BUCKEYE GUMBO

A Thesis
Presented to
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
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Accepted by the faculty of the Caudill College of Humanities, Morehead State University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts Degree.

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Morehead State University, 2002

As a partial requirement towards completing my Master's Degree, I have compiled and polished a collection of short stories with interwoven prose poetry entitled *Buckeye Gumbo*. Thematic concerns include the perceptions of home and geography, as well as the kinds of physical and spiritual movement we experience through life. There are two primary geographic areas that are settings for the stories: The Ohio Valley and New Orleans, Louisiana. The poems suggest an internal kind of movement and are not necessarily bound by the same physical geography as the stories. By interweaving the poems with stories, I want to create a multifaceted picture made up of numerous frames, building layers of image and story line through deliberate placement of each piece, offering the reader a perspective not limited to a narrative point of view.

Accepted by:  

[Signatures]

Chair
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“Any shape or area which has not the pulsating concreteness of real flesh and bones, its vulnerability to pleasure and pain, is nothing at all.”

--Mark Rothko
**Introduction**

As a partial requirement towards completing my Master’s Degree, I have compiled and polished a collection of short stories with interwoven prose poetry entitled *Buckeye Gumbo*. Thematic concerns include the perceptions of home and geography, as well as the kinds of physical and spiritual movement we experience through life. There are two primary geographic areas that are settings for the stories: The Ohio Valley and New Orleans, Louisiana. The poems suggest an internal kind of movement and are not necessarily bound by the same physical geography as the stories. By interweaving the poems with stories, I want to create a multifaceted picture made up of numerous frames, building layers of image and story line through deliberate placement of each piece, offering the reader a perspective not limited to a narrative point of view.

The title of the collection has multiple meanings. One is utilitarian, and has to do with the placement of the stories. The axis points of the stories are the fictional town named Blighton, Cincinnati, and New Orleans. Blighton is a place I have created through various stories, notes, and wanderings infused with my own experience growing up in a similar place. There is also a story that takes places in Eastern Kentucky, intending to demonstrate the kinds of connections an individual can have with multiple places. As a setting, New Orleans provides a stark contrast to small town life,
and life in the Ohio Valley. In addition, it offers an appropriate canvas to explore the multiple illusions we sell ourselves in relation to the concept of home and leaving.

The title also has particular relevance to me, personally. I had my first taste of homemade gumbo while living in New Orleans. While it has always contained okra (where it derives its name) and roux, generic cookbook recipes are relatively new concepts. For a long time, gumbo was simply whatever an Acadian had around to throw in the pot and serve up for dinner. The thematic connections in these stories and poems are something that happened on their own, with pages of revision, rewriting, reconsidering, and revisiting those things that made me want to write them down in the first place. The stories and poems come from the same internal geography, and fit together in an associative fashion.

My interest in combining poetic language with the elements of the story are derived largely from a fascination with impressionistic and expressionist painting, particularly the work of Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock as well as Van Gogh and Monet. These vastly different artists offer views of the world that range from external representations of Monet to the abstract color fields that Rothko produced in the later part of his career. For these painters, the world was not a thing merely to interpret into paint; it was a thing recreate through subjective experience. As a tenet of his private credo, Rothko denied "that the world ha [d] any objective appearance the world is what the artist
makes it." *Buckeye Gumbo* is my attempt at applying this expressionist perspective to my writing. Part of this process is to further attempt to locate and centralize my Voice as distinctive.

I have also included a brief essay, entitled "Penmanship" with the collection. I have done this in order to address more directly my belief that the craft of writing is a process. The essay has no direct thematic connection with any of the previously mentioned themes in *Buckeye Gumbo*. However, I believe that the central idea of the essay directly corresponds to the collection as a body of representative work, and as a piece of art. It is also reflective of the changes I have gone through in the process of finishing the stories and poems, and is indicative of how my views on the now completed project have changed from its inception.
Penmanship

As a matter of habit, everything I write begins in longhand. First I wrote in pencil. Then I wrote strictly in pen, because I thought pencil was too childish. I have since returned to pencils because there is no child more overgrown than a writer. However, regardless of whether I use a pencil or a pen, my family, friends, and loved ones have complained for years about its illegibility. My scrawl is terrible. Despite the adage about practice making perfect, the more I write, the worse my handwriting becomes. It exceeds what my Grandma once called “chicken scratch.”

Many explanations have been offered. My sweet-hearted Grandma accused me of simply trying to be different. My Mom has said that I am trying to be like my Dad, whose handwriting was nearly impossible to forge on bad school report cards. Not a few teachers have accused me of being lazy. A few injudicious people have accused me of not writing at all—merely taking my tool of choice in hand and drawing squiggly lines on the page. Now, students are beginning to comment. They generally squint, turn their marked (in pencil) paper around a few times just in case I decided to write upside down and backwards to confuse them. Then they offer a disconcerting smile. I’ve taken to prefacing the return of story and poem drafts with “If my comments are hard to make out, come see me. I’ll translate.”
They never do. But I have the feeling that, over time, either the students or I will have to change.

Penmanship was stressed heavily during elementary school. It was important that each letter be neat. Clarity and precision. Neat, unbroken lines and meticulous cursive loops. If no one was able to read what I wrote, what was the point in the exercise? The country was preparing to convert to the Metric system to make trading with other countries easier. Handwriting that was reader-friendly and teacher-friendly would have a definite impact on international commerce in my adult years. Undiluted penmanship was the only appropriate accompaniment. Chicken scratch was to be left to the doctors and lawyers.

"Hurried" was a frequent adjective used by my fifth grade grammar and spelling teacher, Mrs. Bick. Her pedagogy adhered closely to the three R's: Recitation. Repent. Repeat. "Do it again" was her favorite form of feedback. I heard it often as her student. Not that it was the first time. My third grade reading teacher, Mrs. Moran would look at my daily writing assignments (we were learning cursive) push a frustrated sigh through pouty, red painted lips, and hand my paper back. Do it again. I rewrote assignments five or six times before it was satisfactory. The word again ceased to be the grammatical object of the sentence and became an active verb. The word was always capitalized. Again. Do it Again.
I doubt either Mrs. Moran or Mrs. Bick knew their desire for neatness would lead me here.

While I was rewriting assignments for Mrs. Bick, I wrote my first poem. One evening in my room, after a day when nothing particular happened, I wrote twenty lines using a yellow number 2 American Standard pencil, and named them “Sunset.” I wrote them using my most reader friendly, teacher friendly handwriting. I knew it was important. Then I showed it to my parents.

Frantic and out of breath, I offered it to them while Tom Brokaw moaned on from the television screen. Mom, the most openly sentimental, beamed. Her son the poet. Dad, the pragmatist read it. He then decreed it “good.” My first critique.

The poem was terrible. Random line breaks and hackneyed rhymes abound. I think it was modeled after some frilly poet I had been subjected to a long the way. Perhaps a Sunday school primer. Yet, for a while those lines were sacred. I would look at it, the careful handwriting, happy I had written a poem. I still have it somewhere, buried away from the leering eyes of non-familial critics. I come across it every so often, while shuffling through papers, and grimace. The meaning exists only for me, the remnant of that little boy who held the yellow number two pencil.

However, the handwriting is still unshakably neat.
Eventually, though, those lines began to nag at me. They weren’t clear enough, or concise enough. I did the only thing I could do. I began to write it Again.

The sunset eventually became the blue eyes of a girl who was the object of a pre-adolescent crush. Then it became God and his fuzzy white beard. Then another girl, this time with dark brown eyes. Then several other girls, all unrequited. Then it was a dream to be a rock star. Then a painter. Then a poet. Then Stephen King. Then Kerouac. Again. Then Again. Anymore, I write Again in my head while the old words fall out of my fingers.

I have a feeling that students will be shaking their heads for years to come. I cannot stop myself. I write Again because there is nothing else and the lines are never quite right, never quite finished.

Penmanship demands it.
**Curbstones**

I. Good night, Angel

The song playing on the juke was one I sang to my daughter. She was a baby—blue eyed infant, squinting at a world exploding in her vision since the autumn afternoon of her birth. I sang that song—a long and lonesome lullaby—trying to soothe the night hours: diaper changes, midnight and 3 o’clock feedings, unarticulated nightmares of her horizon: primordial memories etching themselves onto her eyelids and constructing a new universe. I crooned (for every good reason a father might croon) as the night passed without regard ... worn from countless nights before, from days screaming for silence. I sang my pathetic song, hoping she felt safe. Hoping to sound sure of every note that followed. Hoping to strike upon the rhythm of a mother’s heartbeat.

II. Day break

Snow fell during the night, blanketing the landscape in pristine forgetfulness. The world outside the window is gradually wearing away... eroding into ash colored crags and rolling compost piles. Somewhere, a garbage dump is burning—leaving our only mark upon the horizon in thick, black smoke. It’s burning somewhere beyond the hills, beyond the trees with their limbs genuflected in prayer.

Sitting at my desk, I listen to the clock hands dismiss each minute with mechanical noblesse. I like the tick tock of wind up clocks: it reminds me that time existed before alkaline. The world is winding itself down—my grandfather’s broken pocket watch keeps time just as well— but the tick tock lends the work a rhythm. Breathe in; breathe out in gibbering rhyme. Understudy for God’s metronome heart.

III. Naked games

The air was cold against my skin while she orchestrated me out of my clothes. Upstairs in a winter hideaway, while outside the afternoon wound down into a lingering, gray dusk. She whispered... though we were alone, except for the spirits who looked on in covetous silence (beyond cold and deprived of warmth; robbed of compensation, they perceive hollow eyed.) She whispered each movement, and I kept time. Juxtaposed cadence of breath against sound. Stand. Sit. Lay. Mouthing the melody with her fingers outstretched, enumerating goose bumps, playing dot to dot on my thighs and chest. I am exposed. And she smiled: redeeming me out of the warmth stored up in her belly... the conjunctive powers of the Pentecost. I could do nothing except
wait. Her melodious voice never above a whisper (shy repose) and, always the mother, she instructed with shivering, tactile hands. Her bloodstone eyes glistened, and I am forever laid open.

IV. Communion

9 o’clock in the morning, and the bell tower woke me into Sunday. Last night, the stars were impotent voyeurs; the moon was a lazy night watchman heralding a day in which church bells resonated out of tune.

Technology has filtered utility down to inharmonic symbols.

Thank God for wind up clocks to keep me in step.

I don’t want to be forgiven this morning. All a man can own are his sins. So if you don’t mind, I’ll just hold onto mine. Thanks for the kind words. Pass the plate along, since I can’t buy back the night or the lost piece of my humanity.

The night watchman is still sleeping.

V. In the Garden

She plants dandelions in small piles of dirt on the front steps and asks me if they have enough room to grow. And Daddy, she says, I have to water them everyday. And Daddy, how big will they get – big as me? And Daddy, aren’t they pretty – pretty as me?

My job is to pick the flowers. I bring them, my fingernails green with dandelion stems and Louisiana summer grass. My hands are soft (no workman’s hands here) and the lines are mutable.

