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DARK HOUSE

a trailer park pastoral

by

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McGill University, Montreal

August, 1995

A Thesis submitted to the

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the

degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Dark House is a creative writing thesis. In the story, Ben Sandler, a twenty-five year old graduate student in English, retreats to his great uncle's home in rural Ontario to write his Master's thesis. The text is presented in alternating chapters. Chapters 1, 3, 5, 7 and 9 are first person accounts of Ben's experiences. Chapters 2, 4, 6 and 8 are annotated selections from his writings. The required critical afterword is in two parts. The first section deals with innovative and experimental approaches to literary criticism. In the second section, I consider some issues of epistemology, orienting my discussion around the work of Martha Nussbaum and Stanley Cavell.

RÉSUMÉ

Dark House est une thèse en création littéraire. Ben Sandler, vingt-cinq ans, étudiant de deuxième cycle en littérature anglaise, se retire à la campagne ontarienne pour rédiger sa thèse magistrale dans la maison de son grand-oncle. Le texte est présenté sous forme de chapitres alternants. Les chapitres 1, 3, 5, 7 et 9 racontent, en première personne, les expériences de Ben. Les chapitres 2, 4, 6 et 8 sont des passages annotés de ses écrits. L'après-mot critique est en deux parties. La première s'adresse aux approches innovatrices et expérimentales en critique littéraire. Dans la seconde j'aborde quelques questions d'épistémologie, en orientant la discussion vers l'oeuvre de Martha Nussbaum et Stanley Cavell.

So it seems that "Dark House" was the working title for no less than two of Faulkner's major novels, *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*. One wonders why he never actually used the title that lingered in his imagination for the better part of his most prolific and successful period.

-from the "Notes and Queries" section of *The Mississippi Quarterly* (Summer 1970)

Tuesday and before

Isaac McCaslin, 'Uncle Ike', past seventy and nearer eighty than he ever corroborated any more, a widower now and uncle to half a county and father to no one . . .

I was reciting the opening lines of *Go Down, Moses*, rolling the master's words across my tongue, hoping to conjure up some inspiration or intellectual motivation. It never worked but I did it anyway. Despite the clean t-shirt and the fresh scrapes of deodorant, my armpits were emitting a sweetly pungent stink, a product of the toil and the heat. It was hotter inside the car so my upper body was steaming while my legs were merely uncomfortable. I worked my fingers under the box and pulled on one of the flaps. The top layer of forty dollar paperbacks slid onto the back seat floor. I stopped reciting Faulkner and began to swear.

A voice said "Hi." I knew she was talking to me but I pretended not to hear. She said it again, tapping me on the ass. I pulled my jeans up and craned my neck around. It was a girl, sixteen or seventeen, straight brown hair and a pale face. Standing close,

hovering. There was no breeze to speak of. The trees stood tall and still behind the trailers, the sharp sun casting their shadowed forms across the park.

"Hello," I said, kneeling as I turned back around. Bits of gravel burrowed into the denim under my kneecaps. I stuffed the fallen books into the sides and lifted out the box, hipping the door closed as I stood up. She stood there watching, her hands primed to help me, shifting her weight from side to side like a shortstop on the pitch. I noticed she was pregnant.

"Easy, eeeaaasy," she said, clapping once and keeping her hands together as I arrived at full height. The box collapsed.

"Fuck!" I shouted, dropping the empty cardboard and pounding my fist on the car.

When I came back with the milk crates, having dumped Milt's undergarments onto the closet floor, the sun had shifted. She was squatting on the dusty ground between the porch and the car, half in a shadow and half in the light, the books arranged into four neat piles. Her hands dangled limply over her knees. One of them held *The Will to Power*. "This one's kind of bent up," she said, flexing it. Either her nose was pointed or her eyes were deep-set. "The rest of them look alright though."

"Thank you," I said. "I can take care of this."

"I don't mind." She started filling one of the crates, shaking the dust out from the books and loading them strategically, forming a foundation from the bigger ones. The toes of her sandaled feet peeped out from the layered ends of her dress. Her shoulders were narrow and white. "My name's Gwen," she said.

Not until I was resting the crate on the porch railing did I decide to give her my name. I was balancing it with my left hand and reaching for the cheap thin handle of the screen door with my right. She put the other crate down and held the door for me.

"Thanks," I said. "I'm Benjamin Sandler." I dropped it in front of the closet.

She passed me the second one, hoisting it from her belly and peeking in after the exchange. I caught her trying to identify the smell, puckering for a series of quick whiffs.

Was it the odour of smoke from Milt's closet, I wondered, or the fresh human stench of my pits? "I have a card for the library in Huntsford," she said, holding the door by her neck. "You can borrow it if you want."

I stood with my hands on my hips, wiping my forehead and panting. "I think I've got all the books I need."

"If you need any help getting settled just let me know. Mine's the mobile next door." She pointed with her thumb towards the right, at the trailer I had seen from Milt's workroom. "Actually it belongs to my boyfriend's father but he's driving across Canada for his honeymoon. We're taking care of it for him. Watering the plants."

I didn't know what to say so I just smiled. I wanted her to go away. She seemed to be waiting for something. She wanted me to ask her for help. Bored. "I'll let you get to work." she said, easing her head out and letting the door click shut. "Later." She gave the window a tap and trotted down the steps, disappearing from my view. I saw her reflection in the side windows of the car. And then she reappeared, walking quickly up the road, her arms moving rigidly with the stride.

I sat down on the couch and fell asleep.

* * *

It has been some good entertainment reading over the pages from those four days, annotating them, playing the editor and not the critic for a change. I am grateful for the whim that led me to open up those files. And so what if I wrote the stuff myself? I hope I am qualified to comment on my own thoughts, even the shamelessly derivative ones. It is really less of an ego trip than the standard critical game: no imposing or supposing with anyone else's ideas. Whatever. It has kept me occupied for the last few days. And if I am to fulfill the promise I have made to myself--no research, no reading, no working for the entire month of June (I could use some such respite, you know, after a bloody gruelling

first year here in Charlottesville)--I will be needing something else to do. So I have begun to put down the story that surrounds those odd writings, the ones I have had the impudence to footnote. It will require something truly ugly, I am afraid--remembering the hideous circumstances that brought me there and re-immersing myself in the rather embarrassing mind-set I took with me to Milt's place.

But what else am I supposed to do with my time? There is the pilgrimage to Mississippi I have been planning but it is too hot for that right now. Better to stay here in this dark, stuffy bachelor with the comforting hum of the ineffective air conditioner and recollect those days from last summer. I think I can handle it. Things are fine now that the Diane ordeal is over and I am working on the Ph.D.

Of course none of it would have happened if Eileen hadn't known more than she was supposed to know. How she found out is beyond me. Terrifying. With those kinds of abilities you would think that the mothers of the world would have risen up, infiltrated, broken all our codes. Because I had told her nothing. And three hundred miles West, not having seen me since Christmas, she knew not only that Diane had moved out but that I wasn't dealing with it, that I had sunken into a torpid malaise, had done nothing productive for the better part of two months and that I was smoking, smoking, smoking.

There was that evening, a month after the blowout, somehow more depressing because of the longer than usual silence that came before it. When Eileen called the next morning it was as if she had been there as a silent observer and was now bringing forth her proposals. Like she had witnessed the whole pathetic sequence of events:

"Do you want to come in and warm up?" I said. A month ago it had been our apartment and now it was mine. It was late April, hovering near five degrees; she could have made it home with little danger of frostbite. The collective years of training in analysis and argumentation had meant nothing three hours earlier, when an excuse for not sitting together was all we had needed. We went out for coffee afterwards, drank two pitchers of

beer and managed to agree about something: the lecture had been derivative and uninspired. Diane had recalled a few redeeming points.

"Maybe for a minute," she said.

We were lying under the quilt, sweaty and serene, when I said it. My mumbling ironic drawl: "The bloody Catholics don't know what they're missing."

"What is that supposed to mean?" She leaned on her elbow and waited, pulling the sheet above her bony shoulders.

After three years I should have known to go for the retraction. But I thought my follow up was rather innocuous. Charming even. Mitigating at least: "The heavy duty ones. The ones who actually don't have sex for any reason other than procreation. I guess they come in all religions."

"Why are you always insulting religious people?" She sat up against the wall and crossed her legs, bringing the covers with her. I rolled away, onto my side, my scrotum folding into my thighs. I crouched into a fetal position and rubbed my uncovered arms.

An hour later she was fully clothed, jacket and all, furiously smoking a cigarette at the kitchen table. I was lying on the bed. I had moved only once, to put on my underwear. She tapped a Doc Marten-clad heel on the floor in a stuttered allegro. "What is all your Faulkner bullshit going to do for the goddamn world?" she said. My right arm was folded over my face and I eyed her through the crevice. She was a shadowed form down the hall through the bedroom door, staring straight ahead at the hanging basket of onions. "Do you think that knowing all there is to know about an overrated American writer is going to be of any *moral* value?"

"You've only read *Sanctuary*," I said in a thin, exhausted tremolo. "He admitted that he wrote it for money. Read the preface to the Modern Library edition. Better yet, read *Absalom, Absalom!*. If anything he's *under*rated."

"That's not the point, Ben." Something bounced against the wall--two thuds and a fading roll. One of my Granny Smiths, I thought.

I walked into the kitchen, arranging my face into dog eyes, a dimpled forehead and a compact frown. "Let's not fight," I said, touching her shoulder. She slapped my hand away.

"The point *is* you know nothing *about* feminist theory so you are not entitled to an opinion. Have you read Cixous? Have you read Kristeva? Have you read Mary Fucking Wollstonecraft?" She enunciated with forced calmness, counting off the names of the unread on her fingers. I slouched into the living room chair. My knuckles touched the hardwood. "You think you're so well read. People at school see right through you, you know, and your tedious intellectual confidence act. You can't be an intellectual if you don't *think*, you know. All you've got going for you is that you're maladjusted." She scraped her chair around and smiled, blinking rapidly. "Do you even *like* any women writers?"

I relaxed my neck completely, chin on ribs, cutting her out of my periphery. "I like Virginia Woolf and Eudora Welty," I muttered into my stomach. "I like a lot of women writers."

"What?" she said. "What did you say?"

After she had left, still in my underwear, I turned on the TV and stared absently at the screen, the volume inaudibly low. Moronic science fiction--ray guns and leotards and imploding craters. I looked at the collapsed pile of books under my desk chair and sniffed my fingers.

Eileen called the next morning and suggested I come home for the Easter holiday. It wasn't because she thought I'd want to observe the Passion. "It'll be a refresher," she said. "Breaking your routine could be helpful. We'll go to a few movies, eat on the porch if it's warm enough." I told her to fuck off and that I was too busy, which would have been true if I had been doing what I should have been doing, writing my Master's thesis.

The dim and echoey aisles of the library in summer. It was the first time I had been there in a month. A month of nothing. Sleep and cigarettes and damp, delivered food. I

was returning twenty pounds of overdue books after having received a threatening letter about my triple digit fines. Loitering in the Faulkner section, the PS 3511s. What I wanted was the large biography, the one by Blotner, two fat volumes on the top shelf in the corner. I should have used the Kik-Step.

I managed to lay a finger on Volume One, one foot propping me on a lower shelf, the other dangling somewhere near the copies of *Requiem for a Nun*. They were old sneakers. I had been waiting for Eileen to supply me with a new pair. The soles had been flopping for several months, back and front, and I had altered my walking style to accommodate them--lifting my legs higher to prevent the soles from dragging and shaking out the pebbles without falling from the stride. I had not been walking much.

My sole slipped under the shelf. The big toe of my right foot and the hooked index finger of my left hand were the only things holding me up. I went for the book anyway. The toe slid away and I fell backwards, into the stacks behind me, toppling a row of paperbacks that formed a cushion for my landing. Awkwardly bent in the aisle. There was a visible layer of dirt on the bile-green floors. A booming pulse at the back of my head and a sharp hot pain in the toe. Half of the nail had been plucked away and replaced by slowly oozing blood. The biography was face down on my chest, open to the photographs. I hurled it away. As it flipped through the air I caught a glimpse of the young Faulkner leaning on a cane, playing up his fabricated war injury. It landed with a low heavy thud. I pulled a paperback out from under my thigh: *LOVE'S KNOWLEDGE: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. The cover was white and glossy.

In the elevator I put a flattened cigarette between my lips and prepared a match for striking.

The walk home felt like Quentin Compson's last walk on that June day in Cambridge. Not the torment but the numbness, the nothingness. I had no intention of leaping off a bridge. Only to go home and do some work. The sooner I wrote the thing the

sooner I would escape from the baggage and the ghosts of Montreal. It seemed right to limp a little and so I did. It was drizzling. Too cold for June. St. Laurent street was quiet. Two French women with umbrellas walked by and I thought, *parapluie;* I thought, six years and I still can't speak the language. One of my old students was sitting by the window at Café Méliès so I crossed the street to avoid him. They were hanging dead pigs in the butcher's window. I stopped in front of Warshaw's and thought about buying some groceries. A man shook his cup: "Un peu de change? Vingt-cinq sous?" I said "no" and walked away. *Just go home and do some work*, I thought. *Five pages today*. I detoured at Duluth, afraid of bumping into Diane.

So I got home and went to bed and the phone rang. I knew it would be her. She was the only one who called me. I had yet to re-establish connections. I let it ring five times and then picked it up, making it sound like I had just walked through the door.

"Hey Benjy. Just get in?"

"Don't call me Benjy, Eileen. The only Benjy I know is an idiot with his balls cut off."

"Is that an allusion to something? Faulkner?"

"*The Sound and the Fury.*"

"I won't call you Benjy if you don't call me Eileen."

"Deal."

"*Deal, mom.*"

"Deal, mom."

When she eased her way into the Milt issue I thought it was innocent enough. It was something worth reporting on, a death in the family. It had none of the markings of her other strategies. It took me a second to remember who he was. "I'm sorry," I said, with deliberate insincerity, knowing it couldn't have been a big deal for her.

"Well," she said, in the rolling tone of adages, "he was my father's brother. The last of a generation."

That had to have been the extent of her grieving. If she had mentioned him at all in the past three years it was out of fear that he might accept her token invitations to visit. He had retired recently from whatever rural labour had kept him fed and occupied for most of his life and Eileen--always the confident speculator--had concluded that his ability to sustain the stoic isolation he had upheld for the better part of forty years was waning. On the evidence of his three-line Christmas card messages she had decided that he was lonely and bored and that he might actually go through the trouble of travelling down to Toronto from his place in the Ontario sticks to meet the family he had never been given the chance to know. It was good to learn that she had been wrong about something.

Whatever she knew about the ancient blowout between her father and his younger brother came from her own far too detailed memory of overhearing their last argument during a visit to the family farm when she was eleven or twelve. Milt had been living on his own there for several years. Something about Henry wanting his brother to move to Toronto to join the rest of them, him and the two sisters, and Milt refusing. The angriest she would ever see her father. They left in furious haste and the brothers never spoke again. Their last communications were through lawyers, regarding the sale of the farm. Even to Eileen's over-friendly sensibilities it was nothing short of weird when the first card came, thirty or so years later, the Christmas after Henry's death. He was living in a place a few miles north of the old family property--a small, cottage-like building that I would see a few months later, while reluctantly running an errand for Eileen.

Anyway he was dead and I didn't care.

Eileen waxed about her father for a minute while I peeled the bloody sock from my toe. Then she told me that Milt had left her four thousand dollars, a car that no longer existed, and his home. Which was everything.

"Do I get a cut?" I said. "It would help me through the grieving stage."

"You get a free place to live," she said, "if you feel like you need a change of scenery. It might be a good way to get your work done." I heard her gasp and hold it, anticipating verbal abuse.

But she was saved from my ranting. The doorbell rang. I brought the phone with me to the door. It was a perfectly Freudian moment--me not knowing what I wanted more, to scream into the receiver at my mother or wrap the cord around my ex-fiancée's neck. I told Eileen I would call her back. I couldn't even slip in the requisite expletives, having to feign levelheadedness and all.

She figured out it was Diane, either from her voice or the thick silence that followed her confident "Hello."

"Be firm, Benjy," my mother instructed me. "Don't let her fuck you around."

"I just need the bookshelves." She was taking off her shoes, awkwardly leaning in the doorway and tugging.

"Leave them on," I said, sitting down at the desk, randomly pulling out a page from the stack of papers beside the computer, an enlargement of Faulkner's map of Yoknapatawpha. In one of my more creative procrastinations I had pencilled in a landmark: 'Ben Sandler's, where ground breaking thought on Absalom, Absalom! took place.'

"You're going to need a screwdriver," I said. "I don't have one."

She drew a Phillips from the inside pocket of her motorcycle jacket and shook it like a maraca. I knew right then that she hadn't come over for sex. She unscrewed the brackets while I laid the books on the futon. The short dull noises of our labour and the haze of floating dust. It looked like she had gained at least five pounds.

"How's your thesis coming?" she said, dropping a screw into her breast pocket and blowing the dust from one of the boards.

"I'm about ready to start the second section." What I didn't tell her was that I was intending to write the second section first. I had not put down a word.

"Great," she said. We made eye contact for the first time since the door. "Are you happy with it?"

"It's alright." I cleared away some books and sat on the bed, idly thumbing a paperback, watching her struggle with the shelves. The last thing. Except for the poster above my desk--a kimonoed Faulkner scooping sushi from a bowl--she had taken every adornment. The walls were off-white and barren. She was standing on the baseboard heater to reach the upper screws. "How's *your* work coming?" I said.

"Fine," she said, stepping down. She pointed at my toe. "What happened?"

"I got it caught on something."

"It looks *awful*. You should wash it. It could get infected." She rested the last board against the wall and walked to the bathroom, came back with a wet face-cloth and soap. I didn't protest. It stung at first but the warm water felt good around my foot, the one hand cupping my ankle.

"I'm moving into a cabin up north in Ontario for awhile," I said. The damp ends of the cloth tickled my arches. "Just to be alone and finish up the thesis."

"Really?" Her first syllable was a few tones higher than her second. She wiped away some crusted blood from between my toes, gently stretching them apart. "That sounds nice."

"It's Eileen's uncle's place. He died last week. You probably heard her mention him. The recluse who sent the Christmas cards."

"I don't remember," she said. She lowered my leg to the floor and folded the cloth. I stuck out the other foot but she didn't bite. "You're going soon?"

"Pretty soon. Next week probably."

"So I can have the apartment back?"

"Ummm," I said, propping a pillow against the wall and resting my feet on the Penguin *Clarissa*. "Yes. I guess you can."

"Perfect," she said. "I've been looking for a place. It's too cluttered at Audrey's. I can't get anything done. This is perfect." She grabbed a board with one hand and the stack of brackets with the other. "Is it alright if I leave them in the closet?" she said, already starting on the second load. "There's no point in taking them with me."

She put the shelves in the closet and left. I watched her from the door. Half way down the stairs she stopped and turned around, her leather bending and squeaking. "You should put a Bandaid on it," she said. "Keep it clean."

And I wanted to say "I *know* that you've heard of him" because three years earlier, at the blind and happy start of things, I had told her about the errand. I lay down on the books and thought about it--both the story and its telling, the two of us naked for just the third or fourth time.

How when I was sixteen, in exchange for permission to attend a cottage party in the area, Eileen made me take him a gift. She was trying to reciprocate. It was the summer after the first card and she, of course, had not sent him one. The place was a few miles off the highway at the top of a wooded hill. I started up the dirt road, my heels sinking into the muddy tire tracks, but I spotted the cabin in the distance and opted for the straight route across the pathless woods. The station wagon radios were blaring at the bottom of the hill. Nine male teenagers eager to commence a two day drinking binge. There were window screens and dark wooden walls, a boulder and a large metal basin beside the door. He answered my timid knock quickly. I identified myself, said "this is from my mother," pinched the red ribbon and dangled the box of Laura Secord chocolates in front of him. He was wearing a flannel shirt and baggy jeans, too low at the waist. "Thank you," he said, briefly studying the box. "Thanks very much. Have a great day."

When I called Eileen to tell her it was a done deal, that a few weeks in that cabin would be the perfect thing for working, that I would be in there by the end of the month,

she reminded me that Milt's place had burned down six years earlier and he had moved into a trailer park closer to the town. He had related this to her in one of the cards.

"Why in the hell didn't you tell me that before?" I said.

"I thought you knew. You *did* know. I remember you laughing about it."

I let off an angry sigh and glanced up at the master, cross-legged in Nagano.

"Those things can be quite luxurious," she said. "I doubt his is top of the line but it's still a good opportunity. A change of environment might be nice." There was a long pause and then she started singing quietly, in an old man's Yiddish drawl, a novelty tune she had been doing for as long as I could remember: "Oi yoi buhbuhbuh I'm goinkon veykaaytion."

"You're not Jewish," I said. A time-worn target of my ridicule. Her delusions were made worse by the fact that she had married a man with a Jewish sounding name. I suspected her of having done it on purpose. I had a stock of jokes for whenever the issue arose.

Her constitution simply hadn't equipped her with the ability to leave a musical phrase unfinished. I almost hung up during her ridiculous crescendoed rallentando.

"Oi yoi buhbuhbuh the SOOT-kayse VAH-zn't MYNE!!"

* * *

I should have known she would act up. She couldn't help adopting that overwrought maternal sentimentality when somebody was going away. It put me in a bad mood for the trip.

"My boy! My boy is leaving! He just came home and he's leaving again!" She said it the only way it could have been said--Ethel Merman style, like a snippet of dialogue bridging two numbers in a Broadway musical. We were standing on the porch.

"For Christ sake Eileen," I said, sleeping bag and suitcase in hand. "Release whatever it is you need to release and I'll be on my way."

"Just give me a kiss," she said, puckering and tapping her cheek with two fingers. I wanted to pop her one. She was making me feel like I was going off to camp. I kissed her and went down the steps.

"Forward all mail," I said, jamming my things into the over-packed trunk. "Immediately if it's from one of the schools." I sat down in the driver's seat and adjusted the shade to the late morning sun. Idling in front of the driveway, I looked up the tree-lined road of middle class homes, consciously ignoring her as she stood on the porch waving. I accelerated, sticking my arm out the window at the last minute. She shouted something cute.

Sitting in the Naugahyde truckstop booth, waiting for my cheeseburger, unable to score better than 'satisfactory' on the wooden IQ test game, my rehabilitated visions of an intellectual retreat took another beating. It was something to do with the menu: "Good old home cookin'/ The best in Honey Bay!" I became lost in a glitter of sun in the window pane beside me. The waitress frightened me when she dropped down the chicken soup. I opened the packet of crackers and crushed them in my fist.

The eyes were what gave it away--too pointed, too yellow and without eyeballs. Except for an oval area on the chest, sloppily painted a creamy light brown, the rest of it was dark brown, almost black. No detail, only the vaguely recognizable structure of an owl. Just one pointed ear was left and the body was dented and discoloured. It was collapsing to one side, tilting into the eavestrough above the door. I sat in Eileen's Toyota. Weeds were growing in the foot-high space between the trailer and the ground, collecting around the concrete blocks that held it up: the dull beige aluminum panels and the grey-shingled roof. The wide empty dirt road was reflected in the rear view mirror. No one in sight. Only the pulsing chirp of crickets.

The sludgy current of my thoughts was directed by molded paternal maxims as I stepped from the car and dug the key from my pocket, went up the three steps of the concrete porch, tickling the black metal railing. *You've got to do what you've got to do.* I opened the screen door and slipped the key into the lock. *It will be a lesson.* I went inside.

It was dark. Curtains drawn on all the windows. There was a campfire smell. Faint, like the light; suggested, like the forms of cupboards along the wall on the left. I flicked three switches with my open hand, igniting two dim overhead bulbs. I looked to the right. Three wooden doors with metal knobs along a brown-carpet hallway. On the other side was a wide room. The carpet stopped three quarters of the way across, where once-white tiles began. The tiles were chipped. In several places the plywood beneath them showed through. The kitchen sink and an old, two-burner electric stove were packed into a corner. Standard issue salt and pepper shakers at the centre of the kitchen table. The chair faced the window that looked out over the park.

I took it in from the middle of the trailer. A single ray of sunlight pierced the plastic window of the screen, ending between two slats in a sliding door closet and revealing the dust particles that swam through the air.

The couch surpassed all the gems of my studenthood, tattered and rip-ridden, with bulging, crumbling foam. Through the dirty opaque curtain of the window above it I made out the forest line, the trees only slightly too distant to be touchable by a stuck-out arm. A hideous starving artist nature scene beside the window, inside a cheap wooden frame. Apple crates for furniture: a coffee table and a box for magazines. A water-warped copy of *Cottage Country* showed its once-glossy cover.

I started down the hall, surveying a spot for the computer. The door on the left was the bathroom. I studied the shallow toilet bowl and decided to hold my piss. The shower door was open, showing a concrete floor and the circular grate into which the water fell. A depleted, dry and cracking bar of soap sat in the cubby on the wall. I tried the tap. There was a metallic clanking and then silence. Turning the shower head towards me, I was

blasted by a powerful spurt. Cold water drenched my face and my chest. I took off my t-shirt and wiped my glasses and my face. Looking in the cracked mirror of the medicine cabinet, I placed my right hand on my left shoulder and flattened the flab into a muscle.

