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## Live Ghosts

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### Recommended Citation

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Patricia Anne Ireland entitled "Live Ghosts." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Michael Knight, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Marilyn Kallet, Allen Wier

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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# Live Ghosts

A Thesis Presented for  
the Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Patricia Anne Ireland  
May 2010

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## **Acknowledgements**

For my mother—  
who first taught me the secret;  
who handed me a world of words  
and believed to the end that I could be a god there.

## ABSTRACT

In *Live Ghosts*, Patricia (Patty) Ireland offers a gathering of short stories based upon real life characters she encountered while growing up in the South. Exploring the diversity, complexity and moral ambiguity of those we might normally perceive as being stereotypically “Southern,” Ireland’s tales encompass a variety of time periods, settings, and characters, including: a modern-day family struggling to reconcile the reality of death, interracial lovers in the early 1950’s who are descended from masters and slaves, and an insane killer locked for life in a mental institution of the 1990’s. *Live Ghosts* is infused with tales of fear, love, loss, regret, madness, and self discovery, themes intrinsic not only to Southern culture, but to the universal vulnerability in all of us.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

As Eudora Welty wrote, “Children who grow up listening through rewarding sketches of unhurried time, reading in big lonely rooms, dwelling in the confidence of slow-changing places, are naturally more prone than other children to be entertained from the first by life and to feel free, encouraged, and then in no time compelled, to pass their pleasure on” (163). I was such a child. Surrounded by Civil War monuments, ruins of Corinthian columns sinking in a field, cemeteries with rusted fences whose weathered stones could no longer be deciphered, and brown barns covered in “See Rock City” lettering, I lay for hours watching the sky for signs and wonders. The clouds were shape-changers hovering over a world of old and astounding things—tumbledown houses that had once been grand, Negro conjurers who chanted and prayed, white-steepled chapels where the hymnals were printed with shaped notes and the Appalachian voices rose and fell and rose again, lifting off toward their simple, country spires. The clouds whispered down to me the secret of the land they had observed from the beginning: “Ghosts walk here; the earth breeds flesh-and-blood archetypes every day, and each of them becomes a story, a breathing phantom caught in a time warp between worlds.” I listened. And I transcribed.

My channeling of all that is Southern intensified on Sundays. The literal interpretation of Scripture which permeated every conversation I heard became a source of awe and confusion. I sat on the back pew of St. James Methodist Church making paper airplanes out of bulletins while pondering theological questions: Why was it so bad for Eve to eat that apple? Even if the ingestion of one apple could lead to such dangerous knowledge,

why should *I* have to be cursed with sin over something *she* did? And how did Noah fit all those animals in that boat? Does it really make sense that one man could find two of every kind of living creature on earth and place them into a boat? And why can't we drink wine instead of grape juice at the Lord's Supper the way the Catholics do? Doesn't the Bible plainly state that Jesus turned the water into wine? My logical conclusion: The good Lord must have enjoyed imbibing as much as the next guy, so why shouldn't we?

The quandary that loomed largest, however, centered on this business of "knowing" what occurred after death. I decided rather quickly that any person, no matter how virtuous he might appear, who insisted that he "knew" for certain that there were mansions, streets of gold, or pits of hellfire in the great beyond was most certainly a liar. And I was surrounded by an entire church full of people who publicly avowed their absolute knowledge of such things. Langston Hughes' "Salvation" would later affirm my own bewilderment regarding those who stood, tearful and resolute, to "testify" and prod the rest of us down toward the altar through whatever means (visions of brimstone or angel choirs) necessary. It would take years of writing and pondering to look back on those haunting/haunted faces in the congregation and see the fear, faith and purity of spirit hidden beneath their sanctimonious facades.

Before I sent my airplanes flying off into the netherworld of the high sanctuary ceiling toward an oversized picture of Jesus rising, nail-scared hands outstretched, into what seemed like those same shape-changing clouds on the day of the Ascension, I scribbled questions upon them that were poems in utero: "Where are we whirling, young ones, old ones? Whirling through stars off to somewhere, nowhere?" and "What *is* this being-ness

of skin and hair--this walking around and talking and dreaming in the middle of the broad, bright day?"

Welty also wrote that "it is nothing new or startling that Southerners do write—probably they must write. It is the way they are: born readers and reciters, great document holders, diary keepers, letter exchangers and savers, history tracers—and, outstaying the rest, great talkers" (163). My family was all these things, a band of hoarders and raconteurs who collected family Bibles, old letters written in flamboyant pen, and stories passed down from many generations. They first introduced me to the writings of kindred souls like Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Langston Hughes, Katherine Anne Porter, and Truman Capote. Within the narratives of these fellow watchers and listeners, I recognized the same extraordinary people I was encountering every day down the road or across the pew or up town.

As I grew, I began to probe the racial prejudice I saw spinning around me. After watching a televised interview with one of the infamous "Mississippi Burning" murderers, I asked my mother what she thought and why things could not change.

"It is best for a woman to keep quiet about her opinions," she said. "You'll understand one day." But I didn't understand. My passion to challenge through words only grew stronger.

Mother knew which side of the plate the fork went on. She knew how to sit with her ankles crossed, walk with books stacked on top of her head, drink tea with her pinky finger extended, and find room in her already crowded purse for powder, safety pins, Kleenex, and gloves. Little of this came in handy as she was hanging clothes on the

line or mopping the kitchen, but she perpetuated ladylikeness nevertheless, inflicting its rules on me whenever possible. She taught me to arrange flowers and to make a bed without leaving a single wrinkle in the sheets. She supervised my attempts to set the dinner table. Most importantly, through it all she believed in me with her whole heart. She “knew” that I had somehow been born with a gift for weaving words. The most remarkable thing about Mother was the fact that, despite her conditioning to convention, she encouraged me to use my gift, challenging the world around me as I did so, even if such radical thinking meant that I must eventually defy her own dearly held beliefs and customs.

“Why should a woman have to keep quiet about her opinions?” I asked.

She artfully changed the subject, directing me back to my growing love of language: “Do you know the word ‘omniscience?’ Doesn’t it sound wonderful? It means to know everything in the whole world. Can you imagine that?”

“Yes,” I said, “I can imagine it and, for the most part, I think it would be just awful, but, at the same time, it would make spelling quizzes easier.”

“Well,” she surmised, “what *matters* is that you can imagine it.”

While I initially followed in her footsteps and in those of generations of plebeian women who had settled into unassuming lives filled with heaping mounds of dirty diapers, dishes and laundry, my curious mind did not cease to engage me and my reliable pen followed wherever it led. There was within me a novel brewing night and day. When my children slept, I devoured even more books by authors who had emerged from the same constricted environment I knew so well: Bobbie Ann Mason, Toni Morrison, Jean

Toomer, Maya Angelou, Kate Chopin and Lee Smith. Between chores, I wrote songs, poetry, and short stories using language as a panacea, a catalytic therapy for Southern ennui. I dreamed of continuing my education, but an almost paralyzing fear of academic failure constantly held me in its clutches.

Having married a recording engineer, I went on to enjoy moderate success as a singer/songwriter and vocal coach, leading me to move with my family to Los Angeles, a dramatically disparate cultural environment, where I at last gathered the courage to pursue my lifelong dream of achieving a college education. Though I could only attend Glendale College part time, my experience there was akin to the sudden throwing open of windows in a house that had long been boarded up. The world flooded with light and air, and I realized I had at last found the means for my questioning mind to flourish.

Living in Los Angeles allowed me to look back at my birthplace from a new and startling perspective. The South was no longer “in my face.” Instead, it stood apart and away. For the first time, I felt safe enough to view it in its wholeness, to see how it related and connected to other parts of the universal puzzle surrounding it. I became surprisingly objective—keenly aware of certain flaws and eccentricities in my own nature that I had never been brave enough to truthfully examine before. For example, upon arrival in L.A., I felt sure all Angelinos would be obsessed with appearance, especially the women. After all, Los Angeles was the plastic surgery capitol of the world, as well as the headquarters for the film and television industries. Yet I soon discovered that California girls, even the wealthy and famous ones, wore little makeup and generally went about in blue jeans and tee-shirts. They didn’t tease their hair; they pulled it back

into slicked-down ponytails. In 1998, when I came home to Nashville for Christmas for the first time after having lived in Los Angeles for a year, I was initially stunned to once again see multitudes of women bustling along, herding their children, issuing orders in their honey-coated drawl, arrayed in heavy makeup, big hair and sequined sweaters, and carrying enormous, gold pocketbooks with tacky, plastic openings for family photos. And I *liked* it. My ghosts were alive and well.

The fact is that the South is the only part of America predicated on the love of exaggeration and illusion. So many people and events in this singular place have touted appearance as being our number one cultural priority for well over two centuries. Even today, Southerners continue to hold fast to the concept that, in the end, it is the appearance of a thing that matters most; Solid substance must bow to shadowy daydream. That which is crude and raw and true is often so inconveniently ugly to our well trained eyes that its only function is to lend local color, an over-the-top authenticity, to our archetypal longings, so we go to great lengths to disguise the truth, to embellish it, or to simply pretend it isn't there. The illusion of a "Gone with the Wind" Big House, for example, is still seen as beautiful—never mind the sweat, blood, and injustice of the shabby huts out back that brought it about.

Seeing my place of origin from a distance allowed me to indulge in the favorite pastime all writers relish and require: the amateur psychological analysis of everyone and everything around. I pondered the lowliest "redneck" who somehow discerns he should hold the door open at the grocery store for a female with aplomb, regardless of how he may treat "his" woman at home. How is it that he knows how to utter the words "thank

you,” “yes ma’am,” “no ma’am,” and “ya’ll come back now” with such sincerity, whether he means it or not? Likewise, I brooded over the loftiest “lady” who perceives she should show up for funerals, revivals, Sunday School class, and Wednesday night Prayer and Praise Meeting wearing heels, hose and a color-coordinated outfit with a King James Bible tucked under one arm--even if she silently harbors a hatred for the organist, Mizz Bohannon, whose homemade jelly won “First in Show” at last year’s fair. Or a raging jealousy for Mrs. Espy, who sits on the front row every Sunday in that tawdry fur coat. I knew that the focus was on outward “show.” I had yet to learn that the human truth within told a far more interesting story.

Flannery O’Connor must have pondered these same stereotypical notions in her day as she sat down to write about the Grandmother and the Misfit in “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” She imagined an escaped convict who quietly asks his victims if they wouldn’t mind “stepping off into them woods yonder” for a moment so that his fellow escapees might politely riddle their bodies with bullet holes. The Misfit says “Yes’m” and “Nome,” and even apologizes to the grandmother for not wearing a shirt minutes before murdering her in cold blood. The grandmother, carefully arrayed in white gloves, collar, cuffs, and a purple spray of violets, is more concerned about presenting a ladylike image to anyone who might come across her dead body by the roadside after a potential accident than she is about actually dying in an accident in the first place. Despite these paradoxes, O’Connor somehow made us “feel” her protagonists. She brought them to life in our heads with all their ambiguity, loneliness, irony, and, yes, wit. I wanted to do that.

Another of my idols, Lee Smith, who, no doubt, struggled with the same incongruities,

wrote that Southerners “learn denial in the cradle and carry it to the grave” (viii). She went on to muse about her Aunt Gay Gay in Birmingham, whose job it was to turn Smith into a lady: “Gay Gay believed that if you can’t say something nice, say nothing at all. If you don’t discuss something, it doesn’t exist” (viii). Smith’s writings, haunted by her own living archetypes, reminded me of the traits that seemed inherent in myself and many of the people I had known growing up. Even as an adult, I continued to deny certain truths about people and events while I questioned them inwardly. I began to recognize, as Smith rightly concluded, that our denial, our love of exaggeration and illusion, affects far more than our personal lives; it also affects our politics, culture, religion, mental health and, of course, our literature (viii).

When I moved back to my home state of Tennessee in 2005 and became part of the welcoming, energizing milieu at UTK, my homecoming brought me full circle. I began, for the first time, seriously attempting what Welty called the “passing on of my pleasure” through short stories and novels. Almost immediately, I was hit hard with another secret of my birthright—this time an unromantic, unexpected, and entirely unwelcome one: My larger-than-life, archetypal, living ghost characters felt implausible. I was not translating the “realness” of all I had known from birth onto the page. I was not allowing the backward, unsophisticated “trailer-park trash” or the superstitious, Bible-wielding “tongue speakers” or the wrinkled, old black men on weathered front porches to become relatable and genuine. They were either entirely too virtuous or far too overwhelmingly flawed. I did not dig deeply enough beneath their stereotypical veneers to uncover diversity, complexity and moral ambiguity. I did not know how to make my fiction



credible and gritty in the midst of an actual world that often appeared stranger than fiction. In typical Southern fashion, I went into immediate denial. My live ghosts were just fine the way they were. I didn't need to spruce them up with profundity, ambivalence, or pesky truth-telling.

As Tony Earley said, our responsibility as writers is to make our characters “as worthy of our fair consideration as any Cheeverian Westchester County housewife” (ix). Earley warns us that if we fail to do this, yielding to the temptation to paint our eccentric, colorful characters superficially, “Southern writing will collapse and bury all of us, leaving only kudzu, grits, and a certain vaguely familiar voice to mark the spot” (xi). I owe my ability to climb out of the kudzu to Michael Knight and the remarkable Creative Writing program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Flannery O'Connor once lent some of her stories to a neighbor lady who lived down the road. When the neighbor returned the stories, she said to O'Connor, “Well, them stories just gone and shown you how some folks would do” (90). My experience in the writing workshops at the University of Tennessee allowed those simple words to take on intense meaning. Extraordinary teachers like Michael Knight and Marilyn Kallet have pushed me to portray “how some folks would do” truthfully, without moralizing, glossing over faults, or embellishing virtues. In doing so, they have also opened my mind fully to the richness and beauty of those complex people who fascinated and bewildered me during my growing up years.

Marilyn pressed me to “let the images do their work.” She encouraged me to think like a painter or a sculptor. Authentic, vivid imagery through language was, I learned, central

to any writer's success in making her characters take on flesh through words. In addition, rhythm mattered, particularly in my kind of imagery; that tent revival, camp-meeting cadence of vernacular needed to be let loose on the page with total boldness and without apology so that the reader could "hear" the characters as he "sees" them taking shape. Therefore, in short stories like "Godman" and "The Death of Chairman Meow," there are actual segments from poems I composed in innovative classes like "Dreamworks" which are incorporated into the narrative. These are instances of what I call "poetic breaths," in which the story, the reader, and I take a moment to fill our lungs with a life-giving intake of lyrical air. As we exhale and move back into the motion of the story, the dance of words, the elegiac flow of them, steadies us on our way.

Michael forced me to ponder and understand the following piece of advice from Eudora Welty without ever actually "preaching" such guidance to me: "The main thing Southern writers learn is that the story, whatever it is, is *not* incredible" (164). The story is, instead, one that may revolve around the most common and fallible of incidents or people, which is the very thing that makes such writing likely to touch a universal nerve.