Picking over my offering she chooses with a child’s divinity which are to be saved. Put those back, Daddy, she says. Returning to her garden, she hums the tune to a lullaby. I’ve forgotten the words. I stuff them in my pockets and keep watching.
VI. Still Life

Repose of your essence. Those sapphire eyes: impromptu stage lights upon my wrinkled brow. You standing, perhaps, in front of an artist’s easel. Baring yourself to the world with anonymous splendor -- the curves of you less defined by the swirls of cigarette smoke and lamplight horizon. Conjuring a portrait more complete than medium admits. If I could draw you (if I could draw) and connect line with form, I would begin with your belly button. The first portrait painted by crude, unpracticed hands. Learning not to draw myself.

VII. Beneath a Blue Sun

We drank Darjeeling tea and wondered what it might feel like to make love. Whisper and resolution. Refractory chimes with hollow tones fill the space between each syllable. The tea reflected your infinite pupils: wide, receptive lips unscathed by any quarrel with silence. I lost my watch some miles before --while treading the path to that secluded plateau with all past evidences quickly brushed over.

You painted Belgian cream clouds onto the horizon, and I sat humming over my tea, (it offered no divine gesture) recreating a song I recalled from the echo of church bells.

VIII. Disjecta

It rained three days ago this morning, washing away that pile of leaves in City Park – the place we first fell together in defiance of the chill. Autumn has passed. With the onslaught of Spring, all that remains are undistinguished footprints in the mud. Eventually, they too will be wiped clean.

All that will linger is the incense of moaning October leaves.

VIV. Untitled

Maybe I’ll live to be a bald wise man with a beard long enough to record the passing years. Fading into blindness and deafness, I’ll stroke the white locks and wrap them around rickety fingers. Each strand a catalog of some memory – the sweeping of days under the second hand. With annoying clarity, I’ll interrupt the present affairs of busy men: speaking only in grunts and head nods. I will have earned the right to ignore the world, to be gratefully ignorant of the small town where I will die, and allow the present affairs of clock winders to fade into another man’s forgetfulness.
The Beatification of Alice

She who was to become Saint Alice the White stood on a milk crate pedestal just beyond the steps of the St. Louis Cathedral. Just far enough to be considered entertainment for the tourists by penitent churchgoers exiting Mass in their dark Sunday suits and ironed pleated dresses. They scattered—preferring to avoid eye contact with the crowd and disappear into the Quarter’s narrow corridors. Maybe they were afraid to linger too long; afraid they might witness the termite infested church steeple finally give and crash to the street. Afraid to witness the scavengers picking through the debris for souvenir paperweights and coffee table knick-knacks. Afraid to witness people walking into the Cathedral simply to admire the architecture, snap pictures of the stained glass windows illustrating stories from the lives of Catholic Saints.

She stood with her eyes closed, facing Heaven. The porcelain-like hands held in prayer, clasped to her chest. When somebody tossed a few coins in the small urn at her feet, the eyes opened, the lips smiled. Then the bow from the waist, and the blessing was gone as quickly as it had happened.

The city was arranged in terms of cost. Hotels or hot dogs or beer or beads: everything was clearly marked so as not to confuse the wary buyer whose money kept the wheels wheezing on a while longer. In the Cathedral’s foyer, you could buy a charm necklace depicting the saint of your choice, or pay a few dollars to light a candle and pray for intercession. The sallow glazy-eyed priests heard no confessions.
They simply stood around while the tour guide—usually a perky, short and blonde college student who always wore a petite golden crucifix around her neck—showed people around the Cathedral once they paid. Pointing out the architecture, the hand carving along the wood banisters and the high ceiling. *Isn’t it beautiful, but please, for the sake of preservation, don’t touch. Notice the gift store on the way out, where you can buy a charm of your favorite patron saint.* Parishioners and tourists alike left the quiet walls of the St. Louis Cathedral covering their eyes. Alice met them in silence. Offering to take for a few nickels whatever worries the Church wanted five dollars to catalog.

If only five dollars were enough.

Summer was the best time of year for street artists with large umbrellas. I made the most money during those hours when the sun was high and people were willing to stand in the shade and have a sketch made of them. Two years in the city and it was the only gig worth having. Everything else was bussing tables and living on tips or placing mints on white hotel room pillows. I first saw Alice on one of those static summer weekends. One afternoon I gave her a few pennies, the same way I tossed them into the fountain at the Spanish Plaza. Hoping for a bit of good luck and few more sweaty tourists so I could make the rent on my bunk. Fifty-five dollars a week for an uncomfortable dormitory bunk on South Peter. It was better than one of the shelters. No one tried to save my soul. No one asked me to explain why I was there. Alice never asked, either. She only bowed and smiled, opening her
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absolving arms. Alice’s eyes were white: pure porcelain like the rest of her. Infinite and asking to be filled with sorrow.

Weekends were the best days of the season. Tourists wandered the Quarter, making their way to or from the Riverwalk and the Spanish Plaza to watch the riverboat cruises come and go. Families from Dubuque, or Knoxville, or Cincinnati, visiting the place where nothing ever truly dies. Even in the cemeteries, small vents were built into the old mausoleums, in case someone was inadvertently buried alive. Nothing ever rots in the same way a fallow field might after corn harvest. There was no autumn, no winter, no spring. Fat, unrelenting cockroaches strolled down the sidewalks harassing the pigeons. Dreams birthed themselves into physical dimensions from neon cast shadows; they rose out of the dual Mississippi currents like ancestral troglodytes.

And even during the unrelenting humid summer days, the afternoons smelled of eventual rain.

Early in the season, chubby tourists were already drenched in sweat from the effort of walking. Within a month they would melt from merely standing on the sidewalk. The sons shuffled their feet, bored with shopping and wanting ice cream. Daughters posed for pictures in front of boutiques and begged for carriage rides. Eternal seven-year-olds with wide Dahlia eyes.

My last picture of Dahlia was a school photograph from 1979. Round kindergarten face. Pigtails. Her two top front teeth were missing. For two years she visited me in the pink and orange evening sky over Lake Pontchartrain. Dahlia’s
laughter peeled out above the noise of all the sunset exhibitionists. Waves like rolling southern Ohio hills rose out of the tide, then she ran across them and away from me. Still laughing.

We went to one of her favorite places, the Blighton Village Park. There was a giant castle made of logs: a fantasy full of swings and slides and hiding places. I parked the car on the street, and when I unbuckled her she broke away and ran down the small slope, towards the old steel merry-go-round. It was the same type I played on as child. During recess, we took turns seeing who could spin a fully loaded merry-go-round the fastest: an honor usually left for the bigger boys. The older boys whose bodies didn't seem too gangly, whose legs didn't seem so short. Whose arms were never too weak. Who never ran out of breath. They ran around in circles, and all the giggly girls with their grown up airs loved them. Dahlia ran towards that plaything from my childhood, ignoring the safe and monitored fortress with its tapered towers and plastic flags.

_Catch me, Daddy._

The woman walked with a limp and used a metal cane with a four-pegged foot. Her knees squeaked. Even in the relative comfort of the early morning, her round and rolling face poured with sweat. Her eyes were locked ahead of her. Wheeze and drag, wheeze and drag. The clop of her orthopedic shoes on the cobblestone echoed in the early morning hours. Her silver hair shimmered, fixed and immobile. Around her neck she wore a small silver crucifix, like one a little girl might wear for her first communion. Pale and frail hands accustomed to worn rosary
beads. She was dressed in a lavender polyester dress suit that was probably new when she bought it, and reminded her of younger days. Before the cane. Before the shoes. Before the silver bluish tint in her hair that matched the suit. No wedding ring, but there was a deep indentation on the ring finger of her left hand.

Stopping in front of the Cathedral steps, she stooped a little to read the small plaque that signified the building as a minor Basilica. Pope John Paul II gave a sermon there in 1976. I imagined the Quarter on that day: standing room only, people hoping to see the Pontiff. New Orleans is a Catholic city, with shrines to saints in empty storefronts scattered everywhere between mid-city and the river. She probably already visited St. Jude in search of intercession. For her squinting eyes maybe, or the squeaky replacement knees. Bad arches or varicose veins. Perhaps her son or daughter left the Church. Perhaps she recently met her dead husband’s mistress. Too proud to pray for money. Too lonely to expect mercy. I once heard a story that the apostles were so grief stricken at Jesus’ death, they broke into the tomb and stole the body. To cover up for their crime, they proclaimed the Resurrection. The grandmother gradually turned herself around hobbled towards Alice, standing in perfect stillness. The scent of rain on the breeze, and it was already getting humid. She stood in front of Alice. Saying nothing.

She pulled some loose change out of the small beige handbag she carried and dropped it gingerly into the urn. Alice opened her arms and bowed. Her white eyes looked upon the woman. The lips smiled. Alice paused. I was some distance away,
but I swear I saw her lips move. Alice recoiled. The grandmother hobbled away, 
wheezing.

I watched Alice during the day and she visited me at night. In my dreams she 
had Dahlia’s eyes: blue and wide open to the world. Sometimes ascending into the 
pink and orange evening sky, up and out of sight in flutter of sparrows’ wings. On a 
crowded Saturday afternoon beneath a cloudless sky, the wandering waves of people 
sought after any deliverance from the heat. Standing beneath awnings, in the shade of 
buildings or trees in Jackson Park, or in doorways. They drank bottles of water, juice, 
and plastic cups of beer. Looking skyward for the hint of clouds.

Each of us, in our own way, praying for rain.

*Watch me, Daddy.*

It was spring, and the Ohio Valley landscape was quick to wake from the 
winter. Light and steady breezes over fresh grass, new leaves rustling on saplings. 
After a long season of being swaddled in heated houses, after months of fighting off 
the common cold, pneumonia, and a new strain of the flu, parents sat in huddled 
groups on strategically placed benches to watch over the children and recalibrate their 
vocal cords to adult conversation. Meanwhile, little boys were discovering how to 
make little girls squeal. Little girls found their safety in hide-and-go-seek. Dahlia ran 
away from me, laughing.

*Push me, Daddy. Push me.*

Imagining collective rain dances led by voodoo queens and monks of the 
Order of Saint Jude. Ellipses around Alice the White, waiting for her eyes to open.
The urn is a rouse; throw down your heart instead. Hymns sung in Latin. Common
time beat. Crescendo to show tune extravagance as the parishioners exit the
Cathedral. The steeple blows away in a dry wind and the termites land on our eyes,
eating the iris and leaving the world washed in cornea white.

Around the corner on Decatur Street, one of the souvenir shops usually sold
bottled water. The short Arab man with a mustache who ran the place only shook his
head and pointed down the block. The second place was the same, except it was an
older woman behind the counter wearing a ridiculously large number of Mardi Gras
beads and dangly red crawfish earrings. She looked at me, and also shook her head.

The streets were full of drunken accountants who thought themselves Kings,
their wives mourning the loss of the distressed maiden. Fat hand rolled cigars, the
smell of spilled beer cooking in the sun, piss in the gutters, puddles of vomit on street
corners. I followed the foot traffic as it flowed towards Iberville, heat pushing would
be Kings into strip clubs. Searching for justification. Looking for sanctuary.