The other front-side window was in his bedroom. I opened the curtain and looked up the road--the rows of trailers beyond the trees, stretching to the highway. Still nobody around. Hard to believe that people might have looked down the road and spotted his brown rectangle and thought of luck and luxury, a meadow-like seclusion enjoyed only by the three trailers at the end. I sat on the bed, an uncovered mattress on a rusty frame. There were folded sheets and a striped wool blanket. Eileen had told me that the woman next door had cleaned the place up after Milt; I imagined she was responsible for the tidy bedclothes. She was some kind of superintendent, hired by the owner of the land to keep the place in adequate operation. There was a box of chocolates for her in the glove compartment. I had to fight the urge to lie down and drift off, the impulse to switch on the little black and white TV on the floor in the corner. On top of the clumsy plywood nightstand was an electric clock, the pre-digital kind, on which the numbers rolled over with agonizing slowness. I bent forward to set it and discovered it was right--3:46 p.m. I closed my eyes and listened to the mechanical hum as it strained to 3:47.

I had to shoulder open the door at the end of the hall. Fat laser squares of sun shot a pattern onto my bare chest, a warped detail of the sectioned window. The curtainless pane covered the upper half of the wall. Through it, beyond a scattering of trees, was another trailer. Clean white panels and light blue trim. A bicycle was leaned against the side.

Inside was colour. Spills and brush-strokes of paint patterned the rough plywood of the floor and walls, seemingly unintentional, but with the planned arbitrariness of a modern painting. They were most dense around the table--a carpenter's work bench with a long-legged, drop-splattered stool. Some half-pint cans of paint were stacked on top a pile of yellowing newspapers inside an orange plastic water basin.

The rest of the table was a papier mâché menagerie: a long, two-tone alligator, a brown and orange bird, a moosehead with arched and pointed antlers. The antlers were unpainted, showing lacquered-over text from a newspaper. Other figures on the table and more around the room--mounted on walls, alone in corners. A fat crow dangled from the light fixture on the ceiling. There was paint up there too.

But I went straight for the little man on the windowsill, delicately pinching it up. A defiance of my personal sense of gravity: its feet were glued securely to the ledge. It looked like the newest of the toys. The paint and the finish were glossy. No signs of sun damage, even though the light hit it directly, casting a shadow onto the table, encompassing the six inch figure in a yellow coat of sun. It was a hunter: brown boots, green pants, a red and black checked jacket, a florescent orange cap. There was a rifle in its hand, not primed but ready, angled loosely at the side. There were drawn-on fingers and painted shoelaces. The checks of the jacket were as precise as the bulky material would allow. Under the hat where the face should have been was an expanse of flesh-coloured paint. Featureless.

I cleared a space on the table for the computer and took the moosehead to the living room--a kitschy centrepiece for the coffee table apple crate. I pissed in the rust-spiralled toilet, amazed by the muscle of the flush. And then I went outside and got the Faulkner poster, hung it on the workroom wall.

No distractions, I thought, sliding open the closet doors to ditch the ghettoblaster and the plastic bag of tapes. Something in there was the source. There was the potent reek of a campfire. The stench was on everything--the wool jacket, the folded pants, the parka and the two hanging shirts. Also on the stuff in the milk crates, I assumed, although I refrained from smelling them, the underwear and socks. They were the clothes of a stocky man, a man who didn't give a shit about appearance but demanded durability from what he wore. I saw the orange hunter's cap on the top shelf. Behind it was a nylon rifle case. I poked. There was a rifle inside.

Self-portrait, I thought.

* * *

When Gwen came back I was just sitting down to write. Two minutes earlier she would have woken me up. She didn't knock. She opened the screen door, timidly spoke my name, and then closed it again. When I got there from Milt's workroom she was standing on the porch looking out at the park.

"I made one of these for you," she said. "I didn't know how big your head was so I had to guess." She stuck out her lower jaw and offered it to me with a stiff arm: a piece of white sheet knotted to form a headdress, some black mesh stapled to the front. I gathered from the mesh that it was meant to be an insect mask. I wasn't quite awake.

"Thank you," I said, not knowing whether to laugh or try the monstrosity on.

"You're gonna need it. In a couple of days this place'll be swarming with mosquitoes." She crossed her arms and looked away. I shook my head quickly, trying to unsettle the slumbrous haze. "You just missed the black flies. They were hellish this year. They'll drive you crazy if you let them."

"You're kidding," I said, examining the mask. I hadn't even thought about the insect factor. There was nothing I hated more. The thought of it made me mildly depressed. "Do they bite?"

"The black flies or the mosquitoes? You better believe the mosquitoes bite. If you catch them doing it you can blow them up. My boyfriend does it." I glanced over to where she was pointing but there was nobody there. "You wait for them to stick the stinger in and you squeeze your skin. It fills them up with blood and they explode." She held her arm up and pinched some pale flesh around her inner elbow. Laughing, she chomped down on her tongue.

"Are you serious?" I said.

"Oh yeah. I've seen him do it."

"Well thanks again," I said, insinuating closure. She put her hand on the railing and stepped back, one foot starting down the steps.

"If the mask doesn't do it for you," she said, "you'll have to learn the Muskeegee Swat." She started laughing and moving her hands in rapid circles, as if fighting off a swarm of bees. And I was thinking, there is a pregnant girl standing on the steps of a dead man's mobile home, flailing her arms at invisible bugs.

writing

The only difference being that I was actually sitting there, the cursor pulsating, rather than doing nothing somewhere else. All that the retreat had earned me. Groggy, hot and unable to concentrate, the soft evening sun detailing several years of dirt on the giant pane in front of me. I got up to piss three times in half an hour. Might have gone home if not for the tedious drive. Only a few notes:

-intro: outline modern philosoph. concern w/ authenticity: Nietzsche, Freud, Sartre, etc. (Read Freud & Sartre!)

-Faulkner's characters & authenticity 1) Thomas Sutpen: relentless "design" to attain aristocratic status; self-fulfillment at any cost; nihilism 2) Isaac McCaslin: self-fulfillment in relinquishment, throwing off of patrimony, abandonment to nature ... both disregard the social/moral codes of their societies in an effort to 'be true to themselves' / true to their own originality (cf. Taylor- Malaise of Modernity/ Trilling- Sincerity and Authenticity/ recall Emerson's "Do your thing and I shall know you"- "Self Reliance"(?))

1st line: "... Absalom, Absalom! and Go Down, Moses present opposing versions of the modernist quest for authenticity...." -both portrayed fragmentedly: the multiple narrators of the first; the multiple story units of the second. Thus, "authenticity's code": originality dispersed, available only through varying parts and perspectives; authenticity a construct of atomism (2 senses of "code": system of secret signals/ system of morality) (???)

Which is as far as I would get in my four days there. I read a few random pages in Moses and then put it down, stared at the screen again. Ten minutes at least. It started like this:

Intractable indeed. Stubborn unwavering indomitable wanting nothing more than to be left alone and who can blame the old sonofabitch for that? Who, sitting here, managed at least to accomplish something (this paper zoo) while I fucking well diddle about, me the great incapable

he maybe doubtless probably*

Which led me to an exercise, a sort of procrastination étude. It seemed like a good enough thing to do. It was either that or the computer Scrabble game I had made the mistake of picking up a few months earlier. Or a nap, which hardly seemed reasonable seeing as I had only been awake for an hour. I have made some changes, tried to make these disjointed fragments flow, to mold them into something like a narrative. Parts of them

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* No coincidence that the first lines of my dilatory trailer park ramblings contained several of Faulkner's favourite words. Along with "myriad," "intractable" and "indomitable" appear on virtually every page of Go Down, Moses, especially "The Bear." The master fancied anything that started with an "i" and ended with an "able." Perhaps the only great writer who could consistently get away with strings of essentially synonymous adjectives, effectively contributing to the prose without miring himself in redundancy. Some call it overwriting; I call it genius. "Maybe," "doubtless" and "probably" show up frequently in Absalom, Absalom!, particularly in Shreve McCannon's imaginative reconstruction of Thomas Sutpen's morbid saga. The words are followed, of course, by the description of some action or other; I seem to recall myself writing them in sequence as I struggled to think of something to describe. I have always felt an affinity with Shreve, probably because he is a Canadian ("the child of blizzards and of cold" [Absalom 346]) and has never been anywhere near the American South. As a youth, I took part in a miserable family trip to Florida, where I caught Chicken Pox and spent three days in a hospital before being flown home early. That, until I came to Virginia, was my most intimate experience with the South.

The old sonofabitch is Milt of course.

were barely readable when I opened up these files the other day. And I have reduced some of the purpler moments to a softer mauve. But the structure, the ideas, the scenes remain intact. If nothing else, I'm glad I didn't erase these odd vignettes (as, in mortified frustration, I considered doing in the weeks following the absurd retreat).

he maybe sat here for hours at a time in concentration on these objects, the tightly wrinkled jeweller's squint as he would bend towards the materials, not so much for precision as to compensate (a man near seventy and the sunlight sharp) for failing vision and steadiness, his breaths strong and audible as he delicately applied the brush to the molded paper thing. And giving the most attention to the solitary man, an emblem of old invincibility, pronounced first years before, in a different room where he sat quietly (steadier then) and listened to another speak while the rain drove with infuriated rhythm against a tall window on a cold dark afternoon

and maybe while he sat here, applying the final drop of paint to the stoic hunter--bristleless, barely letting it touch--he thought of it, went back there, bridged the near fifty year gap in a single act of remembering, so perfectly and powerfully that it was not only the two of them (he and his elder brother) sitting across from each other at the family table in the family home, their parents dead for going on ten years now, but in fact three--he and the brother and himself again--an overseer, arbiter, a man near seventy observing his own twenty-one year old resolve. Watching them in juxtaposition across the long dark table, the one speaking softly and only occasionally because determined, believing words to be a province of the uncertain and the defeated: the other quick and long-winded but also quiet, hushed, not out of confidence or calm, but because his young family sat in the adjoining room pretending not to listen and so (his wife at least) concentrating all the more on the hearing. The faint smell of wet wood and of cheese and the long high window behind the table, the steady sound of rain

[Here, I picked up the book again and thought about working. A pang of nauseous fear. The last feeble attempt.]

the elder probably considered it a relinquishment, felt the sting of something like repudiation when the younger spoke with composure (and therefore with emphasis, authority), saying "No, Henry, no. I am going to stay here. You carry on with your family and your life and bring them like this to visit me if you want but I am going to stay here because that is what I want to do." even though it was he, the elder, who had given up the heritage, left it behind for the din and spoils of the city as his sisters did after him and now sitting across from the youngest in the kitchen probably, thinking, *in choosing to stay here he is relinquishing because we, the family, are city people now, we have planted ourselves there to make better lives for us and for our children and for our children's children and by staying here he is saying No to us and to what will be our legacy and as the elder it is my duty to convince him to do otherwise.* And maybe Milt saw it that way too, maybe he saw corruption in the things his brother had chosen, believing things themselves to be tainted and so not merely stubborn or lazy or stupid but actually and actively relinquishing, wanting nothing to do with money or jobs even, probably wanting only the time and freedom and obligationlessness to spend crafting his animals or hunting or simply to live in peace with himself and he knew that he could have found no peace there in the city. It was not with shame or anger that he stared across at his brother, his head tipped slightly downwards and his eyes angled up, arms crossed on the table, but with perfect unflinching resolve. He listened to the other, who for ten years had been to him something like a father, had at least adopted the same stern authority that the real patriarch--a man of old world endurance who had done the same as his elder son was now doing, abandoned in his youth everything he had known or cared about and recreated himself (in fact it was the same recreated lot that the elder now pleaded with the younger to let go, knowing however that it was not the property he had to convince the other to abandon but pure simple principled conviction, knowing that the younger was in fact abdicating in choosing to remain there, that he was forfeiting the lures and guarantees of the city; the elder knowing this and so gradually coming to recognize the impossibility of his task, recognize but not accept)--

would have maintained had he lived into old age. But no defiance in the younger's voice nor irony in his mute attentiveness, only firm indomitable perseverance as he waited out the respectful seconds to determine whether the other had finished speaking and said finally, in the same soft steady timbre, "Thank you, Henry, but no."*

and the girl, eleven maybe, too young to understand but perhaps more viscerally aware as children (and women sometimes) are, so in a sense understanding better than any of them, straight-faced and impregnable, vigorously brushing the hair of her doll, the static rustle adding to the hum of voices from the kitchen and so completing the hover of low, indistinguishable noise. Her mother probably wanting to say *Quiet. Stop that for a minute. Go play somewhere else. Put your sweater on and go outside.* but doubtless continuing as if nothing strange or angry or important was contained in the talking, as if she couldn't hear them and didn't want to anyway, thinking in the way that parents will as she strained her neck in the direction of the voices and held the magazine in front of her, that she was fooling her daughter when in fact she was being fooled. The girl thinking, *I only want to go back home now, away from this big empty house and that big man they tell me to call uncle but never comes within sight of me anyway and I wouldn't if he did,* remembering

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* The conflict described here was borrowed from the marvelous fourth chapter of "The Bear," in which Ike informs his cousin Cass ("rather his brother than cousin and rather his father than either" [Moses 4]) that he is relinquishing the land he stands to inherit because it is corrupt and tainted, because "the earth was no man's but all men's, as light and air and weather were" (3). Milt's age isn't arbitrary: Ike was 21 at the time of his relinquishment. I imagine that my intention (if anything so developed as an intention was in operation at the time) was to mold the Faulknerian scenario around my two characters (Eileen's uncle and her father). It appears, though, that the opposite occurred. For example, there is no reason why Milt's and my grandfather's family home would have had 'the faint smell of cheese.' The anomalous detail is a hold over from "The Bear," in which Ike and Cass have it out in the commissary, "the solar-plexus of the repudiated and relinquished" (Moses 255). Since I knew almost nothing about this chapter of my family's history (having far from cared) the tone of imaginative speculation is appropriate. The idea comes from Absalom, Absalom!--a story told by at least five narrators, none of whom know anything close to an authoritative version. I only remembered Eileen telling me about some dispute between her father and Milt over Milt's decision to continue living in the country. Remembering my grandfather as I do, it is likely that his interest was in selling the family property and pocketing the cash; he very possibly didn't give a shit about his brother. Or, being wont to embellish, Eileen might have made the whole thing up. The bit at the beginning about Milt being figuratively present at the remembered scene is also taken from Absalom, in which Quentin and Shreve, in telling the story, are described as becoming actual witnesses; at times they come to inhabit the bodies of their characters. A classic Faulknerian collapsing of narrator and narrative. I seem to have been trying to imitate the master's style from the late 30's and early 40's in terms of both language and sentence structure. As the effort attests, it wasn't easy. The man knew how to write.

the morning, a few hours earlier, when she awoke in a strange bed in a strange room and looked out the window at the cold dull day and saw him in the distance, saw his long breaths against the cold air as he lifted the axe, held it there, and then quickly brought it down. She heard the sound of the crack, the quick echo of splitting wood, and then watched him raise it again, slowly, deliberately, his face hard and sallow behind the thick beard. Suddenly her father was there, leaning on a fencepost while the man continued to chop. At first they talked casually (the man's breaths staying slow, his head never once turning to look at her father) and she observed the distant tableau (two walls of a grandfather clock, the slow pendulum axe), thinking *they say the man is younger but he looks older to me, much bigger and much older, an old man almost* until eventually--perturbed probably by the slow calm steady chopping--her father flailed his arms in angry gesticulation and bounded away as the man carried on, indomitable and strong. So she knew in the morning that something was the matter.*

and as she held in her hand the simple greeting card (believing finally that the strange man was the younger because her father was dead now, buried three months ago, and the card a token of the other's continued existence, the first in thirty years) she would remember it: the two of them together, amicable it seemed for at least a few minutes, beyond the window on the cold wet day. She would lay the card in front of her and study

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* I'm not sure whether I was thinking of this, but the idea of a scene set against the sound of chopping wood comes from As I Lay Dying, the first third of which is full of reminders of the "chuck chuck chuck of the adze" (2) as Cash builds his mother's coffin while she watches on from her deathbed. In just a few paragraphs I managed to shift between a number of perspectives--Milt, Henry, Eileen, Eileen's mother and, of course, the narrator (me? I think not). If Faulkner never covered this many viewpoints in such a short space I'm sure that he at least had to hold himself back from doing so on a number of occasions. The idea that children and women have superior sensibilities or innate powers of understanding is common in the novels and stories. Old Ephraim's advice to Chick in Intruder In the Dust comes to mind: "If you ever needs to get anything done outside the common run, dont waste yo time on the menfolks; get the womens and children to working at it" (71-2). This is one point on which Faulkner and I differ, assuming as I do that he believed it himself. I included it in my own writing anyway. The pensive girl described is nothing like Eileen must have been at that age unless she underwent a trauma later in life that made her scatterbrained and hyper. She couldn't be "straight-faced and impregnable" if she tried. "Impregnable" is another Faulkner word; it doesn't really fit here. If Milt had a thick beard at 21 he was doing better than I am at 25. I was almost certainly thinking of that bearded ogre Thomas Sutpen, from Absalom, Absalom!, and the young girl Rosa Coldfield's immobilizing fear of him.

it, the white snow inside the red border, the man dragging the sleigh, on it the child, a girl, hugging the spotted dog. Opening it, reading it again, running a finger over the single phrase at the centre of the page, 'Seasons Greetings to you and your family,' and lower, in the corner at the right, 'Yours truly, Milt.' She would recall then that it was through another window that she last saw him on that day thirty years before, not in the morning but in the darker afternoon, through two windows in fact since he was behind one too as her father drove quickly across the muddy lane towards the open gate (the wipers going as it was raining now) and from the back seat through the forming mist she made out his figure behind the rounded pane of the kitchen in the chair from which he had not moved, had only shifted, and, looking her in the eye for what was doubtless the first time (or at least appearing to look at her across the increasing distance and the mist) he nodded slowly once. The same chair where he had sat through all the talking, before the louder shuffling, before her father had left him alone and entered the room where she and her mother had been waiting and spoke quickly, abruptly, saying, "Okay. Let's go. Go upstairs and get your things. We're leaving right away." And she remembered the minutes before that, the murmur from beyond the wall ceasing, disappearing, a long heavy silence while she brushed out the final crimp or knot in the doll's hair or simply applied the last strokes of the brush because the hair had been without knot or crimp for half an hour as the younger of the not-voices would forty years later be applying the final drop of paint to the hunter, propping it on the ledge to watch it dry, thinking, remembering, returning there: the high angry whisper of his elder brother (dead for going on ten years now and the younger himself to be dead soon too) juxtaposed across the kitchen table in the family home

"I only want you to do what's good for you, Milton. There is privacy there despite what you might think. You could start a business. We would help you. We're able to do that now. You could stay with us until you're settled." and he

"That's very nice of you, Henry." and Henry

"Nice or not, it's what is right. The city is where things happen now. You're the youngest. You have the most ahead of you but you have to be in the right place. People won't dismiss you because you missed the war if that's what you're afraid of. They want to forget about the war. A strong man with as much potential as you have can get very far. These are lively times. There are a lot of possibilities. You could start a family. We could support your education if that's what you want." and he

"I'm happy right here. Don't worry about me." and Henry

"You should come back with us to the city. You'll be making a mistake if you don't." and he

"No, Henry, no. I am going to stay here. You carry on with your family and your life and bring them like this to visit me if you want but I am going to stay here because that is what I want to do." and Henry

"There will be cities here before you know it." and he

"Yes, they'll have to come to me."

they sit across from each other, silent now, both in stiff posture (the one out of iron intractability, the other in angry disbelief) while the girl, too young to understand and so understanding better than any of them, plays quietly in the next room while her mother pretends to read, straining still to listen, knowing and probably hoping her husband's brother would emerge victorious.*

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* This sort of repetition--returning to an already described scene in a newly modified context--was one of Faulkner's trademarks. Anything to obfuscate the truth. The various references in my text to chronology ("thirty years earlier," "near half century," etc.) don't add up. I thought about correcting them but there was too much math involved. Though quite meticulous, Faulkner frequently confused the dates of events in his own, infinitely more complex plots. The "and he/and Henry" bit is another Faulknerian technique. It is supposed to give a sense of mythic flow; the master's dialogues are often clashes of psyches or conflicts of moral positions rather than actual conversations. Probably the most ignorant remark I have heard on the subject of Faulkner came from a Ph.D. student I knew while I was working on the M.A. I believe his specialty was "ghetto poetry of the 1970s" or something equally progressive. After reading "The Bear" on my recommendation, he remarked--and I quote him word for word, the stupidity indelibly emblazoned in my brain--"It's just so unrealistic. People simply don't talk like that." He proceeded to read from one of Isaac's more beautiful arguments ("and those who dispossessed him dispossessed him dispossessed. . ." [Moses 258]). "Yes," I said, calmly ironic, "and the word 'mothafucka' shows up all over the place in the King James Bible." I thought that was rather good.

And this crude denouement, three hours later and the darkness complete (after reading it aloud with the remotest southern inflection and thinking, What in the goddamn hell? Saying, "You're not a fucking auteur for Christ sake. Do some bloody work."):

write the goddamn thesis you stupid stupid shit

Tomorrow: the hunt ... orality/morality ... the ethical dimensions of legend and myth ... Ike as (indirect, 2nd hand) source of "Was" (and, hence, of GDM)... dialogue as history (The Bear chpt. 4/ Absalom!) 5 PAGES BY NOON

Tuesday night

So I was both relieved and aggravated when Gwen called out to me. It took me by surprise. I was casing her property at the time, peeking over from the porch, intent on making it to the car without having to talk to her. But the voice came from the other side of Milt's trailer. I wondered if I had gotten it wrong, an orientation thing, somehow reversed the location of her home. There was someone beside her at the picnic table beyond the fence. It was dark but they had a lantern. Their backs were to the park. Gwen was closer to me, obstructing my view of her benchmate. All I could see was the person's hand--a butt between the fingers and a beer inside the palm. So it saved me the five mile drive to the highway bar I had seen but it wasn't the repose I had been hoping for.

"Benjamin," she said, waving. "Come and sit down. I want you to meet someone."

There was a strange tone of familiarity in her beckoning. She spoke as if we shared more than the small acquaintance of that afternoon. It didn't offend me so much as it made me feel uneasy. It occurred to me that she might have been looking for sex. Teenage

pregnant girls from the greater Bayton area weren't high on my methods-of-recovery list. The Diane ordeal required something equally dirty yet less pathetic.

They observed my slow approach, heads turned to the right, neither of them talking. It was an older woman beside Gwen. I thought it might have been her mother but she was too old even for that. By the time I reached the gate I had concluded that it was her grandmother. She was a fat woman in her sixties. A few strands of curly hair around the ears, uncovered by the Blue Jays baseball cap--a reddish brown that wasn't her natural colour.

Gwen stood up as I sat down. "Benjamin," she said, unfolding her arm in a gesture of introduction, "I want you to meet my friend Doreen. This is her place." Her language made me flinch again. The "I want you to meet" routine usually earned an "I've heard a lot about you" kind of response.

In fact, I *had* heard something about her, but not from Gwen. She was the superintendent, the person to whom I was supposed to deliver the chocolates. It sounded odd, the way Gwen called her a friend. I wondered if it was a mode of flattery, akin to the more common "is this your sister?" when the speaker knows damned well it is the person's mother or someone older. I was still fairly sure she was Gwen's grandmother.

We shook hands. I was going to say something about the chocolates but she interrupted me. "I'd stand up but I'm too damn old!" she said loudly, punctuating it with a raucous cackle and then muzzling the laughter with a swig from her beer. Her voice reminded me of an over-confident feminist who had been in one of my classes. It was like her laugh--coarse, loud, without timidity. It wasn't the voice of a woman of her age. I tittered politely. Gwen touched her shoulder, smiling, as if to say "you're not that old but it was a funny joke." And then Doreen offered me a beer.

"I'll get it," Gwen said, and she was half way to the trailer, unhindered by the belly, before Doreen replied "Thanks, dear."

I cranked my head around and gave the property a look, needing to fill the uncomfortable void of her exit. The grass was nearly perfect--only a few patches of unyielding sod. On both sides of the porch (it was more of a porch than Milt's three steps, large enough to hold two plastic lawn chairs and some potted plants) there was a small plot walled off by railroad ties. There were large bushes, some red and yellow flowers, a few climbing vines along the wall.

"Nice," I said.

"Thank you. It's perfect for us. We wouldn't want anything bigger." She took a drag on her cigarette and tapped it out in a blue glass ashtray, exhaling a narrow line at the sky. I breathed deep, wanting to catch a swallow of the second hand fumes. "I'm sorry about your uncle Milton," she said, "or your great uncle I guess it is. He was a very nice man, a perfect neighbour. We never had any troubles with him. He kept to himself, you know." She was doing something I had seen other old ladies do--sticking three limp fingers between the top buttons of her shirt, a detour for the sweat in her monstrous cleavage.

I examined the table, collecting some sandy dirt into a pile and then brushing it away. "Actually I hardly knew him at all. I only met him once. He didn't keep in touch with the family. He sent my mother Christmas cards but that was about it."

