her!”

“Noonie, I really ought to go.”

“No, you’re staying here, Peafart. She’s going to have to realize that neither one of us caused Jim Dog to die. It wasn’t up to us. Shit happens.”

“I’m sorry, Imel,” Peafart implores. “I’m sorry for Jim Dog and for every one of you. I am. I can’t help what happened. You got to see that!”

“All I see right now is how I’d lay you out if I could! I’d whoop you all up and down this hollow!”

Noonie motions for Peafart to help her, and they move simultaneously toward Imel, who continues cursing the women. Imel tries to pull Peafart’s hair, but it is too short, so she sticks her fingernails into the nape of Peafart’s neck. Peafart takes her right side, and Noonie takes her left, and they maneuver her through the narrow doorway and into her bedroom. Once there, Peafart moves away from her quickly, and Noonie looks roughly at her. “What the hell’s the matter with you?”
“I don’t want nobody’s help! If that’s the best you can do, then I’d rather you not do anything at all.”

“Mommy, I’ll get you some clean clothes out and a wet wash rag, but you’ve got to quit this.” She proceeds to do as she has told her mother she will do, then her and Peafart sit on the porch, awkwardly at first, talking.
Dopey

The next morning, Did walks up the road with Dopey, their arms full of clothes for him, his Bible, and his church shoes. There is a tickle in Dopey’s throat as he considers his new role. He does not have to move into Imel’s house, but he figures God has asked him to help his family. “There will be a nurse coming out once a day to help you with her, Dopey, and I’m always just down the road. You know you don’t have to do this if you don’t want to. We’ll understand if you don’t.”

“Now, Mommy, Sissy needs me.”

“I know, Dopey, honey.”

They walk in relative silence towards Imel’s, and Did guides him to the front door. There isn’t any noise, so Did thinks Imel must be sleeping. She and Dopey creep through the living room, and Did whispers for Dopey to sit while she checks on her sister. She looks precariously through Imel’s bedroom door only to see Imel, who has decided overnight that she can no longer walk, lying rigidly in bed. Her eyes are closed, and she has craned her neck back as far as it will go. Did moves quickly away from the door, hoping Imel has not detected her presence. She moves away from it and staggers back into the living room, where she is at first dizzy with confusion, then disgusted, unsure of what to do. All at once, she hears the Coco yelp as if she has been hit hard on the head, then she hears her being kicked to the floor. She is frightened Imel knows she is there. As she stands in the
living room dazed, she whispers into Dopey’s ear that they need to go onto the porch for a few minutes while Imel “dresses.” He needs to be quiet. They are able to escape onto the porch without being detected just before Coco limps quickly towards the door.

After a while, Did goes back to the front door, but this time she knocks and calls for Imel just as if nothing has transpired. Imel tells her to come in, and she does, with Dopey following behind her, thankfully oblivious of everything.

“Me and Dopey’s here, Sis,” Did says out loud, feigning cheer.

“Yeah, come on in. You all didn’t come by a while ago did you?”

“Did somebody come by?”

“I guess I was just hearing things. It gets so lonesome here without Jim Dog. Every sound I hear is him coming back home to me.”

“Howdy, Sissy,” Dopey says to Imel, genuinely delighted to see his aunt.

“You ready for me?”

“Ready for you, hell! I reckon.”

“Now, don’t worry about nothing. I’ll stay out of your way, and when you need me, I’ll be here.”

“He brought his Bible, so he’ll be listening to that on tape, but he has headphones.”

“It’s on tape?”
"Yes, ma'am," Dopey says, smiling comically. "The ch-church got it for me last year."

"I remember that."

"Are you hungry, Imel?"

"I was thinking I'd like to have a bowl of tomato soup. I haven't had that in years."

"Do you got any?"

"I don't reckon."

"Sissy," Dopey tells her, "If you ain't got none, I'll go down to the store for you."

"There ain't no sense in that, Dopey honey, I'll just have a bologna sandwich."

"Mommy, will you come help me?"

Dopey and Did leave the room, and Imel coughs violently, holding on to her chest. Her cough turns into a cry as she cannot form a breath. She beats against her chest bone, trying to eject something, but she knows not what. Her lungs are filled with cilia—smoke covered and lead-heavy. "I swear to God, young ones, I don't know if I'm going to make it much longer!"