“You like that, Daddy?” The whore smiled, wiping the edge of her mouth.
“You liked that real good, huh Daddy?” Echoes of laughter and the sounds of shoes
on the street blew around the corner into the alley where we were. The dancer rose
from her knees, clutching the twenty-dollar bill and pack of cigarettes I gave her like
a catechism. “You see anything else you like, Dad?”

She laughed when I asked her where I might find a drink of water, and pointed
towards St. Ann Street. “Maybe I’ll let you draw me sometime? Trade off?” The girl
laughed again and lilted, disappearing into the dark backdoor of the club she danced in.

The A&P on St. Ann was the only place that had anything to drink. I bought the bottle of water and hurried back to the Pedestrian Market, fighting off the temptation to soak in some of the air conditioning.

A crowd had gathered around where Saint Alice usually stood, and they were all talking and looking at the ground. The police arrived the same time I did, along with an ambulance. Pushing my way through the crowd, I saw her there. Lying on the street, sprawled out, her head piece ripped away to reveal long, thick auburn hair. There was a tickle of blood from her left nostril. Eyes closed. People pointing. Whispering. Finally, the onlookers slowly wandered off, escaping the heat.

If only I could blame the weather.

_Catch me, Daddy. Catch me._

***

The crowds no longer remember. My arms are still weak. Weaker still after years of waiting for her to stop laughing, to stop spinning, to stop running and turn back towards my arms. Dahlia, whom the city resurrects. So I can wait for her to fall again, spinning round and round under a cloudless blue sky, arms out, pretending they were wings. Scenarios playing in my imagination: I save her from hitting the cobblestone. Save her from falling.
We are all still spinning. I am still here. I draw portraits of her, sell them, and then place the money in her porcelain urn. Waiting for the return of Saint Alice under a cloudless, eternal sky. So her eyes might open again.
Autumn

My hat still carries Chesapeake Bay sand in the lining, and weeks afterwards I am shaking out the dandruff memory. Virginia Beach is a grotesque carnival of sunbathers and tourists and failed summer fortune seekers. Sand and the lingering stench of salt-water silk-screen the memory of her horizon eyes on my mother eaten brain.

“We are an inedible clan,” says I, after a crab bites her child foot for the third time. Everything is uncovered by the low evening tide. During the afternoon I teach her to roll with the waves, some broken religion from a Jack London story. Roll with or be rolled over. One more broken shell buried for an eternity in the sand. Child’s laughter at my sage attempts. The illusion fizzled too soon, just after birth: the first time she looked into my eyes, the costume sapphires of a man who has rolled with too many waves and was eventually washed out to sea.

At least I still have my hat. To hold the piece of my head together.

Even as all I have ever been erodes.
Eight of Cups

Joseph met Lydia as the snow melted, on the same day he received a letter from one of the journals he regularly bombarded with submissions. They were finally going to accept his latest story about a man who eroded into a city sidewalk. He felt free for the first time in months. Any residue of the fading Cincinnati winter beneath his skin was banished by the new sun reflecting blindness off the lingering patches of snow. He still remembered being pushed along with plastic fast food cups, empty beer cans, newspaper inserts. The wind had bullied him down the sidewalk with angry hands, and Joseph had dragged his feet against the cold with all the petulance he was able to muster. The stripped limbs of the trees sparsely lining the street, bent under the weight of ice and snow were small, poor aesthetic attempts against the steel and cement city horizon. On this day, however, he barely felt his feet on the cracked, uneven Ludlow Avenue sidewalk while he jaunted to the coffee shop for a celebratory latte. Especially pleased because he refrained from the urge to whistle in order to front nonchalance, he reminded himself that artistic humility was an important trait to foster.

The place was located in the basement of a deteriorating tenement in one of the trendier parts of the city, close to the university. The musty, insulated aura was a salve against the arctic inertia that typically seized him, and amplified the wellspring of excitement he felt on that day. In any state of mind, Joseph relished the metaphor
of being underground and imagined that flowers felt the same way. Beneath warm earth. Hoping towards spring.

After ordering his drink, he smiled. His favorite corner table was open. More good luck. The position afforded Joseph a panoramic view of the entire coffee shop. His favorite past time was to sit and watch the people bustle in and out: college students, high school kids, daily grind lunch goers who watched the younger patrons with silent, damning derision. Occasional freaks from the street. He reveled in his point of view—recording each movement that caught his attention. Precise and calculating. Objective. Perfect fodder for the stories and poems he humbly referred to as useless patterns on paper (although he always smiled when he said it.) The tabletop design was a variation of the Aztec sun... half sol, half luna. Orbiting around the outer rim were the symbols of the zodiac. The wooden chairs were painted to match the table, splashed with multi-colored stars.

Cozy and sipping triumphantly on his latté, he saw Lydia for the first time as she stepped onto the bottom landing, bounded through the screen door and straight to the counter. She ordered an Irish cappuccino. A short woman, with shoulder length blonde hair, a moonish face, large round eyes, and an aquiline nose. She was dressed in a stylized black body suit, matching baggy sweater, and a beret. Trying to shake off the distraction, Joseph refocused on his coffee and examined the new artwork lining the walls. The pieces were all by the same artist—somebody local, whose name was bandied about in the right circles—someone who had, along the way, sold a painting and could claim art as an occupation. Joseph liked the coffee shop
because the owners were good about showing off local talent: painters, musicians, and writers. Everybody had a chance to be seen. An audience was an audience. The last time he read, he received mild applause for a section of the story that had finally seen publication. *Where it all began*, he thought. *This is where they will say it all began.*

The new paintings were done in dark colors. Grays and browns. Shades of black. Ashen elongated faces. Hollow eyes. Lipless mouths agape at him. Vacuous. Watching him from the outside of rain drenched windows. Muted moans. The coffee became bitter… burning his tongue, acidic on his throat, holding his voice hostage.

“Are you Joseph Shell?” Lydia stood before him, cappuccino in hand, smiling wide.

Clearing his throat with a complete lack of grace, Joseph was able to squeeze out some syllables to indicate that he was, in fact, himself. She introduced herself and immediately sat down across from him.

“I heard you read once. At the gallery opening on Short Vine?”

Joseph tried to remember her face from the small gallery crowd in his head. No luck. He asked her if she had any work at the gallery. Her voice lurched, stopping and starting again like a wheezy car engine in the winter.

“Me? No, no, no. I’m a painter, really, and it was primarily a sculpture exhibit. But I love your work. Are you working now? Are you writing? Am I disturbing you?”
Joseph welcomed the reprieve; and when she pulled the sweater over her head, Joseph noticed the low cut of her top and the freckles splashed her chest like the painted stars on his chair. The faces retreated. In a little while he was enjoying the remains of his latte, and crowing about his publishing coup.

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With the first inklings of summer heat, he was seeing Lydia nearly every day. The second week of summer, she found his apartment from the address on some poetry he gave her to read (pieces that were eventually rejected.) She stopped by in the morning just before ten, while he was still in the process of waking up. Lydia sat on his bed, they drank coffee and talked until about three in the afternoon. She quickly made herself at home, kicking off her shoes, wrangled out the mysteries of Joseph’s third hand coffee pot and learned through numerous attempts to brew the perfect poor man’s espresso. She brought her own sugar.

Whether she was seated across from him at the corner of the coffee shop, on his bed, or later, lying next to him wrapped in tangled blankets, Lydia was kinetic. Incessantly talking and flaying the air with her hands, fluttering her fingers to and fro like a frantic sorceress. Or, if she held a mug of coffee like some Slavic refugee in repose, her feet would be tapping in some ritual of metronome motion. Most often, she ended up kicking him. Once, she left a bruise on his left ankle. Her apologies were as hurried and repetitive as everything else about her.

“It’s ve-e-e-r-ry interesting,” she said in her intellectual high tone. A voracious reader, Lydia poured over books more esoteric than Joseph could’ve
tolerated, and read them with religious fervor. Every conversation was a discourse on any one of innumerable theories, and Joseph didn’t bother to keep track. Sitting over one of any number of books, she was a glutton for knowledge. He appreciated the fact that she sought answers somewhere in the lines; between the words maybe, in the little spaces between the typeface, was the answer they both sought. Then, over coffee, kicking her shoes off and sitting on Joseph’s bed, she sermonized their contents. Everyday was another exercise in intellectual thrust and parry. Every day was a renewed conviction to another face of truth: varying levels of feminism, politics, rhetoric, defunct religions. One morning she arrived and told him she was Wiccan and proclaimed her wedding vows null and void. Yet another she was a stern faced Marxist, tossing around terminology and talking about an uprising among the wage slaves. On another, it was the advantages of matriarchy.

On one of her morning visitations, Lydia brought a small box wrapped in a square of purple silk. “Let me tell your future,” she said. Eyes wide and excited, she unwrapped the silk and uncovered a packet of the tarot. “I found these in a voodoo shop in New Orleans. Have you ever been there? It’s a wonderful city, so many lights, so many people, so much.. well, so much, you know, magic in the place. Did you know that voodoo queens are listed in the yellow pages there? People take things seriously down there…”

As per her instructions, Joseph shuffled the cards, focusing on his questions. He thought of nothing in particular, watched her chest heave while she breathed. Three times, Lydia told him. Shuffle them three times. Three is a scared number.
“This is your card,” she pronounced ceremoniously. With the red fingernail of her left index finger, she pointed to the card at the center of the spread. It depicted a man in a red tunic, hunched over and walking away from eight golden goblets. “The cups of his enterprise,” she said. He was retreating towards barren mountains. Lydia also used the word futility. One of her favorite words. She chanted other words. Despondency. Rejection.

“But futility,” she teased, “futility is your word.”

***

They quickly abandoned the confines of the coffee shop, and Joseph began anticipating her visits. He was careful not to usurp her mastery over the coffeepot, or go through the motions of getting out of bed. Over countless cups, Lydia told him about her husband.

He was a fleshy, sweaty, over-possessive, and insecure man. Joseph saw him once, at a distance, on the university campus where he was a graduate student in history. He snarled, lumbered, and growled if anyone but a professor spoke to him. Joseph thought him a pretentious kiss ass. According to Lydia, her eight-year marriage was nothing more than an outmoded farce. Her husband never encouraged her. He never took her passion for art seriously. Insulting and condescending at every opportunity, Lydia’s husband always found a way to make all of her concerns, all of their arguments, and all of her premonitions regarding him (of course he wasn’t having an affair; that was just Lydia being stupid) completely her fault. He didn’t
even especially love her — or at least she hadn’t felt that way in a long time. Lydia knew she didn’t love him, she sighed, and didn’t think she ever really had.

“I can’t even pick up a brush without him making a snide remark.”

After several conversations, Lydia began to talk a little less about her husband (a fact that relieved Joseph immensely) and started talking more about painting. With every fluid movement of her wrist, she air painted the masterpieces she could never create (her husband’s conviction was that nothing worthy had been painted since the fourteenth century.) Lydia spoke of painting and her voice calmed; her tone became soothing, sensuous, as opposed to fluttering between the loosely tied ideas that made up the bulk of their conversations. Lydia lay down next to him, still above the covers, stared at the cracks in the ceiling as if they were clouds, and picked out birds, dragons, giants, ships sailing on an infinite cumulous.