Gwen came back. "There you go," she said, waitress-like, placing the beer in front of me. She sat down where she had been sitting before, right next to Doreen, their elbows almost touching. Behind them, beyond a thin line of trees, there was a pattern of lights from the porches. There was an electric bug lamp somewhere. Every thirty seconds or so another one was tricked out of existence, the sizzle quick yet certain in the quiet, breezeless night. The bottle was open.

"We were just talking about Benjamin's great uncle Milton," Doreen said, turning to Gwen. Her skin was dry and tired. The blue bags of a long time smoker. Low-templed plastic glasses and a polyester shirt. She conformed to my idea of what people in those

parts were like--overweight and fashionless. Also consistent with my impression were the cigarettes and beer. "You should show him your storybook. He might get a kick out of it."

Gwen crossed her arms and smiled, embarrassed.

"Gwen's writing a book for her baby. She's using Milton as the model for her main character." She turned her head with a jerk, slapping her hands flat on the table, nearly toppling her beer over the red ball of wool, the half-formed cuff and the knitting needles. "It's alright if I tell him," she said, "isn't it?"

The girl shrugged modestly and looked away. "I don't care," she said.

"It's about a nice old man who keeps to himself," Doreen continued. "It's superb. The artwork is just beautiful."

I responded with a deliberate expression of confusion, pursing my lips into a lop-sided smirk and squinting. Doreen's delivery and Gwen's bashfulness were so earnest that I had to assume it was true: the girl was writing a book about Milt. For some reason it made me uncomfortable. The politics of representation maybe. But I barely knew the man. I couldn't have been offended by the most libelous portrayal, which that girl would have been incapable of anyway. It was just so bizarre. Eerie in a way. There must have been something about him that I didn't know.

"Why are you writing about *him?*" I finally said.

Some diffident contemplation. She scratched her forearm and studied the moon. "It's not really *about* him. He just gave me the idea. When I was a kid my favourite book was about this old lady who lived alone with a bunch of cats. It was called *The Lonely Old Maid.* I tried to find it when I was at my mother's place but I think she gave it to the church bazaar." With a slow rotation of the head she distributed eye contact between her audience of two. "And then we moved in here and I met Doreen and she started talking about this man who died. I saw him once when I was at Danny's father's place for dinner. So it gave me the idea for a children's book."

It was decidedly curious. They were holding something back. She appeared to have dodged my question, at least to have answered it too deliberately, like a testifying accessory fearful of self-incrimination. The fact that she hadn't known Milt made the matter of her storybook even stranger. I didn't press it any further. I wanted to smoke.

"So how long have you folks been living here?" I said after nodding at her answer and waiting out an appropriate pause. I surprised myself with the word "folks." It was a new addition to my functional vocabulary. They looked at each other, determining who would respond first. Doreen had one of those flabby, double-lobed ears. There was a reflection of the lantern in Gwen's eye.

"I've been here three weeks," Gwen said quickly. "We've got the place 'til the end of July when Danny's father gets back from his honeymoon."

Doreen noticed my eyes following her hands as she went for a cigarette. She held out the glorified beige leather change purse that contained the pack, as archaic a piece of smoking equipment as the long black plastic filter. I pinched one out.

"Thanks," I said. "I'll get you back." I did the lighting with her Bic.

"Ross and me were the second ones to move into the park six years ago," she said, releasing a deep haul. "Your uncle Milton was the first. We used to run a sporting goods store in Huntsford and the guy we rented the shop from bought the park the year we retired. He gave us a good deal on the place. We don't pay any land fees, you know. We're the caretakers. Mr. Mackenzie offered the job to Milton but he turned it down." A single tap from her painted index finger cleanly dislodged a piece of ash. She looked at me like a stern but tolerant parent and said matter-of-factly, "Ross is my husband. He had a bad stroke last week. He's in the hospital in Huntsford."

Gwen spared me from the deed of responding. "Do you mind if I go with you tomorrow?" she said. "I'll bring him some of that Chinese soup, show him the picture I drew of the garden."

"That'd be great," said Doreen. "He'd get a kick out of seeing you." She pinched the visor of her hat and pulled it tighter to her head.

I sucked hard on the ultra-light cigarette, unable to muster a satisfying hit. Pressing three fingers on the back of my neck, I tilted my head to one side, neglecting to disguise it with a cough. It let off a rolling string of pops that ended with a loud, bassy crunch. The distant pain I had been feeling since the afternoon disappeared for a second and then quickly re-established itself behind my right ear.

"Oh my God," Gwen said. "Was that your neck?" She brought her hands to her cheeks and tensed her face in disgust. "Danny does that too."

"It gets locked and I have to pop it into place," I lied.

"It'll give you arthritis," said Doreen.

Then they carried on about Ross. There was a vague solemnity in their talk. Doreen used medical terminology that she clearly didn't understand. She described his physiotherapy program in tedious detail--the schedule, the exercises, the speech therapy. I dropped my butt under the table and stomped it out in the grass, realizing too late that I should have used the ashtray. All that remained of my beer was the last sludgy inch. I had downed it in fast gulps, too thirsty and impatient to have accomplished anything like conservation. So I had no reason for staying there but I couldn't escape. "Hope your husband recovers. Thanks for the beer. Pleasure to meet you. Must run." I just couldn't pull it off.

Doreen interpreted my restlessness as discomfort. The subject of her dying husband was making me uneasy, she appeared to conclude. She flashed me a look indicating that no condolences were required, a dip of the head and a blink. I would have taken it as permission to leave had she not offered me another beer.

"Bring a glass for Benjamin," she yelled, her hands cupped at her mouth to form a megaphone.

"Okay," Gwen said, already past the door.

We listened to the crickets. An engine started up the road. Two cars passed on the highway. A moth circled, fluttering with brainless panic and then folding on the lantern.

"So," said Doreen, "you didn't know Milton very well, eh?"

* * *

Walking from the bathroom to the bedroom, my travelling toiletry bag in hand (a breach of the guest-host relationship, to leave it beside the sink), I looked down the hall through the open door of Milt's workroom. My throat was scraped and phlegm-lined from the cigarettes; the effects of the alcohol had subsided into a thin somnolence. First I saw the light. A transparent white curtain only partially closed. As I turned away, through another perspective, their distant tableau caught my eye. I moved closer, leaning in the doorway of the unlit room. Inside, I could make out almost nothing, only the remote glint of the computer screen and the outline of the dangling crow. Their window cast a long body of light, illuminating two mountain bikes, a path of pine needles, the tall trees and their taller shadows. Behind the window, frozen in the uncurtained oblong, Danny sat on a table facing me. His long straight hair hung over his face in strands as he arched back, jutting his chin, his mouth tensed with the moment. Gwen's head was in his crotch. She braced herself with one arm on the table, the other arm committed to the task, the elbow sticking out, rising a little each time she bobbed her head.

I felt my way onto the stool, jamming a shoeless big toe on a box of heavy books. I could feel the lumps of dry paint on the seat. Hunching behind the computer, I peered out like a rookie detective. There was little to see. It was the fact of the spectacle not the spectacle itself. Dull pornography. It grew more vigorous towards the end. He clamped her head in his hands and took charge, holding it down for ten seconds and then thrusting it away, bouncing her quickly like the final vibrations of a jackhammer deprived of air.

I saw it coming. His cringe became more intense. He drew his arms away, pulling them to his chest with spastic, uncontrolled tension. She stood up slowly and they kissed. When he slid a hand up the back of her pale thigh and under her dress, I left the room and went to bed, impressed with my restraint.

* * *

"No," I said. "I didn't know him at all. I met him once when I was a kid but only for a minute. My mother hadn't seen him in forty years."

"You're kidding," Doreen said. "I believe it though. *I* only talked to him half a dozen times and I lived next *door* to him for six years. I didn't even know if he had any family or not. Had to look through his whole mobile just to find your mother's address." Gwen came clipping down the steps. I heard the bottles clinking. "Your mother sounded very nice on the phone."

"There's a Molson Export and a Blue Light. Who wants what?" She put the mug on the table and held out the beers.

"Give me the light one," said Doreen. "I'm fat enough as it is. And it looks like Ben could stand to gain a couple pounds." She grabbed the bottle from Gwen's hand, winked at me and tilted for a swig. It started overflowing when she put it down and she bent forward to suck the rising foam.

"Where did you find it?" I said, pouring carefully, the nose of the bottle deep inside the angled mug. "The address."

"It took a hell of a long time but I finally looked in the drawer of the nightstand in his bedroom. There was an old box of Christmas cards with your mother's address inside. I didn't even know what their relation was until I got her number from directory assistance and called her up."

"She was very grateful that you did," I said. I couldn't help tossing in a slight ironic inflection. Cordiality wasn't my specialty. But the audience was unsuspecting; I could have gotten away with more. "Oh," I said, intending to deflect the burden of gratitude onto the box of chocolates Eileen had made me bring her. Gwen broke in, collecting her hair into a pony tail, the yellow elastic between her lips.

"Danny saw him at The Pav a couple times. He left before the music started and all the people came in. And the time *I* saw him it was like midnight and he was coming outta the woods." She plucked the elastic from her mouth and secured the tail in a single flourish.

"Yeah," said Doreen, pinching out a cigarette and handing it to me. "He took a lot of walks. Especially in the last year." Gwen picked up the Bic from the table and reached over to give me a light. "I'm not sure he took so well to retirement. He lost his driver's license awhile ago 'cause his eyesight was getting bad. That's gotta be tough. He had to get rid of his car."

A low rumbling vehicle with double headlights turned in from the highway and parked beside one of the trailers at the front. "We wondered if he was a little sick towards the end," Doreen continued, fidgeting with her knitting ball. "Ross saw him walking outta the woods at six in the morning a few times. Sometimes he looked a little weird, like he was lost or something. But he went out no matter what. Even with two feet of snow on the ground, when it was twenty below zero."

"*Jesus Christ!*" I said, and they looked at me, straight-faced and silent, as if someone had asked a question and they were expecting me to answer it. I glanced to the side, away from Milt's trailer, at the dimly visible border of trees. And then I asked Gwen what 'The Pav' was.

"The Pavilion," she said. "It's the bar on 10, the other side of Bayton. You must've driven past it. You came from Toronto, didn't you?"

"Yes," I said. "I think I noticed it."

"My boyfriend's band plays there sometimes. They water down their beer."

I had asked the wrong question. I was hoping for more information about Milt, maybe about her storybook, her odd decision to model her character on Eileen's uncle. But she launched into a monologue about her boyfriend and her life. She was in the habit of pressing her fingertips together lightly, in what I knew as a pose of professorial authority, a William F. Buckley sort of thing. Doreen joined in a few times, throwing in remarks and explanations, flinging her arms forward when she laughed and occasionally pounding the table, rescuing her beer an instant before the spill. I held the mug inside my crotch, fearful of her unpredictable jolts. One of her more intense bursts of laughter ended in a spell of wet coughs.

The girl was to be married at the end of the summer. The baby would be appearing in mid-October. Gwen would spend a term away from Huntsford Collegiate and then go back for her grade twelve. Her grandmother would take care of the kid while she was at school. For one hundred dollars a month they would live in Danny's brother's basement. She hoped to save enough money to move to Toronto; a cousin lived there. ("If you ask *me*," Doreen said, "the place is a jungle.")

Danny was two years older. He worked at a highway gas station. His ensemble rehearsed in the station garage. "Danger Zone" had regular weekend gigs at the bars in Huntsford, the Pavilion, and other regional taverns. She went to hear them sometimes, at the places that would let her in. The week ahead held a few babysitting jobs for her. She had posted an ad at the General Store, managed to recruit some business from the cottage families in the area. The money would go to art supplies and toys for her baby.

I smoked while she talked, blowing clouds into the hot June air, watching them drift from the light. Up the road there was a couple playing cards at a table on a porch. Their voices, but not their words, were audible over Gwen. Across from them, a man worked on his pickup truck. He was shirtless and the truck was bright red. A flashlight hung from the open hood. He bent over, inspecting the mechanical guts of the truck, his

belly heaping out over his too-small shorts. Through the window of the trailer before his I saw the blue and green flashings of a TV. And the highway--the lights and hums of the occasional passing cars, the roars of passing trucks. The sky was cloudless and starry.

"So what do *you* do, Benjamin?"

It woke me from a slouching daze. I had tuned out, gotten lost in my smoking. If not for my name I wouldn't have known I was being addressed. I was used to answering it with a simple "Faulkner and philosophy." It was normally delivered by people of the game.

"I'm a Master's student in English literature."

"Good for you," said Doreen. "You can't get too much education."

"You must be smart," said Gwen. "I guess that's what all those books are for."

"Yes. I came here to write my thesis."

"About what?" said Doreen.

"It's about an American writer named William Faulkner."

"What did *he* write?" Gwen said.

"*Intruder in the Dust*," said Doreen.

"Right," I said, surprised. "Have you read it?"

"Oh, no. I think we've got it on the shelf somewhere, though. Ross and me are both big readers. He likes all that heavy duty stuff like Shakespeare and all that. I'm into fluff." She gave me a look of unabashed confession, pulling her chin into a comic frown and raising her eyebrows above the line of her glasses. "I'm a sucker for those stupid romances. Boy meets girl, they fall in love, girl kills husband for the insurance money. That's my kinda stuff."

"Can I borrow it?" Gwen said.

"What?" said Doreen.

"The book by the guy." Gwen pointed at me.

"William Faulkner," I said.

"Of course," said Doreen. "If I can find it." She angled her head back and took a hit from her Blue Light.

"*Intruder in the Dust* is not the best one," I said, mildly entertained at the thought of the girl attempting Faulkner. "One of the things I'm writing about is a famous novella called 'The Bear.' It's in a book called *Go Down, Moses*. I'm also very fond of *Absalom, Absalom!*. I'd say it's probably his masterpiece."

"Never hearda those ones," Doreen said.

"What are they about?" Gwen said.

I laughed. "Well, one of the interesting things about *Absalom, Absalom!* is that even *Faulkner* didn't seem to know what it was about. He wrote a chronology of the events in the novel but it contradicts the text on a number of points." I was doing Gwen's distribution trick, sharing eye contact with both of them. Gesticulating too. "But I'd have to say that more than anything else the novel is about the *telling* of a story. Faulkner was obsessed with the way that stories were told."

"What about the other one?" Gwen said.

I only smiled. "What is 'The Bear' about?" I repeated in a weighty tone. "I guess in one respect it's about a group of people hunting for a bear." Shifting to adjust my posture, I let the mug sneak away from my crotch's grip. It fell to the ground with a thud. "Shit!" I blurted out, bending over to pick it up. On the way down I realized I was slightly buzzed. I hadn't eaten since lunch. The glass wasn't broken but I lost the last gulp.

"Hunting should be illegal," Gwen said.

There was a loud screeching noise and a heavy cloud of dirt. The guy on the bike stopped abruptly, nearly skidding into the fence. He had a red baseball cap on backwards and long hair behind the ears. Panting.

"Hi Danny," Doreen said, with a taunting tonal interval between the syllables of his name. She turned back around.

"Hey Dor," he said, mimicking her tone. He leaned against the fence with his feet on the pedals.

Gwen lifted her legs from under the table and slid to the edge of the bench. "Dan," she said. "This is Benjamin. He's living in the place next door."

We exchanged hellos.

"I'll see you guys later," she said, standing up and walking to the gate. "Oh, Ben." Her hand was on his back. Judging from the huffing, the t-shirt must have been disgustingly hot and damp. "You should come on Friday night. It's me and Danny's one year anniversary. Doreen and I are cooking supper at our place."

They started off. Danny stayed on the bike, a few feet ahead of her, concentrating on maintaining his balance without pedalling. They detoured around my car and disappeared into the dark. Lights came on in their trailer. A few seconds later I heard the far off thump of a drum beat and the sound of a buzzing bass. It was just loud enough for me to recognize the song--one of those pop anthems, oppressively unavoidable for the two or three months of its popularity. The three note refrain would whine through my head while I tried to fall asleep.

It grew louder as I approached Milt's steps. I thought about what I would do if it kept me from sleeping. My fist was just squeezing the handle of the door when Doreen started calling me. She was approaching in a semi-jog, her arms nearly reaching the height of her head with each jiggling stride. She was more agile than I had imagined. I noticed for the first time that she was wearing shorts.

"Look. Ben, Ben," she said, one arm still rotating, the other held steady, pointing at the sky. She stopped beside the porch. I looked down at her. I didn't look up to where she was pointing. I was waiting for her to tell me what to look for.

"Have y'ever seen the Big Dipper?" she said in a thick whisper, as if the Big Dipper would be scared away if she spoke too loudly. "It's clear as a bell tonight. I've never seen it this bright." I studied the mass of stars but I couldn't make out any patterns.

"It's in that patch right there." Her finger gave the night a poke. "See the curved line? That's the arm of the Dipper. Look for the line and follow it down."

I craned my neck back as far as it would go, producing an unsolicited crack. She stood there looking up at me, waiting for my reaction.

I don't know why I whispered but I did. "I don't see it," I said.

writing

In the thirty seconds it took for the computer to boot I lost all serious motivation. Fragile thing. The sun was just making its way up, gold and fluid between the trees. Mud-thick coffee made in Milt's heavy iron percolator. I had barely slept at all.

and there would be a grim yet impassive heaviness when the news came, without regret or even surprise as he sat there in the stale dark room in the cabin on the hill because there could be no surprises from an old dead thing. He would hold the letter and remember not the last, not the spitting mud from beneath the elder's wheels as he drove for the last time with his family across the lane and through the gate, nor the dismal letters that followed--from the lawyers, the grim formal mediators--not remember these but the two of them at an earlier time, himself able to write his age in double ciphers for only a few days and the other eighteen maybe, certainly the stronger but also therefore the less agile as they

treaded further into the gloomy deathless* woods. Needing only the first few words, *I am sorry to inform you that your brother, Henry, died yesterday. He did not suffer. . .*, and probably the image came to him, unspectral and clear, despite a half century between the recollection and its subject, as if evoked by a bold enclosure, a photograph or portrait (there was none, he had none, wanted none) and he cleared aside the paper animals, set the letter on the table and sat there thinking of an old dead time.

They wake up in the blue morning darkness and with tiptoed mutual impatience they dress. The clothes are laid out on chairs from the evening before (the boy remembers it, the eagerness brimming already as he and his mother folded tomorrow's shirts while from the hallway beyond the door came his father's stern murmur as the elder took instructions on how to guide the morning's hunt) and together they don the heavy ironed garments. As they walk down the hollow steps and across the yard, the dew leaving lines and droplets on their boots (invisible in the still-dark air), the boy thinks, yes, yes, finally, *holding the rifle as he was taught only tighter, clenching it at his side, listening to the moist brushing of their soles on the dewy grass as they slowly approach the woods that border the long empty field. The light seems to arrive suddenly. He can see his boots clearly while before he could see nothing. He does not remember the middle stage, the period when he could barely see, almost see; he remembers not seeing and then seeing. And it seems to him that the noises are quieter under the light, that somehow the darkness had been amplifying*

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* *Deathless?* The old anxiety of influence must have been horking forth its ruthless germs when I came up with this one. Without borrowing his adjectives I was apparently trying to construct the same aura Faulkner created with phrases like "the timeless woods" and "the thick great gloom of ancient woods" (Moses 200). I suppose it is not an altogether unique strategy but the idea of getting a narrative moving with the receipt of a letter containing the news of someone's death comes from Absalom, Absalom!, in which Mr. Compson's epistolary report to Quentin regarding Rosa's demise kick starts a new section of the narrative (Chapter VI). If I borrowed the idea from anywhere, consciously or unconsciously, it was from that book. Like most great authors, Faulkner (in the early days at least) had enough authority to appropriate a conventional trope and shake from it like dust from a throw-rug any trace of derivativeness or over-use--something I did not quite accomplish in my odd meanderings. No, there are rather clear traces of influence in these writings. Clearer than I could have imagined as I double-clicked on the long stagnant icons for these files.

(By sheer fluke--the air conditioner's sputtered breeze against the scrawled-over pages of my copy of Moses-- I have just discovered that Faulkner actually used "deathless" himself (326); I now find the word quite dignified and I am pleased that I came up with it independent of the master's coinage).

*their breathing and their walking and the chirping of the birds and now, with the darkness almost fully gone, those sounds are muffled by the blanket of crisp light. They are well into the woods. The elder walks a few feet ahead of him, occasionally checking his compass (although less often than he did during the nocturnal leg) and looking back at his brother, who walks in coherence with yet unheedful of the other's lead. The elder stops suddenly and with a backwards pointing arm, the hand flatly raised, he instructs his brother to do the same. They are in a small glade. The boy hears a rustling which he quickly registers as the sound of scurrying squirrels. "Get ready," his brother says, but the boy has already prepared his weapon and is delicately easing closer to the target. The elder steps back. Squatting, he props his own gun in vertical repose and watches the younger's movements. The black squirrel clings to a low narrow branch, in profile twenty feet away, immobile save for the nervously wandering vaguely suspecting round bulbous eye. The boy slowly raises the rifle. Morning is full now and through the spaces in the trees come squares of light. The sun glistens slightly on the boy's aiming barrel. "Now," his brother says, the soft static whisper seeming quite loud to the boy, quite loud yet also quite distant, as if screamed from somewhere in the giant breathless woods. "Shoot now."**

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* The little I know about hunting comes from Faulkner and, to a lesser extent, Hemingway. While no animal activist, the thought of it makes me vaguely nauseous. What *should* be one of the richest scenes in Moses--"[Ike hooked his fingers in the deer's nostrils and] drew the head back and the throat taut and drew Sam Fathers' knife across the throat and Sam stooped and dipped his hands in the hot smoking blood and wiped them back and forth across the boy's face" (164)--is for me a test of stomachic endurance. It is the freshness factor, the "hot smoking" detail, that affects me the most. Hence my decision to round off my own scene before the pulling of the trigger. Even the *implied* outcome is nothing compared to Faulkner's graphic depictions of ritual slaughter, though. The young Milt's still target is hardly a triumph and it is absurd to imagine that the youths had to walk for hours through the forest in order to find a squirrel to shoot; as I have learned from Faulkner, squirrels are the game of children and amateurs (cf. the wonderfully comic ending of "The Bear"). Truth be told, I am averse to most forms of sport--one of the rare Canadian boys never to have skied or skated, having preferred the less visceral pursuits from a remarkably young age. I therefore knew very little about what I was representing in this section and had to borrow a good number of images and ideas from the Ike-in-the-woods scenes of Moses, particularly the scene in which the boy first encounters Old Ben, the giant elusive indomitable bear. Perhaps even more than in the previous fragment, I imposed the Cass/Ike relationship on Henry and Milt. This time, though, I emphasized their earlier, pre-relinquishment, half fraternal/half paternal bonding, as in the story "The Old People." How did the master create such powerful boyhood narratives whilst barely dipping into the swamp of the sentimental? Primarily because my own attempt at a richly mythic boyhood narrative has a touch of the Leave It To Beaver in it, I find solace in the fact that Faulkner fell prey to sentimental scavengers later in his career.

and as he plucked the letter and rose from the stool with a sudden fury of motion (his expression still calm as if the muscles of his face operated on an altogether different machine, independent and unknowing of that which controlled his limbs) he was maybe remembering (unforgetting rather) the last--the constant funereal tapping of rain behind him and the low staccato moan of his brother's voice, angrier it seemed because of the affected calm, and beyond them, through the wall that divided the bright giant farmhouse, the elder's family in untranquil repose (who moments later would be taken away almost without glimpsing again his bearded visage and who would remain so, unknown to him for forty years, until three months after the elder's passing when it would be him, not they, who would end the long silence with a strangely habitual almost token gesture as if in reluctant fulfillment of an annual chore). He walked across the wide creaking planks of the dim wooden room, took his jacket from a hook and put it on, dragging the letter through the tunnel of a sleeve. He picked the last red apple from a basket, bit it twice quickly, and then crammed it in his pocket as he reached for the handle of the door.

Walking. Those same woods as in the recollected time but sparser now, mottled with roads and towns and cottages. The terrain is familiar enough to him that he can bow his head (as he does presently, in stiff pensiveness, clenching the letter in his pocket and hanging the other arm at his side) and know exactly what will be in front of him when he lifts it up. He is used to the towns, has absorbed the changes. He no longer skirts around their perimeters when he goes walking. People recognize him and they sometimes wave. He avoids conversation. Today he walks four miles, to the edge of a thickly wooded hill. There he sits down. In the distance a town is visible. He looks towards it, traces the sparse pattern of the buildings, the far off movements of two children (boys?) tossing a stick for a dog. The sky is greying. He pulls the letter from his pocket and sets it on the ground beside him. He stretches out his legs and slouches further down the trunk of the tree, closing his eyes and letting his head relax onto his shoulder. Soon he is asleep.

[The abrupt shift in style and tone in here leads me to think that there was a substantial hiatus in the writing. Memory draws a blank. The remembered evidence of several coffees and an empty stomach tends to point towards a fairly particular mode of interruption but that would contradict my recollection of having made it through the four days without touching flesh to Milt's crapper. Who will ever know what terrible digestive minutiae led to swerves of creative genius in the great artefacts of our culture? I call on the new historicists.]