The first story I ever submitted to Michael Knight in an undergraduate writing workshop was, unfortunately, far too incredible--a daring but horribly written piece about an unborn fetus capable of transmitting its thoughts to its mother as she is in the process of having it aborted. Michael did not chastise me; rather, he pointed out those skills I had utilized along the way that were halfway correct and, with his usual tact and good humor, directed me on the path toward all that is believable and universal. Later, in a graduate

novella workshop when I last began to find myself standing on solid ground, Michael introduced me to nonconforming works like *Ray*, *The House on Mango Street*, and *The Mezzanine*, pieces that defied the norm successfully, as I had attempted to do in my undergraduate writings, yet managed to still address the common and the fallible. Within this setting, my classmates and I encountered new and startling innovations: traditional quotation marks were not incorporated in dialogue, conflict was created by a series of tensions, unity of text was crafted by means of voice and thematic elements, rather than from conventional plot lines or character development, and form mirrored content—that is, the reader learned about the narrator as he learned about himself. Lengthy footnotes and even documents were sometimes used within these inventive novellas.

Wishing to try my hand at incorporating some of these structures, I set about writing the story of a common, fallible woman in an ordinary fix we can all relate to: Eula Longley is seeking a tidy solution to that most annoying conundrum (death!) after her father has passed away and her cat is diagnosed with an inoperable tumor. Eula's obsessive/compulsive desire for order compels her to create symmetrical magazine stacks on her coffee table, fold and hang kitchen towels in a specific sequence, and organize every aspect of her life, even her efforts to have out-of-body experiences and an illicit affair in Ireland, into structured, rational occurrences. The one element she absolutely cannot bring order to, of course, is the reality of death itself. Like many of the living characters of my childhood, Eula exists in a constant state of denial. She, her husband, Kayboy, and their daughter, Riz, though contemporary, still struggle with many of the

same issues that have plagued their historical counterparts and continue to plague us all today. The conflict and the protagonist are not incredible; they are, instead, commonplace and communal.

In “The Problem with *Gone with the Wind*,” Justine Larbalestier poses the following question: “Why do people find it so hard to love something and accept the fact that it is flawed?” My studies in Creative Writing at the University of Tennessee have taught me to do both things at the same time. Most importantly, they have taught me that any writer worth his salt must convey truth in all its beauty *and* ugliness. He must carefully consider motivation. He must ask himself: What motivates the crazy, old, blue haired woman at the Wednesday night prayer meeting with her platter of fried chicken and her twisted banter of righteousness and gossip—the one who will walk right into a vestibule this Sunday morning at a Southern church on a street corner near you? Is it trauma, grief, love, regret, uncertainty? Is it the play of shadows against a revival tent in a place where scripture is taken literally, in a state of mind where the old woman’s predecessor, Eve, plunged the whole world into the blight of transgression and mortality, leaving her to wander around in Bainbridge, Georgia, or East Ridge, Tennessee, or Ida, Alabama, the very embodiment of a curse, the direct descendant of temptation?

Michael Knight has more than proven his point that it is all these things and more that drive our living ghosts. It is the blue-haired woman’s vulnerability as a common symbol to help each of us feel and grasp the value of our dizzying rush toward death. This is what makes her worth writing about. Ordinary sometimes to the point of being obstinate and downright annoying in her human failings, the church lady I grew up with *is* conflict in

the flesh. She is one of many living, breathing archetypes we writers must grapple with, set against a landscape of grace and decadence, powered by an ever blazing furnace of fire and brimstone.

I am still grappling with the “baggage” which comes along with stories like “The Brambles” and “Godman.” The obvious shift between those stories and a more recent one like “The Death of Chairman Meow” clearly shows that earlier efforts remain a “work in progress.” Still, I have a burning need to keep that church lady from passing forever into standardization, to tell you about her, to describe to you her gold lamé house shoes and her pocketbook and her no account nephew. I need just as desperately to paint for you the remains of shabby slave shacks that still dot the landscape off in a corner of a windswept field somewhere, and to call up the gaunt, black figures huddled around a fire in 1851 wailing their freedom songs. I need to let you know about modern-day men wearing wife beaters, who scheme and drink and daydream in their trailer-park vernacular of double negatives. I simply must record for you every nuance of this place, from the live oaks and sweeping columns and “true” ladies and gentlemen who are buried under massive monuments, to the nameless poor without headstones who sleep unknown beneath our feet.

This is my South. These are my ghosts, alive and well. They are the reasons I write. They are in us, *are* us, flowing still in our veins, pungent in our night sweats. I am here to whisper to you, sometimes to shout at you, but always to set before you the truth. Sometimes it is a disagreeable truth that forces the love-hate relationship we often have with our birthplaces.

My rapport with this land of living ghosts is like that of a pathetic, love-struck girl who marries a handsome, hard drinking, charmingly abusive man. He apologizes profusely for every bruise he inflicts. He brings roses when he is sober, declares his love and cries like a baby. His eyes reveal, in those moments, a depth of spirit underneath all that “show” that demonstrates something real inside him. She hates him; she loves him. She wants to slap him, but needs to cherish him. She feels certain she can change him for the better with a little more time and patience. She leaves him every now and then; she goes off, faraway, and makes a new life for herself. She thinks and reads and reflects and looks back at him from the great, safe distance of time and memory. But, in the end, she always comes home.

## 1. The Death of Chairman Meow

My husband and I are driving to the Railroad Salvage Store to buy a make-shift coffin for our dying cat.

I say to Kay-boy: It was not.

He says: It was.

I say: Are you calling me a liar?

He says: If the shoe fits.

I say: I am not a liar. And it was *not* a dream.

He looks straight ahead. Grins a lopsided, Elvis grin. Says nothing.

I say: I've told you before; my soul leaves my body when I'm sleeping and you refuse to believe it. Well it happened again last night. I floated up on the ceiling, looked down and saw my own body lying next to yours. I saw Chairman Meow's spirit floating beside me. He spoke to me. He told me it was his time to go soon and for me not to be sad. And then I drifted downstairs into the dining room and I saw Daddy. And I saw all the other people who have ever died in our house.

Kay-boy's shoulders lift in a heavy intake of breath. He says: Yeah. Right. And I'm Shirley MacLaine.

I say: Look here, Kay: I have read a lot about astral projection--everything I could find in the stacks during my breaks at the library. I have read *How to Have an Out of Body Experience in Thirty Days* and *Adventures in Inter-dimensional Travel* and Edgar Casey's biography--you *do* know who he was, don't you? -- and I have seen people-- PhD. doctor-people-- talking about this thing on "The Maury Show" and "The View"

and, yes, even on “Good Morning America,” and I know astral projection when it is happening to me.

He says: B.F.D.

Then he adds: If you had been as concerned all these years over being *in* your body as much as you are now concerned with trying to get out of it, maybe we could have had a decent sex life.

I get quiet now. I ride along in the passenger seat thinking about the other subject that fascinates me almost as much as leaving my body: this business of calling. Of naming. It’s a masochistic thing, this pondering and squirming and stewing over the signals that shape us and single us out. Take my husband’s name for instance: if I avoid that “boy” part and just say “Kay,” he gets pissed because people might think he’s gay. (Imagine it: one syllable can challenge a grown man’s entire nature.) If I add the “boy” part, he’s pissed because the vocalized “boy” overwhelms the tacit “man.” Fascinating.

His mother. That bitch. She did this to him. It was probably the only interesting thing she ever did in her eighty-three years of an excuse-for-a-life. And the older Kay gets, the more he behaves just like her: whiny, self-contained, streamlined. Now he wants everyone to call him “K.B.” I’m sticking with Kay, though sometimes I revert back to my old stand-by, “Mr. Economy,” (because he budgets everything: paychecks, conversations, sex).

I continue to think about this concept I call the Name-Game the whole way into the parking lot and inside the automatic doors. Then I step back and walk slow and watch Kay-boy bounding down the aisles of the Railroad Salvage Store like Bobby Blaze, that



redneck body slamming wrestler on TV, as he vaults into the ring.

Kay knows the contents of every aisle. He's been here too many times before looking for day-old bread and expired Twinkies. He heads directly toward the plastic storage section, chooses a container and holds it up: a mock offering to the fluorescent gods.

Here we go.

He bellows: They think I'm gonna pay \$12.95 for this piece of crap?

I say: What about a *real* pet coffin like the wooden one I saw online?

Too pricey, he says. Now this one here's good. This one right here. Where's the frickin' lid?

I shake my head. Kay, I won't have the poor thing all scrunched up in a cheap-excuse-for-a-coffin like this. Are you listening to me?

Eula, I've already told you three times, dammit: the hole's too small for your fancy wooden cat coffin and I'm not digging anymore in this January weather. There's the lid. \$6.98. Let's go.

It's plastic for Christ's sake.

Plastic is durable. You environmentalist-types say it never disintegrates.

A ruddy-faced man in torn jeans plods past us, turns to glare at me sullenly from beneath the red, white and blue scarf tied low around his forehead. His hollow-cheeked wife follows, her dark roots upstaging the greasy, peroxide-blond strings extending down her shoulders. She drags a toddler with a snot-caked nose and eyes big as onions.

I shift my weight. I ask: Couldn't we just take a quick peek in the furniture department? They might have some inexpensive little chest or something.

He asks: Will “a quick peek” make you shut the hell up?

I spot it before we round the corner. I rush to it, opening the lid. It is wooden--real wood, not particle board--pale yellow with magenta flowers on one side. Lined with red velvet cloth. The price tag reads: \$69.88.

There. Perfect, I say. I know it will work. Isn't it great, Mr. Economy?

He puffs up with deep, regenerative breath. His fingers clasp the plastic storage container so tightly that his big, clumsy knuckles go white. His pupils dart around like manic hummingbirds.

He starts: Dammit, Eula, this is a coffin for a frickin' cat. What the hell difference will it make? We'll be throwing away sixty nine dollars and eighty eight cents on something nobody will ever see.

No one ever saw the coffin your mother was buried in either, I say, since absolutely no one came to the funeral home except for us and the minister because she was an A-one, certified bitch from hell, but we gave her a nice, expensive send-off anyway, didn't we?

His eyes bulge. I'm going to act like I didn't hear that, he yells. I'm going to chalk it up to your hyper-emotional state right now what with the cat dying and you being in menopause and unable to sleep at night. But let's just remember what your old man said and I quote: “It doesn't matter if I don't even have a coffin--just throw me face down in the cold dirt.” That crusty old fart said, “Lay me out in a cardboard box and it will be just fine with me because I'm not going to be in that box anyway!” Remember that, Eula?

The old man said only his abandoned shell-of-a-body would be in that coffin--an empty container that would no longer hold his soul. Moral of this story: what's good enough for

the old man is good enough for the cat.

I point a manicured finger in Kay-boy's face. Do you think I'm stupid, Kay? I know what my father said. He was *my* father. And you shouldn't make fun of his beliefs. His mother was Cherokee, you know.

Look here, Eula, I know you can't handle death. But this is just too much damned money. Do you realize we've already spent over five hundred dollars on medicine and shots, special syringes, surgery and organic cat food? And for what? None of it did any good. Now we have to fork out another hundred and fifty at the vet's tomorrow.

We wouldn't have to fork out a hundred and fifty dollars at the vet's tomorrow afternoon, KAY, if you weren't determined to put the cat down.

Kay-boy grabs my hand and drags me toward the register to pay for a two by five plastic storage bin. Just like that mother with her snot-caked kid.

\* \* \*

Riz is waiting at the door of our circa 1895 Queen Anne Victorian, the "money-pit" as Mr. Economy calls it. She is nineteen. Slender. Sleek. Eyes of black glass. She studies cultural anthropology at the university. Saunters home late at night. Inhales Ella Fitzgerald in the smoky dark of her room. Swallows up the words of Rimbaud by the light of a lava lamp she bought at a junk mart called "That Seventies Store." Rimbaud would be proud. She is walking poetry. She can pulse the pain of abortion in iambic pentameter. Feminist. Tree hugger. Nihilist vegetarian. She keeps the fading ultrasound folded underneath the shelf liner in her top dresser drawer.

Kay and I--we formed her from the dark depths of our loins.

Has there been any change? I ask.

No.

Is he still under the bed?

Yes.

Have you been sitting with him? Haven't you at least tried to offer him water or--

Yes, Mother, of course I've been sitting with him. I put the water bowl right next to him, but he never moved.

What do you mean you put it next to him? Darling, you can't just put the bowl next to him and expect him to drink. He's too weak. You have to be proactive here. Pick him up. Give him the syringe.

Riz heaves her shoulders and looks at me. Don't you get it, Mother? He doesn't want the syringe. When I try to move him, he makes a little weepy noise.

Well, of course he acts as if he doesn't want it. He's just a little fur person. He doesn't understand--

Then she declares, like a religious vow:

I won't do this anymore! I won't stand here and allow the two of you to make a pawn out of a dying cat in your screwed up "How Much Can We Hate Each Other" game.

She looks past me at the Railroad Salvage shopping bag her father carries and shakes her head. Once. Twice. One more time with feeling. An over-exaggerated sigh. She spouts: Railroad Salvage. Dad, what the hell? What is this shit?

Park it, Riz, he says.

Park it, my ass. What am I, twelve?

Riz, I am not in the mood--

Riz yanks the bag away from Kay and peers inside at the storage container, fixes her eyes on him.

Here she goes:

What *are* you in the mood for, Dad? How about some good, old fashioned death? In the wild, cats go off by themselves when they know it's time to die. Now our cat wants to die peacefully under your bed. Here's an epiphany: why not let him? Stop this "merciful" euthanasia crap. Who is all the "mercy" for, ha, Dad? The cat or you? Let him die. Under the bed. Then, when he's done, don't bury him in some godforsaken, plastic piece-of-shit storage container. Take him out in the woods and lay him under a fucking tree.

Now what is this? Riz is looking straight at *me* with her sentencing eyes. She says: Mom, stop giving him the damned syringes. Stop it stop it stop it.

Stop.

I walk upstairs. The voices rise beneath me.

Kay-boy: I'm the one who paid to feed this damned cat for fifteen goddamned years and I'll bury him in the way I see fit and I won't stand another night of him suffering and moaning and starving underneath my bed while I'm tossing and turning and don't you talk down to me, young lady.

Riz: How can you be fifty fucking years old and still act like you're six and what the hell is wrong with you and who do you think you are to get to decide life and death?

Kay-boy: Life and death? Well, look at the pot calling the kettle black and yeah, *you*. *You* decided life and death six months ago and I paid for your decision--fifteen hundred and sixty three dollars and ninety-nine cents to the fucking Feminist Women's Health Center of Atlanta, Georgia,--remember that little, insignificant but awfully expensive, life-and-death decision? Remember that?

Riz: And who are you supposed to be, Dad, Mr. I-Was-Born-In-The-Sunday-School-Room-With-A-Rosary-Up-My-Ass? I don't think so. Maybe if you had actually been here every now and then, instead of "working late" around--oh, excuse me, *on*--the conference table with some siliconed intern, this shit wouldn't have happened to me.