“Why did you marry him?”

“He got me away from this other guy, who was really abusive.”

The boyfriend in question was a paraplegic who crushed his legs in an accident he caused while driving drunk. Self-medicating on a variety of painkillers, he soothed himself by humiliating her. When he wasn’t screaming and demanding to be fed, bathed, or changed, he made her dress him in her underwear, and forced her to masturbate on command. That was his retribution for her sin: still being able to feel something that (even when he had use of it) he took for granted. Once, at a party he threw to announce his coming out (he was a transvestite) he made her play hostess
wearing only stiletto heels. The main attraction of the evening was when she shaved her pubic hair while the disassociated crowd looked on.

“It’s all shit,” she said; beginning to cry.

Tears welled up in her large blue eyes that stood out against the aboriginal whiteness that encased them. Not one drop fell. Her voice performed the act of crying. Sonorous vibrato. Hoarse. But her eyes never released the tears; they vibrated, brimming with silent panic. Hers were the eyes of a woman drowning. Tears engulfed her face, head and lungs. Flooding her body, and slowly washing away all evidence of her. Lydia drowning in an ocean of salty, unrequited tears.

Then, she kissed him. It was a hurried, desperate kiss that occurred in the absence of language. She whispered his name. Apologies, concessions. With another, more deliberate kiss, Joseph silenced her. Soon, Lydia was straddling him. Removing the last of her clothes, towering.

He pulled her down beside him, moved to mount her gently. The tarot scattered everywhere: on the blankets, the bed, the end table he used for a nightstand, the floor. Some of them fluttered in the air like butterflies, almost suspended for an instant on the heavy air. Joseph didn’t see them fall.

“Don’t worry,” he whispered, lightly kissing her left nipple. “Everything is fine, Lydia...”

***

Even while bemoaning her husband’s rampant jealousy, Lydia continued coming to Joseph’s attic apartment every weekday just a bit before ten in the morning
throughout the summer. She rushed in, bullied by the stalwart summer outside his window, tore herself out of her clothes and dove into the bed. Joseph had long anticipated her visits... though he allowed her the propriety of waking him from sleep with kisses. Typically, he wrote during the night and slept until the mid afternoon. Lydia respected his need to write, and after making love, she let him sleep.

But he always woke up and listened when she talked about life at home. Each tale was more horrific than the last. Endless variations on the same themes of degradation, misery, and loneliness. Her husband didn’t hit her (anymore) so it was still manageable. She was still able to hold on, and believed with whatever new truth she picked up in her dusty books that her situation would work itself out.

In the coffee shop that Joseph and Lydia no longer frequented and the parks they avoided, old men spoke of the weather. That summer was the hottest any of them remembered. Meteorologists spoke utilizing terms they hoped might diminish the impact. Pressure systems. Tropical winds. Dropping river levels. Heat advisories. Record breaking highs. The old men talked much like their grandfathers did: in terms of life and death. The earth groaned; the old men groaned with it, whispered prayers, and imagined it wouldn’t have been so difficult if they were thirty years younger. Flowers wept listlessly, mourning their stunted growth and the dull color of their strained blooms.

For Joseph, however, it was simply the world outside his window. The heat was an altogether different thing. Lydia continued to sweep in every morning she could get away, just before ten. After they were spent, as much by the heat as by
each other, she curled up beside him, spinning more stories of home. Eyes closed, 
Joseph listened to her voice rise and fall, the careful cadence of its minuscule vibrato; 
he felt the rhythm of her body clenching, clenching tighter to him, slowly releasing 
him, the tension of her muscles as her body fought against the urge to release the 
tears. The absence of her tears created in Joseph its own squalid necessity. He 
imagined lapping up her tears as he kissed her eyes, her slightly parted lips, the 
circumference of her breasts, her nipples, her pussy, until she screamed. They 
fucked. She talked. He listened, always wrapped in stifled silence.

Finally, he broke through the silence. “Why don’t you just leave him?”

“Where could I go?” she whimpered, running her frenetic fingers across his 
chest.

Joseph wanted to say something debonair. Something cinematic, like “Come 
here. Get your clothes, and come here.” Maybe “Just stay... who needs clothes?”
But the silence choked him with thick bony fingers, making him unable to release 
those words. Their conversation was dropped in favor of her unrelenting flesh.
Sweet. Futile.

Outside his window, the world was on fire. The old men were too drained to 
speak any more about the weather, and the meteorologists rambled on with their 
numbers, unconcerned that nobody listened anymore. Autumn was a month away, 
and already everything was dying; blowing away in piles of dead leaves and the 
dehydrated corpses of flowers. Lydia’s visits were still predictable, but Joseph had 
become less desperate. Parched, but acquiescent, their time together exuded the
gravity of necessity. They never left their bed. They didn’t even fuck every time; but when they did, it was a familiar, repetitive, established act. Lydia still spoke of her husband, leaving the afterglow sour.

The unbearable summer heat magnified on the weekends without Lydia to soothe him. Unable to write through the long nights, Joseph sat from Friday afternoon until Monday morning, watching the world boil during the day when the sun was in ascendancy, and smolder without satisfaction during the night. He returned to bed only for convention’s sake, not wanting to rob Lydia of her customary wake up call. She arrived Monday morning, fresh with new horror stories of visiting the in-laws, recrimination after recrimination recounted without tears. She began finding him too exhausted for sex.

His nights were devoid of stars. The moon was only a reminder of an unforgiving and combative brother. Try as he did, he wasn’t able to fill in the stars, even to break the monotony of the bland, unreflective darkness. As quickly as he filled in the spaces, they were erased. He fought time and time again trying to superimpose the image of patternless stars from the chairs at the coffee shop. He wondered if the same paintings were there, with their ashen faces and vacuous mouths. For the first time since Lydia came to his bed, he even considered going out for a cup of coffee. Then he remembered Lydia saying her husband had begun frequenting the place. Looking for him. It became a mental exercise; building up the courage to open the door and walk out.
Each night he sat at the small kitchen table, pen in hand. Touching the tip to virgin whiteness. Waiting for the friction to take hold so the words would be born. The old chair with its worn contour, the wobbly table with its cracked and peeling veneer, the pen clutched pensively betwixt the finger and thumb of his right hand, the finite expanse of the empty page—these were familiar circumstances to Joseph. As predictable as the position of stars, as the absence of rain or tears. Each night, he sat down at the table to write. Each night, he ended up staring blankly out the window. Around daybreak, he surrendered his vigil. By the time Joseph saw the flames feasting on the world outside his window, he hadn’t written a word in two months.

Joseph wanted the world to end. Each afternoon after Lydia returned to her husband, he prayed it would be that day. He wanted the world to end so there would be no more secrets. No more starless nights. No more parched silences in the absence of baptismal tears. Joseph watched as the world turned to late summer ash, contemptuous of the season’s slowness. He wanted it to hurry so that none of it would matter, Lydia’s husband wouldn’t matter. The Witch Marie and her dark prophecy wouldn’t matter. Joseph’s rejected manuscripts and abandoned poems wouldn’t matter. The world wouldn’t matter.

On another fruitless night, he sat up until sunrise, looking occasionally at the clock to see how long he had until Lydia arrived. But instead of the sun, dark clouds painted themselves on the horizon, rising above the steel and concrete landscape like barren mountains. A cold front carrying the first storm of an early autumn. He waited for the rain. He waited for Lydia.
Just before ten that morning the clouds broke, and a strangling rain fell—beating the remainders of the grass and flowers into mud. He watched the rain alone. Late that afternoon, the sound of thunder rumbled across the sky, heralding another storm front. Joseph smiled as winter settled into his veins.
I am reminded that life moves an inch at a time, and always with a groan. My goal, among other less important things, is to be conciliatory. And above all, silent. She sleeps late and in our small room, each movement contains amphitheater resonance. The three feet between our bed and my desk is the universe tied at two ends with entities separated by impossible geography. The coffee pot brews life anew as I try words on paper from the previous day.

Conciliatory. And above all, silent. The coffee pot doesn’t cooperate. She sighs. Rolls over. Snores. I like to watch her sleep. Sometimes she talks -- whispering the secrets of a more circumspect woman’s universe where I am a resident alien. She’s learning to ignore me. As time passes, I become increasingly innocuous.

Waiting.

Waiting to light the first cigarette. The scent will rouse her. I enjoy looking at my books, reexamining my rocks. Broken Cape Cod skipping stone. Piece of petrified redwood. Dull stone hatchet head from my grandfather’s basement. Rock from a graveyard in Fort Washington, Kentucky. Beach rock from Virginia. My daughter found it, told me to keep it.

So I would remember.
Iron Belly

Wrapped in a thick blanket, his permanent cloak during the months of isolation, Franklin poured a fresh cup of coffee. According to the farmer’s calendar on the wall, it was Sunday. December. The moon was in her second phase, smiling over the Earth. Laughing at some private joke. He dug through the bits of remaining firewood, found some pieces he hoped would give off a little heat, and stoked the fire. Mostly ashes in the grate. None of the wood he burned during the cold snap was good hard wood, and left few if no embers to build upon. Unsure of how to continue feeding the black, cantankerous beast, again he wished he had replaced it when he first arrived.

He didn't know how old the stove was, but it had been there as long as the structure itself... since his grandfather built the small hunting cabin with his own hands. Each board of the maple walls and walnut floors was chosen carefully by the exacting eyes of the life long carpenter, cut from trees off the land where the foundation was laid. He milled every board -- each chosen for longevity and the simple beauty of unadorned wood. There was no crevice that didn't feel the touch of those measured, callused hands and deliberate fingers of the man Franklin remembered only in vignettes: holidays, Sunday visits, birthdays, and family reunions that were a forgotten pastime before Franklin’s seventh birthday. The cabin sat empty for over a generation, when he inherited it as a footnote in his father’s will—more a record of debts than the distribution of property. Those three and a half acres were the only thing left free and clear. Franklin took responsibility for the
property, adhering to some nostalgic sense of obligation. At the time, he considered renting the place out to weekenders and hunters.

But he never laid an eye on the place until his retreat in the late days of the past summer, leaving his well-planned life in the wake. He went about, blowing the dust off everything, trying to make the place inhabitable again, stumbling onto evidence of the old carpenter's presence. Scent of wood shavings, Lux soap, and cheap after-shave were imbedded in the wood like heavy varnish. An old calendar on the wall above the kitchen sink had read October 1970. A coffee mug from the St. Louis World Exposition. The soft leather rocker retained the imprint of the tall, narrow frame Franklin didn't inherit. The cabin kept the mark of the man. There was no place he could go and not feel as if he were being watched; the wind shook the tin roof, made noises like whispers. At night, the floors creaked from condensation and the temperature changed, waking him up out of shallow sleep. He even began to think his grandfather was still there, tending to the place – that the builder still belonged to the cabin just like the cabin still belonged to the trees, just as the trees belonged to the mountain, just a the mountain belonged only to itself. The iron belly represented another facet of this inevitability. Like the hill he tried to tell himself was his new home, the stove belonged only to itself. It was a squat, black, cast iron beast, made when stoves were made for warmth as much as for cooking. Acclimating to life at the cabin became reckoning with the cantankerous thing.