Did looks back into the bedroom at her sister, then walks to the kitchen to help Dopey. She moves his hands over the items in the refrigerator, telling him which jar contains which condiment, where each meat is located, the contents of
the freezer. There is little in the refrigerator, but there is mayonnaise and bologna. Nooney and Peafart have cleaned the kitchen—cabinets, fridge, and all. Still, the odors of a wooden meat mallet permeate the drawers under the sink, and the light bulb is blown in the fridge. Did holds her hands on her lower back as she guides Dopey in his first task as care-giver. It takes him twenty three steps from the refrigerator to the bedroom door.

Imel has pulled herself onto her side and needs a pillow propped behind her back so she can eat. Did sits at the foot of the bed with one leg crooked toward Imel and the other one dangling on the floor. She pokes a finger at the water retained in her legs, watching the skin turn from purple to white. Imel sucks at her sandwich, her mouth not quite closing with either bite. “I gave him a little money just in case you or him needs anything.”

“Well.”

Did thinks of what she has seen between Imel and Coco and tries to seem unaffected. “You feeling any better, Sis?”

Imel picks at the sandwich then lays it back on the paper towel. “You wouldn’t get me the salt shaker, would you, Dopey?”

“I sure would, Sissy.”

Dopey moves the twenty three careful steps back towards the refrigerator and feels his way across the sink, over the stove, and to the small countertop beside wall that holds up the table. As he searches with his hands for the two identical,
silver plastic lidded shakers, Did promises that she will call everyday to check on Imel. It will be the first time she has been alone in the house overnight since she married as a young girl. She tells Imel that she won’t be scared, just lonesome a little. Dopey holds the shakers to his nose and sniffs. When he is satisfied that he has found the salt, he walks precisely the same number of steps back towards the bedroom, touching the television set as he exits the kitchen, and holding on to the couch as he reaches Imel’s room. Imel vigorously salts what is left of her sandwich.

“What are you going to do with all of these dogs, Sis?”

“They was Jim Dog’s.”

“You can’t keep them all, can you?”

“I hate to get rid of them.”

“You can’t keep all of them.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do.” Imel throws the last bite of sandwich onto the paper towel on her lap. “I don’t know what I’m going to do. The way it looks, I can’t do nothing. I can’t cook, I can’t clean. I can’t even stand up to wipe my ass. Mommy’s gone. Jim Dog’s gone. Brother’s gone. The only one I got left is Noonie, and she couldn’t care less if I died today so long as she gets what she wants.”

“You know me and Dopey is going to be here for you, Imel.”

“That ain’t what I mean.”
"I know it ain’t. I just want to let you know that we’ll do everything we can for you."

"Well."

After Did finally leaves, Dopey sits in the living room in the dark, his back rigid, waiting to be called for. He has made up the couch into a pallet with one blanket against the couch cushions and two more on top of it, turned back to sleep beneath. He has one pillow. He dares not sleep in Jim Dog’s bedroom, nor does he sleep in the back bedroom partly from fear of disrespecting the dead, and partly from the stink of the dogs’ prior inhabitance. He feels comfortable on the couch, close enough to Imel, yet far enough for comfort. He kneels onto his knees when he feels it is late enough for his nightly prayers. As he begins his prayers, Imel calls out to him, “What are you doing in there, Dopey?”

“I-I’m saying my prayers, Sissy. You need anything?”

“I was just wanting some company.”

“If it’s alright with you, I’ll finish talking to the Lord here in a minute, and I’ll be right there.”