The voices rise up and fall back. Riz has the last word. The slam of the front door is her final exclamation point.

I walk over and lift the bed skirt. Chairman Meow lies directly under Kay's side of the bed on top of a box marked "Ireland Mementos" in felt-tipped pen. This has been the place he runs to at the first sound of anything threatening. Doorbells. Vacuum cleaners. Rising and falling voices. Signals that single out. This box has become his sanctuary. Tranquil solace from the human world of artificial light, of grinding sound. Often we would enter to find him "hidden" here, his rump and tail protruding conspicuously. "Real smooth, kitty," Riz would quip and we would chuckle at the cat's obtrusive attempts at camouflage. Today he has succeeded. His thin body is concealed completely.

It is warm and quiet under the bed skirts on top of the memento box. It is the next best thing to a cradle of soft, green leaves on a lush forest floor where long fingers of sunlight reach down through cathedral branches and the sweet breath of spring pants warmly upon

the brow of the dying.

Dying. They say it's natural. Living's postlude. Safe, silent under the bed. Far from January's plaintive song. Mingled grays moaning in a wind that whips the shutters.

Naming us. Calling us out one by one.

\* \* \*

Two days earlier, Chairman Meow sat on the bedroom windowsill swishing his tail, intently watching birds and squirrels while Kay-boy set about digging. The cat casually observed Kay's hulking, bald form bending, straining with the shovel. It was an unusually warm, bright, winter day, the opportune time, Kay said, to get this unavoidable job finished. Later I took Chairman out on the porch. He was weak, but he relished the sunlight, sighed out the crisp air. That evening after I gave him the seven-o'clock syringe, he suddenly leapt up and raced down the stairs, chasing a mouse no one else had spotted into a corner of the kitchen. When he came wearily dragging himself back upstairs to the bedroom, panting heavily, he announced his entrance into the room, as always, with a small, chirping sound. Child-like, questioning.

Two months before Chairman's diagnosis of squamous cell carcinoma of the tongue, (translation: big, fast-growing tumor in a hell-of-an-inoperable spot) he jumped up into the windowsill on the landing in hot pursuit of a squirrel on the roof just beyond his reach outside the glass, knocking over a prized antique potpourri bowl. I yelled and swore. He streaked like lightning to his safe-haven under the bed. He was plump then, the result of leftover chicken, steak, and turkey--"people" food, and bad "people" food at that. How could we eat these table scraps of contaminated flesh, much less give them to an innocent

creature at the mercy of our ignorant, capitalistic whims, Riz demanded. High in cholesterol, additives, preservatives. Every kind of cancer-causing agent. Did we not know the atrocities that some of these fellow creatures must suffer to get to our dinner tables?

Take turkeys for example. Were we not aware that the companies “producing” America’s Thanksgiving Day staples kept thousands of birds in stifling, unsanitary sheds? These oppressed turkeys were being bred to be heavier and heavier; some suffered horrific leg deformities due to the crowding. Consequently, they attacked one another, necessitating that their beaks be cut off so that they would not be killed prematurely. When it finally came time to be unconscionably murdered, they were then hung upside down by their feet on a conveyor belt while moving along toward the point of being inhumanely stunned. Yet many of them didn’t get stunned at all, so that when the belt proceeded forward to the point where the turkeys were to get their necks slit, some of them were still very much alive.

And if all that wasn’t enough, did we not understand that far more land is required to rear animals for slaughter than for growing the same amount of healthy, protein-containing plants? No wonder people were starving in Darfur.

Now how would we like it if someone hung Chairman upside down and slit his throat and served him up on a platter at Thanksgiving? What was the difference, after all? The turkey and Chairman are both animals equally deserving of life. And *we* are animals. That’s what we are. Animals. That’s all.

I say in response to Riz (in my head late at night when I can’t sleep from the hot



flashes--not out loud, never out loud in the daylight): I don't think I am killing Chairman by feeding him meat. And I have never personally murdered a turkey. And I don't think I killed Daddy two years ago when I had him sign over his power of attorney, when I pulled him out of Parkside Nursing Home and moved him here into this house. Parkside Nursing Home would have taken all his savings. Every penny of it. Besides, Dad needed to be in a real home where his own family could take care of him toward the end.

These are all the things I say. Late at night. In my head.

\* \* \*

11:30 P.M.: Chairman's last night.

Chairman is wheezing on top of the Ireland Memento Box. Kay-boy is snoring with his mouth wide open. I am flushed and wet with menopausal sweat in the middle of January, but I am concentrating.

Hummmmm. Deep breaths. Inhale: I accept you, oh, my spirit-body of light. Exhale: I breathe you out and smile upon you.

Now I repeat silently: Eula, you will leave your body tonight. You will experience true astral projection. You will feel the vibrations and then you will begin to float forward.

I remember that *How to Have an Out of Body Experience in Thirty Days* says that I may initially feel a brief tingling sensation or a slight feeling of paralysis in my legs, or my ears might start to ring.

My hand does feel scratchy right now. I think my ears may be ringing a little.

I say to myself: You will focus on seeing and hearing your surroundings without moving your body or opening your eyes.

Kay-boy puffs out a deep, growled snort.

Damn it. My concentration is broken. Now I start thinking about what happened two days before Daddy died, when he looked up from the hospital bed we set up for him downstairs in the den and declared he saw Mother. He said: You won't believe this, Eula, but your mother is floating up there--right up there near the ceiling fan.

I said: Mother is gone, Dad. Remember, she died eleven years ago?

No, no, he said. She's right up there. Floating along. I've been telling her all about how this oxygen thingy works. I told her I hate this nasal cannula crap. I said to her, Joan, I'm going to take this damned thing off. She said, Go ahead, Frank. Take it off and then you can come float up here on the ceiling with me.

I am trying not to think about Daddy. I am trying to concentrate. I say to myself: Stop letting your thoughts wander, Eula. Focus now. Feel the vibrations.

Shit.

1:15 A.M.:

I'm still lying awake. I have thrown off all my blankets. Kay is still snoring. I have pushed him over on his side. Chairman's breathing is shorter and more labored.

- 1) I will now turn to my right side and inhale to the count of 4.
- 2) I will hold my lungs full to the count of 2.
- 3) I will now turn to my left side and exhale to the count of 4.

4) I will hold my lungs empty to the count of 2.

I know that this breathing/turning process will naturally dwindle into a countless breath if I just keep doing it. I will finally flow effortlessly into relaxation, letting go of my body. The vibrations will then begin as a tingling. I will continue to breathe and relax. Cool flows of energy, like a light breeze, will begin to sweep through me. I will start seeing a yellowish energy behind my eyelids, a clear and frequent indication, (according to the parapsychologist on “The View”), of an alpha or theta trance. I will then be able to visit various astral places I have read about at [www.obe.org](http://www.obe.org): the Eco Realm, the Temple Athena, and the Universal Library--that’s where the Akashic Records are kept; maybe I can make an astral stopover there and check out my past lives.

Kay jerks awake with a loud snort. He says: What the hell are you tossing and turning for? Can’t you just go to sleep like a normal person?

Then he gets up to pee.

He has completely broken my concentration again. He comes back to bed, stopping to lift up the bed skirt to stroke Chairman slowly on the head.

I’m going to give him another syringe now, I say.

He says: No you’re not. He doesn’t want it and it will only upset him.

I say: Yes, I am, and I start to get up.

He climbs into bed then and says: Why is it that you only started caring about this cat once you knew it was dying?

I say: I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve always cared about Chairman.

He turns away from me. He mutters: Well, you sure have had a funny way of showing

it. You never brushed him or played with him or petted him or fed him. You acted like he didn't even exist up until a few weeks ago.

I lie back down, glaring at him in the darkness.

Name-Game time: Now I'm going to think about how I named the box Chairman is dying on. How I so carefully positioned it. So that I could feel superior. Real slick. Could I have been any more obvious in my choices? Yet Kay-boy still doesn't know what is inside the "Ireland Memento" box. He doesn't know there are pictures of a strange man with his arm around me--the only man I ever committed adultery with. There are e-mails I printed--stacks of them from rcallaghan@eircom.net. There is the Aer Lingus receipt, a shopping bag from Quigley's Avoca Gifts in County Wicklow, dried roses from a crystal vase on a candlelit table in a flat on Hayford Street in Rathmines. All this contained in the small box upon which the cat lays dying, directly under the bed where Kay-boy sleeps every night.

He has no clue. He thinks it's a box full of smarmy poetry I wrote about the Cliffs of Moher as I stood around with twenty-four other American tourists fresh off the bus from Dublin. This would be downright funny if I didn't know him well enough to understand that he probably wouldn't look inside the box even if he did suspect what it contained. After all, what's my one little indiscretion when compared to his five or six? Or ten or twelve? I did an Irishman. He did my twenty-three-year-old niece, some dizzy-headed interns and probably a whole typing pool of secretaries. But I fixed one of them good. I got her fired the next day. And the niece? Well, she had some nice art work permanently embossed on the side of her brand new Firebird: "Whore," in bright, neon green letters.

The Name-Game again.

You do what you have to do to keep things in order. And once, just once, if you let yourself slip through the cracks, you stash your memories in a cardboard box under the bed.

*My Destiny in Dublin:*

1. *To swerve into outskirts;*
2. *Drift, an aimless hobo hopping pubs;*
3. *Coast out doorways, lounge on wet lawns;*
4. *Send my slow, engulfing pupils, infinitesimal black wells of wandering, out over the green hills;*
5. *Cling like rainwater on rose cheeks to sweet air, to ricochets of outdoor laughter;*
6. *Fuck some man I have never met before;*
7. *Dream large over the fields, Over.*

\* \* \*

2:10 A.M:

Chairman is moaning a little. I get a flashlight and try to give him a syringe full of painkiller. He will not open his mouth.

Oh, god oh god oh god. Does he know? If cats really are psychic, couldn't he have some idea that this is his last night on earth?

I lie back down. Kay grunts and turns toward me.

I am thinking of Dad again. Why can't I stop it? Why do I always think of him in the middle of the night?

When I called Dad's room at Parkside Nursing Home during my lunch break as Assistant to the Head Archivist at the downtown library, I would ask: "How are you?" He never answered "Fine," or "Good," or "Hanging in there." He was better than that.

He would say: I'm still here. Wherever *that* is.

Which led to talk about "here." Here as a singular entity. Here in relation to "there." Here contrasted with "there." Here as opposed to "nowhere." Which would lead to talk about Lawrence Welk and the miracle of television by which we might observe the long-dead singing, dancing and blowing champagne bubbles.

Dad would begin: He was a German, but I liked him. Do you remember "Yellow Bird" and "Calcutta?" His Christmas shows were the best and is Norma Zimmer still alive? Jimmy Roberts is gone now and also Myron Floren. Did you see the rerun of the 1967 Christmas show? Now that was a good one. That was my favorite.

Because Dad's memory was starting to go, every day or two he would repeat the following thought about "there": I think death is going to be like a dream.

And I would answer according to my conviction in the same way every time: I hope not. I hope it is not all hazy and dizzy and mixed up like that. I need it to be real--a three-dimensional, solid place that fills all five senses.

Once I asked "how are you" and he said: I dreamed we were climbing Mowbry Mountain last night, you and me. We made it to the top and I started down the other side. But then I didn't see you anymore. All I could see was that great blue mist hovering. It was like being swallowed by a Cloud Monster.

The last time I asked "how are you," (about two hours before he died), all he said was:

Things don't stay the same.

Daddy was honest. Kay is honest. To a fault. Kay can admit to every one of his affairs, even while he's having them. Kay can discuss dying as if it happens every day. The pisser is: it does.

When Kay, Riz and I went to the cemetery two days after Dad's burial, Kay announced: I'm not going to be buried. I want my organs donated and then I want to be cremated. It's cheaper that way. You don't have to fool around with these creeped-out mother-fucking-funeral-home-bloodsucking-sons-of-bitches.

I said: Do we have to talk about this now? Now, Kay?

Why not now, he asked? Where could we find a more perfectly suited environment? I'm telling you what I want and I hope you're going to have gumption enough to carry out my wishes if I croak first.

As we walked, we saw that some of the old stones had fallen over. The one that said: "Tempy Parker, Wife of James Parker, Born 1811, Passed from This Life: 1891." The one that said: "Dearest sister, thou has left us/here thy loss we deeply feel/but 'twas God who hath bereft us/He will all our sorrow heal."

Riz wandered around trying for once to ignore us. She mumbled something that sounded like this: These new stones aren't even stones maybe. They look like they were never hand-chiseled. Never quarried. Too creamy-smooth, too soft and gray-green. Like they never came from the earth.

I said to Kay: You want to push this cremation crap with me? All right, then. Here is

my answer: No way. If you die first, no way will I donate your organs and have you cremated. There. Satisfied? I won't have your organs cut out and distributed like butcher meat. You've distributed yourself around plenty while you were alive. I won't have you reduced to ash and placed up on the mantle in some stupid urn. I want a nice, traditional, orderly service with wreaths and organ music. I want to be able to say goodbye to you. I want to be able to visit you in a pretty place like this where there are statues and flowers and grass that is neatly mowed. And I want to look down at your headstone and know you're intact.

We walked up the hill to Dad's plot then. Daddy chose it two years before Mother died as part of what is called a "pre-planned funeral arrangement." It wasn't his style. He only did it to appease me. He showed me the brochure:

*The last thing your family should have to worry about is finding information for your death certificate and obituary, or choosing a funeral package without knowing your desires. Working together with our experienced staff, you can ease the stress on your loved ones in planning ahead for a time when all of their energies will be needed to cope with emotions of loss and grief. Also, an advance funeral plan eliminates the anxiety of how your family will pay for funeral expenses. Rossville Funeral Home, East Chapel, wishes to help you make this process as easy as possible. We have developed a simple form, one which takes you through an easy three-step process and allows you to submit your information online, from the comforts of home. Alternatively, you can download our form as a printable PDF file, which you may complete and mail to Rossville Funeral Home, East Chapel, at your convenience. One of our experienced Funeral Directors will be in touch with you to finalize any details with which you may need assistance, as well as help you decide on payment arrangements.*

Kay and I stood with our heads down looking at the red, upturned earth.

Kay said: Organ donation might save somebody's life. You would feel different about it if it was Riz in need of a kidney, now wouldn't you?



I kept looking down, imagining Dad's monument, determined not to say another word.

Daddy's stone had to be special-ordered because of the photograph plaque I insisted on having which would be attached on the lower right corner so that people walking by would be able to look down and know what Dad looked like and see that he was a real person once. Right at this moment, Dad's only marker was a pile of dying flowers lying in a half-circle over the latest grass-ridden mound of dirt.