After feeding the iron belly, he returned to the table. It was covered in papers strewn in no particular order. As he sat, his back bent with accepted familiarity and
he went over the computations from the night before. 390,400,000. He noted where
he began to nod off, around the middle of the page. Lines upon lines of handwritten
numbers. Hypnotic repetition. He was still impressed by the shorthand system he
devised to get past writing so many zeroes. He began prayerfully.

“Every integer greater than three is the sum of two prime numbers.” There
was something in the columns of numbers, something soothing. He allowed himself
one more look at the calendar, and spoke another, more bitter number.

“Thirty.”

Madeline stopped calling thirty days ago.

He imagined her as she was six months before. Sitting at the kitchen table of
their new home. Everything around them embossed with the obscene glow of new,
unlived objects. Acquisitions without distinction. Devoid of personality. The house
was the first in a brand new subdivision outside of Blighton. Everywhere he looked,
rolling farmland was being transformed by men and bulldozers and cement trucks.
Within the year, most of Edge Lane would be completed. The only thing remaining
of the farm would be the un-uniform house across the road, with it’s wide porch, tin
shingled roof, and the rusty water pump in the front Madeline labeled “divinely
picturesque.” The new kitchen table was made in what the store placard referred to as
a New England design. She picked it to match the decorating scheme in the rest of
the house. The wood was so shiny; her reflection stared up at him with the same
hollow eyed gaze. His only escape was to look off into the kitchen, filled with off the
showroom floor, unused appliances, all reflecting his face back to him as he went through the meticulously practiced speech, using the tone he supposed was resolute.

"Please," he told her. "It won't be forever. It's just something I need to do."

He watched her fidget with her engagement ring. The night he proposed, things were so much clearer to him in the candlelight. Madeline had never been so beautiful. Thinking of that night, he very nearly took back all he said, retracted his leaving before it occurred. If she had asked, Franklin knew he would have changed his mind.

"I thought no one could prove it."

"I can..."

"You against three centuries of mathematicians?"

"I have to."

She didn't answer. Franklin was glad, because he knew he would have ended up leaving anyway, in the middle of the night. There was still time to postpone the wedding, and send back the gifts. There was still time.

One month after his arrival, she began calling. Initially, he was annoyed with himself for even bothering to turn on the phone; it never occurred to him that anybody would actually call. Strictly for emergencies. Seasonal changes were in progress outside. All around the cabin, summer whittled away. There had been more than the usual amount of rain during the spring and early summer, and the trees maintained their dignity even as the leaves fell. Japanese beetles had been bad though, so many of the pine trees as well as a few poplars and maples were dead weight against the wind. Madeline asked him about the weather, about the condition
of cabin. If it was nice. If it was warm. Were there any deer, because her brother was always on the lookout for new hunting grounds. Was the work going well? Did he need anything? No, Franklin told her. He was just fine. Just him, Goldbach’s conjecture, and the iron belly stove. There was plenty of food. Plenty of everything he needed.

Franklin imagined her every time she called. Her scent, her touch, her subtle and athletic curves carefully hidden beneath conservative business suits. When she came in from the gym, he used to follow her into the shower and soap her down, making sure to bubble every inch of her body. He was enamored of the way she laughed with surprise each time.

Madeline never asked him to come back. “Do you miss me?” she asked him once. “Are you enjoying life without me?”

He never answered. He only spoke of Goldbach, prime numbers, and the early death brought on by Japanese Beetles.

He tried to sound distant whenever she called. As if her call was an intrusion. As if. He didn’t quite know what to say to her, and wasn’t entirely sure why she called. Love, he supposed. He wasn’t sure if he loved her or not. He certainly knew he wasn’t ready for the life she was building around the two of them: a life of mortgages and car payments and midnight feedings. College trust funds. IRA accounts and Certificates of Deposit. He knew he wasn’t ready to be the first person to use a chair, or sit at a kitchen table, or dirty an unblemished spoon. There was time for all that, if Madeline wasn’t so damned positive about the whole thing. More than
any of it, her unwavering faith in all the fixtures and trappings of their neat and tidy life unnerved him. As if it were expected. Normal. Franklin knew people married every day; people bought houses and cars and opened Christmas savings accounts. The home waiting for him—that he supposed was waiting for him—was a clean slate. He knew if he told Madeline he wanted to come back, she’d let him. There were no ghosts in the cracks. No worn marks in the New England style table. No imprints on the furniture. All prepared to accrue the scars and etchings of some life she saw so clearly. So much care taken by her to ensure its perfection. All the colors coordinated. The wallpaper was appropriate and seamless. The artwork matched her decorating scheme. Everything was placed in just the right spot for optimal visual effect and usage. A filtered, planned kind of comfort.

It was a home impossible for him to grasp before leaving. Gradually, the thought of it became alien. Maybe that was the reason she quit calling. By the end, all he really heard was the lilting, invitational tone. Her words were gibberish. It reminded him of speaking in tongues. His grandmother’s church. He used to spend weekends at her house when his parents needed to forget they were no longer the young and irresponsible people they had married. The minister was a helmet hair old man in a Texan Sunday suit. He thundered from his pulpit about pervasive sin and the selfish ways of the world, railed against rock and roll, quoted scripture without once looking at the worn Bible he waved and pounded like a tambourine. The summer Franklin was ten years old, he watched as his grandmother—normally a quiet and self
possessed woman who crocheted her own potholders—jabber and weave on her swollen ankles until she reached a near frenzy, passing out from the oppressive heat.

Autumn wheezed into winter, and Madeline’s calls became sparse. For two weeks she didn’t call at all; but eventually, she did. Franklin engaged in as much conversation as he thought was necessary, unable to distinguish her words. He envisioned her vegetable garden and the flowers she planted around the house’s perimeter. She warbled in a widow’s tone, and Franklin spoke only of the numbers.

Thirty. Such a small, inconsequential number.

Midday shadows slinked around the walls, the floors. Whispering and hissing amongst themselves, no longer interested in him. They were familiar with each other, Franklin and the shadows. They understood one another. He shivered, and stood up to go and check the stove again. It was rapacious. Opening the door in time to see the last bit of flame die out, Franklin looked and saw there were no embers to build on. Just a mound of gray ash.

_I’ll have to empty it soon or it’ll never keep a flame._ A few ashes drifted out with the next gush of wind down the chimney pipe, fluttered to the floor with the careful descent of yearling feathers. The only kindling left was the aborted portion of his computations. No one would be interested in the steps, anyway. Only the final line mattered. A few scraps of paper. The walls glowed in the reflection of the open grate and while he watched the carefully written lines instantly flame then turn black and into gray ash, he noticed one of the running boards along the wall was loose. Good solid wood. He walked over, tore it off the wall. It separated from the wall in
two pieces. He placed those in the dying flame, watched the yellow fire take hold and burn a bluish green. There would be plenty of wood, and plenty of time.

The iron belly hissed, content to be nourished again.
August

I smoke on the back porch because the Old Woman in the House is dying. Going slowly, and we sit. Waiting. On Better Days she enjoys canasta with her son, my friend who is also waiting. But he doesn’t smoke. My eyeglasses fog up when I step outside because her house is like a meat locker. To help preserve herself a while longer.

The night sky indicates nothing, and there is no divine interpretation arriving on the storm clouds in the western sky. Waiting for rain. Maybe tomorrow it will break the heat, and for the space of an hour we will feel again. It rains just enough to keep the grass growing. Just wet enough to make mowing impossible. Just enough to raise the humidity.

The grass is up to my knees and there is no news it will change.

On Better Days when my friend is too impatient to play cards, she sits and tells me stories from her life. Marking time through sporadic recollection, omitting the undesired parts. Her tongue on biography is a cancer.

She asks me if I enjoy my cigarettes, recalling her last twenty years ago.
Rapture

The morning of the day he turned to sand and washed away with a July evening rain, Megaphone Moses took his place in front of the Customs House on Canal Street to wait for the onslaught of early morning tourists. He wore a blue and white bullhorn around his neck tied with a long piece of packing string. As he prayed for the strength to survive another day, he stroked it gently. Yesterday was a song and dance day; he improvised a funk version of "How Great Thou Art" using a Thelonius Monk bass beat and a bit of a carnival dance. Planning was so important. Changing steps between Lent and Pentecost was the trademark of a deliberate and inspired heart.

Locals were all but lost. Moses saw himself full-fledged into the redemption of tourists. Wide eyes with bulging wallets streaming into the city and out again like coal barges. Locals were numb from birth. Numb by the neon lights and the low, barely audible hum they made. Lights that blocked out the stars, blurred the very eyes of God. Lights that stole the night and left a perpetual dusk. And the hum... humming that traveled through the cochlea, building up in the inner ear, until it was all a person heard, and all they saw were the neon lights. Moses knew he wasn't immune, and so he slept with cotton balls in his ears and a bandanna tied around his eyes. Once while he was asleep, somebody left him a small, green, Gideon's Bible. Although he was partial to the Old Testament prophets himself, the gift was appreciated.
Every morning he prayed for a flood to wash away the lights and the humming, to wash away the grime that the city was built upon. When he spoke, rolling his baritone voice out into the street, he always tried to speak above the neon hum. On good days, his voice echoes, bouncing off the buildings, returning and washing over him.

He chose the Customs House for his pulpit as a personal touch; an inside joke he amused himself with on days when the crowds weren’t so friendly. Once, he stayed out too late and a group of Texans broke from the Iberville titty bars attacked him. They quit after he spit up red on an expensive looking pair of shoes, left him bleeding on the front steps of the Customs House. His father told him once that slaves were bought and sold on those very steps, the blood leaving its stench there forever. Moses enjoyed knowing he would save them on the very ground where they had been damned.

He saw a reflection of himself in a bus window. *Smile, Mo*. *Always Smile.* He brushed the dust off his padded shoulders. Brown double-breasted suit coat. Similar to the kind Big Clarence D, his father, wore when he preached. Even when he brought his family to New Orleans for the first time in July 1955, Big Clarence D. wore his suit coat in defiance of the heat, and never took it off once. The city was different back then; not so many tourists, not so many junk stands, beer bins, souvenir shops. The Quarter was still mostly residential. Basin Street still had a sense of itself.
As the bus pulled away, he smiled again, and watched his reflection ride off and out of the city on the I-10. He closed his eyes, imagined the bus passing over the shipyard, suspended on the bridge over the world, out onto Lake Pontchartrain and away. *Always smile son, and they'll carry a piece of you with them.*

“Blessed is HE!”

*When you preach, speak as though you are a mountain. You have always been. The Words have always been. Even if they become another body, another voice, another place, Mo’ always reflect eternity.*

“Blessed is HE who comes in the Name of the Lord!”