As she waits for Dopey, Imel looks wildly into her hand mirror, her fingers nimbly reading the brail of her face. She squeezes her nostrils between her thumb and hooked forefinger, pressing solidified pus from the dozens of infected pores. After the nostrils, she moves to the bridge and then down to the wide, ball
of her nose. After she has scoured her nose, she takes a break and readjusts her body. She lies awkwardly, with her back arched over a pillow and her feet planted flat on the mattress. Her right elbow props up her body, and she looks intently into the mirror at her eyebrow area, taking special care to see stray hairs close to the crease at the corners of her eyelids. Those hairs are the longest and lightest and hardest to see, so she pays special attention to pulling them. She wouldn’t be caught dead with those dark hairs that occur underneath women’s eyebrows when they’ve not been plucked in weeks. She pulls one and winces, then pulls another and winces again. Dopey is still in the living room on his knees, back erect, face devastating and pointed to the ceiling. He cries out loudly as he prays, and Imel can hear every word of his pleas to God. She fidgets as he prays, torn up over some unexplainable anxiety. Her hands shake as she reaches over to the night stand for her makeup case. “Dopey,” she calls out, but he is lost in the fervor of his prayers. She cleans the makeup from her face by moistening a corner of her bed sheet with water from her hospital mug. She lathers her rose scented face cream onto her skin, and then wipes it away. With cigarette perched between her lips, she takes fingers full of beige cosmetic and rubs it into her skin. She does not look in the mirror. She knows the curvature of her face. She rubs it in and blends it down her neck. “Dopey,” she calls out again. This time, Dopey has finished his prayers, and he stands almost at attention. “Yeah?” he calls back.

“Come in here a minute.”
“Alright.” He feels his way through the room around the couch. At the doorway, he asks, “What you need, Sissy?”

“I need you to go in there in Mommy’s closet and get me one of them dresses.”

“H-h-how will I know which one you want?”

Dopey’s hesitation sparks Imel’s anger, and she looks up at him hatefully. “Just pick one.”

“Now Sissy, I don’t want to get the wrong one.”

“It don’t matter what one you get, goddamnit! Just get me one of Mommy’s dresses.”

Dopey turns around in the doorway slowly and feels his way toward the hallway where he has to slide his fingers across the what-not shelves and past the washing machine and dryer. The smell is putrid, but Dopey goes on. He does not know where the closet would be in the bedroom, so he walks the length of the wall at his right, shuffling unknown objects out of the way with his feet. He feels a part of the wall give, and he slides his hands down it until he feels a small round knob. Something is stuck in the door, so it does not open all the way, but Dopey is able to put his arm through it up to his elbow. There are hundreds of pieces of clothes, all polyester and synthetic silk. He takes his time choosing a dress, deciding on which one he thinks Imel will want. After he settles on a dress of medium weight and medium length, he follows his steps back to the bedroom. He can hear noises.
coming from Imel that are loud and unfamiliar. Imel sits up naked on the edge of the bed, jewelry box pulled up to her. She sorts through it wildly, throwing pieces here and there. Her makeup is half-applied, and she makes noise opening containers and closing them.

“What are you doing in there, Sissy?”

“I’m putting on my war paint. Have you seen that seven diamond cluster Mommy got me?”

“No, Sissy, honey, I hain’t.”

Imel’s legs are restless, and she contorts herself back up onto the bed and lays as flat as she can. She screams as if somehow frightened and breathes heavily.

“I knowed you wasn’t coming here to help me. All you want to do is lay in there on the couch and jack. You ever do that, Dopey? Ever play with your ding-a-ling?”

“Now, Sissy, I can’t stay here and you talking dirty like that.”

She mocks him: “you talking dirty like that.”

She rises back up quickly and takes hold of her jewelry box. “What do you want, Dopey?” She throws jewelry at him, hitting him. “You want gemstones or a tennis bracelet? I’ve got anything here you could ever want.”

“I don’t want your things, Sissy.” Dopey bends down to the floor and begins searching for Imel’s jewels. He finds earrings and necklaces. “What you want to do this to me for, Sissy?”
“Do this to you? To you! Give me Mommy’s dress.”

Dopey stands up on his knees and reaches Imel the dress that he has laid across the blankets at the foot of the bed. Imel tells him, “I need you to help me put it on.”

“You’re wearing Granny’s dress, Sissy? I can get you something out of your clothes to put on.”

“I’m wearing this!” She grabs the dress from Dopey, inhaling it, pressing it against her, rubbing it across her breasts and stomach as though it were sacred, or expensive lingerie. She opens her legs wide and moans awkwardly. Dopey’s eyes are wide open; scared at the noises he has never before heard. She unbuttons the top buttons on the dress then slides it over her head and arms. She re-buttons it.

“You’ve got to help me pull it down.”

Dopey obediently moves toward Imel. “Be careful of my bag. You’ve got to get me under the arms. Here.” She helps him wrap his arms around her.