*It is crucial to take one's time in choosing the appropriate inscription. In addition, one must bear in mind the length of text used. If the inscription is too lengthy, there may not be sufficient room on the stone for future additions.*

*A vase plate is an additional amenity that one may choose to be placed in front of the stone. One must consider how many flower vases the plate must accommodate. It is recommended that all vase plates are inscribed with the grave number and square number.*

*Before a gravestone can be erected in the cemetery, a permit must be submitted to the cemetery and the appropriate fee paid. The grave stone will be inspected both before and after it is put into place.*

*Permits are sometimes refused for the following reasons:*

- a) The correct grave owner has not signed the permit and given his/her name in full, exactly as it appears in the cemetery records (if there is more than one registered owner, all the owners must give their full name(s) and sign the permit).*
- b) The grave stone does not meet proper cemetery regulations.*

All of a sudden Kay piped up: Oh, now let me get this straight. You would rather have my guts sucked out by a mother-fucking industrial-strength mortuary vacuum cleaning/gutting machine so that you can come and stare down at me and talk about how natural I look and how I look "like I'm just sleeping" right before some bulldozer clears the way for me to rot six feet under for all eternity while the worms chew out my eyeballs. Right?

I said: I would just rather things be appropriate, that's all. The way they're supposed

to be.

Kay said: Me, too. That's why I'm carrying a driver's license in my wallet with a big, fat checkmark on the back where it says "Organ Donor."

Then Riz walked over and bent down, gathered up some wilted blooms and said: Take these roses home. I will dry them. I will recycle them into potpourri.

\* \* \*

2:35 A.M.:

Kay must be having a nightmare. He is jerking around, muttering something about not letting Chairman run out into the street.

I have my flashlight under the covers. I have turned to Edgar Cayce's *There is a River*, page 29: "It is not all of life to live, nor yet all of death to die; for life and death are one."

Sure enough, Edgar?

The night before Daddy died, I emptied the catheter bottle. When I returned to hook up the empty bottle, I heard the "death rattle" for the first time. The Hospice nurse said:

- The noise is present because the patient is not coughing or clearing his throat as he normally would;
- If the patient is deeply asleep or unconscious, he will not be distressed by the rattling, even though it may sound as though breathing is difficult;
- Despite best attempts at treating the rattle with medication, this does not always work;
- Give hyoscine hydrobromide 400µg stat subcutaneously and start hyoscine hydrobromide 1.2-1.6mg/24h CSCI.
- Wait for half an hour and reassess the patient. If there is still an unacceptable rattle, and there has not been a marked improvement:
- Give a further dose of hyoscine hydrobromide 400µg stat SC.

Then I said: Death is too much with us, too present and proud, whistling on morning radio, snapping the wings of young birds, crashing through windshields on Highway 41.

Isn't it enough to creep over the hunched backs of grandfathers, break them, lay them out beneath gnarled branches of Appalachian oaks?

Hey you--Nightingale. Shall we give it up now or waltz on wildly in this transient wind?

3:11 A.M.:

Sometime before this, I have fallen asleep.

I never feel a tingle. I never hear anything vibrate. I do not leave my body, but I do the next best thing: I *dream* my soul leaves my body. In the dream, my soul slips out through the top of my head and, with a quick popping sound, floats up free toward the high ceiling. I drift giddy as a drunken teenager, bouncing against the crown molding, sailing right through rotating blades of the ceiling fan with no awareness of their slicing force. Stopping at the transom above the doorway, I peer through its glass down into the darkened hall below to see the others who float here, the dead who soar to the ceilings like me, drift through walls silently, effortlessly.

Then sniffing, little, weepy moans pull at me in the midst of this wonderful dream, drawing me back into my body. I am wide awake now. I realize I didn't dream the cries. They are real and they are coming from Kay-boy. Mr. Economy. The same guy who cheated on me with leather-skirted interns. The same Kay I walked in on four years ago with my naked, twenty-three-year-old niece on her knees at the edge of our bed. Bad ass, emotionally-bankrupt, ruggedly fumbling, cheapskate Kay-boy.

Now this guy weeps for a cat?--a stupid, ingenuous cat who loved him best, followed

him around, slept curled up against him, waited by the door for him faithfully every afternoon? A cat he wants to put down and bury in a plastic storage bin from Railroad Salvage.

News-flash: I am the one who got up every four hours in the night for the last six nights in a row to give the feline version of “Ensure” in syringes. I am the one who went online searching desperately for miraculous cures for feline squamous cell carcinoma of the tongue. It was me who ordered the organic cat food and the purified water from a healing spring in Connecticut. Why wouldn’t the damn cat worship at my feet? Why can’t you cry for me in the middle of the night?

KAY-BOY. I name you. I call you out.

\* \* \*

When morning comes, Kay gets up first, lifts the bed skirt and checks to see if Chairman is still breathing.

Then Riz bursts into our room. She says: Dad, if you follow through with this “murder” today, I will never speak to you again.

His right eye twitches. He says: Whatever.

Then she leaves, flying down the stairs, slamming the door again for good measure.

We take our showers. We eat breakfast in silence while we watch “The Today Show.” I go upstairs to brush my teeth. Then Kay climbs the stairs after me to get the cat. To drag him out from under the bed. To lock him up in pet carrier prison. To take him to the vet

for execution--oh, pardon me-- euthanasia. Here is what the vet's pamphlet says:

*Euthanasia is an act of love toward an animal no longer able to enjoy life. Euthanasia literally means 'gentle death'. Other terms you may hear are 'put to sleep', 'put down', 'put out of its misery' or, less kindly, 'destroy.' Veterinary staff may use the term 'humane destruction,' which is another technical term for euthanasia. It is a caring act, not a callous act; therefore, it is not "murder."*

I pass Kay on the stairs. Say nothing. Keep my eyes straight ahead.

Here is my three-fold plan:

1. Go downstairs to re-arrange magazine stacks on the coffee table so that they are symmetrical;
2. Go into the kitchen to move the dishtowel back to where it belongs on the towel rack—fold it crosswise, smooth any wrinkles, then place it embroidered side up on the rack;
3. Check to see if I need to close any kitchen drawers.

Because I am nervous, I reverse the order of the list, accomplishing numbers 2 and 3 first. When I come into the den to start organizing the magazines, the television is still on. It is “The Montel Williams Show.”

Some guy in a bow tie says to Montel: Current research levels a hard blow against those who believe that the mind and spirit are somehow separate from the brain. In reality, all experience is derived from the brain.

Can you explain how this works exactly? Montel asks.

Certainly, the man says. The angular gyrus plays an important role in the way the brain analyzes sensory information to give us a perception of our own bodies. In instances of

stress or in certain moments of meditation or drug-induced hallucination, this part of the brain shuts off. The result is a false vision of floating outside ourselves.

Montel: So this is what is actually happening when people claim they are having out-of-body-experiences?

Man-in-bow-tie: Absolutely.

Montel: And those prone to having such experiences are the meditative, the drug-induced, the stressed?

Man-in-bow-tie: Those individuals, yes. Our research also indicates that those inclined toward OBE's are actually persons who are unhappy with or less in touch with their physical bodies.

I say out loud: Bullshit. I click off the television. Kay descends the stairs with Chairman moaning faintly in the pet carrier.

Kay says: Chairman had another bloody bowel movement on top of the box under the bed. Can you clean it up?

I yell: Stop messing up my magazines, Kay. Why would you read *O* anyway? Do you want to start "living your best life?" Okay. Then stop hanging my dishtowel from the refrigerator handle. Why do you need the dishtowel? You never dry dishes. Have you left any kitchen drawers slightly ajar (just like your mother when she came to visit and opened every single one of my kitchen drawers "just a crack" to let the air circulate)?

I'll scream. I will. I'll scream out loud if you do any of these three things ever again.

Kay does not say anything, but sets the carrier down, grabs paper towels from the kitchen and goes upstairs to clean up the mess.

Chairman lies panting in the carrier. His eyes are heavy and watery. Pleading eyes. Like Daddy's right at the end when he said to the Hospice nurse: Don't touch me.

In a minute, Kay comes back down the stairs, picks up the pet carrier and walks directly out the door and toward the car.

I get my purse. I lock the front door. I am someone's shadow walking down the driveway, watching my breath blow small ghosts into the frozen air while Kay places the pet carrier into the back seat. Something alive is in it. Alive and sharply aware. The cat lets loose with long, wailing cries now, howls pitifully as he always does when the future gapes before him like a fathomless open wound. We are taking him to the border of yet another new land. Along the way, he, the immigrant, tries to decipher our strange, irrational tongue. Our calling, naming signals. Our mad, inscrutable ways.

His eyes tell an old, old story: He is not afraid of death; he is afraid of what human beings do to death.

\* \* \*

Kay starts the car. Chairman's moaning intensifies, even in his weakened state. He always moaned any time we took him anywhere in the car, even when our destinations were supposed to be liberating.

Christmas Day, 2005: We drove to North Carolina for a raucous family gathering of cackling cousins and heavily perfumed great-aunts. First cousin Lodie. Second cousin Billy Hue. Aunt Al-Smree. (Real name: Alice Marie, but the drawl morphed the four syllables into one soft mouthful of mountain candy.) She was loud and raucous. Built

solid like a truck. Chairman hated her. Ran low to the ground to escape her gritty laughter. Under a coffee table covered in plastic poinsettias. Side-glancing. Sinewy like a sleek, fur-clad secret agent. Behind the aluminum Christmas tree. Safe. Hidden beneath a mound of red and green wrapping paper.

Daddy entered with an armload of packages. Something for everyone. Every cousin, every aunt and uncle. Every child and grandchild and godchild and in-law and out-law.

“How *are* you?”

“I’m still here. Wherever that is.”

Fourth of July, 2007: We loaded up for a family weekend of camping in the mountains. We went because I bitched.

Kay said: Camping sucks. I want to take a shower. In my own house.

I said: Camping is cheaper than going to Disney World.

He said: Help me pack the gear.

Riz sat alone by the lake to contemplate all aspects of reflection. (She would write seven poems, one after another, before nightfall.)

I strummed my guitar. Crooned old country songs I wrote twenty years before and was later ashamed of while the sun crept around the backs of the mountains.

Kay tried to fish. Riz bitched at him to throw all the fish back.

Kay shot fireworks out over the lake. Dared some blustering, wanna-be fire-marshal, shit-head park ranger to come and get him.

Chairman did not like campfire smoke. Chairman hated fireworks. But Chairman loved



nightfall in a tent. His eyes darted back and forth to catch shadows playing against the canvas. He knew forked tongues flashed between green limbs outside. Winding serpents, moon circles on the water.

Be still. There, in the distance was the rattle of turtle shell. Caw, caw of the shorebirds. Whispers in the trees. Chairman, who accepted life and death, would listen and watch until sunrise.

Always we took him with us. Always Kay looked back toward the cowering, furry form huddled in the furthest corner of the pet carrier and he said, "It will be all right," and the frightened howls would cease. The illiterate immigrant had come to understand that these five strange sounds made in succession ("it will be all right") somehow signaled that he needn't be afraid of what humans will do to death, at least not in the current moment.

Kay says nothing now. Not one word all the way to the vet's.

Chairman keeps moaning. Louder and louder.

Finally I say: What in hell is wrong with you, Kay? Turn around and look at him. Say it! Say the words: "it will be all right!"

Kay reaches to turn up the radio then and swerves out of his lane a little, almost sideswiping a pony-tailed guy in a Volkswagen beetle, then veers back into his lane, jerking at the wheel. In the back seat, the pet carrier slides to the left, then to the right again. Chairman stops howling. His eyes are enormous.

In the waiting room, there are three dogs. The dogs bark and struggle to escape their leashes at the sight of a cat entering. In the corner, a young couple with a little girl waits for their cat to be released after being spayed.

The man says: Look at that kitty, Charlotte. He is something, isn't he?

He is pretty, says the kid. Pretty but skinny. I wonder if he has a toy mouse like Snowball? His eyes are big and green. Like Easter eggs. What's wrong with that lady?

### **Euthanasia Authorization**

By submitting this form, I do hereby certify that I am the owner (or duly authorized agent for the owner) of the animal described above. I do hereby give the doctors of Broadway Animal Hospital and their staff and representatives full and complete authority to euthanize said animal. I do hereby release the said doctors of Broadway Animal Hospital and their staff and representatives from any and all liability for euthanizing and disposing of said animal. I also certify to the best of my knowledge that this animal has not bitten any person or animal during the last ten (10) days and has not been exposed to rabies.

It is my desire that: *(required)*

My pet be released to me for burial at home. [x]

My pet be sent to Resthaven for private cremation with return of ashes (\$120). [ ]

My pet be sent to Resthaven for disposal (\$25). [ ]

Five minutes. Ten minutes. A terrier, a parakeet, two tabbies and a beagle mix come and go. The receptionist staples forms together, then files them. The phone rings. The veterinary assistants laugh at a private joke. Some guy comes in to buy a four-month pack of Advantage flea treatment.

Then we hear a pleasant voice that sounds almost like a tape recording: Mr. Longley?

You can follow me now.

Kay gets up, lifts the pet carrier. Chairman lies curled in the very back. Silent.

Unmoving.

I sit still. Go on, I say. I'm not coming back with you.

Fifteen minutes later, Kay reappears.

He says: Come back now, Eula. Please.

Everyone's eyes are on me. I don't want to make a scene. So, I get up. I follow Kay back to this tiny, out-of-the-way room with a "Staff Only" sign on the door. We have never noticed it before in all our fifteen years of vet visits.

Chairman is lying on the table, twitching, breathing fast and hard.

I say: Why are you doing this to *me*, Kay? Why are you making me watch this?

He says: I'm not making you do anything. I just thought you might like to be with him when he passes.

Well, you thought wrong, I say, and I walk out, straight through the lobby, out the door and into the car.

It is freezing in the car. I don't care. I sit and look up at the tree limbs, bare and brown, waving around frantically like thin, skeletal arms, reaching up to an oblivious sky for help that will not come.

Suddenly Kay emerges with the pet carrier, makes his way to the car and places it in the back seat.

So fast, I think. So sterile and industrious and efficient, this euthanasia business.

Kay gets in the driver's seat and starts the car. His eyes are red.

Rain envelopes the "here" as we drive back to the house. Blue mountains, growing gray now, blend into cold, clear sky.

As we round the corner to our street, I think I hear a faint little moan. Then another. And another.

I turn to look in the back seat: Chairman is lying in the pet carrier, weak, but still alive.

Kay says: I couldn't do it.

\* \* \*

Night falls. Look up "there": Old stars cough up spittle of ash, stoop over the moon, drag their comet tail reels of memory across blank overhead screens. Dead stars. Overdosed on moonshine. Still sending their glow from billions of light years away to finally reach our feeble, human eyes long after the fact.

Daddy, are we all animals, just like the cat? Here for a moment, never knowing why? Never knowing where "here" is or what it is for? And then we are gone?

Chairman will die under the bed sometime during the night. We will wake and notice a complete silence, soft and almost dreamlike in the dark, like the silence around your hospital bed after you died, Dad. When something rose up from the bed sheets and left you and, in an instant, your body became like a piece of furniture.

No one will know what to say.