Big Clarence D was always partial to “Blessed are the Meek,” but Moses enjoyed the differences. Of course he’ll get to it eventually, but he felt it was important to begin with resonance. Spilling out his baritone voice and rolling intonation, the way he heard his father speak to full tents and tabernacles in so many towns he never bothered to learn the names. He imagined the voice and those rolling tones as baptismal waves over the city; a flood along the walls of Canal Street, uptown into the Central Business District, all the way up town, and rushing back to him. Carried away in a sanctified flood... only like his namesake, spared from harm. He thought again about the first time he remembered seeing Big Clarence D baptize anyone. It took place in a back yard swimming pool. Everyone was happy. Their eyes shone on Big Clarence D. Spokesman of God—His very hand of in a suburban swimming pool, somewhere in the pearl bed of America.
Moses remembered the houses: concentric little boxes like game pieces scattered on the landscape. The Reverend Clarence Delmont with his traveling tent revival. Music by the divinely talented Mrs. Emma Jean Delmont and son. That 65-year-old prune cried as his father's huge and weathered hands lifted her out of the chlorinated water. Redeemed. The small crowd of family and friends applauded. Big Clarence D smiled the way he taught Moses to smile.

Mid morning crowds shuffled through while Moses ran down the Ten Commandments. Beatitudes were a good beginning; but the commandments were the sacred meat. The nitty gritty, as his father used to say. His father's nitty gritty went down on so many revival tent floors in so many backyards, farm fields and parking lots. For years he listened to his father's sermons over and over in his mind; turning them over, word for word and line for line. Every pause and every change. Every time Big Clarence D took a breath, his son took note of it in repetition. Trying to find the place it all began. Somewhere in the words.

Moses took a lot of pride from knowing that while Big Clarence D spoke to packed tents, he spoke to an entire city. There was no tent large enough for him. His congregation flowed in on buses daily, and he always knew them on sight. Moreover, they wouldn't forget him, either. Booming his voice through the bullhorn, his baritone voice would be louder than the incessant hum; so long as he spoke during the day, the neon lights would never erase him. The crowd would see and hear and listen. And though he never personally saw the results, Megaphone Moses believed he would be a presence in their minds and in their homes, in their concentric little
boxes. On some days, he felt his words bounce off the city buildings and return to
him stronger for the traveling; the more he spoke, the stronger his words became. He
remembered one of Big Clarence D’s favorite hymns, “The Battle of Jericho.” Sound
destroyed city wall, then. And on the days when his words flooded back to him, even
he felt as though he might be washed away by them: a flood of words, washing away
the sidewalks, the neon lights, drowning out the humming for good. It all would be
washed away into the Delta current and sink to the bottom of the ocean to be
forgotten.

The people passing him looked as though they were melting like soft cheese
beneath the high summer sun. Losing little dribbles and drops of themselves as they
wandered from shop to shop toting Mardi Gras beads to hang from the rear view
mirrors of shiny new cars, bottles of “genuine” Cajun hot sauce, fresh beignets, t-
shirts, and cookbooks. Each forage into air conditioning was another place to ferret
out memories that would end up in neat little cardboard boxes tied with string in the
back of closets. Neat and tidy, so the memory could be dragged out at anytime. Even
the whores stayed inside during the daylight summer heat, waiting for that cyclic late
afternoon rain to cool things off for a while. Waiting for the sun to finally set into
Lake Pontchartrain.

“Blessed are the Meek, for they shall inherit the Earth!” It was good to rewind
sometimes, to go back and comfort the congregation. Big Clarence D was big on
comforting a body’s way into Heaven.
"Blessed are the poor in spirit..."

The heat was taking more out of him than usual, and Wendy's up the way charged a quarter for a simple cup of ice. Moses thought of the Old Testament parable about the rich man in Hell. When they would want water to stave off the heat, who would give it to them?

_For you store up... Not wealth and positions here on Earth, but Heavenly wealth and glory!_

For the first time in a long time, Moses felt like sitting down. Maybe yesterday's singing and dancing had taken it out of him. Maybe, he thought, he simply overworked himself. He wasn't a young man anymore, Praise God. Whenever he looked over to the shaded spot on the steps, though, Big Clarence D was sitting in his place. Watching. He had always visited Moses on occasion; as if he were checking in, making sure things were being done. In life, Big Clarence D had been a meticulous, exacting overseer. Sometimes he went ahead of the family two or three days to make sure that everything was in place. Now he was visiting daily. Never talking. Only sitting and waiting. Watching Moses through his bottomless eyes.

But if that all wasn't bad enough, he was losing the crowd to the chess player set up under the Burger King awning five blocks up the street. Three separate games set up, with his tip jar (of course) waiting for a challenger. It wasn't so extraordinary to watch a man play chess; but three games at once, and winning all three—that was something. Moses knew he was little more than a trained monkey. Hiding neon
blindness under impenetrable dark glasses. Playing in silence. Moses had no time for chess, and no temperament for the game. An uncle tried to teach him how to play once, but Big Clarence D forbid him to continue with it.

He couldn’t remember the uncle’s name, but he never saw him again after the revival in Blighton. His father told Moses he had been born there; but the place held no affinity for him. It was one more small town in southern Ohio.

_Blighton’s perfect for a Revival._

“Why, Daddy?”

_Because if ever a place was in need, it’s this one._

The old chessman was surely deaf because of the low hum, blind because of the unrelenting neon lights. Once, a photographer from the newspaper came and took the chess player’s picture, put it in the paper with a caption _Chess Master Defeats 700th Challenger_. No one ever came to take a picture of him, print it with a caption _Preacher Redeems One Thousand Tourists_. Moses knew that would never happen.

_It’s a thankless job, Mo’._

Big Clarence D never had to compete for anybody’s attention. All it took was the large banners reading: REVIVAL 6PM. THE HONORABLE “BIG” CLARENCE DELMONT AND FAMILY. Sometimes some reporter interviewed him, and his words ended up in print. Sometimes, if the town was small enough or the revival large enough, a reporter came and took his photograph, and talked to him about the tenor of the times. His mother saved all the clippings and pictures. Those
times when his father had gone ahead, preparing for their arrival, Moses looked at them all and practiced the wide smile in the fuzzy black and white.

The last picture Moses ever saw of Big Clarence D was the one they printed in the paper before his funeral. Smiling that smile the way he taught Moses, the caption read: EVANGELIST DEAD. People came from everywhere for the funeral. Big Clarence D passed while preparing for his Blighton revival. The funeral service brought mourners in from everywhere, all those places Moses never remembered, all those people without names. Moses was fifteen years old then; his oldest sister was going to be married within the month (Big Clarence D officiating) to the minister of a small church in Jubilee, Illinois. His brother was too young to attend the funeral and stayed with friends. In the back row of the crowded tent where his funeral was held, sat a row of women with little boys and girls, some Moses' age, some younger. Theirs were the only faces not broken or showing any signs of grief. All the eyes staring back at him looked familiar, as if he had known them all his life. Like his eyes. And he had wondered if they knew how to smile.

"Blessed are those who suffer for…"

He noticed then that the bullhorn no longer carried his voice, that his words weren't returning to him anymore. Apparently the battery ran itself down.

It was one of those long life lantern batteries. How long had the battery worked? It had always worked, ever since he stumbled on the bullhorn by the stature of Simon Bolivar. At first, Moses had thought it was a mistake. That it was left by one of the evangelists who frequented that particular perch. But some kid, a local,
saw him holding it, laughed and said, “Hey there, Megaphone Man; what’s the good news today?” It had to be a divine call. But a dead battery... no one offered him money, and he didn’t leave out a tip can like the blind old chess master.

He looked over and found Big Clarence D was gone. The heat was taking its toll, sweat pouring profusely down his face. He double-checked his pockets to make sure he didn’t have a quarter to buy a cup of water from the Wendy’s across Decatur Street. Or something he could uses to make the bullhorn work again, make the words flood out and back to him again. Words that might even wash him away, too. But Moses didn’t believe in handouts, and only took what he needed. When Big Clarence D passed the offering plate, it was to help maintain the ministry. Theirs had been a life of charity, a life of sacrifice. Finery was for other people, those people with the pretty little box houses lining wide, nameless streets.

Right before Big Clarence D fell in the pulpit from the heart attack that took him (he had never been sick a day in his life), Sandy haired men in gray suits came to visit him at Blighton. They each carried leather briefcases full of papers. Big Clarence D spoke with them on the front porch. After they left, he refused to speak, but continued to prepare for the revival.

Those people who come to hear, they’re not interested in your life. They’re hunting Redemption, Mo’; they want to know that if they live the Good Life, that Heaven will be waiting for them. They want to know Fire and Brimstone are real, too.
Moses didn’t hear his father’s sermons, anymore. Not for a long time. Three months after they put Big Clarence D into an anonymous grave (the sandy haired men took all the money donated for the burial) and the grass grew back in, Moses left and never returned. Mother moved in with his uncle and took a job at the elementary school as a cook. He imagined her on Sundays, sitting on the front porch, staring at the road leading out of Blighton. Squinting into a permanent blindness.

When Big Clarence D left him alone in front of the Customs House, Moses simply sat and waited to be cooled by the evening rain. The joints in his knees and ankles ached (probably from yesterday’s song and dance routine; he should’ve known he was too old for all that sideshow stuff) and his head was beginning to spin. He chalked it up to humidity and thirst. Silent in the late afternoon, the crowds grew in around where he typically stood, and all trace of him was lost in the foot traffic. Sounds of feet on pavement. Laughter and the endless buzzing of conversations having nothing to do with him. His throat felt swollen, and the only thing that kept him from dizziness was closing his eyes. He wanted to find shelter before dusk, when the lights would wash out the night sky.

But Moses could not make himself move. He no longer fought the humming. And when the eventual rain fell, washing him away into the sidewalk cracks and gutters, he was dreaming of a revival in the middle of harvested cornfield in southern Ohio where all the eyes were his, and all the smiles were the same smile Big Clarence D taught him.
My friend's cat stares through me with all the descriptive intent of a Spanish movie. Morning light fractured, filtered through Venetian blinds: stripes of insufficient illumination casting aspersions to the crucifix on the wall.

A bird taunts me with its beacon call, reminding me I am limited to a man's language. But today there is the remembered hope that the birds will begin to imitate me – calling out words I understand. Maybe then I can cage all the birds of the world, and my good friend's cat can stare through them instead. And I can go on deciphering the crucifix on the wall, standing out like another prop from that Spanish movie.

Prayers whispered to southern summer skies, cadence kept by tire tread. Questions uttered to gods awakened only by the sound of road kill. Map in hand, playing Copernicus east of the Mississippi River. Sleeping in cheap motels beneath mock period paintings done after the style of some anonymous third generation impressionist.

West Virginia disappears into colorless, morning fog. This must be the edge of the world... where God became bored and quit. Appalachian rain is falling through my broken car window. My map is soaked and all the world is under erasure by ink and the elements. The ink bleeds into new lakes on cornfields in Clinton, Iowa.