When he awakened it was raining. The tree had sheltered him. He was dry save for the soaked patch on his right knee and the damp muddy clinging of his pants at the back. In the course of his sleeping he had slid from a half-leaning position against the trunk into an awkward sprawl with his head in a rooted burrow of the tree. His neck was stiff. He lay there in a stuttered process of waking, seeming to reach full consciousness and then instantly slipping again into a transient doze. Waking, slipping. The ground beneath him was rigid with the tree's long roots. The sky was dimming into evening and he was hungry. He had not eaten since the morning. He felt languid and tight. His sense of time was obfuscated. During one fleeting spell of waking, as he turned his head towards the darkening sky, he wondered if it was morning, if he had slept through the night as well as the afternoon. For a moment he wondered whether the dimness was receding or falling. Then he fell asleep again. The rain was light yet constant and its patter lulled him.

Finally he sat up, his back straight against the tree. He rotated his head quickly, side to side, shaking away the enveloping comatose film. He spotted the letter beside him. It was wet and the ink was running. Several thinly streaked lines ran across the page, meeting at the centre and forming a miniscule, faintly splotched puddle. As he looked at the paper another drop fell onto it. He heard it first, the quiet slap of water on crimped paper, and then he watched as it liquified a phrase into curving lines that travelled inwards towards the puddle. It was large enough to have been several drops, he thought, ones that had collected on a leaf and combined for the falling.

The clouded sun is golden and low through the forest to the west. Eight thirty, he thinks. The darkness will be long complete by the time he arrives home. He remembers the apple and reaches into his pocket. The bitten areas are brown, spongy, patterned with lint and red wool from his jacket. He eats the good parts in four voracious bites. A white stream runs down his bearded chin as well as a yellower ooze from the rot. He tosses the bare core away, picks up the letter and pulls in his legs so that his knees are almost touching his head. He holds the letter open between his shins. It is beginning to tear at the damp folds. His thumbprints become temporarily etched on the page in diluted ink.

He sits there thinking, musing on the black dripping page, thinking even the *is* of this *was* will be *was* when the rain is done with it, when the rain is *was*, thinking of walking home in the cool autumn drizzle.*

I could barely see the screen for the sunlight. It was approaching noon. The nervous guilt of procrastination was announcing itself in clenched fists and quivers. I observed the dull danc[illegible]y screen saver, lazily transfixed like a hippie stoned. My back was sore from the noisy jutting springs of Milt's mattress. I wanted to be eating Chinese food--not the cheap North American bastard stuff but the real McWong. The shadow of the paper hunter annoyed me, the way it bent across my arm and over my eye. I propped my

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* My preoccupation with sleep is no surprise, seeing as I was working on only two or three hours myself. It is perhaps the reason why I slipped into some Light in Augustisms for the denouement of this vignette; I can't think of any other reason why I might have mimicked the most overrated of Faulkner's novels. There is a section in the latter half of chapter 14, just before Joe Christmas is captured, in which the fugitive sleeps and wakes up about five times in the space of three or four pages. Surely the master knew what he was doing but it does not make for the most compelling dramatic action. Christmas also eats rotten food. The mixing of tenses and the terse psychological detail, steeped mainly in physical thought, resembles the (dry to my taste) style of August as well.

With regard to my short concluding paragraph, it is quite a stretch to imagine that I wasn't thinking of the ending of the seventeenth section of As I Lay Dying, Darl's strange, vaguely philosophical musings about time (about *is* and *was*) and his marvelously poetic, unquestionmarked final phrase, "How often have I lain beneath rain on a strange roof, thinking of home" (52). As a latter-year undergraduate I wrote an entire paper about that sentence: "Often have I lain beneath rain: Memory and the Pathetic Fallacy in As I Lay Dying"--a complex and ambitious project, I thought at the time. My professor challenged the entire premise, claiming that the line was not in fact an instance of the pathetic fallacy and assigning the work a grade of "B-." I formally challenged his evaluation and, after much administrative rigmarole, had the mark upgraded to a "B." That paper is residing somewhere in the annals of my hard drive. The meticulous editor might give it a perusal but this one is too fearful that its B minusness will be glaringly, glaringly obvious.

copy of The Unvanquished against the window behind it, molding the shadow into a solid block. I saluted the poster of Faulkner, shut off the computer and left the room.

Wednesday

Tacky with sweat, the fragile caffeine energy fizzling out, I ran the water to dislodge the mossy scum from the concrete corners and the drain and I got into the shower. The cool water diverged over my body in streams, the biggest one collecting at my nose, falling onto my penis and splitting to trickle down my inner legs. I couldn't hold the images back. They became increasingly revolting--Milt standing naked in the shower, his tough-skinned, haunchy body getting soaked by the spray; or lying in bed in his socks and underwear, eyes open and hands behind head. I pictured him taking a shit, first in his toilet and then in the woods, squatting against a tree and wiping his ass with a maple leaf. To shake it I tried singing. I covered my ears and closed my eyes and shook my head.

But it was the knocking that did the job. I jumped from the stall and fumbled for the towel, left a trail of drips between the bathroom and the door, clumping to declare the inconvenience. A prospective buyer, I figured, someone responding to the ad Eileen had taken out in some regional weekly. I was in no mood to put up a sales pitch. Hoping that

the sight of a buzz-haired bespectacled intellectual type tall man with nothing but a towel around his waist would drive them away.

It was Gwen and Doreen wanting to know if I would join them for a picnic. "Hey," Gwen said. "We thought you were ignoring us. I knew you were in here 'cause I saw you working on your computer." The door was only open half an inch; she hadn't seen me yet. I was behind it adjusting my towel, making sure my penis wasn't slipping through the slit. She gave the door a push. The big toe of my left foot acted as a doorstop. "Oooh," she said, bobbing in and retreating. "We get you outta the shower?"

I pulled it open the rest of the way and faced them, holding the knot for security. Doreen stood at the bottom of the steps with one hand on the railing's scroll. Attached to her glasses was a massive shield of shaded plastic, the sort of thing you got for two dollars at the drug store. It went down below her nose. "My God," she said, smiling. "You're skinnier than Ross when he was your age. You're like a rake."

Gwen snickered. "What are you doing now? Besides getting dressed."

I had managed to clue in on the picnic motif; Doreen held a basket in her other hand. I stupidly thought the truth would get me out of it. "I was going to drive into town for some lunch," I said.

"Come down to the docks with us." Behind her, up the road, there were people doing whatever you did on a hot day at the trailer park. White sheets on a clothesline. A kid rode dusty circles on a bike. "We've got a picnic ready. Just gotta pick up a few things at the store. It'll be a little cooler by the water."

I racked for an excuse. "Come on, Ben," Doreen said with the sort of whine that projected the stigma of complaint onto the receiver. "You can't stay by yourself all day. Take a break with us. It's gorgeous out. Perfect for a picnic. And it's in between black fly and mosquito season. It's a sin not to take advantage of it." She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed the sweat from her forehead.

"Well," I said, cornered, and wanting more than anything to cut the awful towel encounter short, "I wouldn't want to commit a sin, would I?" So I found myself getting dressed quickly. I pulled the curtain in Milt's bedroom, threw on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, snapped the custom clip onto my glasses and went back outside.

"You're wearing jeans?" Doreen said before I had both feet on the porch. "You're nuts. Last night was one thing but it's boiling out today." They were sitting on the steps sharing a Coke like loitering kids in Brooklyn.

Gwen twisted around. "It's really hot out, Ben. I might even go swimming. I've got my suit on under my dress."

I hated wearing shorts. Revealing my scrawny, underhaired and unmuscular lower legs made me self-conscious. I would have preferred to have sweated it out in jeans. It was one of my few purely masculine pleasures. But I went inside and changed, also replacing my black shirt with a white one. I took off my sneakers, removed the wool socks, put the shoes back on. They would be reeking by late afternoon.

We stood beside the car discussing how we'd get to Bayton. I couldn't believe Doreen was advocating the walk. "It's my only exercise," she said. "Without Ross here I don't even get to play any catch." Gwen opened a door to illustrate her theory that the car would be too hot. I told her it was air conditioned. By the time it took effect we'd be in town peeling our legs from the vinyl, she argued. We settled on the walking.

As we crossed into the main space of trailers Gwen told us about Danny's fetish for long pants. He didn't care that the other gas jockeys wore shorts: "He's so goddamn stubborn sometimes. You just have to let him have his way." I tried not to burst ahead of them with my city strides. A last minute excuse came to mind but I couldn't pull it off. It was hot and bright. There was some cackling and the murmur of a TV coming from one of the trailers. Just before the road opened onto the highway, two people sat on lawn chairs on top of a school bus, a sky blue cooler in between them. "Let him go on thinking shorts are so uncool," she said. "He's the one who suffers." She reached out to take the basket

from Doreen. With both fists on the handle she pulled it to her body, letting her belly take the weight.

"Thank you," said Doreen.

It was one of the people I had seen from the picnic bench the night before. He was sitting on the hood of his pickup truck working on a beer.

"Hi Ron," they said in unison. He was younger and fatter than the distance and darkness had made me think. The same garment--tight red soccer shorts with a white stripe up each thigh. Several folds of hairy fat rolled over onto one another, covering up the waist band of the shorts.

"Howdy folks," he said in a fake western accent, tipping his non-existent hat. The trailer behind him was a more decrepit model of Milt's place. Some aluminum panels were missing; others dangled from the concrete wall. There was a heap of construction materials next to his porch. The truck was either new or freshly painted.

"This is Benjamin," said Doreen. "He's Milt's nephew." She patted me on the back and nudged me towards him.

"Oh," he said, stepping down. "Doreen told me you might be coming. I'm very sorry for your loss."

He transferred the beer to his left hand and we shook. The hand was cold and wet. Thick black stubble went up to his eyes. I decided against my "I hardly knew him at all" routine. "Nice to meet you," I said.

"How's Ross doing?" he said, turning to Doreen. There was a chunk missing from one of the lenses of his glasses. "I've been meaning to go visit him."

"He's stable," she said. "Gwen and me were there this morning. He's getting some of his colour back. They've got him doing therapy three hours a day. It really knocks him out." She paused, apparently contemplating whether to say what she did end up saying, quickly and softly: "He'll be fine."

"Give him my best and tell him I'll visit soon."

"Will do." She started walking.

"Adios amigo," he said to me, lifting himself onto the truck. The bottle brushed the hood.

Doreen waited until we were out of earshot. "Poor Ron," she said. "He's had the worst luck finding work. He's a roofer. It's a bad time for them." We turned onto the shoulder of the highway and began the steep downward climb into town, beside the jagged walls of dynamited rock-face, the sun's bright sheen against the road. "We asked him to put shingles on our place a few months ago but he said we didn't need it."

"I like Ron a lot," Gwen said. "He's a really funny guy." She said something else but it was muffled by a rumbling truck. It came dangerously close to us and I stepped away, nearly fell into the ditch, had to stick out my arms for balance. The ladies laughed.

He teetered for a second before letting go, screaming as he fell, the drop ending in a foamy splash. You knew which ones were his parents because they paid attention. As soon as he came up they went back to their books and bottled water. On the grass behind the docks there were blankets for each set of parents, three in all. Six boys jumping. We stood on the bridge and watched them.

"Those must be cottage kids," Doreen said, pointing down at some of the boys. They were wrapped in towels, dripping on the docks. The parents, at least, wore their cottagehood in their clothing--the tall socks and golf shirts on the men and the pastel cotton dresses on the women. City people. Across the bay and over the little hill was half the town of Bayton. Bungalows and white asphalt.

"These two fellas are from town." They were making their way up the hill. Older than the other kids and parentless. They didn't waste any time. They ran to the middle of the bridge and leapt off. No screams, only splashes. They swam to the shore and started up again. "I'm pretty sure that short kid is Bill Gutman. His folks used to run the restaurant across from our store. I heard they split up awhile ago." She turned around to face the

other side of town. There was more of it to see from where we stood; the bay rounded off and the buildings started up. "I dunno where Rick went but Gloria still lives over there." She nodded at a row of houses two hundred yards away. A Doberman barked violently, wrestling with its chain. There were tall antennas and covered snowmobiles and some of the places had boats.

"Is his brother Tom Gutman?" Gwen asked, putting her elbows on the railing and resting her face in the heels of her palms. A car sped by, the first one in minutes. I could already feel a sunburn forming on the back of my neck. "He goes to my school. He thinks he's such a hotshot. *I* think he's a slimy fucking creep." She stood up straight, snapping her bathing suit through her dress. There were red cylinders on her cheeks.

Doreen drove some wet snot onto her upper lip with a chortle. "I know the type," she said, wiping it with the back of her hand. "Ross has a sixteen year old nephew--Jamie--thinks he's the greatest thing on earth." She bent over and reached into the basket at her feet. "Sometimes I wanna ring his stupid little neck. Spoiled brat. Any time me and Ross start regretting we never had any kids we go visit Jamie." Fishing through the basket with one hand, she held out two bananas with the other. Gwen took them and offered me one.

"No thanks," I said, still revelling in her crude summation of the kid's brother. It was impressive. I could picture the bastard. The cool sonsofbitches from my own highschool still made me clench on occasion.

"He'll grow out of it though," Doreen continued, panting slightly as she stood up. "They almost always do." Gwen gave her the banana she had peeled. She picked up the basket and we started walking.

"Let's find some shade while we wait for those people to clear away," said Doreen. "It's too busy for a picnic right now." Both sides of town branched off one road at the far end of the bridge. Beyond it, the highway folded upward into trees. We turned left onto the waterless side.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?" Gwen asked me as we passed by a large concrete building, The Bayton Memorial Arena. There was one car in the gravel parking lot. A signboard advertised bingo and a dance.

"No," I said. "I'm an only child."

"I bet that's why you're so good at school. Only children are smarter than kids with siblings. They get more nurturing from their parents and they have better attention spans." She held the basket low, by the handle, with her arms outstretched in front of her. It bounced against her knees.

"Aren't you gonna tell him?" Doreen said.

"Tell him what?"

Doreen cupped a beefy hand around her mouth and spoke in a loud, hoarse whisper, the secretiveness a burlesque: "It's true, Ben. Gwen's an only child too." Gwen walked ahead of us, laughing, her head tilted back, baring her teeth and squinting at the sky. "She's the number one student in the district. They gave her a hundred dollars and a plaque."

It was the sort of thing that could have driven me to violence if I'd had to endure it for any length of time. I wondered if the people who lived near the dam experienced trauma when they visited places without a constant flushing noise. We were sitting on a squat stone fence at the foot of a dead end. There was a three storey lime green building across the street, the lowest level shaded by a protruding roof, covered with black shingles and supported by a row of narrow pillars. A muddy white billboard:

THE LINCOLN
TAVERN &
FAMILY DINING
BAYTON
OPEN YEAR ROUND
"The best place to eat by a dam site"

Taped to the window were pictures of greasy meals, peeling away and fading into greenness.

Gwen was singing. Her voice was recognizably stylized--the untrained juvenile whine a long-haired junky had made popular in the seventies. I tried to think of the singer's name but couldn't. It sounded like a contemporary pop number. The right mix of meaningless visionary images and anxious melodic lament: "See the valleys/ See the hills/ See the heavens/ Hear the whippoorwills/ And I am calling/ Calling to you/ And I am crawling/ Crawling to you." There were miniscule shapes of sun in a confused pattern on the road, the rays that had made it through the branches. Gwen moved her head around, studying the surroundings, turning to watch the dam. She stretched out a leg and lifted it a few inches off the ground.

"What the hell do you want?" she shouted suddenly, breaking off in mid-chorus. Doreen laughed so hard and for so long that I was genuinely afraid she might collapse. By the end of it she was sounding like a weak engine on a winter morning, a sputtering hack falling further from the chug. I waited for an explanation while the girl only smiled.

"That's what Ross calls it," Doreen said, clutching her chest and heaving. "'The What the Hell Do You Want Lounge.'" She took off her glasses and wiped her eyes. "One time he was in there watching a ball game and he swears on his life Fran said 'What the hell do you want?' when she came to take his order. He was so shocked he got up and left."

I translate the rest from her telling, editing out the fits of happy choking:

Though once a thriving community meeting place, its clientele had been reduced to two main groups: under-age cottage teenagers, who went there to drink beer, and truckers, who would eat anything and be treated in any way that wasn't formal. Most held a woman named Fran Beardsley responsible for The Lincoln's decline. Her husband Jerry had been dead for five years. Travelling home from Huntsford on a winter afternoon he had pulled to the shoulder of the highway, released the driver's seat into a full reclining position, and died. With him went the brain behind the business. Inside a year, Fran's barbarousness

and bad cooking had driven all the regulars away. The Pavilion had established itself as the local restaurant and drinking place of choice. Bitter, Fran had alienated herself from everyone in town. She had become notorious for her bursts of unexplainable anger and irrational rudeness. No one knew how she had managed to keep the dump in operation for so long. It was the town's oldest business--a fact that was advertised on a standing sign board, next to "Todayspecial," which had never once been identified in the six years Doreen had lived there.

The story was glaringly mythic. Doreen had failed to account for the fact that I was trained in analyzing narratives, an expert at examining genre and convention and truth. The hag who ran the place was straight out of a fairy tale and Ross' account of her vulgarity was more than a little suspicious. It held a strange authority, though, insofar as its author had been hospitalized, immune from interrogation. The bit about Jerry's quiet roadside exit was curious too. He had probably been decapitated in a high speed accident, I figured, but the truth was too mundane to make a legend.

Only when we started walking did the noise come back to me. It had already sunken in. A game: predict the landmark where the dam can no longer be heard.

I craved Szechwan.

A string of small bells announced our arrival. The woman paraded around the counter, saying "Doreen and Gwen and Benjamin this must be Benjamin, Bill, Milton's great nephew. Is that what you call it or is it nephew-once-removed? Hmm. I wonder." I was glad she didn't wait for an answer. I had no idea what the official relation was.

It was just off the main road, separated from the highway by a field of weeds and tall grass. They were trying for a small town Norman Rockwell look--old Coca-Cola signs, a green awning, an antique ice freezer. If not for the aluminum siding I might have been overwhelmed by sentiment.

They called her Shirley. I imagined that her heavy sweats were supposed to give the impression that the air conditioner was working. The thing droned away above the door but there was no noticeable difference in temperature inside the store. Apart from the noise, its only tangible effects were the lukewarm drips of water that fell on your head as you entered.

Gwen went straight for the sliding door fridge and discovered there was no Seven Up. Shirley must have lived upstairs because she went there for a bottle from her private stock. "I'll just be a minute," she said, bounding up the stairway at the back.

"Really, Shirl. It's no big deal. We'll have something else to drink."

"No, no." She compensated for the increasing distance by bellowing. I assumed she was the one with the fetish for cats. There were pictures of them lining the back wall above the empty bottles, one of them a replica of the drawing on her sweatshirt--two kittens pawing at a ball of string. "We're getting a shipment tomorrow. I don't need it before then."

Her husband sat on a stool behind the meat counter reading a newspaper and smoking. A sparse display of tough looking chicken legs and packaged cold cuts. Doreen leaned against it and pinched her sweat-soaked shirt into two nipples, puffing up a breeze and sighing.

"I thought Ross looked pretty good this morning," Bill said. He was painfully thin. The baseball hat was like a helmet atop his hollow, bony face.

"Didn't ya think he was a bit depressed, Bill? I thought he was a little depressed." She walked around the counter and sat down beside him. "He's having trouble getting motivated for the therapy. It's a real struggle."

I started up one of the aisles. Gwen was reading *Newsweek*. She glanced up and smiled as I passed and then returned to the text opposite a photo of a Third World corpse. Captain Crunch was on sale for $3.99. I knew I wouldn't be able to eat whatever was

warming in that basket so I planned to sneak out to a restaurant after the picnic. In the meantime, I tried to think of some food scenes in Faulkner but none came to mind.

"When I busted my leg snowmobiling the last thing I wanted was to get up and walk around," I heard Bill say. "You gotta do it though or everything tightens up."

"It'd be nice if he could get a room with a TV." Doreen coughed a few times and then sighed again. "He'd be a lot happier if he could watch the ball games."

"Shirley and me'll bring our TV to the hospital some night," Bill said, "when it's on regular not cable."

There was a pillared booth near the front, the counter piled high with rolls of film and candy. An office calculator was propped against the ancient, big-buttoned cash register. Cigarette packs spanned the upper shelves. Some weary looking t-shirts were on display, wrinkling off of coat hangers, high enough to require a ladder to get them down. There were the requisite sports and music jerseys as well as a few idiotic slogans: "Party Animal," "Shit Happens." The most prominent were the cream-coloured monstrositi with a brown rubber drawing of the bridge: *Beautiful Bayton, Ontario: In the Land of a Thousand Bays.*

Who bought that shit, I wondered. Who bothered to make it? What frail engines were at work in the effort to turn a profit out of that unspectacular town? There was a collage of photographs on one of the pillars, glued to yellow Bristol board, forming a square around "The Wall of Fame"--the stencilled words in thick black ink at the centre. I focussed on the top left corner--Bill and Shirley smiling behind the register (Shirley with the same sweatshirt, Bill under the same hat). The Wall of Fame beside them. The real Shirley galloped down the stairs. Her arm came through the door at the back, two litres of Seven Up in hand.

"Here you go, dear. Sorry it's not very cold. The fridge is giving us trouble. A guy from Huntsford's coming to fix it but he's real busy with everybody's air conditioners on the fritz."

Doreen in the winter. An obvious pose. Pretending to steal a magazine, conspicuously tucking it inside her bulky parka, attempting a sly criminal mug.

"Thanks a lot, Shirl. You didn't have to do that. We could've had something else."

Ron, the same chip in his glasses, his hand on the side view mirror of the pickup, parked outside the store.

"Should we get some crackers or something, Gwen?"

"If you get Ritz get the plain kind. We've already got some cheese."

And then Milt. I didn't notice him at first. He was in the background, out of focus, not the main subject of the image. It was taken from behind the counter. There was someone in front of him. The profile of a bearded face was turned towards a baby, puckering for a kiss. The kid was looking at the camera, his or her tiny hand reaching out for it, blocking his or her own face. It was hard to look beyond that image--the weird dynamic between the kissing man and the pointing child--but something drew me to the background. It was the glint of orange behind the point of focus, the sparkle from Milt's hunting cap. Under the hat was the same haggard face I had encountered nine years earlier. The bushy eyebrows were whiter; the five day growth on his cheeks was grey and stiff. There was something of the late Faulkner in him, the rounded chin and sharp dark eyes. His mouth formed a small oval. It wasn't clear whether the expression showed vacancy or focus. He was holding a carton of milk in his hand, apparently waiting to pay for it.

"Oh, you discovered the Wall of Fame, did ya? Hey, we should get a picture of you. Yeah. Bill! Where's the Polaroid, Bill? Never mind. Here it is. Doreen, Gwen, come over here and get in the picture with Benjamin. Put your stuff down on the counter. There *is* film in this, isn't there? Say cheese!"

And before I knew what was going on they were on either side of me, Doreen with her hand on my shoulder, the camera's old fashioned flash exploding and then quickly fading into a blue crystal core. Then we were standing next to the counter, huddling over the grey-on-white rectangle, waiting for the image. It came out dark. There was a sickly

yellowness, as if it had been taken with a jaundiced lens. Everyone's eyes had a demonic red glare. I looked stunned, unadapted to the sudden pose. I wasn't looking at the camera, but to the right of it, at Milt's picture. Embarrassingly scrawny in my khaki shorts and white t-shirt. I stood at least a full head taller than the other two, my long legs cut off at the knees. Doreen had an affected s. .e, the kind you only saw in photographs, and Gwen was doing the rabbit-ears routine, sticking out two fingers behind my head. The bottom corner didn't come out properly so her body was cut off. You couldn't tell she was pregnant.

They studied the picture ("I look possessed;" "God am I ever fat;" "Ben looks like a giant") while I went over to check out Milt.

"When was this taken?" I asked Shirley, silencing their laughter.

"Oh yeah, the one with Milton in the back. That's the only one we've got of him. He didn't like having his picture taken. I moved the camera over to make sure I got him in." She scratched her head in mugged contemplation. "Don and Heather's baby is about two months there and she's five months now. So it's maybe three months ago. Come to think of it that's the last time I ever saw him. He didn't come in too much."

Gwen moved over to look. "Is that him?" she said, pointing, her finger briefly blocking his head. "He looks younger than I thought."

"He's shorter than I thought," I said, thinking of the writing. Although mildly embarrassed with myself, I had already formed the intention to pump out at least one more of those odd vignettes before getting down to work. The thesis would have to wait. My stomach creaked and churned. It surprised me that Milt had been a milk drinker.

Shirley told Doreen about Fran Beardsley's attempt to return a half-eaten chocolate bar while Gwen and I stood there dumbly, looking at it, a few feet away from where Milt stood in the photo. The girl turned to me, uttering a high weak grunt of astonishment as though she'd just learned a remarkable fact of astronomy. And then she turned to look at the picture again.

* * *

Weak with hunger and boredom, I headed out for something to eat. It was just getting dark. The heat had not subsided any. The irritatingly bright sun was gone but it was even more humid than it had been in the afternoon. It felt good to have the wind blowing at me through the windows of the car. As I cruised down the hill towards Bayton I turned on the radio, settled on the first station that came in clearly. Some solo piano music was playing. "Beethoven," I muttered, slicing the wind with my arm. I cranked it up as I sped across the bridge. It must have been audible at every corner of the otherwise silent town.