But maybe Kay will say that we will leave Chairman in peace until morning. That once the sun is up, he will go out in the cold and dig a bigger hole. And then we will bury Chairman in a real, wooden box from the Railroad Salvage Store--the one that costs \$69.88. And Riz will lay flowers. And I will stand over the spot, Dad, and call your name out loud in the bright, broad day.

## 2. The Brambles

*Spring Hill, Tennessee, 2007*

Jessamine loved words—their spoken music, their gritty blackness against white paper. When I met her, she owned three books: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston, *Cane*, by Jean Toomer, and the dictionary. She was saving her money to buy more so that someday she could have a whole library of her own. She said if we ever had children, she was going to name them Zora and Jean.

The first night we spent together, she read me her favorite passage from *Cane*: “Half moon is a white child that sleeps upon the treetops of the forest/White winds croon its sleep song/Black mother sways/Teat moonchildren at her breasts.” I can see it: the white moon baby, the black sky mother, rocking, swaying when the wind sends a cloud over.

These days I spend a lot of time doing nothing but standing here in the front yard looking up at that moonbaby. I’ve had a good life. Not many regrets. But something about nearing the end of things takes you back to the beginning. Now I spend whole evenings dreaming light and shadows. Bright white against deep dark. Me and Jessamine. I stand here and look up, then look out over what used to be miles of fields and trees set against the crumbling ruins of a grand old house, and I think back to that last night I met Jessamine at The Brambles forty six years ago in the autumn of 1951.

Normally, I would have been jumping over that September moon just to know she was waiting, but not that night. She sent a note by way of a neighbor boy letting me know that she had been to see “the Conjuror,” an ancient black woman by the name of Addy, who could brew potions, cast spells and enact curses, skills she learned from her mother, a captive arriving via African slave ship in 1840.

To this day, I remember every word of Jessa's note by heart: "Dear Harlan: By now, I guess you know I'm in the family way. Today I've been to see The Conjurer. Here is what she told me to do: mix up grave dirt, cotton root and ginger root in a scalding hot tea and drink it at bedtime. Next soak in a tub of hot water, hot as you can stand it, with saltpeter and cayenne pepper mixed in. Then cover up with as many blankets as you can until your insides get to boiling and you start to sweat. Come morning, there won't be no more baby. Meet me at house tonight. You can be with me when I drink the tea. I'll be waiting."

Last time I made love to Jessamine, it was June of '51 in the big, front room of The Brambles. I was seventeen and she was sixteen. It was raining hard, slick and wet. Mud oozed up to my ankles by the time I hit the clearing. But, Jesus, she was soft as midnight and waiting. She let me in wearing nothing but a raggedy lace tablecloth she found in the attic draped from her hair like a wedding veil. It fell loose over her round shoulders and pointed breasts. Her black flesh was gleaming through the pale lace. She carried a bouquet of honeysuckle. She took a flower and sucked out the fragrant petal from inside and rolled it around with her tongue while I watched.

Then she ripped my one good shirt open, ran that sweet honeysuckle vine through my hair and over my chest and said: "Marry me, Harlan Wilkes, you white bastard. It's high time you married me. I dare you. Bet you we'd stir up this town for sure. Stir us up some white blood with some black blood. Boil us up some powerful brew."

Then she let that tablecloth fall to the floor. Flashes of lightning lit up her shiny-dark body as she got down on all fours and spread that table cover in front of the parlor room



hearth. She laid down then, stretched herself out and motioned for me. Rolls of thunder made the old house tremble like it had been a naughty child and now God was lifting it up from out of its little corner to shake some holy sense into its willful head. The sweet smell of rain came blowing in through the wide, long windows. We rolled and wrestled, twisted and writhed till my breath was coming so hard it seemed for all the world like the lightning bolts fallen and settled themselves on the ceiling of that tumble down place.

When we were done she said, “Goddamn you, Harlan Wilkes. Because of you I got a splinter in my ass. And that’s a sign for sure. A real bad omen.”

She eased herself over my lap. Beautiful, slick-black ass plump in my face. And sure enough, if she didn’t have a splinter sticking out her butt long as a toothpick.

“That ain’t no sign of nothing except the pitiful state of these rotten floors,” I said.

Then I pulled that splinter out, pressed my lips down against her cool, damp skin and sucked the blood. Blood of slave songs and share cropping and black bodies strung up to pine tree Calvarys.

~ ~ ~

Daddy and Lou Branson, our hired hand from up North, used to hover out back of the house and talk dirty in low whispers about how they’d been with lots of different women—girls from Nashville pool rooms who worked the alleys, got in your car and fucked you right there in the back seat for twenty dollars. For a long time when I was younger, they never wanted me to hear.

One night when I was nine, I hid behind the barn and I heard Lou ask Daddy, “Tell the truth now, Trey, you ever been with a nigger gal?”

Daddy laughed and said, “Hell, no. I don’t believe in the mixing of races. I was raised to know better.”

And Lou said: “You been with a Jap girl during the war, ain’t you? Ain’t that race-mixing? What’s the damned difference?”

And Daddy said, “Difference is a Jap girl ain’t got no jungle blood.”

After Mama died, they didn’t care if I heard anymore. They talked women and swallowed hard liquor and swore like sailors right in front of me most every night. And finally, when I turned seventeen, they took me to Nashville. They laughed and snickered and spat tobacco outside the car while the alley girl tried to get my pants undone.

“Come on, Hon,” she whined, “don’t be shy now. I know just what you need and I’m bound to give it to you.” And then: “Well, bless my soul! I’ll be goddamned if you ain’t come right here in my hand before I’ve even got your pants all the way down! Jesus H. Christ, boy!”

I can’t remember her face or her eyes. Only things I remember are from the waist down. There could have been a mule’s head sitting on top of her shoulders for all I cared. I could have passed her thirty times on the street since then and never recognized her once.

But Jessamine was different. I remembered everything about her, the way the whole evening used to flow into her sleepy, dark eyes, her chattering on about slave ghosts wandering the halls and voodoo spells cast into the night, her cooing and growling, the

way it felt to be inside her. Funniest part is, what I liked to remember most was the sleeping afterwards. Watching her breath rise and fall. Running my fingers through her woolly, stiff hair. Picking out little strands one by one. Pulling them out straight. Watching them kink back up. I never touched Negro hair before I knew her.

~ ~ ~

The Brambles was built in 1843 by my forefather, Lyndon Wilkes. Two Greats. The place got its name because of the thick brambleberry bushes that grew wild all around the slave huts. In the beginning, it had a proper name: Pine Shadows. But those notorious brambleberry vines changed that forever. They say my One-Great, who inherited the place, wouldn't cut those bushes down because he found himself a practical use for them: when the slaves had been horse-whipped, he would stick the sharp bramble thorns into their raw wounds for after-dinner sport.

By the 1950's, the old skeleton of a house rose up from the fields like a ghost ship, tall and pale against the black sky. The front veranda was sunken in so deep it wasn't safe to walk on anymore and the back portico had been swallowed up by the brambleberries. Those sharp, thorny vines had climbed clear up the outside chimney and into the cracks of the Master Bedroom walls. Jessa and I would come in through the shutters of a tall, side window to keep from falling through rotten boards and to avoid getting ourselves stuck with prickly thorns.

Most of the walls were still standing then and some of the original furniture was even there—a mammoth old rickety china cabinet way too big to fit in our little house, a

soaring dresser with no drawers and a square grand piano missing its ivories. Daddy swore up and down he was going to make that piano into a pool table one day, but he never did.

My granddaddy, Gordon Wilkes, Junior, tried to keep the place going for nearly forty years. He sold off fifty acres of land to keep things afloat. But by the time the Great Depression did its work and Granddaddy died, the old mansion was in such disrepair that Daddy couldn't figure how he could afford to mend all the plaster cracks or replace the rotted floorboards and missing slate roof tiles, much less how he could manage to have it plumbed and wired and pay the heating bills. So, the house creaked and crumbled down around us like a feeble old woman.

Strange how that all that high standing and power and Confederate money the family had before wasn't worth a damn once the Civil War ended and the carpetbaggers came. I guess it was a keen stroke of luck that my One-Great was able to hold on to the house and land at all. But in the old days, things were different. They say there were 200 slaves living on the land, so many that my One-Great didn't even know most of them on sight. I heard a story once about how he ran into one of his long time field hands on the turnpike road and didn't even recognize his own property.

He said, "Boy, who is your master?"

And the "boy," who was going on seventy, said "Massa Gordon Wilkes, suh."

One-Great said: "Does he treat you right, boy?"

"Nawsir," came the plainspoken reply. "He don' feed us much nor give us no clothes exceptin for one tow linen shirt a year and he beat us to a mighty pulp, too, without no

provocation. Then when he done beatin', he lay into our stripes with them brambleberry thorns. Gawd Almighty hep us.”

“Well, well. Now ain't that just a crying shame. Some of the Masters around these here parts don't have the spirit of Christ in 'em nowheres, I reckon. Well, good day to ye, boy.” And off my One-Great trotted on one of his fine, pure bred mares.

Nothing happened for three weeks. Then that old black slave got called out of the field one morning, stripped and staked up, beaten fifty lashes, pierced by the bramble thorns, and he didn't even know what for. Next thing he knew, he was being shipped downriver while his stripes were still bloody, sold away from his wife of fifty years and his children and grandchildren and everything and everyone he knew.

His name was Philippi. He was Jessamine's Great-Great.

~ ~ ~

Jessa's last name was the same as mine: Wilkes. She said the reason was not just because my ancestors owned her ancestors going back for three generations. She said it was also because we were related; we were “family” in a twisted way, because my Great-Great Grandpa and my Great Grandpa fucked her Great-Great Grandma and her Great Grandma. Raped them, she said, in the huts that stood behind the Big House. Came storming in half drunk and ordered their men out. Ripped their clothes off and took them then and there on the dirt floor while their Negro men stood outside shivering with cold and helpless rage. I remember the look that would come across Jessa's face sometimes when she talked about our mixed-up history, almost like she was wishing she could hop

in a time machine and go back, just to see what those days were really like.

She said my One-Great gave her female ancestors ribbons for their hair after he raped them. Once he gave Mellur, Jessa's Great Grandma, a brooch made of gold with a red ruby set in the middle because she was his favorite. When the Mistress (My Great Grandma) saw it, she had the Overseer tie Mellur up to an oak tree and sodomize her with an iron pole till it split her asshole open and ruptured her intestines. She died that night. She was thirteen. But she had already birthed a daughter by the Master. That daughter was Jessamine's Grand.

One day I asked Jessa: "How come you know so much about your family going way back to Two Greats? You don't have any written records, no birth certificates, no marriage certificates. Nothing."

She said to me: "Harlan Wilkes, you pasty fool. Don't you know that nigger records is kept in the singing, in the telling of tales, in the drumming of chants on the porch at midnight?"

Back then, I didn't know anything about Negroes except that they seemed to glide along after dark, blending in with the shadows and the shifting wind. And their eyes from close up looked like deep pools of oil. And when they laughed, it came from way down in their bellies. I didn't know much in those days at all. But I learned.

~ ~ ~

If I could've gone on farther in school and learned to love words early on like Jessa did, maybe I could have explained to people around here how I felt about her and maybe

it might have made a difference. I could have described how the moonchildren and the midnight-black teat of sky and the tall, white columns of The Brambles poking up into the stars like twisted steeples made me feel inside. But nobody around here cared about words back then, except for Jessamine.

She wanted to go the Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State Normal School for Negroes in Davidson County when she turned eighteen to become a teacher. Every day she looked up a new word in her dictionary. On that last day in June when I made love to her, the word she was studying was from the Greek: *agape*. When I asked her what it meant, she held the dictionary open and pointed to the following lines: *agape*<sup>1</sup> (ä-gä'pā, ä'gə-pā') ► n. [Gk. *agapē*.] 1. Self-sacrificing love. 2. A love in action. 3. Love which has a redemptive power; a power to transform individuals. 4. A love seeking to preserve and create community.

Then she said, “*Agape* means the finest kind of love there is--a love that doesn't just come from feelings, but from willpower--from a choice you make all by yourself.”

~ ~ ~

By the time I was fifteen years old, the plaster had fallen away in big chunks in every single room of The Brambles, leaving the laths tangled up in silvery cobwebs. The crumbling walls were spattered with what must have been musket shot. And one wall in the parlor downstairs was scarred from a cannonball. But there was a beauty in it--a wild and growing thing that wove in and out and wrapped around and grabbed hold of a man like a beautiful creeper clambering up his spine.

When I was a kid, I spent hours playing in that big, old, mysterious house, pretending I was a Yankee general come to take over, or standing out front throwing rocks at the high, old windows to strengthen my pitching arm for baseball try-outs. I passed a lot of summer afternoons searching for hidden passageways and digging holes in the nearby woods looking for family silver that had been buried just before the Union army came. I found some minie balls, a couple of Indian arrowheads, and some old tools, but the rest of the secrets of that house were buried too deep to be uncovered.

Jessa said there was fighting. Lots of fighting. And dying. And screaming. Soldiers got their arms and legs amputated in the parlor room and thrown into a wagon parked just under the big, front window. Jessamine's Two Greats helped haul the wagon loads of bloody limbs out into the woods. And Jessamine's One-Great helped dig the holes to bury them in. And she said if we listened hard, late at night we could still hear ghost soldiers softly moaning.

~ ~ ~

The first time I saw Jessamine, I was cane fishing in the early spring. She came sashaying along the opposite bank picking thimbleweed flowers. She was wearing a plain yellow cotton dress, dirty brown tennis shoes, and a white sweater draped around her shoulders. She bent down, picked a buttercup flower, then stuck it with the others in the bodice of her dress. The delicate, yellow petals of those thimbleweeds against the shiny cleavage of her black bosom was the most beautiful promise of sin I ever saw.

She didn't know I was on the opposite bank watching. She was humming some tune



and occasionally she stopped, closed her eyes and sang the words:

*Time, time is windin' up  
Time is windin' up  
Oh, destruction to this land, God done moved His hand  
And time is windin' up*

“Hey! Where’d you learn that?” I hollered.

She didn’t answer. She didn’t turn. She just kept on walking.

Next time I saw her, I was waiting in line at the movies on a Saturday, and she was coming out of the colored beauty shop where she worked in the afternoons straightening Negro hair. I watched her walk to the corner bus stop. She didn’t sit down on the bench; there were two white men there already. When the bus pulled up, the white men stood and climbed on board right in front of her to pay the driver. She waited and climbed in after them to do the same. Even though there wasn’t any one else on the bus except for the white driver and the two white passengers, she had to get off and re-board through the back door. But before she ever made it around to the back, the driver pulled off, slapping his hand on his knee and laughing, red-faced and mean.

The first time she spoke to me was two weeks later on a Sunday. She was on her way to church at the AME and I was walking home from work at the foundry. She was carrying a Bible under one arm, wearing a bright, pretty, green dress, stockings with a seam up the back, black Mary-Janes, a big, green hat with netting and a bow, and dainty little lace gloves. We passed each other on the turnpike road and I said, “Hey, aren’t you the one I saw picking thimbleweeds?”

She kept her eyes down.” Might have been,” she said.