Twenty-four miles out of Huntington, the mountains are drawn anew by the expectation of you.
The only difference between going and coming is that the corn grew a few inches; creeping slowly, forcing the watchful eye to slow down. Take care. Illinois Interstate 78 stretches under my tires, testing the boundaries established by the Appalachian hills that will never open her arms to me. Rolling landscapes, corn silos, a solitary tree defiant in a vast crowd of corn stretch to the ends of the earth as I drive up the tongue of God, down the gullet of the Ohio Valley that will claim me eventually, whether I am willing or not. Home is never a place to return to – only corporate square acreage dragging reanimated corpses back to the crypt just to vomit us up again. So the scent of maggot moist earth remains always in our noses. Illinois lays herself down like a tired bar bitch, the forgotten seed running down the irrigation ditches feeding fields of bio-engineered corn.
Avery Versus the Baby-Killing Rat

Miranda wanted to explore the old high school—see the old graffiti, etchings in desks, left behind books, and fossilized chewing gum. We decided to wait until the night before it was scheduled for demolition. To keep it adventurous.

"Wouldn't it be funny, Avery, to find a desk with your Mom's name on it? Like those notes on the inside of our lockers about the cheerleaders?"

When she talked, it was like Miranda just put words together, then let them spill out of her mouth. She always laughed like a crazy girl when she said things like that. She knew I wouldn't respond. We had been friends since Mrs. Kuntz's Kindergarten class. You had to forgive certain things after knowing somebody for so long.

The abandoned Blighton High School was located behind the Society back on the corner of Plain and MacHabernaty. The abandoned administration building was salvaged and renovated into spill over space for the Mayor's offices above the bank. The old art building was turned into a community after school center. But the old high school was empty and beyond redemption. It was a three story brick and cement monolith with huge gaping windows made of splintering panes and mostly broken glass from rocks and the occasional bullet. Wide concrete steps, once burnished white to offer the illusion of marble, were gray, cracked, and sinking in places. The heavy oak doors were out of place, and belonged to something more ancient, like an old church. Something resolute. Maybe Catholic.
The chain on the doors was broken. Miranda giggled and nearly slipped on a broken piece of the steps. Luckily, I caught her.

"My hero," she pretended to sigh.

"Just be careful, will ya? The cops are out tonight, you know."

"Oh, yeah. Sure. The cops," she whispered, but not really. "We have to be careful and watch for the fuzz."

Miranda's dad was the Chief of Police. The only thing he did most of the time was fiddle around in his office, then go home for lunch and nap for the rest of the afternoon. There were two others. One was younger, the new guy. He enjoyed pulling people over to use his new ink pen and show off the brand new car he was given. The other was a blonde woman who (all the guys said) used her handcuffs for more than arresting people. There weren't too many problems. Our mothers were all on committees. We were all safe.

Miranda wasn't wild or anything. Not like the Baptist preacher's daughter. She dated the upperclassman football players, and was one of those cheerleaders they wrote about on the inside of lockers and in bathroom stalls. Miranda mostly read books. We still had that in common, though I stuck to horror and sci-fi and fantasy. She always read those books buried in the back of the library; and since she worked there during her study halls, she generally just took them without bothering to check them out. She always showed me the last due date stamp. It was usually before we were born.
The door was heavy, and the hinges were rusty. Again, Miranda giggled. The sound echoed through the empty halls. I saw shadows moving everywhere—rats and dogs and cats, or whatever else moved into the building after people moved out. My older brother and cousins used to tell me there was a baby-killing rat in the boiler room. They told me it weighed 250 pounds, and sometimes at night it left the school and chewed through the walls of people's houses to eat small children. My brother claimed to have seen it once: hypnotic red eyes, long sharp teeth that tore through human skin like toilet paper.

Of course I didn't believe them. Having Miranda with me meant having a witness. So I could finally get the last laugh on them.

Everything was wrapped in the lingering odor of mildew and peeling paint. On the wall just inside the door were the class pictures of the graduating classes, just like our high school. They were wet and gummy. The smell made me think about asbestos, and how Mom said the expense to remove the stuff was so high that the township didn't even consider trying to salvage the building. Cancer was encased in successive layers of lead based paint. It was in the best interest of the community that the building be demolished to make room for a public parking lot that would encourage business on Main Street. Dad was never sure why there was a debate. Just blow the fucker up, he said when he thought I was out of earshot.

It was difficult to imagine our parents younger than they were. None of the pictures looked like them. Each was a fuzzy eyed reflection of some sons and daughters who looked too much like us to be the withered tired faces that were
familiar. Each face was locked. None of the guys smiled. The girls always did.

Faded and colorless, their eyes looked ahead, through, and beyond the wall behind us.

"Here he is," Miranda pointed like she looked at it everyday. The tip of her finger touching the gummy glass. "Here's Dad."

"You sure that's him?"

"Yes."

"It don't look like him."

"I'd know him anywhere."

I shined the flashlight on the picture. "Move your finger so I can see."

The picture didn't look like him. Her dad was tall, broad shouldered and wide bellied. He laughed at his own jokes a lot and belched all the time. The picture her finger touched was a young, square jawed football player. Thick necked. He had a wide, flat lineman's nose. Hooray for the Fighting Tigers. I wondered if the old banners were still hanging in the gymnasium.

She giggled. "That's him."

Sigh and giggle. Always acting like some silly little girl, and she was nearly seventeen. The other girls were more serious and trying to act like adults. Dating college guys and writing their future married names over and over again on the back of spiral notebooks. Miranda asked me if I saw my parents.

"No. I'm not sure they graduated from here."

"We can look some more if you want..."
"Let's go," I told her. "They all look the same." She stood there for a moment with her finger on her Dad's picture. Staring at it, the way she stared at everybody.

The guys gave me a hard time because I still hung out with her. They kept asking me if I'd fucked her yet, if she was good, did she swallow, was I going to share the wealth. It wasn't that she wasn't pretty. They joked about the size of her boobs, the sway of her hips, and her pouty baby lips. She had big dark eyes, like the broken windows of the old high school, leading to hallways and staircases made from all the books she read. It wasn't that she wasn't pretty. It was just that she was Miranda. Once in fifth grade, I sent her a flower on Valentine's Day. They always sold roses and carnations. Blue meant friendship. White meant innocence. Purple stood for crazy. I sent her a red rose. She was embarrassed and asked me why I did such a thing. Everybody laughed. Laughed at her. Laughed at me.

"Oh, okay. God, Avery. You're so bossy sometimes. Who put you in charge?"

I reminded her that I was the one with the flashlight. "We should go to the basement, now."

We passed wrecked classrooms; the desks were broken into pieces and spay paint was all over the blackboards. Empty beer cans, bottles, and cigarette butts were everywhere. In one of the classrooms, we found a water-damaged porno. Miranda laughed and said, "You might want to save that. So you don't get confused later."

The principal's office was worse. The room smelled like mildew and old piss. Papers were everywhere. Somebody cut the legs off the old wooden desk and
managed to break it in half. Maybe with a chainsaw or something. I didn't remember anyone walking through town with a chainsaw.

We left the office and made our way to the stair well at the far end of the hall.

"Avery," she asked, "do you think I'm pretty?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, it's just that Joel told me I was pretty..."

"Joel said that?"

"Yes..."

"And you believed him?"

Joel had been giving me a hard time about Miranda lately. More than usual. I knew how he was, though. She was quiet as we made our way down the basement stairs. I could hear her breathe. She always got quiet when she was upset.

"It's not that you're not pretty," I said. "But Joel... he's tried with most of the girls in school."

"I know," she sniffed.

"So just be careful, okay? He talks about all those girls, you know."

"Do you think I'm pretty?"

"Sure," I said. "I think you're pretty. Pay attention and don't fall down the stairs."

The staircase was narrow and steep. The banister was loose, like it all might fall apart in a second.

"Isn't this exciting? This place, it feels so old, doesn't it?"
The scent of mildew was getting stronger the further down we went. Behind us, the moonlit top of the stairs was glowing, marking where we had been.

Joel was probably hitting on her, figuring it would be something to rub in my face. He was just that way. I never told him if I liked a girl because he always went after them. When he was done with them, they'd never even look at me. Guilt by association. Miranda didn't go out much because of her dad, and most guys didn't want to get into trouble. You just never knew, and it was better to be safe. Her dad and my mom grew up together, and Dad knew them both though he was a few years older. Our families were friends. I ate dinner at her house a lot. Her Mom's specialty was Chicken Parmesan. She said she learned it a real Italian chef in college. Her dad didn't care about who my friends were. Miranda told me her dad wouldn't let her date, though. So even if one of the guys asked her out, nothing would have come of it.

Our footsteps echoed on the stairs. The moonlight followed us part of the way. The way out looked easy enough.

"Yeah, it sure smells old."

"Do you think the stories are true?"

"Which ones?"

"About the baby-killing rat?"

"Nah," I said. There were some pretty big shadows upstairs, though, and scamper of animal feet. Outside the building it was easier to laugh. But the moon
didn't follow us down into the boiler room, and the flashlight seemed to be getting dim.

"What about the other stories?"

"What other stories?"

"Dad told me that the football team used to come down here and smoke cigarettes with the principal."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. They used to sneak down all the time."

It wasn't as fantastic as a baby-killing rat; but it was interesting. The older guys used to talk about sneaking into the old high school, taking girls there. Better than a scary movie. Cheaper, too.

"They used to bring girls down here, too," she went on. Her grip on my arm tightened. She was so close I could hear her breathing. Fast, shallow, and scared. Her voice was low and raspy, like she was trying to whisper so no one else could hear.

"He TELLS you that stuff? Doesn't it freak you out?"

"Dad tells me a lot of things."

I started looking around for the rat, just to be on the safe side. The water pipes leaked, and the dripping sound knocked and pinged off the shadows. Old foundation bricks groaned. I had to keep the flashlight aimed at the floor so I wouldn't step in dog or cat shit, or the weird murky puddles that looked too dirty to be water. A heavy soot covered everything. When I did shine the light on the walls, the
cracks were large and pronounced. The whole building was actually leaning to one side— I never noticed it from the outside—and it was gradually falling apart, crumbling like under baked clay.

"Avery..."

She slipped away from me when I wasn't paying attention. I was wishing that I had brought my b-b gun when she tapped on the shoulder.

"Jeezus, Miranda, you scared the piss outta me!"

"Sorry..."

"What's wrong now?"

I turned around to shine the flashlight in her face. Her shoulders were bare, and beneath the circumference of the light, I saw the outline of her. "Do you think I'm pretty?"

"Miranda, I..."

She grabbed my arm. "We could stay down here, Avery. Can't we just stay down here? We could, you know. You and me. And Avery, we could just stay and die down here. They'd never find us, Not Joel. Not Dad. They'll tell stories about us; we'll live forever and ever, buried like Egyptian Pharaohs..."

Shaking loose, I said, "Come on, let's get out of here. This place isn't safe."

"He brought your mother down here, too, Avery! Just like Joel... just like me. He did it to her, too..."

"Come on," I said. "This place isn't safe."

I ran, and left my flashlight at the top of the stairs for Miranda.
When people talked about her after the building was demolished and she disappeared, they usually laughed and filled in what they didn't know. Some said she left because she was pregnant and her dad didn't want it to be a show around town. The mothers believed some transient, or maybe a truck driver kidnapped her. There were other stories, and some snickers. When people at school asked me what I thought, I told them the giant rat was responsible.
In the Afternoon

The landscape is crystallized outside my window with the first hint of autumnal dew--harbinger of another Appalachian ice age. Farmers are saying (yet again) it will be a bad winter. Yet I am reminded a half-hour before sunrise that the world is always pristine at a distance. Intersection stoplights are rubies and emeralds encased in dew at 40 degrees, and life is now a matter of shaking off the chill.