The movement ended and a faster one began. I imagined myself at a party--a modest, well decorated home, thirty or so of my professors and fellow students standing around in small groups, quaintly sipping on red wine or brown beer. Amidst the patter of their voices, their remotely competitive intellectual banter, I snuck over to the baby grand in the corner. I started banging out the music on the radio. People gathered around. I was oblivious to them, wrapped up as I was in the gradual crescendo. For the last minute a two bar bass figure was repeated under virtuosic runs in the upper keys. It ended with an abrupt, unsustained minor chord. I did a hundred and fifty kilometres an hour as the audience applauded.

I pretended that the announcer was a gaping witness of my performance. Instead of identifying the piece as an early Schumann sonata, as the announcer did, the voice asked amazed questions about my talents. Nobody in the audience had known that I played the piano. Which, in reality, I didn't.

I switched it off as I pulled into the station. The man who pumped my gas told me I was lucky; he'd been closed for half an hour and was about to shut off the pumps when he saw me drive in. I attempted a grateful smile. He made a second stab at conversation, something about the heat, but I denied him any reply. He put the pump on automatic and went inside.

Three younger men were sitting on a light blue Chevrolet beside the garage. Late teens, twenty-one at most. All of them were smoking. Empty beer bottles on the roof of the car. The one in the middle tapped out a rhythm between his legs. The beat came out in the unfriendly thud of wood on metal. It looked like he had drum sticks.

They were talking about what would happen if someone threw a lit match into a gas tank. They had all heard the same thing: nothing would happen; the match would go out. The one in jeans was trying to draw a bet out of the other two. He was frustrated that they agreed. While the attendant filled out my credit card slip they moved to the side of the Chevy. The drummer continued his beat on the roof. The aggressive one kneeled down and opened the tank. He started blowing smoke into and around it, sticking out his tongue in mock eroticism. I was about to alert the man to their antics when the idiot flicked his butt into the tank and closed the little door. They were laughing as he handed me my card.

It wasn't until I was walking through the doors of The Pavilion that I realized the performance I had witnessed had been Danny's.

* * *

"Won't you even have any strawberries, Ben?" It woke me from a reflective spell. I was lying on the grass with my eyes closed, conjuring up the blurry image, trying to kick Milt out of his captured state. I should have taken the sunscreen and the ridiculous, plastic-visored hat when Doreen offered them. You couldn't go back on those decisions. Gwen had been right; it was a little cooler by the water. But the sun was oppressive. I wanted to crawl under a tree and sleep. Save for a few crackers I had eaten nothing from the spread. I tried one of the strawberries. It had the vague taste of cigarette smoke.

The jumpers and their parents were gone, smart enough to have sought shelter from the awful heat of mid-afternoon. So it was quiet by the docks. In the centre of the tablecloth

was a messy, depleted buffet of crackers, cheese and fruit. Doreen nibbled at a slice of bologna, the package on her lap, visibly damp with warm grease.

"It's too bad Ross couldn't be here," Gwen said. A Styrofoam cup sat beside her, floating on the blades. There were teeth marks around the rim.

"I'll bring him some leftovers when I go tonight," said Doreen, starting to fill a garbage bag with paper plates and banana peels. "He loves strawberries and bananas. The only fruit he doesn't like is apples. Can you believe that? Have y'ever hearda anybody who didn't like apples?" She crawled over to pick up someone else's litter from grass.

Gwen dug a school binder from the basket.

"Oh," said Doreen. "You're gonna show it to him?"

"It's the first three pages of my storybook," she said, ripping open the velcro-fastened cover. "I wanted to know what you thought. It's only for little kids, five and under. I'm planning to write one for grade schoolers after this." As she handed me the pages she twisted her mouth to one side. "I'm gonna go for a swim while you look at it," she said quickly, springing up and heading for the docks. She pulled her dress off with a graceful stretch. The white one-piece bathing suit conformed to her belly. It was too tight at the back. She huddled on the edge of the dock, bending forward as far as the belly would allow, clasping her hands at her shins.

"*I* think it's terrific," said Doreen, pointing at the papers with one of her knitting needles. The sweater had grown a crew neck since the night before. "Gwen's got a real knack."

The drawings were done on heavy art paper with jagged edges. They were busy with colour in some places and virtually empty in others. I assumed she was intending to go back to them, to colour the empty spaces in. In the areas of colour she had made full use of her Laurentians. Every shade of pencil crayon imaginable was featured in her layered skies and psychedelic suns.

Along the bottom of each page were sentences in neat calligraphy. There were faint remnants of ruled pencil lines under the words. On the first page she had glued a strip of paper over a word, creating a gap in the phrase. The glue was unsticking. Lifting up a corner, I could see that the deleted word was "lonely." So in its first version the sentence read: "ONCE THERE WAS A LONELY OLD MAN WHO LIVED IN A TRAILER." And in its revised form: "ONCE THERE WAS AN OLD MAN WHO LIVED IN A TRAILER." The bare outline of a mobile home surrounded by a dense, multi-coloured sky and surreal trees. Purple branches dangled over the roof. There was almost no detail to the trailer. A face looked out of the window, but it too was nondescript. The only indication that it was a man was the patch of grey spots around the mouth; a five o'clock shadow, I gathered, not freckles.

"THERE WERE PLENTY OF PEOPLE AROUND BUT THE OLD MAN KEPT TO HIMSELF." Gwen had pulled off a clever reversal on the second page. It was the old man's perspective through the window. Different colours in the sky and uncoloured shapes of people in groups along the road. Their speech was implied through open mouths and gesturing arms.

The third was the only one she'd finished· the old man in the forest surrounded by bushes and trees, a bird on his shoulder and a rabbit at his feet. His body was done in rich colours--crimson, purple and dark blue. He was smiling, the maroon lips turned upwards and the spotted beard higher up on his cheeks. There was a wild green vine with red berries wrapped around his torso like lights on a tree. Beneath the leaf-scattered ground on which he stood, the caption read: "HE LIKED TO GO WALKING IN THE FOREST. THE TREES AND THE ANIMALS WERE HIS FRIENDS."

"Isn't it cute?" Doreen said, continuing to knit as she looked at me.

I heard a splash. There was a bubbly circle beyond the dock with small waves rolling away in all directions. Gwen emerged, flinging her hair into place.

"AHHH!" she said, grabbing onto the half submerged ladder and leaning back. "It feels *so* good!"

She let go, falling backwards, poking an arched foot through the surface.

* * *

Bill and Shirley were finishing a meal of hamburgers and french fries. They didn't notice me. I sat in another section of the bar. I ordered a jumbo basket of chicken wings and a Budweiser. I had no memory of ever having drunk a Budweiser before. Waiting, I studied the neon beer signs on the walls, the sticky looking varnish of the tables. There was a music video on the overhead TV. It had nothing to do with the country tune that was playing.

I ate quickly. The wings were meaty and fat. Steaming dark meat dripping with spicy, half-congealed red slop. Delicious. I bummed a post-meal cigarette from the waitress and smoked it in mammoth gasps. Back at the car, I looked at myself in the rear view mirror. There was a piece of gristle lodged in my lower front teeth and a splotch of sauce on my chin.

writing

Sunburnt. Doreen had supplied me with a tube of some ointment or other. Creamy marshes of the stuff across my neck, nose and shins. It had a powerful medicinal odour with a faint tinge of sweet awful coconut. I found a single beer in Milt's cupboard and spent half an hour trying to find a way to open it. I managed to pry the cap off with the help of a crevice in the porch railing and then sat down to write. This idea had been developing for several hours.

The orange sun was sinking now behind the hills beyond the town and it was Friday so they were beginning to collect around the General Store. Johncy was there as usual, his lank figure in its perpetual pose of relaxation, half leaning and half sitting on the wooden storage bin in front of the porch. A cigarette dangled from his lips, the smoke hovering under the warped visor of his grease-stained red cap, the cap which had sat atop his head for going on twenty years and so had become a kind of symbol of the town's equilibrium.

He removed the cigarette and spat. "Saw the Sasquatch yestiday," he said.

The man they called the Sasquatch had first appeared near the border of town two years before, hunching and alone, walking slowly along the shoulder of the road. It was Dean who had spotted him and, in the time it took to run from Brooks Point to the gallery of the store, had turned him into a mysterious hulking creature whose shadow had appeared to possess its own mobility and whose head contained a long expanse of empty skull between hairline and brow, giving him the appearance of a circus performer or a pre-historic man.

"I saw him last week," Dean said, squatting on the stoop. "Over by the turnoff to the old Cowley place. Saw me comin and he dipped into the woods."

"Where in Jesus' name did that guy come from?" Jack said.

"Where'd he *come* from?" Dean said. "Where'n hell's he *goin?*"

There were eight of them on the gallery, a kind of study in positions of recline, all of them either sitting or squatting or leaning. Miss Stella could be seen through the window behind them, sweating slightly and fanning herself, her feet propped on the counter, observing them with a woman's content and reassuring boredom. Exactly four of the men swatted at flies while the others sat or leaned or squatted in unbothered repose. Johncy was among the still ones, the mask of grey smoke thick enough to protect him from the buzzing swarms but transparent enough that you could make out behind it the constant narrow puckered grin, the yellow teeth clamping the damp deformed cigarette in the corner. He scratched his head through the cap.

"Name's Milton" he said, continuing to look ahead, his tone low and soothing. "Lives in wunna them trailers up there on the hill. Evrybody up there's got somethin wrong with'em. Somethin in the water f'yask me."*

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* While the immediate inspiration for this silly demi-scene might have been our little jaunt to the Bayton General Store, the idea has many precedents. The Jefferson store is a central meeting place and narrative vehicle in Faulkner's Snopes trilogy. There are always a "half dozen overalled men sitting or squatting about it with pocket knives and slivers of wood" (The Hamlet 9). Those men chew tobacco, tell stories and

I quickly aborted the attempt after reading over what I had written and gagging on its pure stupid awfulness. The beer was skunky and warm. I tried the little black and white in the bedroom but nothing came through. An inning of radio baseball and then sleep.

(Waking in perfect darkness--too dark even to see the clock--I was unsure whether it had been a dream or something Doreen had told me. In the very early morning, a crisp dewy pang in the half dark air, he is outside in his underwear working a flyswatter and pacing. He walks delicately, barefoot on the moist dirty ground. Hunching slightly, he lifts his knees high in the air with each slow motion stride and turns to the side of the trailer and then turns again to circle around the back. He is swatting with sporadic sudden motions of the arm--at flies or maybe at nothing. Slowly circling the trailer in his underwear with a flyswatter in his hand.)

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spit. My late 20th century Toronto sensibilities led me to a few errors. For instance, the idea that it would have to be a Friday evening for the men to gather in this fashion contradicts the very foundation of the conventional scenario. Cowley and Brooks are the names of two old Faulkner scholars. My speakers were named after Faulkner's three brothers. Stella (classic Southern belle monicker that it is) is short for Estelle--Faulkner's crazy wife. The idea for the mysterious character and the town's reaction to him could have come from any number of minor characters in the later anecdotal writings. I also threw in a personal detail: the bit about the shape of his skull is an embellished description of my own abnormally protuberant forehead, a magnet for much ridicule in my youth. Milt might very well have had a similar deformity if such things are hereditary.

I have no clue what led me to try to imitate the late Faulkner. I can hardly bear to read that stuff. In fact, it is generally painful to even think about anything he composed after the mid-forties. They should never have given him that Nobel Prize. Pretty much everything he attempted after it was fluff. Having never developed any interest in reading what the master had to say about Jesus in France during WWI, I have never read A Fable. But The Town and The Mansion are mediocre at best and The Reivers, his last, is truly awful.

(Forgive me, William Cuthbert. I bear no ill will. Only pure, unfaltering respect and adoration.)

Thursday

"Lo?" she said. It was an aggravating tendency of hers to start speaking before the receiver had reached her mouth. I spared her from the usual mockery.

"Greetings. It's your son Ben."

"Ben! My son! Where are you?"

"I'm in dreary, overcast Bayton, the only phone booth in town. I think I'm the first person ever to use it. I swear to god, the phone book is uncut."

She laughed hysterically. I have always been able to make Eileen laugh, even in the midst of my depressions. She is not the most difficult of audiences.

"Let me guess: Uncle Milton had no phone."

"Uncle Milton barely had a fucking toilet, Eileen."

"What's it like? Are you getting some work done? How are you doing?"

"All of the above."

"Did you get the letter?"

"What letter?" I looked through the plastic pane of the booth, up the highway towards the bridge. A truck was approaching. I followed it with my eyes, keeping my head straight, nervously awaiting her response.

"You probably have to go to the post office to check on your mail."

"What letter are you talking about for Christ sake?"

Not a flutter. She intentionally delayed her answer, I think, to throw one back at me. Without uttering a word she won uncontestedly. "Virginia," she said.

"Good news?"

"Couldn't tell. Should I have checked?"

"When did you mail it?"

"Tuesday. It came the day you left."

"*Jesus*," I said.

The fat woman at the post office was suspicious. She made a big deal out of the fact that I didn't know the box number.

"Milton McQuilan," I said, "from the trailer park up the hill. A letter for Benjamin Sandler from the University of Virginia." I dug my wallet out of the pocket of my shorts. "I'll show you some I.D."

"I was informed that Mr. McQuilan had died."

"You were informed correctly. I'm his nephew or great nephew or something."

"And why are you expecting mail at your uncle's address?"

"Never mind," I said, dramatizing my annoyance by stuffing back the wallet and starting for the door. "I'll get the number from Doreen."

"Hold on. I'll check." She opened one of the metal boxes on the wall with a key from the chain on her belt loop. You had to show your stuff sometimes; a little forcefulness brought people like that around.

"Sorry. There's nothing here for you."

I bought a pack of cigarettes on my way back to the park.

The second round draft pick--Faulkner, philosophy and modern fiction--MISTAH BENJAMIN SANDLAHHH!!!!! I actually said it as I sped across the road, stirring up dirt, braking at the foot of Milt's steps. I had to step over the bumper to get inside. A nervous excitement was bubbling in my gut. Virginia was the place. A haven of Faulkner scholarship. They had put me on a waiting list and for a month I had been hoping that someone would receive a better offer or be otherwise removed from the game. Good news from Charlottseville could put me to work on the thesis.

But it wasn't going to happen today. I dropped a cassette into the ghettoblaster and sat down at the kitchen table with a cigarette. Smoke filled up the room. Filmy clouds hovered around the windows, rising in slow twirls. The dirty pleasure of the day's first smoke. I put my feet up on the table and thought about Virginia.

"Women Singers," I had labelled the tape. Diane would have been pleased with me. I sat there through a few Ella ballads, staring out the window. The air outside was visibly potent, ready to burst into a pounding rain at any time. It was dark and the road was empty. A faster song came on. Big Mama Thornton--raunchy and furious, delivered in throaty screams.

I wish I was an apple
Hangin' from a tree
Havin' all the sweet little men
Reachin' out to me
Now swing it on home, Big Mama,
Swing it on home

I lit another cigarette and sprung from the chair, went quickly down the hall, boosted up the volume on the way. Frozen in the doorway of the workroom, absently casing the juxtapositions: computer, brush-stroke, book-crate, kimonoed Faulkner,

figurine. And then flipping through the newspapers with half-attention, idly absorbed, taking in the odd photograph or headline: "Summer Cottagers: Where Are They to Vote?" "Huntsford to Get a Second Baseball Diamond." Big Mama was right inside the shuffle, employing every inch of her fat. *Hope that when you hear this record I'll be in you're home someday, now swing it on home.* I left the papers in a sloppy pile on top of the paint cans and wiped my dry, inky hands on my shirt.

The alligator's terraced back was brittle: a single poke produced a hole. I pushed the crow into a swaying rhythm with the song and then I watched it fall out of synch--a defective metronome until it lagged into a half time beat. I knelt in front of the window and inspected the hunter, pinching the butt between my teeth. The checkered pattern of the jacket was nearly flawless: he had compensated for the creases in the material with mathematical insertions of paint. I stifled the urge to singe its blank face with my heater, to take one of the animals and give it a good pummeling, smash it over the table like a virgin piñata. A waft of smoke floated into my eyes. I gave them the bent-finger scratch.

The campfire smell assaulted me when I slid open the closet doors. It had steeped beyond my consciousness like an odour I had carried from birth. The source shook my olfactory awake, alerted me to the conditions of my air. I could taste the smoky wood. Rifling through the pockets--jacket, parka, shirts, pants--I found a few sales receipts, nothing more. They were from Bill and Shirley's store, I conjectured. I went so far as to imagine that one of them, a one-item purchase worth $1.76, was for the quart of milk he was holding in the photograph. That seemed real enough. His last milk. The bill for it in his old man's pants.

Ruth Brown piped in with her sexy guttural black woman's whine. I sang along in a semi-falsetto:

Lucky lips are always kissin'

Lucky lips are never blue

Lucky lips will always find a man

With lips that will be true

I don't need a four leaf clover

Rabbit's foot or good luck charm

With lucky lips I'll always have

A fella in my arms

I pulled the orange hat down from the shelf, saw the pattern of grease from Milt's forehead. The stubbly white hair I thought I had found was a fleck of stiff wool. A pair of tough, elbow-length leather gloves, a shoetree, another *Cottage Country*, another stack of newspapers. The blue nylon rifle case was by far the most promising of the meagre offerings.

The unfinished moosehead with its unexpressive black eyes sat on the coffee table looking ridiculous. It stared me down as I sank into the couch with the weapon across my lap. The case had several pockets, each one shaped for a specific purpose, like the various hooks and dips of workmen's pants. I went through them all, finding only a granola bar wrapper and another pair of gloves, wool ones with the fingers cut off. No shells or accessories. As I tugged on the main zipper, the background singers came out of nowhere for the absurdly dramatic final notes of "Lucky Lips."

The case slid from my lap onto the floor as I pulled the rifle out. I felt the wooden base, avoided the trigger area, lightly ran my fingers along the cold grey rod out of which the ammunition flew. The entire weapon was strangely cold, as if he had last used it on a frigid winter day and promptly returned it to its case, a thermos for the gun. (A circular walking bass line followed by the smooth, airy phrasings of Anita O'Day).

Every honey bee

Fills with jealousy

When they see you out with me

I don't blame them goodness knows

Honeysuckle rose

A few nicks around the barrel, a slight dent in what I assumed was the trigger guard. No surprises.

I was afraid to pick it up of course. Visions of an ugly, inadvertent discharge. The last thing I needed was a bullet wound and a crowd of curious neighbours. I gripped the base and pinched the barrel, lifted it a few inches above my lap and cupped my palms. Left hand down the shaft, right finger around the trigger guard, up to eye level, turning it ahead. The barrel sat between the moose's eyes. The muscles of my arms were in a moon-like suspension, trembling. I held it there through two verses and a bridge, squinting like the aiming riflemen of old movies. Anita O'Day. *You're my honey honey honeysuckle rose.* I blew a pool of saliva against the roof of my mouth in imitated explosion, pulling the rifle away, slowly and dramatically upwards, the moosehead teetering and then falling backwards. The clunk of its fall coincided with the final brass punch of the song. In the ensuing silence--it was the end of the side--I read the unpainted bottom of the thing. A photograph of two hags holding an oversized cheque and smiling: "Dorset Sisters Strike it Rich in Provincial Lottery." I returned the moosehead to an upright position and put the rifle back on the shelf.

The energizing pang of a small discovery, a sudden lunge of blood. It was neither the first nor the last time I would feel like an excitable child on that day. My nostrils flared up. The sensation held a primitive similarity to the intellectual challenge rush--the confident thrill of formulating an articulate counter to a seminarian's claims, with authoritative references, the consciously subdued raising of the hand. I had to tell somebody. I clutched the matchbook in my fist and calmly walked outside. It was the first time in awhile that I had felt like running.

They were standing in front of Doreen's trailer covering the garden with a tarp. One end was attached to the railing of the porch and they were busy securing the other end to a

stick. Before the pleasantries were up I was holding it out to them, saying "Check this out. You're not going to believe it."

"It's a book of matches from The Lincoln," Doreen said.

"Look inside. I found it in the nightstand drawer under the Christmas cards." Me, hands in pockets, anticipating disbelief. She took a look and handed it to Gwen. The girl studied the old man's sloppy, small, press-hard scrawl. The phrase in dark blue ink: "Fran - Thurs. 8pm."

"What do you think it means?" Doreen said.

"I think it means they were a couple," I said, camouflaging my excitement with a casual, ironic delivery. "They were dating."

"Milton and Fran?" she said with a dismissive chortle. "Give me another one."

"Why not?" Gwen said. "I can believe it--two old people looking for companionship." She cracked a sly smile that made me suspect I was being teased. I chose to accept her defense for what it was, not to credit her with the gift of irony.

"Yeah," I said. "They're consenting adults." Nobody laughed.

"Fran Beardsley is a crazy, mean spirited old bitch," Doreen said. Gwen laughed at that. "Milt was such a shy old guy. There's no *way* the two of them could've had a relationship. They'd be like cats and dogs." She gave me a jocular poke in the shoulder. "You're out of your cotton pickin' mind," she said, bending down to pluck a weed out from the grass.

"Maybe they were both very lonely," Gwen said. If she wasn't putting me on she was playing devil's advocate. It was clear that she agreed with Doreen.

"Just because people spend time alone doesn't mean they're lonely," Doreen said. "There's a difference between solitude and loneliness. Solitude is self-imposed. If Milton wanted to he would have talked to us more often. God *knows* we tried." There was a pause while Gwen handed me the matches and Doreen assessed the clouds. "Can you help us

with this damn covering, Ben? It keeps falling over. There's gonna be an awful storm and I don't want the garden to be ruined."

We sat at the picnic table drinking Cokes. It was mid-afternoon but it was dark enough to be dusk. The sky was a mass of dense, shaving cream clouds. I felt foolish about the Milt and Fran fiasco, wishing I had given it some thought before presenting them with my interpretation of a matchbook with a scribbled phrase. They appeared to have forgiven me.

Doreen told me about that morning's visit with Ross. He had been more cheerful than usual. She had brought him the sports section and he'd studied the boxscores and statistics. If his condition continued to improve he would be out of hospital by early next week. "He's eager to meet you," she said. "I told him all about our picnic. He wants to know how you can make heads or tails of that William Faulkner guy. He said to tell you that Ernest Hemingway is his favourite. He likes *The Old Man and the Sea*."

Gwen reminded me about her party, which was scheduled for the next night. She would be serving spaghetti. The sauce would be made with tomatoes from Doreen's garden. Did I drink red wine? Yes. Good. Her mother was bringing a bottle.

I swigged the last sweet puddle from the can and excused myself, claiming I had work to do, intending to take a nap. My hungry dizzy lethargy made itself fully known when I tilted my head back for a look at the owl. The thing had sat there unacknowledged since my first time through the door. A puff of low clouds in the background brought it out. I straddled the railing and tried to hoist myself by the corner of the roof for a closer look.

"What on earth are you doing?" Doreen said. "You're gonna break your neck if you're not careful." They were identical in height, I noticed, and their arms moved in complementary rhythms. A drop of rain fell on my nose. "Would you get the step ladder

from the far side of the house, dear?" she asked Gwen. "It's under the box of Geraniums where we keep the hose."

I sat down on the steps and Doreen paced in front of me, hands on hips, testing out various perspectives on the owl. "You're not gonna take it down are you? There'll be sparrows all over the place if you do. We'll have it if you don't want it. Anything to get rid of the damn birds."

So it was a scarecrow. I pretended to have known that, wondering if any of the other beasts had served a purpose beyond the hobby, if they had been more than mere objects with which to whittle at the hours of the day. Perhaps the hunter discouraged intruders. "I just want to have a look," I said. Which was a lie now. I only wanted to sleep.

Her knee grazed mine as she sat down. "Ever since the day we moved in here Ross wanted to ask Milton to make one for us. He never felt comfortable, though. He tried to do it himself a few years ago but he never finished it. I think it's papier mâché. I guess you figured out that Milton was an expert at papier mâché. Could you *believe* some of the things he made? It's too bad I didn't see them until after he died 'cause I know a lady in Huntsford who runs a craft store."

Gwen came back with the step ladder. I placed it in front of the door and climbed to the highest level. They stood together at my left, waiting for something. I was face to face with the owl. It was mounted on a soft and rotting wooden base. A support pole ran diagonally from its head to the roof. Some earwigs skittered away when I leaned my hand above the eavestrough.

"It's kind of grotesque," Gwen said. "It looks like a devil."

From up close it didn't look like much of anything. A solid ball with a vague semblance of form: the head was smaller than the body. Without the yellow eyes, the one ear and the suggestion of another, its owlhood would have been questionable at best. He hadn't intended it for close-range viewing. Thick varnish, like a layer of industrial plastic, functioned as its protective coating. In several areas the stuff had congealed into bumpy

lines and bubbles. There was a patch of flaky pulp where the second ear had been. The structure remained precariously intact but the paint job was fading with age. I could see through to the original material.

It was something thicker than newspaper. There were illegible letters and an embossed emblem--a woman's stylish nineteenth century profile. I had to think for a moment before it came to me.

"Oh my god," I said, looking down at them and smiling.