“What’s your name?”

“Jessamine.”

“Hello. I’m real pleased to meet you.” I put out my hand to shake hers, but she backed away. I kept talking: “I liked those flowers you were picking the other day. And I liked that dress you were wearing. And this dress you’re wearing today, I like it just fine, too. And I’m real sorry about that bus driver taking your money and pulling off and--”

“I got to go.”

“Hey, wait. You ever seen just hatched starlings?”

“No.”

“I can show you some. They sure are something. You want to see?”

She looked up then, looked me square in the eye for the first time. She kept looking. Finally she said, “I reckon.”

I led her straight to The Brambles, in through the big, long side window with its thick, wavy old glass and up the grand staircase to what used to be a nursery. That’s where the starlings came in through broken window glass and made their nests every year, high up on top of a crooked cornice board. It just so happened that the mama and daddy birds were gone right then.

“Be real careful now,” I said, and I helped her climb on top of the dresser with no drawers to see the hatchlings close up. “And, whatever you do, don’t touch them. If a human touches them, their mamas won’t have anything else to do with them. Their mamas will fly on off and leave them to starve.”

“Lord Jesus. Why won’t their mamas have nothing else to do with them? That don’t seem right to me to just desert them like that. It ain’t their fault if one of us don’t have

sense enough better than to touch them.”

“No, it’s not. But nature don’t care what’s right or who’s fault things are.”

“They is so tiny,” she said after she climbed up and looked close. “And uglier than sin without no feathers. So damn ugly, they’s cute.”

She climbed down, clutched the Bible against her chest and looked at me again. Hard.

“What’s your name?”

“Harlan Wilkes.”

“Won’t you get in trouble coming in this big old house without somebody’s say-so, Harlan Wilkes?”

“My Daddy owns this place.”

She stared me up and down, pursed her lips and said, “Now I got to go. I got to get to the preaching. And don’t you try nothing funny with me, or I’ll kill you.”

“I wouldn’t ever do that,” I said. “Unless you wanted me to.”

She turned fast and rushed down the stairs, fell over a loose board at the bottom, dropped her Bible, ripped her stockings, swore a little, brushed herself off and headed for the window.

“Hey, Jessamine!” I yelled as she climbed out.

“What?”

“Will you meet me here next Wednesday evening?”

She hiked her legs over the window ledge and onto the wide, wrap-around porch.

She took off and never looked back. But I could hear her when she called, “Next

Wednesday. 9 p.m., Harlan Wilkes. And you damn well better be here.”

~ ~ ~

The Carlton Foundry and Machine Works Company was hell vomited up on this earth. If you could imagine a preacher's fire and brimstone sermon breathed to life, this was it. You felt the heat and smelled the sizzling before you ever saw the fire. Your eyeballs started to burn and tear; your skin started blistering. You could sniff death in the air when the eerie orange shadows licked the high, concrete walls like wild demons let loose from a pit.

I was a blast furnace operator because I couldn't do anything else back then. Didn't have an education--dropped out of school in the tenth grade. So I tended the furnace that melted ore for iron. I stood there in the fiery shadows and poured the molten ore into molds. I did this for hours. All night long except for Wednesday, my one night off. That's the night I always met Jessamine at The Brambles.

It was over 1,000 degrees in the blast furnace and a man could get himself killed in a heartbeat in a hellhole like that--get himself burned to a crisp so his corpse wouldn't even look human.

Joe Lockwood, the foundry foreman, was meaner than a snake and twice as poison. I heard through the grapevine he was a Klansman, and I didn't doubt it. Lou said Joe's daddy was the Grand Cyclops over this whole part of the state.

One morning right in the middle of third shift about 3 a.m., I got to dreaming of Jessamine and my hands were shaking so violently while I was pouring that ore that I poured some of that hell liquid right out on my foot and screamed like a banshee.

"What in God's name is wrong with you, Wilkes?" Lockwood yelled through the

shadows. “What the hell have you done now? I swear if they put your brains in a blue jay it would fly backwards.”

I lay there screaming and coiling up like a baby longing for its mother’s womb, too pained to speak.

He said, “You do a dumb ass thing like this just one more time and you’re history. You got it? I won’t be responsible for you getting yourself killed.”

An ambulance came and took me to County General. I was laid up for a while. My left foot has never been the same.

One night in May, Lockwood made his way over to me and said straight out, “I hear tell you been fucking a nigger gal, Wilkes. That right?”

I didn’t say anything.

He said, “Well, I guess some boys ain’t got no pride. Some boys need it so bad at your age they just liable to stick their dicks into any hole they can find.”

My fists tightened and my stomach muscles tensed up.

“Let me give it to you straight, Wilkes. I don’t care how good a lay she is: Quit messing with that girl or somebody’s going to get hurt.”

~ ~ ~

First thing Jessamine and I did most times we met was to walk hand in hand completely naked through that big, old house pretending we were the Master and the Mistress. The light from our lantern dipped and swayed as we went along, sending ghost shadows up and down the grand, old stairway. We were black and white. We were

lightning flash and the dark it sprang up from set against faded flowers on the wallpaper. I had seen naked white girls in magazine spreads and I had fondled Katherine Humphrey's breasts under the bleachers after school and I had seen that alley whore in Nashville. But I had never seen a Negro girl naked before. The sight of her was like a shock wave.

"Mizz Jessamine," I said, "May I escort you to the bedchamber or would you prefer to fuck right here on the landing?"

"Well, suh," she laughed, "I believes I's jus' as prone to fuck right here as anywhere else 'cause, after all, I is the lady of this manor and, well suh, you know how we uppity ladies are—we act all prim and proper on the outside, but truth is, we jest love to fuck a gentleman most any place he's ready."

"Why, Mizz Jessamine! I am floored! However, please allow me to back you up against the wainscoting and lift up your right leg over this here railing because we wouldn't want no one to say that I ain't a gentleman and that I ain't nothing but ready."

Later, when we laid down to sleep on a blanket I brought up to the master bedroom, we looked at the stars through ceiling cracks that went clear to the roof. The wind came singing through those cracks and it was one strange lullaby. "Oooh, weeee!" it crooned and she put her head down close against my chest.

Sometimes the wind made what was left of the shutters slam and rattle against the outside of the house like the world was coming to an end.

Jessamine said: "Lord Jesus! I'll swan if those slave ghosts ain't drumming their tom toms to some African voodoo spell tonight." Then: "Let's light us a candle and

call up their spirits in a séance. Bet you we'd see my Great-Great and my Great and maybe my Grand, too."

"But, on the other hand," I said, "We might see *my* Great-Great or *my* Great or *my* Grand."

She looked at me then like she really had seen a ghost. I stroked her hair and whispered, "No one can call up the past. That's a bunch of crazy dreamer talk." And she settled down a little and nuzzled her head into my shoulder. "Go to sleep now, Jessa," I said. "Go on to sleep, my own."

~ ~ ~

That summer was hotter than Hades. The mosquitoes buzzed around my ankles in a soft whir. At night, lightning bugs came out and studded the fields like flashing Christmas bulbs. And the whole time, whether I was walking home from the foundry, or helping Daddy mend a fence or just sitting, I thought of nothing but Jessa. I imagined her face, her big, melting eyes, soft like a doe's, her lips, lusty and full. I remembered every detail of her body: her little pouch of a stomach, her hips, fleshy and wide, her long, lean legs. And I ached for that girl more than I have ever ached for anything or anyone in my life.

Now I can look back and see that the saddest and happiest day of my life all in one was that last day in June when she tried to tell me there was going to be a baby. I didn't have sense enough to catch her true meaning at first when she said, "It's high time you marry me," and "I dare you," and "bet you we'd stir up this town for sure."

After I pulled out her splinter, she rolled over and looked up at me with those melting

dark eyes. She said, “You want children, Harl?”

I said: “Someday. I guess.”

She said: “How would you feel about being a daddy to a half-black chile’?”

I didn’t know what to say next, so I said, “Depends on who the mama is.”

She looked up at me, smiled, then looked away. “Would you marry me if you thought I was gonna be a mama?” she asked.

“I reckon,” I said. “We could leave this place--go up north to Detroit. Lou says it’s different there.”

“And what if I *wasn’t* gonna be a mama,” she said, gazing past me, up at the crumbling ceiling, “would you still want to marry me anyways?”

I laughed. “We got plenty of time to think about such dreaming. Now hush your crazy talk and let’s go upstairs and sleep a while.”

When we started up the steps, I spotted a blanket over in the corner strewn with all manner of odd things: seashells, doll parts, chalk, bird skulls, bloody rags, bottles and bases of cast iron cooking pots. “What the hell is all that?” I asked.

She said, “It’s for conjuration. For to protect us against bad signs.”

~ ~ ~

The next Wednesday, when it came our regular time to meet, Jessa wasn’t there. I paced around through the creaky old house. I took a piss out the long, shuttered window and onto the rotten veranda. I sat down in front of the cracked glass of the big, gold mirror in the front parlor room and remembered Jessa saying that if we stared into that



mirror at midnight long enough, we would see a face from the past staring back. I figured it was pretty close to midnight then, so I stared and stared for what must have amounted to twenty minutes. But I saw only my pale reflection, broken and distorted like in one of those funhouses at the county fair. I pondered her words about marrying and being a mama. I ambled around a while longer, wondering if she had been fooling with me or if there really was going to be a baby. She was such a dreamer, always seeing signs and long dead wonders--ghost soldiers and African voodoo queens and slave voices howling through the night fields. How could a man figure the difference between what was already dead and what was about to be birthed?

She never came that night. I lay alone in the upstairs bedroom and watched the stars through the ceiling cracks until dawn.

June ended. July dragged on into August. I saw Jessa every now and then in town. I would be headed into the feed store and she would be coming out of the colored beauty shop. Or I would be going in to the movies and she would be waiting for the bus. We never waved or smiled. But her eyes would search mine just before I looked away. And, when she walked off, my eyes would follow the lines of her body. Up and down. And I could see that her belly was getting bigger.

~ ~ ~

It was September 23, 1951, when Jessamine finally broke her silence and sent me the note about her visit to the conjure woman. As I was walking to The Brambles that night to meet her for what turned out to be the last time, I thought things through backwards and forwards, from the very first moment I saw her to the last. I decided that I was going to stay with her come hell or high water and that I was going to convince her not to drink the tea because I loved her and, regardless of what the rest of the world thought or did, somehow that love would give us the strength to survive.

When I reached the clearing, I saw The Brambles rising up like a white sword stabbing at the sky. I saw the lantern light flickering from inside the tall, old windows. She was in there.

“Jessamine?” I called as I climbed through the shutters.

She was sitting Indian style on the hearth cradling her belly. “Yeah,” she said, not looking up.

“Have you drunk the tea?”

“Naw.”

“You gonna birth the baby, then?”

She kept looking at the floor. She was scribbling invisible letters in the dust with one finger. “Babies,” she said. “I think there might be more than one.”

“Twins?”

“Yeah. Old Addy says she saw two faces in the tea leaves.”

I remember feeling overjoyed. But my heart was in my throat and all I could manage

to say was, “Well. All right.”

She looked up. Looked me square in the face. “That all you got to say, Harlan Wilkes? ‘Well’ and ‘all right?’”

“No.”

“What else you got to say then?”

I walked over to her, stooped down to put my arms around her, but she jerked away. I rose up then and said: “I reckon I’ve got to say that we could go north, like I said before. Lou says it’s different there and—”

“We ain’t going nowheres. Even if we both really wanted to, we ain’t got no money to get no where anyhow. Besides, people up there ain’t going to take to us any better than people down here.”

“Well, they might. If we don’t go north, then we’ll stay here. We’ll figure it out somehow. I’ll get two jobs. We’ll live somewhere cheap outside of town and try to save up money to go north. We’ll be all right. We can make it work.”

“*We can’t do nothing. I can marry one of my own kind.*”

I came up behind her, brushed her wooly hair aside and ran my fingers down the nape of her neck. “Jessa, what are you talking about? I love you,” I said, “and you love me. You sang to me. You read to me from out of your books and you told me your dictionary words and you laid your head down on my chest.”

“It don’t matter.”

“What do you mean it don’t matter? How could you be with someone else, Jessamine? Who is he? Whoever he is, I’ll find him. I’ll break his neck with my bare hands when I

find him.”

“You won’t do no such of a thing, Harlan Wilkes. You want to know who he is? He’s a nigger boy, that’s who he is, a good boy who’ll marry me and be a father to these babies and no one won’t never know the difference even if the babies turn out pure white because he’s got white blood in him too, just like I do. He will love me and them. He’s saved up some money already. We’ll go away up north. He’ll give these babies a real chance at life and I won’t be a side show to him—a spectacle like I am to you.”

“What do you mean, a ‘spectacle’? It’s not like that. I love you—love you more than anything in this world.”

She looked straight ahead and said nothing.

“Have you been with him?” I asked.

“It don’t make no difference.”

“Does to me. Have you been with him?”

“No.”

“Then why can’t we get married?”

“Because you don’t want to marry me, Harlan Wilkes. I tried to ask you.”

“I thought you were joking, Jessa. I didn’t know. I just didn’t figure it out right off. You can’t hold that against me.”

“It ain’t me holding nothing against you. It’s nature, remember? You said nature don’t care what’s right or who’s fault things are. You said it and you was right. Now you got to grow up and be a realist.”

“Be a what?”

“A re-a-list: ‘A person who only considers things as they are or appear to be, and avoids idealism and abstractions.’”

“Shut up,” I said. “Shut the hell up. You don’t know those words for shit, Jessamine. You and all your dreaming talk of ghost soldiers and slaves howling and séances and staring into mirrors at midnight. You don’t know those words for shit.”

“May be I didn’t used to know them. But I know them now, ‘cause I looked them up in my dictionary when I saw that all my dream-talking didn’t do nobody no good. That’s why now I got to be a realist, Harlan. And you got to be one, too. Don’t you know things is still just the same ‘round here? Still the same as they always was? You ain’t no different from your forebears. You want me for the same reason you *don’t* want me: I got black skin. If this keeps on, somebody’s gonna get hurt.”

She stood up straight. There was a firmness in her voice. “This circle has got to be broke,” she said. “Get out of my way.”

Jessa opened the shutters and climbed through the tall window onto the sinking veranda. She had trouble this time because she was heavier.

I held myself back, tried to stop myself from running after her. But finally, it wasn’t any use. My body just took off, no matter what my brain said. Next thing I knew, she was in the middle of the field underneath the moonlight, wind whipping her skirts up to her thighs, playing strange melodies through her hair. I rushed up behind her. She turned and fell into my arms. I found her mouth and we kissed long and hard.

“Jessamine. My own,” I said. “You can talk however you want, dream talking or realist talking. But you know we were meant to be. You and me both--we will always

know that.”

She looked up into my face. Her eyes drifted. Silent, dark. Like two wild dancers in long, liquid robes. Tears came. Black mist on a white baby moon.

“Yes,” she said, almost in a whisper, “we was meant to be. Here in this broke down place for this sweet little while.”