“Just lift me up off the bed, and I’ll fix my dress.” Once she is dressed and he has sat her back down on the edge of the bed, he asks, “Do you need anything else, Sissy?” She tells him she doesn’t reckon, and then she behaves as if in a reverie, feeling the dress against her skin with her hands, imagining her mother in it.

“This morning, I had this dream Dopey,” she starts telling him before he can turn back around and get to the living room, “It was like the sky was wide open and the sun was coming down, and I couldn’t see anything except that light for the
longest time, and then all of a sudden, I was looking down at the ground, and I knew without touching it that the dirt was as cold as the dirt underneath somebody’s porch that’s been in the shade for years.” Dopey stops his flight back to his pallet and sits down on the bed beside Imel. He senses her staring straight ahead of herself just by the nostalgic tone in her voice. When he listens to people talk, he faces them, but tonight, he sits facing the same way she faces with his right ear piqued and his hands properly one on each knee. “I felt like if I could just get up under some porch somehow, I could hide, but I don’t know what I’d be hiding from. Then it hit me. Mommy was up under there, calling out to me to come to her. She wanted to play marbles. I ain’t played marbles since Jim Dog was a little boy and we lived in Alabama and he lived here with Mommy. It was like if I looked hard enough at that dirt, I could see planks of wood underneath it—painted wood, like greens and white. I could smell turnips cooking and hear the sound of Mommy’s big spoon scraping cornbread batter out of her baking bowl.”

Dopey interrupts her. “I had a dream about Daddy not too long ago.”

“Did you see him?”

“I seen him in a way, I guess.”

“This was like Mommy was right there, and everything was just like I thought it should be, but I could hear Jim Dog hollering at me to come right there! He didn’t have nothing on but a little t-shirt, and he was waddling over to me like a toddler would do. He said ‘You get your mangy ass back in that car right now.’
He was coming towards me with a great big sickle, like we used to use to hack down weeds with, and I was trying as hard as I could to crawl up underneath that porch towards Mommy, but I couldn’t get my legs to work. Dopey, honey, I’m afraid I’m dying, and I ain’t going to get to see Mommy nor Jim Dog nor Brother nor nobody else. You know, I’ve put up with a lot in my lifetime. You wouldn’t know it to look at me, but I used to be somebody.” She stops talking and looks over at Dopey who listens with his eyes squinted, absorbing her visions through her story. She sighs deeply and picks her hand mirror back up. Her face is red in spots where she has squeezed pustules, and some have hardened crusts over them that she scrapes away as easily as anything.

Just as quickly as she picked the mirror up, she puts it back down. “You know, Dopey, they ain’t none of them that would have done this, would have lugged me up and down.”

“I do what the Good Lord wants me to do, Sissy.”

“What the Good Lord wants you to do? If I had done what the Good Lord wanted me to do, I figure I’d have gone to Hell a long time ago. He didn’t want me to succeed in this world. He didn’t want me to do nothing. He never give me nothing, that’s for sure.”

“Sissy, now I know you’re not feeling good right now...”
Imel interrupts what Dopey says to her. “All I’m saying right now is that if the Good Lord cared one good goddamn for me or for anybody else, then he’d have made this world a helluva lot easier.”

Dopey speaks up in a troubled voice, “I’d rather not listen to you talking about the Good Lord that way, Sissy. You can’t say them kinds of things. If you’re going to talk like that, I’m going to have to go out on the porch until you’re through because I don’t want to listen to that kind of talk.”

Imel lies back on the bed and feels a joint in her spine pop, giving her the minute relaxing feeling that comes after popping knuckles. “You can go wherever the hell you want to go! I appreciate you being here, but I ain’t going put up with you telling me what I can and can’t do.”

“I ain’t telling you what you can and can’t do, Sissy. I’m just saying that the Lord don’t want me hearing talk like that. I’d rather not listen to you make fun.”

Drawing from an unseen source of strength, Imel rises up from the bed and hooks Dopey around the neck with her right arm and pushes him over onto his back. Startled, he tries to get up immediately, but Imel holds her weight on her arms, which are on either side of Dopey’s head, and swings herself over onto him. “All I wanted was for you to come in here and keep me company, to trot me to sleep or to just be friends. Fuck. You don’t know nothing! Nothing! I’d like to see you or anybody else put up with what I’ve put up with all these years, and then
you can think about what the Good Lord does for you! For all I know, he’s off in
fucking La-la-land, while I’m left here to deal with his shit.”