* * *

At first I thought it was gunfire. I had been lying in bed since six o'clock, drifting near the margins of sleep. Those were the best kind--the long, ecstatic, half-conscious naps. I tended to take more of them when I was depressed; they were easier to justify. *You are tired and unhappy*, I would tell myself as I slid under the sheets. Depression had its perks. After a prolonged spell of semi-sleep--an erotic cloud encircling my brain, holding me back yet encouraging me to waken--the noises came: a string of small explosions then a scream. I stayed calm, slowly stood up from the bed. Dizzy from too much rest, I had to sit down with my head bowed and wait for the impending black out to pass.

I lifted the curtain and peeked out. The park was coated in darkening blue. All the porch lights were on, a harbour-like effect. There was a crowd up the road, ten or twelve of them in a sloppy circle. Others were standing on their porches. Those with lawns were making use of them, sitting on plastic chairs or leaning against fences, spectators. I put on my shoes and went to see what was going on.

The rain had stopped. There were small puddles on the steps and the ground was muddy. The Toyota showed a layer of droplets, glistening with the remains of daylight. Music coming from the crowd. There was another series of explosive pops as I started

towards them, a dance of yellow strings in the sky. Fireworks. Some yelps and screams followed the sequence of coloured lights.

"Hi there, Ben," Doreen said, surprised and glad to see me. She was on a lawn chair a hundred feet out from her property where the road broadened out and the rows of trailers began. "Did you come for the show? There's another chair beside the mobile if you want." Her legs were crossed and she was working on the last sleeve, only partially interested in the doings of the crowd. The sweater was red, crew necked, a pattern of white deer.

"What's this all about?" I said. The gathering was another hundred feet in front of us.

"It's Canada Day. July the first. What'd ya think all those flags were for? Usually Ross and me drive out to the Rowan Lake campgrounds. They have a spectacular display."

Most of them were teenagers. Everyone else stuck to the peripheries or to their land. There was a lot of movement and increasing noise. Someone turned up the music. Gwen was just outside the group, clapping and grooving. There was a series of louder, more dispersed bangs. Some roman candles were released into the cloudy evening sky.

"Go up and join them if you want," said Doreen. "There's a cooler of beer somewhere. I pitched in five dollars but I don't want any."

Gwen kept on dancing as I approached, pointing at me with stiff-armed passion and pumping her finger to the beat. "I-I-I-I-I'm not your stepping stone," she sang loudly, giving me a glazed yet potent stare. She was powerfully stoned. Her eyes were bloodshot and puffy. She seemed out of synch, a few seconds behind her own movements as she turned to face the crowd, appearing to forget about me.

Danny was near the centre of the mob, walking in quick and idle circles, shaking up a beer and spraying it at his friends. The others were also drinking, standing in small groups, some of them dancing, all of them shouting. There was smoke from the fireworks and dust from the road. One knelt down and set off some green shooters. Another sat on

the cooler strumming violently on an acoustic guitar. The music drowned out his accompaniment. The ghettoblaster was beside him. Behind it was a pile of bottles and cans. Ron was sitting on the hood of his truck again, holding a baby in his arms. A younger woman sat in the front seat hanging her legs out the passenger door.

I moved closer to the cooler. When the song ended the kid dropped the guitar and joined the others. I pulled a Molson Canadian from the box of freezing water and beer. There weren't many left. I held the bottle low, at the side of my leg, and returned to the outside of the group. Gwen was gone, nowhere in sight. I stood there for ten minutes with my beer. The fireworks got faster until eventually there were only a few seconds between each blast. They were spending their resources, cutting the entertainment short. It was a basic but plentiful display. They started counting down and shooting two or three off simultaneously, from different corners of the crowd, creating new patterns of drooping light.

It was still going on when I walked back. Doreen was gone too. I saw her watching through her window. As I approached Milt's steps, I noticed Gwen standing on the roof of her trailer, her hands clasped above her head. She moved deliberately in the dim light, turning her pregnant hips in slow circles and rolling her neck. I thought I saw a firefly flicker out beside her. She was dancing to something slower than the music.

I tried to read but it was useless. A single beer had drowned any hope of making ground on the thesis. The nervous guilt of procrastination was growing stronger. I felt it in my gut and knew that it would rise steadily until I managed to accomplish something. I was more than hoping that the news from Virginia would be good; it overcame me, went beyond hope, to the realm of pathetic dependency. It would provide the strongest incentive to finally sit down and write the nagging text. The material was up there, I thought, ready to be recorded, waiting for me to surmount my mountainous block.

So there I was--alone again in the trailer, incapable of doing what I was supposed to do, not a corner left to explore and far from sleep or inspiration. I sat on the bed, a stack of books eyeing me from the floor, and I recalled the Sunday boredoms of my youth. As on those later Sundays, when boredom was a condition not a circumstance, my hand slowly crawled into my shorts.

I was normally a slow and silent masturbator. It was a technique I had developed out of necessity; as a youth, my parents' bedroom had adjoined my own. When I became a student bachelor in another city I had maintained the subdued approach--part habit, part homage. I saved the more vigorous technique for special occasions.

My moment of trailer park ennui was apparently one such time--Canada Day perhaps. After building up gradually to the full commitment I lay down and started fisting it. The party was still going on outside. I became oblivious to the revellers' noise, wrapped up as I was in my fantasy, and surrounded by the beat of the creaking bed. Diane was my imagined subject; despite my efforts at suppression I rarely succeeded in keeping her out of my fantasies. It had been three years since I had been with anybody else. I breezed through the situational elements, a condition of erotic realism: the dinner, the wine, the foreplay. All of it was remembered from a particular evening: the time of our best sex, during our best year--the middle one. It climaxed with a bizarre twisting half-standing half-leaning-backwards position which we could never quite accomplish after the fact. The relationship dwindled after that. Our last six months were essentially sexless. Something about my rushing to intercourse.

It was a long one. I grew tired and considered giving up. I had to find a new screenplay for my sessions. As wonderfully filthy as it was, the Diane sequence was beginning to frustrate me, hold me back. Finally, after what must have been half an hour, I felt it coming.

At the surge--the perfect moment before--I dropped the remembered fantasy and let myself go. But an unwilled image entered my mind, intractable, more real than my

memory's titillations. Milton McQuilan stood naked in front of me, hands wrapped around erect penis, his scrotum red and tight, as I reached out for the nearest rag-like object and spent myself into the nylon mesh of Gwen's bug mask.

* * *

I told them the story. They were leaning against my car and I was sitting on Milt's steps. As I discovered in the telling, the narrative was brief and boring in its genuine form: I walked up the hill and handed him the chocolates. So I found myself embellishing. A few crude fairy tale details about how he offered me a drink, had whiskey on his breath, how I was terrified instead of just impatient; something about desperately having to go to the bathroom while he talked to me at the door. He was fiercer and more verbal in my account than he was in actuality. I structured it well, I think, concluding with the dramatic revelation they had been waiting for. I pointed at the roof and told them what I had just discovered: the owl was made from the very box of chocolates I had delivered on that day.

Apparently it was less of a comedy than I had thought. They came over and patted me on the shoulder as if I had just told them about a family member's death.

"Milton was a terrific guy." Doreen said. "I wish we could have known him better."

"He reminds me of my aunt Ruth." said Gwen. "She lives alone in a bungalow on highway eleven. I love visiting her. She's got ten canaries. She lets the n fly around the house. They land on your hand if you hold it out the right way. She has names for every one of them. I can't tell them apart but she knows them just from their chirps. My mother and I go there every Easter."

The rain came on quickly. A few drops of warning and it was pouring hard. They bolted in opposite directions.

writing

The last was shot off while I waited for the post office to re-open. I was thoroughly annoyed. I had gone down there in the morning only to find a neighbourly memo: "To my customers: I've had to go to Huntsford to pick up a few things to facilatate [sic] the efficient operation of the Bayton Post Office. I should be back no later than 3 p.m. Sorry for any inconvenience. 'In the interest of serving you better,' Susie Lamb." I figured she'd been struck by an irrepressible craving for one of the foot long hotdogs Doreen had mentioned. So I killed the time by writing.

He fumbles with the thing. There is no place for it. He needs both of his hands to fight the branches that snap back at him unexpectedly once stinging his eye and leaving a single red streak across his forehead and his pockets are too small. So he holds the box in front of him, arms outstretched, shield-like, and observes the hilly ground for navigation. Their laughter has subsided. He does not look back at them. Already they are invisible behind the trees at the base of the hill, their radio blaring but still beyond his hearing. It has

been only a minute but he remembers the thud and click of the car door as if it had been an hour ago and in that time he had traversed a distance equal to the lapse. He shows an hour's sweat at least--the toil of the steep climb without his arms' energy; in fact losing strength because of them, because they hold in tense and frightened posture the weightless box of chocolates made heavy by the grip and soon he wonders why he is doing it; why the shield? Why not hold the thing at his side and have at least one arm's energy to provide additional strength and occasional support and if he were to keep his head bowed as he has been doing anyway the branches would pose no threat and really there is no need for such protection but he carries on, holding it in front of him like a white-flag bearing soldier ascending from the trench to approach the hostile other, nervously hoping the white will be visible across the distance and the night and so holding it fierce and flagrant, his only armour now. Having to weave the pathless climb over fallen trees and rotting stumps and hillside bushes. He stops and leans, bringing the effectless weapon down, slouching. Panting, he remembers the morning. In the city then. His mother's instructions. And even her unsure of where the place might be, knowing only that it was five miles beyond the town and another three miles along a dirt road and at the base of the hill was another home--one Mr. Norman--whose roadside sign announced as much and she, his mother, knew this only because he, her dead father's younger brother, had provided a return address on the Christmas card (which in itself was a surprise, having heard nothing from him in nearly thirty years, since the last visit with her father to the family farm which the brother would later sell to buy the land on the hill and disappear into taciturn seclusion, failing even to attend his brother's funeral but that same year, a few months after the death, sending her the card as if out of habit, tradition, writing nothing about the brother or the near half century of silence, only 'Merry Christmas' and such): Milton McQuilan c/o John Norman box --- etc., etc., so she contacted Mr. Norman and got directions for the boy. Him on the porch, sleeping bag in hand, saying "do I hafta? do I hafta?" and her, stern and in command, "not if you want to stay home." and him "but the other guys . . ." and her "I

don't care about the other guys. Do your mother a favour." and him taking the box with a reluctant grab of protest and starting towards his friends waiting in the car, looking at the thing, the stupid red ribbon in a stupid bow and the woman's embossed profile.

Leaning and panting and thinking of the stories he had been hearing for as long as he could remember, how the man was never to be mentioned around his now dead grandfather, the explanation in the stories themselves--the two men around a table thirty years ago or more so himself not a witness* but his mother in the next room maybe brushing the hair of her doll but certainly listening, not understanding maybe, but storing the dialogue until it could be understood and then relating it to her own family thirty years later as a piece of her history, with the sentimental glaze she was prone to ("I know exactly what I was wearing and my mother too, a burgundy cotton dress. . ."), the story growing more and more dramatic as he grew up until finally, in its most recent manifestation (in a dinner table reminiscence shortly after her father's death, in fact at Christmas, inspired by the receipt of the card) she had her father raising his voice in concerned fraternal anger and then bounding from the table to collect his wife and daughter and their things, leaving his brother sitting at the breakfast table of their childhoods while he drove back to the city never to see or speak to him again. "He's a fool, he's a fool," her father muttered all the way home in the car, addressing no one in particular, speeding dangerously but her mother

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* "this was not something participated in or even seen by himself, but by his elder cousin, McCaslin Edmonds, grandson of Isaac's father's sister and so descended by the distaff, yet notwithstanding the inheritor, and in his time the bequestor, of that which some had thought then and some still thought should have been Isaac's, since his was the name in which the title to the land had first been granted from the Indian patent and which some of the descendents of his father's slaves still bore in the land" (Go Down, Moses 3). Maybe my favourite sentence in all of Faulkner, at least the books I've read. It introduces the first story of Moses, "Was," orienting the narrative around Isaac, despite the fact that the events of the story take place several years before his birth. I was trying for a similar thing but it doesn't have quite the same effect. In a single, wonderfully rhythmic yet initially incomprehensible sentence, Faulkner establishes the major themes and issues of the novel: genealogy, folklore, race, dispossession, the burden of history, etc., etc. cf. also the first lines of The Town for another example of the "inherited story" framing device and, of course, Absalom, Absalom! for the most sophisticated presentation of a narrative's development through a history of transference and telling. There is a veritable cornucopia of Faulknerian techniques in this paragraph and the last half of the previous one: relative obscurity, shifts in time, well placed repetitions, cleverly incorporated dialogue. Yet there is something distinctively *un*Faulknerian about this vignette. I can't put my finger on it. It is bothering me. I thought it might have something to do with the fact that this is a true story but that is impossible. The account bears no resemblance to the actual event.

knowing that to remark on his driving would not be the right thing to do. "It's not even for the family, I told him. It's for yourself. There's nothing here for you. It is a dead place to be. I told him he could sell the house and keep all the money and settle down in the city but he just kept on saying 'no no no I don't want to' and I asked him if he wanted anything at all, whether he intended to make something of his life, and he kept saying 'I'm not unhappy, Henry. I'm just fine' and I heard it one too many times and I got so angry that I had to get of there. I'm never going back. Never. He's damned well on his own."

So he starts up again, not even half way up the hill, going over it in his head, his too-detailed excuse so obviously a lie when merely to say that people are waiting for him would be enough and in fact no excuse will be necessary as the old man will be aloof, unresponsive; he will not invite him in. About how they must get to their destination by three o'clock because an electrician is meeting them to fix the wiring so they will have light and be able to use the heaters if it gets cold and if they are not there on time he will charge them $50 for the visit and still they will be without light and heating if they need it. This time holding the chocolates with only one arm, held lower but still not relaxed, the other hand grabbing at narrow trees for support. Small sticks crack and bushes collapse beneath his sneakers; he pays no heed to them, not weaving amongst the clearings, the natural paths, but going straight, thinking what is one bush one branch within the myriad* green? and if he were to stop and hold his breath without pants or crackles he would hear the distant murmur of the highway. And then wondering why, after however many years atop the hill this man, his mother's uncle, has not developed a path, unintentionally even,

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* Faulkner's favourite word (in "The Bear" especially). I must have been trying to copy the tone of that great novella again, this time imposing Ike's early experiences in the woods on Milt's spindly and gormless great nephew. The difference being, of course, that Ike is "a better woodsman than most grown men" (Moses 210) while my own young hero has trouble making it up a hill. In what follows, it looks like I was trying to get at the master's concern with the increasing threat that industrialization posed to the "big woods": "that doomed wilderness whose edges were being constantly and punily gnawed at by men with plows and axes who feared it because it was wilderness, men myriad and nameless even to one another in the land where the old bear had earned a name. . ." (Moses 193). I am a city boy, though. The most environmental concern I have ever shown was in my purchase of a re-useable coffee mug from the cafeteria on campus. I never remembered to bring it to school. I continue to use Styrofoam.

simply from the walking. He thinks, *even if he only comes down the hill once a month there ought to be a sign of it.* He stops and looks back, worried that he has been too forceful in his treading. As if blossoming, a flattened bush folds into shape, making its own windless rustling, a sound not unlike his walking but quieter, with more flow and less rhythm; it opens slowly and stops for a moment before finishing, still slightly angled, somehow threatening in its almostness, and then the last twig snaps into place, escaping from a snag. He carries on.

The cabin appears suddenly, cresting out over the hill, crossed and rotting beams stuck deep into the soil, compensating for the cliff; the home falling anyway, existing on an increasing slant. The dirt beneath the one-windowed wall and the jutting floor is stagnant yet it has the appearance of downward motion, as if frozen in a roll, or perhaps even actually moving but quickly and discreetly and soundlessly. Him thinking, *I could leave it here, somewhere obvious. The red of the ribbon will stand out amidst the greens and browns of these woods and there is a card to identify it, to tell him who it came from, and what would it matter if he never finds it, never passes by the spot? She wouldn't know, would have no way of finding out.* But he does it, he knocks, unsure of which is more cowardly--the not leaving or not knocking--and before he has the chance to consider, the heavy wooden nail-ridden door is opening with the frictioned creak of wooden hinges and he is thinking as the dark and shadow behind the door become slowly clearer and the man's form appears, *I am the first visitor the old man has ever received mine may be the first face he has seen in years.*

The old man's eyes are like black marbles in soft sand, sunken yet hard and apparent.* His skin is white yet fading with age beneath the stiff white whiskers into a

* The master had a thing for eyes. They are the most frequently described features of his characters. A personal favourite is Popeye from Sanctuary, whose eyes "[look] like rubber knobs, like they'd give to the touch and then recover with the whorled smudge of the thumb on them" (3). In my own description I suspect I was thinking of Sutpen, from Absalom, Absalom!, whose eyes are "like ... pieces of coal pressed into soft dough" (65). I might have had Milt's photograph in mind but my interest in producing an evocative Faulknerian eye-description almost certainly superseded my concern with realism. I falter, I think, with the follow up to the simile; a good descriptive image should require no such explanation. Hawthorne

reddish undertone not quite Indian looking and not a vibrant hue as on the huffing boy but almost a clay-like undertone unaltered by his expression as he doesn't have one, impassive and huge as he stands there waiting. The boy studies him, first mesmerized by his giant boots which form and taint the whole impression: everything after the long high leather boots is to the boy the biggest of whatever it is: beneath the loose pants, he imagines, are thick calves and hard pointed kneecaps and the heavy stained shirt covers a wide belly and chest neither fat nor particularly muscular but simply huge and he thinks *this must not be him it cant be*, thinking of his grandfather, the old man's brother, in his later years frail and thinning, appearing to shrink as the boy grew taller and possibly even shrinking in his final months until eventually the boy outsized him and in their last meeting had to look down at him and strain to hear his speech like that of a diffident child and now having to crane his neck and impulsively stepping back at the sight of the daunting figure he thinks *this cant be him it mustn't be.*[*] and he

"Ahhh my name is Ben Sandler, Eileen Sandler's son, Eileen McQuilan Sandler." taking another step backwards and stretching his arm out as he had before on the hill except with more trepidation and the old man

"Oh yes." and he

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tended to elucidate his metaphors in this way--a trait I have always found annoyingly interruptive. The bit about the shade of Milt's skin points to Sam Fathers, Ike's mentor in "The Bear" and elsewhere, the son of a Chickasaw chief and a quadroon slave woman. Or perhaps even Sutpen again, "whose flesh had the appearance of pottery" (Absalom 33).

[*] Here, as throughout this fragment, the writing is informed by the early chapters of Intruder in the Dust. My overwrought and greatly embellished account of my sole meeting with Milt resembles the young Charles ("Chick") Mallison's first encounter with Lucas Beauchamp. After nearly drowning in an icy creek, Chick crawls out to see "two feet in gum boots . . . and then the legs, the overalls rising out of them and he climbed on and stood up and saw a Negro man with an axe on his shoulder, in a heavy sheep-lined coat and a broad pale felt hat such as his grandfather had used to wear, looking at him and that was when he saw Lucas Beauchamp for the first time that he remembered or rather for the first time because you didn't forget Lucas Beauchamp" (6). I tried to make Milt terrifying in the way that Luke was to Chick but, especially in the dialogue that follows, there is a kind of geezerly quality about him that serves to diminish the effect. The dialogue is the only accurate part of the account; unlike the version I had told to Gwen and Doreen the day before, it is essentially unembellished. As I recall now, Milt was more of a stoic Santa Claus than anything else--definitely not the hard and proud black man that is Luke Beauchamp, and in no way as big as I make him out to be. I was sixteen when I delivered the chocolates but I seem to have been envisioning a younger boy in the writing, perhaps something closer to Chick's twelve. Prepubescent anyway. The stuff about my grandfather is entirely made up; he died of a heart attack, quickly and painlessly, without any of the deterioration described.

"She asked me to bring this to you." and the old man

"Thank you. Thanks very much. Have a great day." taking the box from him and starting to close the door

[I have removed a few scraps here--a brief shopping list and a note reminding me to consider the significance of Ike McCaslin's carpentry skills whenever I got around to working on the thesis. "Isn't somebody fairly important in the Bible a carpenter?" I wrote. "Isaac? Jacob? Jesus? Did I bring my fucking KJV?" The latter part of this selection is more fragmentary; I have added a few sentences to create at least a semblance of flow. The narrative moves abruptly from the delivery of the chocolates to a later event in which the box is involved. The pronoun 'he' suddenly acquires a different referent--one of Faulkner's favourite tricks.]

Having lived for more than sixty years in places whose only heat came from iron stoves, his olfactory was numb to the odour of the smoke. He had long since given up on closing the iron doors on those cold nights because the warm air spread stronger and faster, never quite reaching a level you could call comfortable but allowing for a few hours of sleep before the cold teased him out of it. He had just replenished the fire and he knew that if there was to be any rest before the frigid wind let up it would be now. So he could never say how long it was. It was the coughing that woke him up.

Swatting at the wall with the blanket, he thought *it's warm enough in here now goddamnit it's warm enough in here now* and he realized it was too far gone, that even with a hose and running water, something with which to douse the flames widely and quickly and efficiently, the cabin was done for; it could not have withstood even half of what it had already endured without afterwards being dangerously fragile and uselessly cold. So he wrapped the paper animals in the blanket and went outside.

He sat there watching, following the flames as they grew larger, illuminating the northward path of the billows. The snow around him was melting from the heat. He listened for the crackles and watched their brief trinkets, their orange fading showers, and

in the middle of one--a louder snap that spit upward and spread to cover the once-building's width--he noticed it, remembered, as the lava-like sparkles trickled from its head. But there was nothing left to grab onto; the wall around the door was engulfed in rushing flames. He approached the door and stepped back impulsively, shrinking from the heat, as the boy had stepped back three years before and he thought *I should have asked him in it would have been alright* looking at the thing and remembering the boy's intimidated tremor, his downcast nervous eyes *I wanted to but he was frightened and so was I and what would we have talked about and where would we have sat?* jumping and swatting, trying to knock it down but missing and landing on his back. There wasn't any time: the fire heaved noisily with the wind and he could see the melting finish like sweat on its imploding chest.

The next morning he woke up in Mr. Norman's spare bed, felt the blisters on his palm, and remembered; remembered the iron handle of the door, having had it in his fist for only a second; remembered feeling the sting and barely knowing if it was hot or cold because his gloveless hands had already been frozen by the cold sharp wind; remembered lifting himself up with one hand on the ceiling of the door and grabbing the wooden base with the other hand, tearing it away from an encroaching body of flames, and letting himself go at the sound of another crackling burst. He remembered falling backwards again, the cardboard bird in hand, a rain of sparkles following him down, surrounding him in a thin nimbus of fire.*

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* This last phrase is quite beautiful. Unfortunately, it is lifted directly from As I Lay Dying, the scene in which Jewel saves his mother's coffin from the blazing barn: "[the coffin] stands upright while the sparks rain on it in scattering bursts as though they engendered other sparks from the contact. Then it topples forward, gaining momentum, revealing Jewel and the sparks raining on him too in engendering gusts, so that he appears to be enclosed in a thin nimbus of fire" (152). This is the closest I came to outright plagiarism in my trailer park writings. I must plead ignorance, or at least unconsciousness. Of course I had read As I Lay Dying, and I was almost certainly thinking of this very scene, but I did *not* consult the novel and I had *not* consciously memorized the phrase. I re-read Faulkner's scene this morning, after going over my account of the burning of Milt's cabin, and was disappointed to discover that I had not come up with the description myself. I can't explain it, but I must confess that it isn't a coincidence. I'm sure of this because I had to look "nimbus" up in the dictionary when I came across it in my text. I had no idea what it meant. It occurs to me now that if this fire had actually taken place, the paper owl would have been the first thing to

With a tense arm holding up the owl, still protecting it from the fall, he lay half submerged in a puddle of snow and through the screen of a heavy drift noticed the flames crawling down his sleeve towards his neck.*

It ends like that. I checked the clock in Milt's bedroom and saw that it was 2:55. I bolted for the post office, intending to finish the fire scene upon my return. I never got around to it. Just now, I thought about giving it a shot, trying to round it off somehow. But I seem to have lost whatever strange inspiration I might have had during those four days. No endings come to mind, only a beginning: "Once there was an old man. . . ."

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go. I'm not even sure that Milt's cabin burned down anymore; he might have sold it to a cottager. I'll have to remember to ask Eileen the next time I speak to her.

* The following editions have been used: my pocket-size Modern Library hardcover of Absalom, Absalom!, bought by Eileen for 95¢ for an undergraduate course at some fly by night institution in the 1960's, defaced by her embarrassing notes ["NB. racism, see Huck Finn," 74] until chapter V, at which point the notes disappear, indicating to me that she never finished it, although she claims to have read it cover to cover; my Vintage paperback of Go Down, Moses (coloured with my own clever remarks, notes and underlinings) which I have been using for five years now, not a single page of which remains attached to another page save for a clump towards the middle ("Pantaloon in Black"), and the back cover of which contains a sweeping, authoritative editorial blurb ("rich in implication and understanding of the human condition") that mistakenly refers to the story "Was" as "War"; The Hamlet is in the Modern Library paperback and Intruder in the Dust is in the Random House and both are from the library and both are worn and stinking with years of anonymous use; the editions of As I Lay Dying, Sanctuary and Light in August belong to the handsome Random House hardcover collection, which either Eileen or my father acquired through a book club (other than through my scholarly activities, the Hemingway and Fitzgerald collections have seen a good deal more action off their shelves), my only complaint being that the dimwitted compilers of the series chose to include Sanctuary and leave out Moses, thereby displaying their general ignorance of the master's *oeuvre*.