My hands clasped onto hers as she pulled away. Our fingers let go.

Jessamine looked one last time at the tall columns of The Brambles and turned. I watched her walk on toward a thin line of pine trees, gliding, blending into the dark.

That was the last time I ever saw her. I heard from Old Addy that she married that black boy and moved away to Lansing, Michigan.

~ ~ ~

Daddy died of a heart attack in 1972. In 1984, I sold the bulk of the land for \$375,000 to the Saturn Corporation. I kept two acres and built myself a brick rancher with four bedrooms and a screened in back porch. Between the sale of the land and my military pension, I’ve done all right.

In 1985, the Saturn Corporation, along with the county, formed Brambles Inc., a 501C3 Non-Profit Corporation dedicated to historic preservation and education. Now most of the property is taken up with the Saturn assembly plant. There are twenty-five acres of buildings and parking lots. Four hundred fifty people come to work every day to build engines, transmissions, frames, plastic panels and interiors, or to work in

engineering or sales and marketing. And off to the east just a little through a gated drive stands The Brambles, looking just the way it did in 1843, tall and proud and completely restored.

There are guided house tours every Tuesday through Saturday from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and on Sundays from 1 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. It costs ten dollars for an adult to get in and five dollars for children. The mansion and grounds are available for weddings and receptions. They say you can even follow The Brambles on Twitter.

The brochure in the Museum Shop reads: “Completed in 1843 by Lyndon Wilkes, The Brambles has stood for over 150 years. Come revisit the Wilkes’ family's early roots in Maury County, the world of the plantation, plus the Civil War and the years of reconstruction. Your tour will relive the November 29th, 1864 Battle of Spring Hill when The Brambles was at the apex of the Confederacy’s ‘Last Offensive Campaign’ of the Civil War at Franklin and Nashville.”

My wife died ten years ago. Her name was Juliana and she was the kindest woman I ever knew. I met her in 1966 when I was home on leave from Vietnam. We had three children: Carly, Gordy, and Louisa. Gordy got killed by a roadside bomb in Iraq last year. Carly got hit by a drunk driver on her way to work in 1994, but Louisa lives in Murfreesboro, is married to a dentist, and has two boys, Conner and Preston.

Things have changed a lot in Spring Hill. All the mom and pop shops got bought out by the big boys. There’s a Walmart Superstore near the interstate and a new mall where Jessa’s house used to stand in the old colored part of town. Lately, I’ve been thinking of moving to Murfreesboro to be near Louisa and my grandsons. There’s an assisted living

place there and she says it's a good one.

Two nights ago, there was a beautiful half moon. I sat out on the front porch and looked up at it for an hour or more thinking about time and change and that word, *agape*.

Last Sunday, the preacher brought a message about that word. For five dollars, you can buy a CD of the message in the vestibule after the eleven o'clock service, so I did. After I finished looking at the moon, I came inside and sat down in the den and hit "play."

The preacher's voice said: "Christian writers have generally described *agape* as a form of love which is both unconditional and voluntary. The Christian usage of the term comes directly from the canonical Gospels' accounts of the teachings of Jesus. When asked what was the greatest commandment, Jesus said, 'Love (*agape*) the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love (*agape*) your neighbor as yourself.' All the teachings of the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. *Agape* has been expounded on by history's greatest wordsmiths in a specifically Christian context. C. S. Lewis, in his book *The Four Loves*, used *agape* to describe what he believed was the highest level of love known to humanity—a selfless love, a love that was passionately committed to the well-being of the other. . ."

Zora and Jean, if you are out there, I hope you know how much *agape* your mother had for you.



### 3. Godman

In my mind Jesus makes love to me—long and soft and deep like shadows swallowing a weathered front porch. He never looks Jewish: his nose is small and finely chiseled, his hair, honey-blonde, his eyes, a robin’s egg blue. Light freckles dot his back and shoulders. His face looks a little too perfect, like a model’s or a movie star’s. When he comes, he says, “You’re safe. You’re saved,” over and over, like an automated celestial recording.

I used to fantasize about him even more than I do now. I used to look for him up and down supermarket aisles. On street corners. At the mall. I lay awake till the wee hours reading Scripture, imagining the other lifetimes he might have become my Godman: in mossy Jerusalem temples, by the dusty banks of the Red Sea, on stained sheets at the Motel Six.

Around here they tell me he doesn’t exist, at least not on this earth, but I do--I and my fantastic, schizophrenic brain, with all its starts and stops and flaws and glorious spurts of industry. This brain is a goddess of slippery, wet birth. It creates light from out of the void, moves over the face of the waters. It has character, I say, like some abandoned plantation house, filled to overflowing with ghosts who sit in cobwebbed rocking chairs on the front porch chattering. This brain is an eccentric old woman in a big, floppy hat, who wears orange socks, talks to herself and cans fleshy peaches in a kitchen with lime green linoleum floors. Yeah, it’s a factory. I hear the rumblings and clinkings when I sit very, very still.

*Oh, dear, holy, sweet, heavenly Lord, I am worse than the whore of Babylon. I wish I was dead.*

\* \* \*

When I was four I learned about Cinderella, Snow White, Red Riding Hood, Goldilocks and--what's-her-name?--the one trapped up in the tower with the long hair? I learned about Eve and Mary Magdalene and the woman at the well and the adulteress who was about to get stoned to death. How strange. Mother told me. And every time it was just the same. The poor girl didn't have wits enough about her to come in from the rain. She couldn't get to the ball. She couldn't find Grandma's house. She couldn't make it to Heaven. She couldn't even eat an apple without some horrible disaster befalling her or, even worse, the entire world. She hadn't sense enough to know any better than to steer clear of witches, wolves, bears, dwarfs, serpents and sin.

Then magic happened. The Godman came. Sometimes he was the Prince of Peace. Sometimes he was just a prince. Either way, he brought safety and salvation. He leaned down and kissed the poor, helpless girl, startling her out of her dreary sleep. Or he shimmied up the tower, axed the wolves, shot the bears and melted the witches. Or he floated down, straight down from the sky, and raised the dead and healed the blind and walked on water and died and was buried and rose again, fixing everything that the very first woman, Eve, had messed up with all her terrible lusting after knowledge and ripe, red fruit. But for him, our pitiful heroine would have remained trapped forever, completely naked in a garden of her own inadequacy.

*This ain't no fucking garden. This is a locked ward at Lyon's View Mental Health Asylum.*

~ ~ ~

Let me tell you what my life is like: Every morning I wake up to the loneliness of a train whistle faraway dying somewhere over the river beyond these industrial-green walls. I need the sound. I listen and ache in the marrow for Georgia mornings raised up gently and for my father, the substance of all things believed in, hoped for, the only flesh and blood man I ever knew who was worth a damn. When I'm sinking into that sound, I can see clear back to 1968 through the filmy pane of glass at the security door. Lackadaisical porch swing, cradle-rocking willow branch, Mother, pacing in the kitchen muttering:

*“Revelations chapter 21, verse 8: But the fearful, and unbelieving, the abominable and the murderers, the whoremongers, sorcerers, idolaters and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone.”*

Then I see Daddy through the curtain lace, home at last, taking the porch steps two at a time, bursting into my room. He is walking sunlight, the essence of loyalty, trustworthiness and calm. A prince of a man who pays bills ahead of time, measures twice, cuts once. Keeps up a crazy wife who hasn't slept in the same room with him for going on eight years.

“Melinda Jean, my favorite girl. You know I love you, don't you? Come on, let's get out of here.”

Off we go in his pick up. To town for ice cream. To the park for a picnic. Always winding up walking along the old tracks that run in back of the house clear down to the river.

“These old W&A tracks, now they meander. But, those new tracks over there make a straight shot clear across Georgia. Ah, it don’t matter. The whistles still call out your name. You hear that, now? They’re calling you: Me-lin-da-Jean!”

In this place I need the heaving moans of old whistles, choking back tears under thick plumes belched from smoke stacks like fire from the nostrils of a giant. I need black fingers gripping heaven. I need to hear preaching in a fever heat, glossolalia of rails, the ancient call and response of drumming trestles: two longs and a short wailing over the river. I need to see a Holy Ghost smoke ring lifting up a ragged angel, splaying her gray face like dripping plaster to pronounce redemption across an empty sky.

~ ~ ~

Some days I think I should try to get out of here. Away from the nurses with their drawn, featureless faces. Faraway from the shots and pills they bring that make me drool and forget my name. Back to the light where normal people live in two-story houses and trim their hedges and grill on the patio, where there are no community showers or straightjackets or pools of urine on the floor. A place where people want to wake up.

Then I remember that out there neighborhood children would keep walking right past my door on Halloween night, whispering that I might be a witch. They wouldn’t suspect that I would be just like all those other misconstrued witches from fairytales, another lonely, forgotten woman passing the time by rhyming incantations and gulping down some brew to dull the pain. They would never guess that witches are what Snow White, Cinderella and Red Riding Hood become the morning after.

*Come back, sleep. Rock me on a willow branch to the lullaby of rails going nowhere.  
Fall down slow, cradle and all.*

~ ~ ~

Dr. Berg asks the same questions every Tuesday and Thursday:

“Have you been hearing any voices, Melinda?”

*Yes, Dr. Berg. I heard your voice just now. It sounded rather hollow. Just like it sounded last Thursday and the Tuesday before that and all the Tuesdays and Thursdays that line up in a winding, never-ending row stretching back for years.*

“Have you been seeing anything unusual today?”

*Well, I see you right now, Dr. Berg. Do you consider yourself unusual? Are you really there? Because you don't seem to be. You look through me, straight through my body into the wall. You recite the same lines over and over again, like a robot whose program got stuck.*

*Could I be hallucinating you, then, Dr. Berg? Or are you, perhaps, hallucinating me? Could we both be newborns fast asleep in some hospital nursery, dreaming elaborate futures that will never come to pass? Future landscapes where I grow up to be the shrink and you grow up to be the nut-job who tries to fuck a corpse? And where is “there,” by the way? Third rock from one of two hundred billion stars in the spiral arm of a remote galaxy indistinct from the other one hundred ninety-nine hundred billion swirls of dust and gas that rotate constantly toward a borderland of nothingness?*

“Your mother had a history of mental illness, didn't she, Melinda?”

*Mother didn't have any history, Dr. Berg, because Mother didn't have a life. She didn't have a job. She didn't have a friend. She didn't have a hobby. She didn't have a single substantial thought in her brain. She didn't even have sex. Except, of course, for the day she conceived me. The only thing she did have was the Holiness Way Assembly of God Church on Sundays and televangelists through the week.*

“And your father? Melinda Jean? Tell me about your father.”

~ ~ ~

Daddy brought me raisin pies from Haley's Bakery. He brought rainbow sherbet ice cream and peanut butter cups and pecan pralines. He could never understand why people couldn't eat dessert before the meal. When he came home from long days driving diesel trains in and out of Cravens Yard, he showed me how the engine wheels flattened pennies when he laid them down on the trestle. He told me about hobos who lived in his freight cars and the chained Nazi S.S. men he had hauled around in barred passenger cars during World War II. He took me for rides in the back of his pick-up truck to Bob's Bigburger every Wednesday night while Mother went to church. I could spin around until I was deliriously dizzy on the counter stools and stuff myself full of fries and milkshakes. Once he took me to Woolworth's Five and Dime and bought me a large sack of chocolate covered peanuts. He said a mock blessing, winked, then let me devour the whole bag.

Mother went to church every time the doors opened. The rest of the time, she sat in front of the television changing channels until she found a preacher. She didn't go for walks. She didn't eat dessert. She read the Bible cover to cover twice a year. She prayed

in her closet just like it said in Matthew 6:6-9: “But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.”

Sometimes in the early morning, she went into her closet and didn't come out until the next day.

~ ~ ~

Daddy died on a Monday. It was a sad, old, Acute Myeloid Leukemia Monday late in September when summer gave her last gasp and autumn eased into the empty space. It was as if this day had tried to dawn every Monday since the beginning of the world and only now, in the ever-increasing pale of sky, was it finally able to loom supreme.

We buried him on top of a hill at Greenslake Cemetery.

After his funeral, Mother went back into the closet. When she came out two days later, she burned my blue jeans in a backyard bonfire because Jesus told her to.

~ ~ ~

Dr. Berg isn't a Southerner. He doesn't understand the churning drama of this place, the slow liquefaction of a young woman's brain. He doesn't know that this place is anathema. Every slave who was ever stripped, staked to a post and beaten, raped or castrated behind a barn, lynched from a tall oak and riddled with buckshot has breathed a last breath of despair and longing here on this writhing, seething ground. And every one of those final breaths has added up to a monumental curse. The fair princesses in their hoop skirts fanning themselves on waiting balconies, the gallant cavaliers jousting on their steeds at Chickamauga, the peacocks strutting in the dense shade of the white-

columned Big House, the regal, robed ministers spouting scripture from lofty pulpits to justify this twisted world, all of it, the whole damned fairytale from beginning to end, is cursed.

I tried to believe. I needed Jesus and the Brothers Grimm. I wanted to be safe and saved, to feel the sanctification of the Holy Ghost down in the soles of my feet. I also wanted to slip naked in between the cool, crisp sheets of some faraway, overstuffed bed with a real live Godman who knew how to make every cell of my body scream with ecstasy, deep and cutting, stinging, chilling my sweltering skin till it felt so good it hurt.

How to reconcile the two? Now that was the question that hung in between the shadow spaces. That was the quandary that brought on all my teenage crushes, each and every one involving unrequited love with elusive males who were unavailable, generally because they were dead. I fell madly in love with brooding nineteenth-century poets. Civil War generals in long, frock coats. Elvis Presley. James Dean. But mostly, I fell in love with Jesus of Nazareth—the Jesus with the outstretched arms and the big, dreamy, blue eyes. The Jesus who wrote mysteries in the sand and sweated blood at Gethsemane.

The increasingly challenging problem was that dead men and eternal saviors can't fuck. That is the reason I lost my virginity to our forty-five-year-old Holiness Way preacher in a Georgia Sunday school room when I was fifteen, my first possible, true-to-life Godman, Brother Stead Hamilton.

“Don't be afraid, just let go and move with me.”

“But, isn't this fornication, Brother Stead? Didn't you say in the pulpit that fornicators will burn in hell?”



“The Lord knows that you and me was meant to be together right now, right here in this Sunday school room, Melinda. He pre-ordained it. Now slip those panties off. Slow, Melinda Jean. That’s right. Let your hair fall down. I want you to shake your head around and let that long, blonde hair fall down all around those nice, milky-white tits of yours.”

“But, I’m not sure, Brother Stead. I’m not sure. . . if I’m saved. And how will I--oh, God--how will I know? If I’m saved?”

“I’m gonna save you, Melinda. I’m gonna save you right here and now, girl.”

“But, don’t I have to accept--Jesus? Everyone will burn in hell forever if they don’t accept-- Christ!”

“Are you coming? Come with me.”