Below and outside, cars steered by sentient sleepwalkers mark time between windowpanes. Drivers trying to make the miles erase their comfortable pillows, the bodies of warm lovers, the blankets, the bed. We have already talked about the weather: the sculpturesque quality of the season, the puritanical inevitability of winter. Christmas is coming.

I will smile in the afternoon when the world seems real again.

Shadows pulled over the horizon, joining Earth and Heaven. The hills hit their mark above the concrete and gas station lights. Down there, the cash register attendants are mute and the sleepdrivers dream of a time prettier than self-service.
Story of Two Funerals

Mom never called unless something was wrong. From the first syllable, her voice carried the weight of tethered restraint. She could never hide anything, and was never able to mask her emotions: it was a family trait passed and passed and passed onto her, which she passed on to her children. The best place to hide was in the absence of her children, the absence of her husband, retreating into prayer meetings where she was safe to betray herself to God and God alone. When she called my office, Janice the secretary transferred the call with an added admonishment that maybe I didn’t call home often enough. Maybe.

“What’s wrong?”

Hiccups and restrained tears tied the words together. “Grandma died.”

Grandma died on a sunny afternoon in October (the month when everyone in my family dies.) After spending the morning on a trip to an antique shop, and lunch at her favorite restaurant, where they made liver and onions the way she used to, she laid down for a nap. She asked the duty nurse to wake her an hour later, giving her plenty of time to make the weekly bingo game. Sometime between 1:30 and 2:00 Grandpa returned for her after eleven years of separation, necessitating my first visit home in a decade.

When I was six or seven, I noticed the insulin needle next to her lunch plate like a salad fork, and the odd collections of things like a candy bar wrapper from the soda shop in Wisconsin where Grandpa proposed. Later, the wandering off glances in
the grocery store, depression over not finding the correct brand of mothballs that gave old clothes that certain smell. The extended relatives quit visiting. During holiday dinners, she referred to us all by names of people we didn't know. Names of people she grew up with. Her best friend from grade school. Her first boyfriend. Her twin sister who drowned when they were five. Her biological mother who left to become an actress.

One afternoon, my uncle found her in the middle of a conversation with his youngest son who died in a house fire two years before. She was sitting on the couch telling the empty rocker about a giant snapping turtle Grandpa found in a drainpipe near the old house. Embellishing the way sentimentalists and grandparents do, she had already talked about how he shot it with the .22 and how he cut the meat out. How she prepared it for dinner that night (it needed a lot of salt) and how it was the best meal she had ever eaten.

The place they put her was adequate and sterile. But it wasn't in the same small town where she lived for fifty years, raised her children, watched her grandchildren grow. Where there were church bizarre and school programs and all the mothers knew one another and all the fathers were churchdeacons and VFW members, where the sons were all on the baseball team and all the daughters wore ribbons in their hair and knee high socks. The place we all deserted eventually, except for her and Mom. In the home, Grandma was allowed a certain autonomy, and a nurse always administered the insulin. Her days were filled with arts and crafts, bingo, weekly trips to the shops and historical sites. Once a year, she went to a local
elementary school and told stories about the days before telephones and cars and airplanes and atom bombs. Everyone knew she was happy after she started complaining about the food.

Home was a place only a funeral could force me to visit. When I left for college, I began the first of many attempts to erase the place from memory. But the streets rolled out cement arms to follow me, the buildings reappeared in every town I drove through, the faces became faces of people I knew filling pre-scripted roles. I was eighteen then, and too young to realize such existential exercises were impossible. But it didn’t stop me from convincing myself that after ten years, home was just another place, family just another cocktail party, the landscape simply a piece of scenery on the other side of a smudged car window.

The visitation was scheduled for Friday night. Grandma had taken care of the arrangements ahead of time with ghoulish determination. She had built her life around her husband and her children, then her grandchildren. One of her fondest memories was a yarn about the time in 1955 when she caught pneumonia and the doctor put her on bed rest. She was pregnant with Mom at the time. Watching Grandpa iron his own shirt, she said she cried and cried and cried. She never let herself be put tied down like that, again. None of us thought she would live six months after grandpa died.

By the time she passed, everything was accounted for; down to the pillow her head would lie on for eternity: a simple square pillow covered in a light blue satin that matched the color of her coffin.
Wearing the solemn face of familial obligation, I re-entered my childhood role. The oldest of three brothers, and the only bachelor. My nieces and nephews were energetic confections of everyone in the family; a jumbled collection of noses, ears, eyes, and hair from old scrapbooks. Running around Mom’s small apartment near the park, playing hide-n-seek. Stomping and thumping like Celts and Huns, screaming banshees exempt from the business of adult morosity.

I would have preferred to go alone and say my good-byes. We had long escaped from the reunions and family picnics, the strange summer days when my mother’s cousins from Rockcastle County would sit and talk about the Democratic Party and southern nobility while going through a few cases of Schlitz and Pabst Blue Ribbon. The last reunion we attended, I was thirteen years old and one of my cousins, a second or fourth or third, made everyone laugh when he ran back from a football game telling them how he barely tackled me and that I cried anyway. Years later, when my first real job took me to Covington, I discovered that he delivered my newspaper. I wondered if he was going to be at the visitation, talking about tag football memories and newspaper subscriptions. Everyone came out for funerals.

We drove to the funeral home together. A four-car procession of nervous denial. My brothers drove with their families and Mom rode in my car. She wore a flower print dress that reminded me of something a new Grandmother might wear to a christening. We talked about everything except where we were going. She told me she liked my suit. It made me look distinguished. Reminded her of Grandpa. He
always looked dignified, even in bib overalls, she said. I remembered him as quiet. Aloof. Solitary.

"I wish you'd visit more often," she said, looking out the passenger window to hide her face.

"You know how it is," I answered. "Work makes it hard to get away."

"The conversation drifted into other topics. Changes. The hometown wasn't the same she said, since they put in the government housing project behind the high school. A person had to have at least three kids just to apply for an apartment. Nobody knew who all the kids in town were anymore. There were more crime reports in the paper, and the PTA bake sale hadn't been written about in several years. There was talk of Wal-Mart moving in, but they built closer to the city instead. A lot of fuss over the Mexicans moving in to take advantage of cheap rents and seasonal tobacco work. Mom complained about the Spanish labels in the grocery store. Then there was our minister's daughter who got married then left her husband for the high school girl's basketball coach. The chili parlor by the high school closed down when the Arab who owned it was beaten nearly to death in the parking lot. The old shoe factory apartments finally burned down, but the town couldn't decide what to do with the property. Sometimes in the late summer you could still smell charred bricks and melted plastic.

We talked about Dad a little. He died in October, too. It had been unseasonably warm, but it stormed for two weeks, nearly flooding out the lower part of town. During the burial service, rain spit on my face.
"You didn’t need to leave,” she said. “He wouldn’t have wanted that. He wouldn’t have wanted this.”

"Wanted what?"

Still looking out the car window, she tried to straighten the creases in her dress with shaking hands. “It’s not right for you to live your life alone. It wasn’t your fault.”

The funeral home came into view. We were met by an elderly, pasty-faced man who then led us into a room with pink pastel walls. Canned church hymns were piped along with the barbiturate air. Grandma’s blue coffin sat in the front of the room, the chairs fanned out in empty rows to greet us. Even the children became solemn when confronted with the thick air. I shuffled my feet. Checked and double-checked to make sure my signature in the guest book looked appropriately familial.

Dad’s funeral had been in the same building. I couldn’t remember if this was the same room. Were the walls pink? Maybe yellow. His was a simple dirt brown coffin, with a white satin pillow and lining. The Legion Honor Guard arrived at the grave site drunk. The kid playing Taps was there to get out of school for a couple of hours. I knew him from classes. Mom had wanted an echo chorus; but no one else would play outside on such a miserable day. The same old man worked at the funeral home. I remembered him just as pale and lipless, wearing the same gray suit.

The family shuffled in. Flocks of gawkers whose names I didn’t remember. Reading the guest book didn’t help. All of the signatures were illegible and hurried. Most of them commented on how natural Grandma looked.

Pictorial descriptions of new houses, boats, and cars. Kids at college. My nieces and nephews were a big hit when their restlessness won out over the air. They ran around, ducking behind the empty chairs and stationary adults, oblivious to the fears being pinned on them to lighten our loads. One of my great aunts whispered that she would have never picked a blue coffin. Something more solemn was appropriate, maybe brown or black. Some cousin commented that her dress made her hair look blue. The mortician caked on too much make-up. One of my seven-year-old nieces sneaked up and placed a dandelion in the coffin. It was quickly removed. Stories of her homemade cookies and hand knitted bookmarks with Stephen Crane quotations. The string of popcorn she put around the Christmas tree and refused to throw away because it was still beautiful to her after forty years.

It wasn’t until the burial on the following day that I noticed just how old Mom looked. She stood, wrapped in silent mourning. Only a few of us returned for the interment. My brothers and their families, Mom, and I were all who remained. I helped my brothers unload the casket, and the weight seemed inappropriate. Mexican groundskeepers already prepared the plot next to Grandpa. Her name was chiseled into the tombstone. Mom’s was already on hers and Dad’s, too. Our family plot was just on the other side of the small road cutting through the cemetery. I knew without looking how many spots were left. My brothers sold theirs so they could be buried with their families. I kept mine. It was next to Dad, beside the road. I thought it was easy to have a place to go.
The Saturday before Halloween, and the leaves were already starved. Time and widowhood was doing its slow work on Mom. Resilient lines were drawn into her face. The weight of years had begun bending her back. Two decades after Dad’s death and she still wore her wedding band. Blue veins showed through the thin skin of her shaking hands as she fought to keep the dignity of her grief intact. Her hair, once a dark brown, had faded into a careful hidden but respectable gray. I tried to remember a time when I strained my neck to look at her face. So strange to look down and see the top of her head, her thinning hair. Her head was bowed, and I wondered if she still really prayed. If she still wondered if I still prayed.

The old minister finished his ashes to dust and the casket was lowered into the ground while the groundskeepers looked on, waiting. Three generations on both sides of the road. Beneath the ground, offering nothing. Years buried under unrelenting decay.
In the Valley

The liquor stores close early, and even the coffee shops are vacant before dark. Every fly in town congregates on the corner where the sports store was: fat and territorial, they take offense at a man walking down First Street alone after dark. Life in a town that sold itself on consignment—a dress nobody would bury their great-grandmother in.

Downtown streets are quaint subjects for old men. But all the park benches are gone and they have nowhere to meet. Their grandchildren live in Clinton, Iowa and every year they send Christmas cards made on home computers. All the neon lights are church marquees highlighting re-run sermons and the War Memorial is never quite complete.

There is a corner drug store that sells a genuine Vanilla Coke; but nowhere can a lonely man with a bottle of cheap bourbon buy Playboy.