Friday

I opened it at the post office.

"Dear Mr. Sandler,

"We are pleased to accept your application for admission into the Ph.D. program in English. . . ."

Scanning past the bullshit, searching for the figures.

". . .The Oldham-Carpenter Fellowship, valued at $12, 000, includes a yearly tuition fee waiver and is renewable for up to five years. . . ."

I gave off the sportsman's arm-clench celebration, as if elbowing an attacker. A masculine grunt of self-congratulation. The woman clasped her hands together and brought them to her cheek. She cracked a rosy, sentimental smile, the 'look at him have his moment' sort. I could have sworn that she said "Mazeltov" as I was walking out the door.

*

They had me peeling carrots before I could tell them I was going home. I felt uncomfortable about it after their enthusiastic reception of the Virginia news. Eileen hadn't been home when I called but Doreen and Gwen had filled in for the loud-mouthed maternal excitement quite well. I got kisses from both of them and we toasted with lemonade.

"So what does this mean exactly?" Gwen said, working on some onions, very meticulous about the shape of the cut. "I guess I don't really know what a Ph.D. *is*." She rounded them slowly, with the tip of the knife, creating uniform pieces that looked like the petals of tulips.

I had to think for a moment. "It's like becoming a doctor of literature," I said. "It's the highest degree you can get."

"And what do you do once you've got it? I mean a doctor starts a practice or he specializes and does surgery or research."

I put down the peeler and brushed some moist rinds from my lap onto the grass under the picnic table. "Hopefully you get a teaching position and you publish papers and stuff like that."

"Hmmm," she said, elongating her face and wiping a tear away with her wrist. The onions had finally gotten to her.

Doreen shook the ice cubes in her glass. There was a spread of vegetables on the table in various stages of preparation. Dish towels and plastic cutting boards and the pitcher of lemonade. It was five o'clock. Dinner was scheduled for eight, when Danny came home from work. I had some trouble with the fact that the food was being coated with poisonous smoke. There were four Pics burning, one at each corner of the table. I was familiar with them from childhood camping trips. Coiling green things like elements on a stove. They let off narrow lines of sweet smelling, repellant smoke. From a distance, the bench appeared to be protected by a science fiction laser box--four transparent corners. At least it was keeping the bugs away.

"Are there any games you like to play, Ben?" Doreen gave me a pudgy, earnest smile.

"I'm not much of a game *guy*," I said.

"Neither am I but I thought it might be fun." She turned to Gwen, chomping down on a piece of celery and waving away a bug that had made it through the shield. "I bet Ben would give Ross a pretty good run for his money in Trivial Pursuit."

"I don't know," Gwen said, picking up a carrot and scraping off a part I had missed. "Except for entertainment Ross knows every category. Ben might beat him at arts and literature but I bet Ross could take him in science and geography and sports." She started scooping the onions into a large metal bowl. "He's incredible. You wouldn't *believe* how much he knows."

"I'll play Trivial Pursuit," I said.

"No," she said. "Danny hates games. Besides, it would take hours without Ross here."

So I was suckered into going to the party but I told them I was leaving as soon as it was done. I had to. There was no more time for experimentation. I would have to be in Charlottesville in less than two months. Whatever meagre potential the retreat might have held had either been lost or spent. I couldn't be productive there. I blamed Eileen for thinking it might have worked. I would spend the rest of the summer in my parents' house. I'd eat Eileen's cooking. She'd do my laundry. I'd get the thesis written.

The job of clearing of the workroom wasn't the least bit sentimental. I was glad to get out of there. I crawled under the table, over the brushstrokes and plywood knots, and unplugged the computer, smashing my head on the way out. The books were still in their boxes. I felt confident as I carried them to the hall. Virginia was the push I had needed. I was the looming dictator of those texts, the cunning mastermind who'd just arranged his last killing on the road to power. There would be no more quaint creativity, only serious

scholarly toil. I left Milt's figures where I had put them, lined up on the ledge, stacked away on the floor. They were dry and stupid. Nothing more than molded masses of painted newspaper. An old man with too much time on his hands. I plucked *The Unvanquished* from behind the hunter and went to load the car.

As I threw the boxes into the trunk and the back seat, no heed to the efficient use of space, Gwen sat at the picnic table working on the food. Doreen picked flowers from her garden, clipping the stems and arranging a bouquet. The air was dense with mosquitoes. I could barely lift a crate from the ground to the car without being attacked at the head and the ankles. I shook and fluttered spastically.

"You're not a vegetarian, are you Ben?" Gwen stopped behind me as I was maneuvering a box onto the back seat floor and blowing upwards at my face, trying to thwart a hairline assault. She was bringing the food to her trailer. Covered bowls of vegetables on an oval plastic tray. "It's okay if you are. I'm making both sauces. I just need to know which one to make more of. My mother and I are having vegetarian and Danny and Doreen'll eat the meat sauce." She put a foot up on the bumper and rested the platter on her leg, oblivious to the bugs.

"I think I'll go vegetarian," I said, standing up awkwardly, rotating my arms and lifting my feet in a feeble grape-crushing dance. Even the food seemed to be safer than my flesh. I wondered if it had anything to do with the fact that I hadn't bathed in over twenty four hours.

"Do you just not like the taste?" she said. "Or is it political? Or sentimental?"

"What do you mean?" I said.

"Those are the three kinds of vegetarians." She took the tray by the handles and put down her leg, turning towards home. "Me and my mom are sentimental. I just can't bear to eat anything that used to have a personality. I eat fish, though. I love lobster."

"Oh," I said. The truth was that I was afraid of salmonella, didn't trust the local meat. "I just don't like the taste."

I bent down for another box and she started off, taking a few steps and then turning back around. "You can come over any time," she said. "My mother'll be here soon. We're gonna start cooking in a minute. Doreen's just getting some spices. They don't even have any garlic salt at our place."

Her face suddenly contorted into a bemused expression as she spotted something behind me in the distance. I turned to look. Doreen trundled down her steps and across the lawn, in an obvious flurry of distress. One of her rubber thongs came off as she plowed through the gate. She picked it up but didn't put it back on. She ran towards us, crunching the shoe in her fist, stirring the dirt into a widening cloud and breathing in a half-shrieked pant.

"Something's happened to Ross," she said in a husky breathless baritone, still twenty feet from us. Frenzied and holding back tears, she came to a heavy stop beside the car. "I just got a call from Lynn at the hospital. She says Ross collapsed or something. I've gotta go out there. I'm sorry Gwen. I'm gonna miss the party."

"Oh my God," Gwen said, wanting to move her arms but crippled by the platter. "Let me come with you. It doesn't matter. We'll have the party another night."

"No no no," said Doreen, consciously breathing, calming herself. "You can't cancel it now. I'll be fine. I've just gotta make it out there."

"Do you want me to drive you?" I said, attempting a concerned tone amidst my swatting.

"Would you, Ben? You can make it back for the party. I'm just too shaken up to drive myself."

Gwen looked dejected in the rear view mirror, standing there holding her tray.

I didn't know whether to speed or play it calm. Doreen sat in the passenger seat, straight-backed, hands on knees, her feet resting on a stack of photocopied articles. She pursed her lips and looked ahead. I settled on a velocity somewhere in the middle ground

between urgency and regular impatience. She appeared satisfied. I looked over at her a few times, starting to speak and then stifling it. I was useless in those situations. It was a dream of mine to make it through life without having to deal with anyone else's traumas. I preferred my own; no civility was required. The last awful incident I could remember was the death of Diane's grandmother. That time, my efforts at consolation had earned me a lecture on patronization. She asked me not to go to the funeral but I went anyway, fearing that respecting her request would land me in another dreadful prosecution.

It was Doreen who broke the five minute lull. "So you're leaving us?" she said. "That's a shame. It was nice having another new face around. 'Course Gwen'll be leaving too in a couple weeks." The air conditioner blew low and cold as I crested another hill on the empty winding highway. Nine kilometres to Huntsford, a sign read, thirty-six to Dorset. Doreen tapped her fingers on her legs. "They come and they go," she said.

"Well," I said, somehow feeling vaguely guilty, "it's been nice. I didn't realize how much I relied on the library, though." I flipped the sunshade down and picked up the speed.

"If your mother needs any help selling the trailer just tell her to give me a call. I'd be happy to show it. I hope she gets an alright price for it." She was twisting one of the rings on her right hand. "*Somebody* better move in there. It'd be a shame to have it sit empty. It's a good place for a young couple. Until they could afford something better."

I was disengaged from her musings. Something else was on my mind, inspired by her mention of Eileen. It was one of the rare occasions in my life when I wasn't stiffly proud of my ignorance of decorum. I had no idea whether it was an appropriate time to bring it up. There must be standards for such things, I thought. "Ummm," I said finally, without having arrived at any conclusions on the issue but needing something to say, "there's something in the glove compartment for you. I forgot all about it. It's from my mother."

She reached out for the knob and looked at me. "Do you want me to open it?"

"Yes," I said. "It's for you."

The springless door fell open at her touch and she pulled the chocolates out from under a pile of maps and fast food condiment packets. A red ribbon around the unwrapped box. "*This?*" she said. "*For me?*"

I nodded.

"Oh, isn't that lovely." Practised gift reception awe. "She didn't have to do that." Then she read the card aloud. "To Doreen Ackert. Thank you for all your help in this difficult time. Sincerely, Eileen M. Sandler."

I had to hold myself back from laughing at the absurd inscription. Doreen was obviously moved.

"Your mother sounds like a very special person," she said, holding the box in front of her and examining it. I was glad she didn't crack the seal: the chocolates were almost certainly melted from the heat. "Sandler," she said, resting it on her lap. "Are you Jewish?"

"No," I said. "My mother seems to think she is, though. She buys these multi-candle candle holders that look just like menoras." She looked at me, straight faced and earnest, as I leaned forward and turned off the air conditioner. "What kind of name is Ackert?"

"Austrian," she said.

It was a small, primitive looking hospital. The decor made me think of a TV board game commercial from the mid-seventies. There were massive mounted photographs of a busy playground hung symmetrically on the walls. Four groups of people sat on the vinyl couches of the waiting room. The three juvenile casualties appeared to be cottage types. Two broken bones and a nosebleed. An older man sat next to his wife, taking oxygen from a machine.

"Hello Doreen," the woman behind the counter said with enthusiastic compensation. It made me suspect that Ross was in serious danger.

"Hello dear. What's the news?"

Her name tag identified her as a registered nurse named Lynn. She had a lot of twisting blonde hair and blue make-up. A variation on the white nurse's uniform--the lime green cardigan. She reeked of perfume. They walked together to a remote corner of the waiting room and I stayed back. Lynn put her arm around Doreen as they sat down.

Idle uncomfortableness while I waited. I picked up a pamphlet--"Coping With Heart Attacks"--flipped through it and then stuffed it in my pocket. I studied the selection on the Pepsi machine. There was a row of wheelchairs against a wall and I tried to give one a push, to align it with the others, but I miscalculated its weight and didn't try again. It was the need to stay busy, the sense that people were looking at me, expecting me to be occupied. I wished I had gone home in the afternoon.

I was reading a bulletin board of community announcements when I smelled her coming. She was reaching out to tap me on the shoulder as I turned around. A smooth red fingernail scraped me on the chin.

"Sorry," she said. "You're Benjamin?" Her teeth were grossly yellow. She shook my hand weakly, her dexterity limited by the nails. "I've just told Doreen that Ross had a brain hemorrhage about an hour and a half ago. They're working on stopping the bleeding right now." She spoke in a school teacher drawl, pasty, like she'd just consumed a quart of milk. The clipboard was tight at her breast. "My parents are going to drive up from Bayton to be with her. It'd be nice if you could stay 'til they get here but she's anxious about some party at the trailer park. She wants you to be there."

"Okay," I said, and I walked towards the corner of the room where Doreen sat, shaking my keys through my pocket. The couch let off a fart-like puff of air as I sat down. Reactionless, she kept her head pointed stoically forward, transfixed on one of the playground scenes--a chain of children on a silver slide. The voice carried its usual strength.

"I just feel so awful about Gwen's little party," she said. "She was so excited. And I was supposed to help her with the cooking." She touched a clammy hand to my knee and turned her head towards me. "I want you to go as soon as Bill and Shirley get here. Gwen would love for you to be there."

"Is she Bill and Shirley's daughter?" I said, pointing at the nurse, who had returned to her niche behind the rounded counter and was busily moving things about.

"Yes. That's Lynn. She's got two kids of her own, Pat and Goldie. Ross and me took care of them for a weekend in the spring." She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket. "You've got a little blood on your face," she said, creating a corner and dabbing my chin.

I felt my face. It was stubbly and greasy, unshaven since Toronto. I jiggled my leg and worked on my posture, trying to think of something to say. I was about to offer to get her a drink when she started speaking again.

"He collapsed during therapy this afternoon," she said. "It's too bad. He was in such good spirits yesterday. They thought he was out of danger."

"Maybe you should think about transferring him to another hospital." It was the first thing that came to mind. I was regretting it before the sentence was over. Hardly comforting. But the place had such an archaic feel about it. I wouldn't have brought a tummy ache there.

"Oh, no," she said. "These are fantastic doctors. They've been nothing but supportive. I have all the confidence in the world in them."

"Yes. I'm sure they're very good."

"It sure is frightening, though," she said, stuffing her hands under her thighs and starting to rock back and forth slowly. "Ross isn't even seventy yet." She puffed up her cheeks and then exhaled. "We were gonna take a trip in September to visit his sister in Austria but I doubt he'll be up to it now."

When I came back with the Pepsis she read to me from an article called "The Inner Life of Dogs."

*

I parked in the area behind the docks and sat down on the hood, feeling the warmth of the twenty mile drive through my shorts. It took a minute for the engine to wind down. When it did there was a final splutter and then silence. The occasional faint tinkling from the water, the distant rush of the dam. Some mosquitoes collected around my head. I reached into my pocket for the cigarettes, hoping to drive the bugs away with smoke. The heart attack pamphlet came out in my hand with the pack. I yanked a match from the Lincoln book. The sulphur was flaky. After three tries I managed to get one lit. It let off a spark that landed on my leg and fizzled before I could slap it out. One singed hair, a quick pinch and nothing more. I held the match until it threatened my fingers, observing its powers of illumination. It was dark but the tiny flame lit up the area in front of me, enough to see the details of the gravel, the border of the grass. I lit the cigarette, inhaled deep.

The prospect of Gwen's party was frustrating. Her mother, her idiot boyfriend, the morose constraints of the Ross issue; the girl would be expecting a full report. I plotted to stay for half an hour, claim tiredness, and then make the drive to Toronto. If I played it right I could be out of there by ten, home by one thirty. I'd wake my parents up, Eileen at least. We'll end up sitting on the porch talking, I thought, drinking iced tea. The news about Virginia will make her scream; she'll wake up the neighbourhood. Talking until the early hints of sunrise. She'll make me tell her my stories.

Squatting on the grass where the picnic had been. The ground was still moist from yesterday's rain. I wrenched out a handful of grass held together by a clump of earth and tossed it at the water. It fell short. I heard its soft landing on the dock. I went down there to find it, somehow needing to see it end up in the water. The dock was wet with shapes of people. Someone had been swimming just before I came. With the moonlight, I spotted the patch of earth and flung it with all the strength I could muster. It spiralled ten feet out and plunked into the bay.

I sat there thinking of Diane. Not with anger or bitterness or sex, only wondering. On the docks of Bayton, Ontario, on the second of July, I resolved to send her a Christmas card in December. For a moment I wondered whether she would be living at the old address, how I would find her if she wasn't. Then I laughed at my absurd line of thought. I flicked my butt into the water and listened for the dousing whisper. Kneeling over, I examined my moon-cast shadow in the bay. I scooped up some water and splashed it on my face, forgetting about my glasses.

She must have heard me pull up. She cut across her lawn and was at my window before the ignition was off. Someone stood inside the bright rectangle of the open trailer door. It had to be her mother.

"Hey. How's Ross doing? What's going on?" She hunched over with her palms on her knees, in the runner's post-marathon stance, folding her belly between her upper and lower body. The expression on her face wasn't fatigue but urgent concentration. We walked to her trailer and I told her what I knew.

"Ben, this is my mother, Lorraine." We were too far apart to shake hands. "He says that Ross had a brain hemorrhage."

"Oh, dear," Lorraine said. She couldn't have been much older than thirty-five. Clean and thin and fashionable. Her jeans fit snugly, showing off pelvic contours and the outlines of the objects in her pockets--a set of keys and a tubular thing, lipstick probably. "He's in good hands," she said. "It's an excellent hospital." We sat down at the table. They were working on a dessert of ice cream and peach pie. Danny wasn't there.

"Do you want some spaghetti, Ben?" Gwen stood up again, heading for the kitchen counter.

"Maybe I'll just have a bite of that pie."

She returned with a massive, quarter-pie chunk on a flower-rimmed plate. It was warm, smothered with a dollop of vanilla ice cream. There was something vaguely erotic in the sweet juxtaposition of temperatures. It tasted remarkably good.

"Did you make this?" I asked Lorraine.

"Yes," she said. "The peaches are wonderful this year." The top buttons of her shirt were undone. I had to force myself not to study her freckled cleavage. A glossy, dripping slice of peach fell from my fork onto my pants. We laughed. Lorraine dampened the corner of a dishtowel and dabbed at the stain. The trailer was bright. Every light was on. It was amazingly spacious. New, sky blue shag carpets and dark brown imitation wood panels on the walls. There was a complete home entertainment centre--stereo, TV, VCR.

"So is Doreen going to stay the night at the hospital?" Gwen said, pouring a pot of water into the coffee machine.

"I'm not sure what her plan is," I said. "Bill and Shirley are with her."

"Could you give me a ride out there, mom? I'll stay at your place tonight."

"Okay," said Lorraine, standing up to carry a stack of dishes to the sink. She had a country singer's backside, a shameful weakness of mine, and her shirt hung loose at the back, revealing the ridges of her collar bone and the glaze of her brownly tanned neck. "Leave a note for Danny. I don't want him calling in the middle of the night."

Gwen sat down while Lorraine put the plates in the dishwasher. "Some party this turned out to be," she said, hoisting her legs onto a chair and raising her brow. The coffee started gurgling. "First the bad news about Ross and then Danny doesn't even show up. There's a band meeting. They've gotta discuss they're future. Like they *have* one." She plucked a remote control from the table and in a single motion pointed it, pressed a button, and tossed it onto one of the couches. The music came on as it landed with a bounce.

"Have you met Danny?" Lorraine said, sitting down.

"Briefly," I said.

"She thinks I should break up with him." Gwen said flippantly, fingering a spot of melted ice cream from my plate and then tonguing it.

"I didn't say that," said Lorraine. "I said you should talk to him. Lay down the law before it's too late. I should have done it with your father ten years ago." She turned her collar up and adjusted one of her earrings. "If you don't start putting your foot down now then god help you and your baby five years down the road."

"It's no big deal," said Gwen. "It's just the way he is. It pisses me off sometimes but sometimes I piss him off too." She focussed on the space in between us, bending forward to massage a muscle at the back of her leg. The calves were beginning to show the effects of the pregnancy. Slightly swollen, freshly shaved.

"That's what I told myself too," Lorraine said, "the whole time I was pregnant with you. You can only give him the benefit of the doubt for so long."

"*You can only give him the benefit of the doubt for so long*," Gwen mimicked. "How many times have I heard *that?* You're not exactly Miss Maturity when it comes to relationships."

I hid behind my peaches.

* * *

Turning onto the highway with an impatient jerk, I heard it drop onto the passenger floor. I flicked on the overhead light to see what it was. It took me until the bottom of the hill to resolve to turn back. I missed the road, had to double back again, making a dangerous U turn at a lightless, sloping curve. I sped across the park, growling in frustration, the highbeams spattering the trailers. The radio blared through the windows of the car as I walked through Doreen's gate.

There was further irritation. I struggled to keep it balanced against the main door long enough to shut the screen. It took several attempts to accomplish the piddling task.

Those chocolates must have been frail and mutant blobs by the time she got to them. Then, with no further prospects of hindrance--only the three hour drive ahead of me--I lifted my leg over the porch railing, stretching towards the window, wanting to see inside her home. A fleeting spark of curiosity that could easily have gone untended. I wished it had. My foot landed on a clay flowerpot, which fell from the porch onto one of the railroad ties, splintering and spilling dirt. A hot flash of embarrassed anger. I repositioned myself safely and leaned my forehead against the window. It was dark in there. I couldn't see a thing.

It looked like the work of a forest animal. I tossed the crushed geranium into the garden and dispersed the terracotta shards.

* * *

When Danny came in I was working on my exit. My fingers were sticky and I felt bloated. I had consumed the entire plate of pie, my only food since breakfast. The coffee was a terrible French Vanilla flavour so I had added a few cubes of sugar, something I normally disapproved of, wanting to smother the awful taste. I was hoping the caffeine would help me through the drive.

"Danny," said Gwen, surprised. "You said you wouldn't be home until midnight."

"I told them I had to go. Hey Lorraine. Hi." He smelled like cigarettes and he might have been drunk, I couldn't tell. Either way he was playing exhausted. I recognized the strategy: a last grasp at mitigation. A guitar hung over his shoulder in a nylon case. He went straight for the food, clawing a mound of pasta onto a plate and easing the instrument off his back, catching it by the strap.

"Ross had a brain hemorrhage," Gwen said. "He's in intensive care."

He made a blowing sound and shook his head, dropping the guitar onto the couch. A wavy line of red drops appeared around the fly of his jeans as he set the plate down; he

let it go an inch too soon. "How's Doreen taking it?" he said, grabbing a fork from the centre of the table and slumping into the chair.

Gwen gestured to me. "Ben's the one who took her to the hospital."

"I think she's okay," I said. It was the first time I had seen his face up close. He had tough skin, older than his age. He hunched over and began shovelling the spaghetti into his mouth, slurping back the noodles. I looked beyond him down the long hall. There was an unmade bed in the room at the end, some clothing draped across the headboard.

"I bet the doctors did something wrong," he said, chewing. "Idiots go to school and make so much money and they can't even keep the guy healthy when he's right there in the hospital."

"It's not always that easy, Danny," Lorraine said as she wiped a line of crumbs over the edge of the table into her palm. She dropped them into a paper napkin and crumpled it in her fist.

"Do you know anyone who's had a brain hemorrhage?" Gwen asked her mother.

"No, I don't," she said, brushing her hands off in a soft clap.

"Can we talk about something else?" Danny said. He reached over for the container of processed Parmesan. "I'm sort of trying to eat."

We listened to a noodling guitar solo and the sound of Danny sucking. The girl slid to the edge of her chair and stretched out her legs, her fingers intertwined over her stomach. She let out a stuffed sigh.

Lorraine said, "If you want me to drive you to the hospital you better get ready, Gwendolyn. I've gotta get going. I have to be up early in the morning." Eyes angled up and chin drawn in, she gave Gwen a knowing look. It was clearly tactical; she had displayed no intention to leave before Danny made his appearance.

Gwen tickled the support bars between the legs of the chair. "Maybe I'll go tomorrow," she said. "I'm kind of tired."

"We can go tonight." Danny mumbled. He was forking a noodle into an S shape on his plate. "We'll take *our* car."

I was the last one to catch on. I had only been half-listening, hoping that someone, probably Lorraine, would detect my restlessness and offer me an opportunity to leave. Both mother and daughter flashed overwrought expressions. Danny lifted his head up and showed a sly, self-approving grin.

"*Did you buy a car, Dan?*" Gwen said.

"Yup," he said, plucking the keys from his pocket and starting for the door. "Come and have a look." We followed.

In front of their plot was an old, light blue Chevy sedan. It looked like the one I had seen at the gas station. I thought about him tossing his cigarette butt into the tank. It seemed like a long time ago. They circled it slowly and Gwen dragged her hand across the sides, the faint squeak of sweaty flesh on metal. The bugs were still out in full force, buzzing around my ears.

"It's for us," Danny said, picking out the key from his chain. "Happy anniversary. That's why I was so late. I was washing it and changing the oil." There was a low clunking sound as he unlocked the door and opened it. "Greg's letting me have it on consignment. I'm gonna work it off. He's giving it to me for the same price he paid."

"Oh my god, Dan," she said. "What a surprise. I've definitely gotta get my license now." They exchanged a quick kiss before she got into the driver's seat.

"It's very nice, Danny," Lorraine said.

I smiled, slapping a mosquito on the back of my neck and flicking it onto my shoe. Through the windshield I watched Gwen run her fingers across the dash. She was laughing. Danny stood beside her, one arm folded over the open door, the other on top of the roof. The headlights came on. I threw my arms up in front of my eyes and turned my head away. Highbeams.

"Sorry, Ben," Gwen said, turning them off and trying the turn signals, giving the horn a tap.