“Oh, fornicators like us especially, Brother Stead, if we don’t accept. . .Jesus Christ! As personal lord. And savior. If we don’t accept. God!”

“I’m coming, Melinda Jean!! Wrap your legs around my back.”

~ ~ ~

To this day, I still don’t know how Mother found out.

“Come here to me, Melinda Jean. Drink this. Drink it down. Come here right now and take off all your clothes. I said all of them. Lay down on this bed, Melinda Jean. Open your legs. Wide. I’m going to cut this token of fornication out of your loins. And I’m going to cut out the part of you that feels pleasure, too. And you won’t never do this again. You hear me? You won’t never disrespect the Lord and me like this again.”

We struggle. Roll on the floor in a tumble of Scripture and swearwords. I yank the scissors away from her, grab up my torn dress and rush out of the house. I never stop

running until I come to the railroad bridge. I take those scissors and whack off my waist-length, blonde hair, scatter long tufts of it to the shifting winds, watch them drift over the side rails and into the gray-green water below.

Then I stab myself in the wrist a few times till I pass out. I try all night to die. I miscarry the next day.

When I walk into the vestibule at the Holiness Way Assembly of God Church three nights later, no one looks up into my eyes or down at my wrists. Everyone wants to know what happened to my beautiful hair.

~ ~ ~

I dropped out of high school, grew up, left Mother and got a job waitressing at a place called Lenn's. Between shifts I sat by myself in a corner scribbling poems on napkins-- poems that woke me up at night drumming their rhythms. Pulsing closer. Drumming down, straight down into my head.

This is the poem I was scribbling the Friday night I met Guthrie Hawkins:

*There is rain you make in your head  
Beating pure as a baby's heart,  
Gathering force, bursting banks,  
Drops that do not drown in motherhood, lover-hood,  
Soft, clear beads that do not stain the flow*

Guthrie was a car salesman at Bryan Dickson Chrysler-Dodge. He walked up and

asked if he could buy me a drink. He sat down beside me, read the napkin and said, “You know what? If you lived in Nashville, you could probably write country songs.”

Guthrie wasn't handsome or ugly, intelligent or stupid, passionate or indifferent. He was somewhere in the middle. So I moved in with him in his split level rancher with the chain link fence. Six months later, a justice of the peace married us at the courthouse.

“You don't have to work anymore, Linda. I make enough money for us to live okay. I want to take care of you and, besides, you need your rest. You have headaches all day and you can't sleep at night for those poems in your head waking you up all the time. Why don't you just stay here and work in the yard, buy some trinkets and decorate the house up? You know how you love those things. You can even order some magazines like *Woman's Day* and *Good Housekeeping* to give you ideas.”

I planted azaleas, junipers, petunias and two dogwood trees. I made a wreath for the front door for every season. I bought scrap booking supplies at the mall and taped and cut and pasted. I watched “The Price is Right” and “As the World Turns.”

Guthrie brought home a kitten for my birthday. I named her Sophie. Guthrie told me a neighbor had found my mother hanging from a light fixture in the closet after the mailman noticed a smell. I took Advil every six hours all day. I woke up four or five times a night, went down to the kitchen, made coffee and scribbled poems on post-it notes.

Sex with Guthrie was not horrible. It was part of the Saturday morning routine. Wake up, get paper towels, give him a hand job for a few minutes, let him bump and grind, ignore the blob of belly fat pushing against me and the fact that he keeps his socks on, act

like I come, wipe up the mess, wash my hands, brew Maxwell House, scramble four eggs.

I never told Guthrie “I love you,” but my tongue still ached to say the words. My body throbbed all over late at night in the heavy air to make those three words come true.

Then it happened. I actually came to believe I loved a living, breathing man, so much that I sincerely thought he was the Godman come to save me. I used to call him up when I knew he wasn’t home just to hear his voice on the answering machine. I studied his face, drank in his eyes, though I could never remember them clearly. My reproduction was always far superior to the real thing.

His name was River.

*“I like to feel the water touch my feet, but I don’t go in too deep. I never learned how to swim.”*

That was one of the last things he ever said to me and that pretty much summed things up.

Was it true? What is truth? Is it that he would have married me once I was free, swept me away to that quaint New England town where he was born, given me flowers for no reason, written me sonnets every Sunday for the rest of my life? Or is it that he was a sawed-off-little-shrimp-of-a-scholar with an expanding bald spot and a screwed up ego and the thought of my Southern-born husband, who liked to shoot wild boars for fun, scared the living hell out of him?

Truth is drab. It’s far more pleasant to sit on the back veranda after recreation time on one of those afternoons when the nurses say I’m having a good day and smell the scent of

the rich, moist earth being pelted by a slick barrage of fat raindrops, dreaming guttural whispers in the half light.

I have an active imagination. No, that isn't quite true. I have a *female* imagination-- incredible, able to leap tall buildings, causing reality to instantly shrivel up and die without the feeblest last-ditch struggle. I can turn a seventies rancher with vinyl siding into a nostalgic, ivy-covered cottage, a run-down, mom-and-pop restaurant into a café by the Seine, and an aging, balding man into my Handsome Prince Holy Sweet Lord. With one swoop of my magic wand, I can turn years of dishpan hands and drooping breasts into shimmering carriages and gallant footmen. And I turned that man named River into exactly what I wanted him to be.

~ ~ ~

I met River at Walker State Community College because I got tired of soap operas, scrap-booking, azaleas, and Saturday morning sex. Guthrie probably doesn't know to this day that I was a student at WCC and River was my GED English teacher. Guthrie certainly doesn't know that our diagnostic writing assignment was to be entitled, "What Makes Love True." He will never know that, when I got my paper back, there was a "C-" in red letters at the top. He will never see what River wrote at the bottom of the page:

"Melinda: One cannot speculate on the elements that make love true without first defining love.

~ ~ ~

Even though Guthrie didn't like it, I kept waiting tables at Lenn's on Friday nights.

One night I looked up and saw River drinking in a smoky corner alone. When I got

through with my shift, he motioned for me to come over. He laid down a ten dollar tip and an envelope with my name on it. He looked at me close with those melting, blue eyes. Then he got up and walked out without uttering a word.

The next day I opened the envelope.

“Dear Melinda:

What makes love true? Love is traditionally distinguished as untamed emotion, sexual eroticism, unbridled desire, near-obsession, a frenzied, romantic rapture. Yet, love is, simultaneously, parental devotion, sibling camaraderie, comradeship, the affection born of shared experience. Human beings have defined love in its ultimate form as self-sacrificial and have literally bowed to those whom they have perceived as having comprehended love fully in this state. The Bible has defined love as God. But to strip away the customary notions and unveil the truth of this thing requires the elusive understanding that love moves beyond what is felt within the human heart. Love, Melinda, is not simply an emotion human beings feel, no matter how well intended. Love is the action of selfless intent that ennobles emotion, crowning it with meaning. Love is the deed, the response, the reaction, the daily journey. Love is this moment.

Archibald MacLeish aptly expressed it in this way: ‘Love arms the worth of life in spite of it.’ Love’s ultimate strength, Melinda, is the freedom of our will--the autonomy of our continuing evolution.

What, then, makes love true? We do.

I hope this helps,

--River.”

*And it comes again. Sweeping my head with Cinderella thoughts, Snow White dreams in the summer heat. Slippers that fit. Princes who ride on white horses and hide their flaws inside pumpkin seeds. Fairy Godmothers waving frantic wands. The fertile orchard, yonder there in the distance, dripping with fruit. Sweet, ripe knowledge of good and evil.*

*Lay me out on a bed of green moss on the floor of some whispering forest. Send the dwarfs to dance 'round my coffin of glass before the eastern clouds split open in righteous wrath.*

~ ~ ~

Sweet, sweet River. How is it you do this to me? My fingers never tire of touching you there, wrapping themselves around the length of you. Pulling the foreskin back and taking you deep in my mouth.

Eucharist.

Can I spend a day without thinking of you? An hour without considering the lines around your eyes, the inflection of your voice when you pose a question? The way you move and groan and grasp my fingers firmly in yours, stretching my arms up past the bedposts, holding them there until I feel my bones will snap?

The poems in my head play all night and day now. Poems I can't recite to anyone else. Poems that sing of midnight by the water, by the still, cool rush of that undulating body of liquid that bears your name.

And you lift my legs high in the air and you push, push. Grind your hips while I grip your hair, that little, tousled bit of hair, and I shriek and moan and the water hears me, the night air and the vagrant wind and the still, still stars all stop, fixed as tombstones, hushed

in silent knowing.

~ ~ ~

Dr. Berg says I was clasping an envelope in my hand when they first brought me here. He says it took two nurses to inject me and pry that ripped-open envelope away from me. He says there was one solitary name on the front of the envelope: Sarah. Another English student named Sarah? Another waitress in a smoky dive named Sarah? Sarah, the scorned wife back home making scrapbooks, planting azaleas, dreading Saturdays? The letter inside the envelope read:

Dear Sarah:

What makes love true? Love is traditionally distinguished as untamed emotion, sexual eroticism, unbridled desire, near-obsession, a frenzied, romantic rapture. Yet, love is, simultaneously, parental devotion, sibling camaraderie, comradeship, the affection born of shared experience. Human beings have defined love in its ultimate form as self-sacrificial and have literally bowed to those whom they have perceived as having comprehended love fully in this state. The Bible has defined God as love.

Blah, Blah, Blah.

Archibald McLeish, etc.

I hope this helps,

--River.

~ ~ ~

It was Daddy's birthday the night River died. Daddy would have been fifty-eight. River and I ate ice cream for dinner at Bob's Bigburger in Daddy's honor. It was when



River got up from the table to go pay the check that I found the letter addressed to another version of me, a faceless, nebulous girl named Sarah. The letter drifted down from his pocket to the floor soft as a snowflake when he pulled out his wallet. He never even noticed it.

After we left Bob's Bigburger, we took handfuls of pennies down by the new tracks and laid them on the trestles as a further tribute to Daddy. Then we walked to the railroad bridge and looked down on the silver reflection of twilight sky swirling in the drifting waters.

"Do you want to skinny dip?" I asked.

"No, I like to feel the water touch my feet, but I don't go in too deep. I never learned how to swim."

"Come on, River! You're the one who said human beings make love true. Our moments, our reactions, our daily journeys shifting through the endless cycle of seasons, make love true. The water's not deep here. It only comes up to your waist."

"All right, Melinda Jean Perriloux. But you have to take off your clothes first."

"Be careful climbing down on these rocks, River. Help me unhook my bra. What? What are you doing? You're getting in without taking off your briefs? Oh, for Christ's sake."

"All right, you win. I'll take them off. What can I say? I'm shy in the light of day."

We are naked. We are surrounded by light, the reflective, golden, fluid light of water meeting sky. We splash and play and laugh. He lifts me up on the bank of the river and

kisses my nipples, first the right one, then the left. We are talking of what we will do next. After the divorce. Where we will go. New England. Quiet, provincial. How I will finish college there. How he will teach and I will write outrageously innovative poems and we will publish the great American novel together. Someday.

“I’m feeling very brave now, Ms. Perriloux-Hawkins. Let’s go out farther in the water.”

We wade out until the silver engulfs us up to our thighs.

“Lick me,” I whisper then. “Put your tongue deep inside. Lick me up and down.”

He stoops down. I stand with my legs spread. His trembling fingers hold the delicate folds of skin open. His tongue begins a light dance around, between. Playing softly at first. Then darting in and out, faster and faster. Harsh like a fury.

A sound breaks his concentration. “A fucking train is coming!” he says.

“Never mind don’t stop oh don’t stop River I am coming I am coming now.”

Coming and coming. Hard and fast like the pelting, sharp shower of a thousand lightning bolts. My thighs tighten. Lock around his head. Clamp down tight like a steel trap. He gasps and struggles. His arms flail. His head bobs up and down, but my hands grab him by the hair and push his head back under the water with a power I drain from the swelling wail of the rushing locomotive. He emerges one last time, eyes fixed wide with surprise and panic. Then a tired stillness settles on the water. His head droops, falls limp into the liquid cool of purity and reflection.

I release my grip.

The diesel roars by overhead, not the gentle, clacking rhythm of the old steamers

drumming down time-worn, meandering tracks, but a new, stream-lined rush of high-tech steel, shooting like a missile into the lengthening evening.

~ ~ ~

*“River?”*

*He floats face down. Silent. His forehead nestled into my pubic hair.*

*Sad, old, drifting River. He’s been playing with me.*

~ ~ ~

Dr. Berg says some fishermen found me the next day. Says I was stark naked on all fours over the bloated, blue body of a nude man whose glassy eyes glared upward toward the bridge, past the trees, beyond the sky. Says I was touching the corpse all over, his face and his hair, his hands and his chest. Putting my fingers into my mouth, throwing my head back to the wind, rubbing the saliva-drenched fingertips onto my hard nipples, then inside my vagina, trying to lower myself down onto his cold, shriveled penis. Screaming something about rivers and old train tracks and fairytales and making love true.

~ ~ ~

*Whistles pray  
Benediction,  
Towncryers of the  
old tribe,  
Calling out morning,  
whispering evening,  
Yes, I feel it!  
In my bones, Lord!  
Birth, death,  
in between dreams.*

*Where will we go, girls, to  
end the sweet story?  
To  
sing Jesus down  
when the  
old tracks are gone?  
To find greenery and moist, wet  
Things,  
And brooding sky, girls,  
Once  
upon a time?*

~ ~ ~

Sometimes Guthrie comes to see me on visitation day. He brings me chocolate covered peanuts and *Woman's Day* magazines. Once he brought me a scrapbook I had made twenty years before with a dried rose from an anniversary bouquet, a fur clipping from our cat, Sophie, and lots of old pictures of him and me in front of the rancher, on vacation in Branson, opening presents on Christmas morning.

He is stooped now, walks with a limp. He never talks about it--what happened, I mean. Dr. Berg has told him not to. I am too fragile still. I will always be too fragile. Best to let it go, let it be, let life carry us on our separate ways like the ever-rushing water.

Sometimes he says we will do this or that "when you come home." Sometimes he says next summer or next autumn or next spring or next Christmas it will be this way or that way.

He kisses me when he leaves. He says, "I love you, Linda. You know I love you, don't you?" I watch him go out the security door. I hear the thud of it closing behind him. Then I go and press my face to the narrow glass and my eyes follow him until he fades down

the shadowy hall. I rush over to the big window and watch through the bars as he gets into his car in the parking lot below. The brake lights come on. He cranes his neck to look behind, around. He casts a final, lingering glance up at the caged window where I am standing. The car backs up slow, glides off down the drive and onto the highway over the river. A long asphalt ribbon unwinds toward the railroad tracks, sweating ebony in the gleaming sun.



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## Vita

Patricia (Patty) Ireland was raised in East Ridge, Tennessee. She spent the first part of her life in the music industry as a performer and songwriter of Country and Contemporary Christian music. Coming back to school in her forties, she received a B.A. and an M.A. in English/Creative Writing from the University of Tennessee/Knoxville. Her first love has always been, and continues to be, writing about the South.