“Sissy, Sissy, please! Please, Sissy! I didn’t mean nothing. Y-y-you k-k-know I can’t breathe! Oh, Sissy, please g-g-get off of me!”

Imel rolls off him, but keeps her right arm over his chest. “I ain’t never
done nothing to nobody,” she says, “It’s everybody else that’s done to me.
Mommy. Big Avery. Avery. I ain’t ever had nothing. Everybody says, “Imel’s
got this, and Imel’s got that. I ain’t got a damn thing.”

Dopey lies still and quiet, tears rolling hot out of his squinted eyes. His
lips mumble a nervous prayer to his God, and he fears that he might urinate on his
trousers. “I dreamed I was out there behind the house. That’s an awful funny thing
to dream about, ain’t it? I was out there on that cold ground digging up marbles
like worms to play with, and Jim Dog was coming towards me with that sickle, and
Mommy was calling to me like she was off far away somewhere even though I
knowed she was up under the porch, and before I could get away, since my legs
didn’t work, Jim Dog drew back that sickle, and cut the head clear off Coco.”

“Coco?”

“That fucking mutt of his, I reckon.” She removes her arm from Dopey’s
chest and sort of snuggles up against him. He dares not move.

“He wasn’t after you?”
"No. I thought he was, but he killed that dog that he loved so good. Hell, he used to get up and feed her a full breakfast and a Xanax." Dopey fidgets, wanting badly to sit up. "I ain't going to bother you, Dopey."

"I know you ain't, Sissy. You wouldn't do anything like that."

"Would you just hold me, Dopey, honey?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just lay here with me and put your arms around me until I fall asleep?"

"I don't think I'd feel right with that, Sissy."

"They ain't nothing wrong with it?"

"Well, there is, now, and I just don't know."

She cries out in pain, "Please, Dopey! I ain't got nobody else!"

"I'll call Mommy to come over here if you want."

"I don't want her out here this late at night. It ain't nothing, Dopey, just holding on to me until I get to sleep."

"I can't, now Sissy, and I won't! The Lord saith that man and woman should not lay together who are not married and who are kin, and I will not disobey the Lord!"

"You will not disobey me, either!" Imel lifts up her walker from the floor and brings it down hard on Dopey's chest and groin and legs. He cries out, wounded! She continues to bring it down hard on him until it is too much to hold on to, and she takes her arms, throwing herself back onto him, and hits him in the
chest. He wrestles with her to free himself, only to find her hitting him with her fists into his head. "I can't live like this no more, Dopey! I can't!" She has tired herself, and she rolls off him, wild in her eyes where Dopey is vacant in his.

"You'll get out of here right now!"

"What are you talking about, Sissy?" Dopey asks her, raising up off the bed.

"I'll tell you exactly what I'm talking about. I'm talking about you and every other cock-sucker. Here I lay, dying, on my death-bed, and you all can't do nothing. Nothing!"

"All you had to do was ask me to go home, Sissy."

"I'm telling you now, ain't I?"

Dopey walks quickly out of the bedroom, eager to be gone. He stops in the living room at his pallet, Imel cursing wildly behind him. He collects his church shoes, which have been set neatly beside the left arm of the couch, and his Bible tapes, and feels himself quickly towards the door. Imel explodes in a mix of reverie and truth. Her hair stands electrified as she sits on the edge of the bed in her mother's dress, Dopey running confusedly in the road outside, rocking back and forth in the memories of her mother and son, feral at the mouth like one of Jim Dog's abandoned mutts. She beats at her head with her fists and itches all over, desperate to return to everything she has lost, yet thrown in the realization that her loneliness has overtaken all her other malignancies. She will die, by God, whether
she wants to or not. She reaches over behind her to the curtain on the wall. She picks up her lighter. She lets it burn, burn, burn just like the loss and the time, burned up like it all, all at once. The fire catches quick, and she calls out to her mother and brother and son, cursing and laughing until there are only ashes left, and the distinct feeling that one might have of disgust after biting into red fruit only to find its center blackened.