Danny lit a cigarette and jangled the keys in front of her. "Start it," he said.

epilogue

Charlottesville is an ugly town, choking on southern decay. It is dirty and hot and occasionally the wind carries a corrosive stink, the source of which I have yet to identify. There is little to do here. But the University of Virginia is a beautiful looking place: green and even, brimming with history. It was designed by Thomas Jefferson. William Faulkner was writer-in-residence here for a few years in the late fifties. One of my professors tells an inherited story about the master arriving drunk to take on the distinguished post.

It has cooled down considerably since the day when I opened those trailer park files and began to amuse myself with the commentary. Bearable now. I feel I can draw the curtains, re-enter the light and summer, release myself from the detailed recollection of those days. It had been awhile since I had thought about that time, since the fall in fact, when Eileen called to tell me that she had received a box of Milt's animals in the mail, sent to her by the newlyweds upon whom she had unloaded the trailer. The box is residing on a shelf in her basement. My father wants to throw it out but she won't let him.

Despite all my education in twentieth century aesthetics, I find myself searching for an ending; for my own stories, at least, I require closure. And it has got to come soon. I want to catch the morning bus to Oxford so I can get a few hours in at Rowan Oak, the giant Faulkner farmhouse turned museum. I could end with my arrival at my parents' house that early morning (my mother slept right through it), where I quickly went to bed, manually summoned the image of Lorraine, and then fell into a long, narcotic sleep; or with the ecstatic moment in the middle of August when I dropped the thesis into the mail; or with my first walk through the pastures of my new, prestigious school.

But all of that is bullshit. It ended with this: ten minutes along the highway, just past The Pavilion, when a truck started riding up my tail. I am an impetuous driver and I was more than slightly frustrated by the events of the day. You would have thought that a dispute with a trucker would have put me over the edge. The guy let out a blast from his horn and his lights were engulfing my car. Annoyed, I flicked my cigarette out the window and concentrated on the driving. There was some holiday cottage traffic so it was risky for him to speed past me on the two-lane, although he was thinking about it. The problem was, I couldn't see him. The back seat was piled high with boxes of books and the rear window was blocked completely. I could tell it was a big truck, though; there was a palpable, rumbling immensity. The situation was making me nervous.

I was as surprised as anyone when I eased over to the shoulder and let him pass.

AFTERWORD

1. *Critical Fictions*

In recent years, the issue of style has become a central concern for a number of literary critics and philosophers. They have recognized that conventional modes of analysis are ineffective in some contexts, that one can only express certain ideas--philosophical though they may be--through narratives or other non-traditional styles. Form is as important as content, in other words, even when it comes to scholarly writing, and the relation between form and content is equally critical. Writers such as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida are widely read in literature departments not only for their ideas but also for their stylistic innovations--which is a problematic distinction, of course, since form and content are so intimately wedded in their writings. The analytic philosopher, desperately clinging to the notion that philosophical rigour precludes creativity, is likely to dismiss such writers as "mere poets," believing that deviation from accepted forms always represents an abandonment of intellectual standards. But the critic who introduces creative elements into

his or her work is, rather, a transgressor of limits, a taker of risks. And this, trends and politics aside, is the reason why many students of literature have found the so-called "post-modern" theorists so interesting.

Geoffrey Hartman welcomes the creative experiments of serious critics, claiming that "[w]e have viewed the critical essay too reductively" and applauding any work that employs "speculative" tools to test the limits of the critical function. In his essay "Literary Commentary as Literature," he goes so far as to question the worth of traditional criticism, wondering "whether any critic has value who is only a critic: who does not put us in the presence of 'critical fictions.'" Criticism should no longer be subordinate to another text, he argues, but should constitute its own "primary" text despite its "commentating function" (351). He offers Derrida's Glas as an example of a successful union of creative and critical discourses. It is a work that engages other texts while remaining unsubordinated, a work that might be read for its value independent of the commentary (354).

European post-structuralists are not the only writers who have tested the limits of discourse in this way. Stanley Cavell and Martha Nussbaum have each made substantial contributions to the development of a more creative intellectual style--the former incorporating narratives into his studies of philosophy and literature, the latter dedicating an entire volume of essays (Love's Knowledge) to the search for a "less abstract and schematic" style for "philosophical criticism," one that is "more respectful of the claims of the emotions and imagination, more tentative and improvisatory, than philosophy has frequently been" (239). As part of this project, Nussbaum--a philosophically trained academic--concedes that narratives are sometimes the most effective conveyors of ideas (5). Austin Wright's book Recalcitrance, Faulkner and the Professors: A Critical Fiction is grounded in this belief. Wanting to place As I Lay Dying in a context that does not negate the insights of the novel, Wright frames his study in a mythic narrative, complete with dramatic action and dialogue.

In the "writing" chapters of Dark House I have tried to encourage the reader to consider the text at least partially in relation to literary criticism. The writings are, in a sense, framed by the expectation of critical prose, since Ben is ostensibly working on his thesis when he composes them. He later returns to the fragments and transforms them into a kind of critical entity, adding cross references and commentary, aping the language and practices of editorial scholarship. At the same time as they parody the discourse, though, I hope that the "writing" chapters do engage Faulkner's texts in an interesting and somewhat original way. While they may not provide any thoroughgoing "interpretation" of the novels, they attest to the power of Faulkner's writing, the strength of his language and of his myths. I do not mean to suggest that they answer Hartman's call for a more creative criticism, or even that they constitute any kind of serious textual study, but for the purposes of this afterword I will consider them in the context of creative and innovative methods of responding to literature. I do not want readers to see these chapters solely as an experiment in literary response; it is the very idea that a written text must be *one thing and one thing only*--either philosophy or criticism or fiction--that I am rejecting here. I have merely chosen to focus on a particular aspect of the text, as one might focus on the aesthetic value of Glas without reference to Derrida's insight into the works of Jean Genet.

If the "writing" chapters say something about Faulkner's fiction, they also make a statement about the nature of influence, perhaps working from the core thesis of The Anxiety of Influence, that all poems are creative misreadings of earlier poems, and that the difference between criticism and poetry is only a difference in the degree of misinterpretation (Bloom 94-95). Ben's writings make the distinction between creative and critical response even blurrier, not least in their union of two very different prose styles. And Ben clearly wrestles with a "precursor" in Faulkner, but unlike Bloom's "strong poets," he does not emerge victorious: the footnotes detail his failing in this regard. It is only a failure in the context of Bloom's anxiety theory, though, and the fact that Ben does not "overcome" his precursor does not mean that the writings fail as responses to Faulkner.

Another function of the footnotes is to ensure that, if nothing else, the fragments affirm the power of Faulkner's fiction.

Since Ben is not a "strong poet," another perspective on the phenomenon of literary influence might be more appropriate here. In his book-length personal essay U and I, Nicholson Baker describes a more visceral type of influence--one that does not entail a monumental artistic struggle between a burgeoning genius and an established one, but rather a patchwork of petty obsession and idolatry. The book traces the history of Baker's professed obsession with John Updike (the "U" in the title). Its purpose is not to provide "a traditional critical study," but "to record how one increasingly famous writer and his books, read and unread, *really functioned* in the fifteen or so years of my life since I had first become aware of his existence" (27, italics mine). And, as Baker shows, the true function of a precursor is often revealed through personal memories, half-remembered phrases, or any other detail from the "imaginary friendship" (70) one maintains with the object of a literary "obsession." For ordinary writers, anyway, influence may not conform to Bloom's model.

Less directly, Ben's writings also address the issue of the 'true function' of a precursor's writing. Rather than composing a removed academic study, as he is supposed to be doing, Ben deals with Faulkner's texts on a more visceral level, applying his favourite scenes and characters from the novels within his own creative act. Among other things, it is a much more "readerly" response than traditional criticism allows, and one that is distinct from the literary-historical orientation of reception aesthetics. It reveals as much about the "critic" as it does about the works in question. Below, I will discuss the function of autobiography within criticism with reference to a number of particularly innovative critical experiments. The strong presence of the "critic" in this type of readerly response is fitting. As Baker's book and Ben's writings show, "obsession" with an author ultimately amounts to a form of self-obsession, a kind of displaced narcissism, since the reader comes

to consider the author's works as part of himself without abandoning his adoration for those works.

This is another factor that distinguishes U and I and the "writing" sections of Dark House from Bloom's model: neither Baker nor Ben are genuinely afflicted with the anxiety; in different ways, they both *want* to be overwhelmed by their precursor. "[P]ermanent influences like Updike," Baker says, "make you very unhappy when they threaten to be more unlike you as human beings than you had thought" (69). Comments like this one indicate that Baker suffers from an anxiety of idealization, an affliction common to "[w]eaker talents," as Bloom says (5). Ben reveals his idealization of Faulkner throughout the footnotes, confessing to his tendency to give "the master's" thoughts priority over his own: "This is one point on which Faulkner and I differ, assuming as I do that he believed it himself. I included it in my own writing anyway" (26). From a psychoanalytic understanding, this phenomenon is very different from anxiety. Bloom claims that "anxiety and desire are the antinomies of the ephebe or beginning poet." The novice is torn between fearing and wanting to be flooded by the precursor's words. "Every good reader properly *desires* to drown," Bloom says, "but if the poet drowns, he will become *only a reader*." (57). We have, then, parallel distinctions between anxiety and desire on the one hand and creativity and reading on the other. By these standards Ben is only a reader, overwhelmed by his "desire" for Faulkner's texts. Bloom appears to leave room for the possibility that the failed poet could successfully "inscribe" the reading experience since the "drowned" poem is the product of a "reading."

Without a doubt, Ben's writings, before the additions of the footnotes, "drown" in Faulkner, and one of the functions of the commentary is to trace and examine that process. In Bloom's psychoanalytic language, these fragments are imbued with readerly "desire." So the material Ben writes during his stay in Milt's home cannot be called "poetry" because of the extent of the Faulkner influences and it is certainly not "criticism" in any common sense of the word. What is it, then? I want to argue that the writings become something

different with the additions of the commentary, but what was their status *before* those additions?

"Pastiche" is the most appropriate generic term. The O.E.D.'s definition would certainly apply to the "writing" chapters of Dark House: "a literary or other work of art composed in the style of a well-known author." Roland Barthes' remarks about the genre in Criticism and Truth are relevant here, particularly because they employ a terminology similar to Bloom's:

> Only reading loves the work, entertains with it a relationship of desire. To read is to desire the work, to want to be the work, to refuse to echo the work using any discourse other than that of the work: the only commentary which a pure reader could produce, if he were to remain purely a reader, would be a pastiche (as the example of Proust, lover of reading and pastiches, shows). To go from reading to criticism is to change desires, it is no longer to desire the work but to desire one's own language (93-94).

Ben's acts of writing might reveal his reluctance to "change desires" in this way. Which does not necessarily mean that he is motivated by respect for Faulkner's discourse, since, as I have already shown in connection with U and I, his "desire" for Faulkner's language is not without its solipsistic elements.

Before the additions of the footnotes, then, the writings are a sort of inscribing of readerly desire--written responses to Faulkner's fiction that maintain "the pleasure of the text" as Barthes has called it elsewhere. While he allows that such responses might constitute a kind of "commentary," Barthes makes it clear that such commentary cannot be "critical" in nature. With the annotations included, one might understand Ben's efforts as part of a search for a criticism that maintains the "pleasure of the text" yet also makes room for a form of commentary beyond mere pastiche. Such a form must begin as pastiche, since, as Barthes says, this is the only type of written response that does not re-direct

readerly desire. With his "desire" already inscribed, Ben returns to the writings a year later and annotates them, expanding in more critical, non-Faulknerian language on the phenomenon of his desire. If there is a critical content to these writings, this phenomenon is its focal point.

The italicized commentary (as distinguished from the footnotes, but also inserted at a later time) might represent what Barthes would call the "abrasions" (The Pleasure of the Text 11) of the reading experience. "I read on, I skip, I look up, I dip in again," Barthes says (12), and these temporal factors contribute to the pleasure of the text. Ironically, while Ben is engaged in the act writing ("reading," since it is a pastiche), picking up one of Faulkner's books threatens to disrupt the flow of readerly desire; it means that he must adopt the critical pose. The "abrasions," then, take the following form:"*/Here, I picked up the book again and thought about working. A pang of nauseous fear. The last feeble attempt/*" (23). Like the footnotes, these posterior insertions are part of Ben's effort to trace in a semi-critical manner the "readerly" functions that engaged him as he composed the Faulknerian pastiche a year before.The writings, as they are presented in the text of Dark House, with all of their various components included, instantiate and evaluate the desire inspired by Faulkner's fiction.

They are therefore highly "autobiographical," oriented around Ben's personal experiences with Faulkner's novels; in a more piecemeal fashion, the commentary tracks a history of influence similar to that which Baker describes in U and I. This is in keeping with several radical reconceptions of the critical function, including Ihab Hassan's. Inspired by Barthes, Hassan has developed a theory of criticism in which desire, autobiography and narrative are foundational elements. "In desiring, in reading, in making," he says, "the critic acts out his autobiography, compounded of many selves" (158). In this essay, entitled "Parabiography," Hassan manipulates form to its fullest potential, making the very style and structure of the piece into a central facet of his argument. Within a discussion of "The Varieties of Critical Experience"--focussing largely

on philosophical theories of the act of reading--he inserts italicized passages of autobiographical, third person narrative, detailing his own experiences with literature and tracing some key moments in his intellectual education. It is initially quite shocking to encounter this type of prose in a theoretical context: "*He thinks of another scene, decades later, a graduate student, subsisting mainly on apples and Hershey bars, earning his doctorate in a foreign tongue*" (157). One of Hassan's guiding motives, I think, is to embrace what Barthes might call the condition of criticism--the fact, simply put, that the critic can neither transcend his own language nor reduce the work in any way. Hassan makes this condition explicit; he puts it to use. His autobiographical, narrative style does not only differ from standard criticism in terms of form. The work questions the very *function* of criticism. While his diverse experiments (the "Parabiography" essay is only one example from a career of critical experimentation) are not always effective, it is unfair to condemn him, as Edward Said does, for "silliness of style" (Said 6). His work is refreshing and certainly more thought-provoking than many strong yet traditional contributions.

Ultimately, of course, the "writing" chapters of Dark House present an even less "formal" mode of criticism than Hassan's work but they share an emphasis on the critical experience and perhaps a consciousness of the limitations of discourse.

Another critical experiment that has some affinities with Ben's writings is the Austin Wright book mentioned above. This "Critical Fiction" takes the singing match convention of pastoral literature, replacing the singers with feuding members of a literature department and the songs with their lectures on As I Lay Dying. On the scale of critical experimentation and tradition, it stands somewhere in between Ben's writings and, say, Cleanth Brooks' essays on Faulkner. The work is not a "readerly" response to Faulkner; it employs conventional critical modes within the narrative and makes no attempt at pastiche. But Wright does attempt to deal with the novel on its own terms; the criticism and its subject share the common ground of a mythic narrative. Wright admits that his story is

"pretty thin" (xvii), indicating that his structure is designed to complement the fiction, to embrace the discourse rather than overtake it. The "writing" chapters of Dark House and Wright's study of As I Lay Dying share the same foundational conception: that in some instances the most appropriate way for one to respond to great fiction is to tell stories in return and thereby engage in a kind of communication with the work. They both maintain a profound faith in the power and importance of storytelling.

2. *Love's Knowledge*

But what exactly do the "writing" chapters have to do with the rest of the text? Why present this experiment in the context of the larger surrounding narrative?

I will return to these questions at the end of this essay. To get there, I want to place Dark House in the context of several philosophical inquiries into the relation between ethics and aesthetics. I begin with some of the ideas Martha Nussbaum puts forth in her book Love's Knowledge--in particular, those connected with her reading of Ann Beattie's short story "Learning to Fall." Nussbaum's book, as the reader might recall, is the same one that Ben pulls "out from under [his] thigh" after his accident in the library; it has "formed a cushion for [his] landing" and thereby saved him from greater injury (8). I mean for this incident to encapsulate several of the novella's themes. Much of what Ben learns--or, rather, is given the opportunity to learn in his experience at the trailer park--is articulated by Nussbaum in the title essay of this volume. Indeed, her ideas about "love's knowledge" and the corresponding notion of community provided a conceptual groundwork as I was developing my three main characters (Gwen, Doreen and Ben) and their relationships.

The essay outlines several different views of self-knowledge, a phenomenon that Nussbaum refers to variously as "knowledge of the heart" or "knowledge of love." Although she deals specifically with questions of emotion, the issue has much broader implications. An individual's "knowledge of the heart" and her beliefs about that

knowledge largely define her perspective on the world, her way of being and of functioning.

The model that Nussbaum finds in "Learning to Fall" challenges two popular views. The first of these belongs to the philosophical tradition. It is the view that intellectual removal is essential to the acquisition of knowledge, that "our passions and our feelings" can only impede the search for truth (262-3). She takes her example of the second view--"catalepsis ordered by reflection," as she characterizes it (272)--from Proust's Remembrance of Things Past. Unlike the philosophical position, our "passions" *do* contribute to the epistemic process on this understanding, although only through the function of suffering and the individual's subsequent reflection on that suffering. "Feelings" are referred to in the search for knowledge but only through a "solitary impression" that isolates them from their social-historical circumstances. The cataleptic lover believes that the "other" can never be known and that any belief in an "other" entails self-deception of some sort. As a means of dealing with this perceived fact, he embraces "the truth of skepticism" (273) so that he can be "alone and self-sufficient in the world of knowledge" (272).

Although these models are quite different from one another--the second one a product of Marcel's reaction to the failures of the philosophical model---I would like to emphasize their common elements. Under both construals, as Nussbaum says, "knowledge of love is . . . a state or function of the solitary person" (274). Both views attach great importance to *privacy*, removal from others, intellectual solitude. They are versions of a sheerly internalized view of knowledge, each highly skeptical in its own way. Both are grounded in a lack of trust. Philosophy doubts the self, the ability of the emotional being to discern truth. The "cataleptic" view doubts others, trusts only the self, through its capacity for isolated suffering.

The final view is the least intellectual of the three. It is not based on in-depth intellectual scrutiny or isolated skepticism but on fundamental human interaction. On this

model, knowledge amounts to open, active, unsuspecting participation in a community; it derives naturally out of this "complex way of being." One must "go beyond Proustian skepticism and solitude" (274) and recognize that "knowledge might *be* something other than intellectual grasping--might be an emotional response, or even a complex *form of life*" (283, latter italics mine). "We could find it in many places," Nussbaum claims (274), but she chooses to elucidate this view through a detailed reading of "Learning to Fall"--a story about two women, one of whom (the narrator) is a skeptic in the manner of Proust's Marcel, while the other (Ruth) has transcended the limitations of the philosophical and Proustian attitudes towards knowledge. It is Ruth who is "learning to fall" in her dance class (Beattie 14) but the image applies to the narrator. As Nussbaum observes, "[k]nowledge of love is [a] whole way of life" (275) for Ruth and her son Andrew. It is largely through them, through the basic structures of their relationship, that the narrator learns the values of trust. She comes to have greater faith in others as well as in herself. And in gradually discarding her skepticism she opens herself to a broader capacity for self-knowledge.

I will discuss the story in more detail as I apply it to Dark House. But it is this basic tension--between trusting and doubting--that is most relevant to the conflicts of my novella and the questions about knowledge that I hope it poses.

While the intellectualist view is represented in Ben's would-be academic pursuits, Ben himself, like the narrator of "Learning to Fall," most closely reflects the Proustian model. One should remember here that Nussbaum's categories ultimately refer to attitudes, ways of living, outlooks on the world; a character need not articulate or invoke a formal epistemic position for the reader to make these kinds of judgements. I mention this because Ben is not an overly introspective or confessional narrator. He is more concerned with reporting on the physical minutiae of his experiences, as in the novella's first paragraph ("my armpits were emitting a sweetly pungent stink" [2]) or in his preoccupation with smoking that runs throughout the text. But even this is symptomatic of his skepticism, his

refusal to acknowledge others. Ben is uncomfortable with his own body: "I hated wearing shorts. Revealing my scrawny, underhaired and unmuscular lower legs made me self-conscious" (53). Nussbaum observes similar tendencies in the narrator of Beattie's story (276n.21). In both cases it reveals a fear of exposure, a lack of trust. Meanwhile Gwen--in one sense a physical anomaly (the pregnant teenager)--is remarkably comfortable and carefree with her body: "She let go, falling backwards, poking an arched foot through the surface" (68). She has "learned to fall."

Gwen and Doreen have formed a microcosmic community while Ben is almost obsessively private. Nussbaum remarks on the skeptic's guiding intuition "that our natural psychological tendency is always toward self-insulation and the blunting of intrusive stimuli" (269). Natural or not, this accurately describes Ben's psychological tendencies. He deals with his depression by shunning human company whenever possible. He rejects, mocks even, the charitable gestures of the people around him, particularly his mother. Like the cataleptic lover, Ben is willing to suffer in isolation but unwilling to partake in any kind of communal process of healing. He will neither accept nor offer help: "It was a dream of mine to make it through life without having to deal with anyone else's traumas. I preferred my own; no civility was required" (100). Ultimately, as I will argue with reference to Nussbaum and several other paradigms, Ben's refusal to participate in the communities that are available to him is not only a social but ultimately an *epistemic* deficiency. His aloof, cynical, anti-social tendencies contribute to his exclusion from the domain of genuine self-knowledge.

I hope that my claims regarding the "community" of Gwen and Doreen do not require much arguing. The two women share a friendship based on mutual trust and support. As with any relationship of faithful acknowledgment, these qualities pervade their communication; they are "a whole way of life," as Nussbaum says of Ruth and Andrew. Laughter is one of the key elements in such a relationship, and one of the factors that separates the "community" view of knowledge from the overly serious skeptical position.

At the end of "Learning to Fall," the narrator's character growth is evident in her ability to take part in humorous exchanges with the people she has learned to trust. "Laughter is something social and relational," Nussbaum says in reference to the story, "something involving a context of trust" (280). Ben is often excluded from the moments of laughter that Gwen and Doreen share, mainly because of his tendency to be suspicious, his unwillingness to "fall" with the moment. In the scene outside The Lincoln, for example, Ben "wait[s] for an explanation" (58) while Doreen laughs hysterically at Gwen's joke. There is a similar episode at the end of "Tuesday night" when Doreen excitedly tries to point out the Big Dipper. "I didn't look up to where she was pointing," Ben says. "I was waiting for her to tell me what to look for" (42).

Also relevant here are the two sex scenes of the novella. Ben narrates the interlude in the "Tuesday night" chapter--the Danny and Gwen blow job scene--from a position of darkness and solitude. Literally or figuratively, all of his observations derive from such a place, from the dark house of his cynical mind. He views the scene in relation to himself, as "dull pornography" (36), rather than potentially good sex, or simply a shared moment of intimacy between two lovers. Even when it comes to the issue of sex, Ben is unable to see the value of mutuality. The repulsive masturbation episode of the "Thursday" chapter makes this explicit. As Nussbaum observes, "there is really nothing but masturbation" in the skeptical view, with all its emphasis on privacy and its denial of otherness (280). When reciprocal sexual relations were available to him, Ben's attitude was no different. He dismisses Diane's complaints about his selfishness: "Something about my rushing to intercourse" (84).

In leading up to her claims about the unlikelihood of successful mutual sexual relations under the skeptical view, Nussbaum establishes the following distinction. "To imagine love as a form of mourning," she says, "is already to court solipsism." At no point in Dark House does Ben discuss the way he "imagines love," but he reveals it, I hope, with embarrassing clarity, not least in his detailed summary of his masturbation techniques. If

his attitude is not a "form of mourning," as it is for Proust's Marcel, it is certainly solipsistic in other ways. The other side of Nussbaum's dichotomy nicely characterizes the attitudes of Gwen and Doreen: "To imagine it as a form of laughter (of smiling conversation)," she says, "is to insist that it presupposes, or is, a transcendence of solipsism, *the achievement of community*" (280, my italics).

But what is it about community that allows for greater access to the 'truth,' whatever that may be? Why can't Ben, armed with a car load of books and a depressive solitude, acquire any truly substantial knowledge, or at least self-knowledge? What is it about skeptical privacy that is so inhibiting?

To answer this question it will be necessary to look beyond (or behind) Nussbaum to some of her sources. Questions about the connection between knowledge and community have a rich philosophical history. Much of the material about community that I have found useful in this context has foundations in a particular interpretation of Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations--the one espoused by Charles Taylor among others. He claims that Investigations, particularly Wittgenstein's concept of "forms of life," successfully argues for an understanding of the knowing agent as *engaged*, rather than disengaged as the epistemological tradition would have it; he or she is "embedded in a culture, a form of life, a 'world' of involvements" (Taylor 61). David Bloor has dedicated an entire book to the reading of Wittgenstein's later thought as a "social theory of knowledge." "For [Wittgenstein]," Bloor claims, "our interactions with one another and our participation in a social group . . . were constitutive of all that we can ever claim by way of knowledge" (2). This is true because of the background understanding (of a *Lebensform*, a "form of life") that Wittgenstein deemed necessary for individuals to comprehend even the simplest claim or utterance. Under this influential construal, then, knowledge is a product of communities, inseparable from and unavailable outside of a communal framework. As I have already noted, Nussbaum consciously invokes

Wittgenstein, and particularly the "community" reading, in her application of the "form of life" concept to the lessons of the Beattie story (283).

Perhaps crudely, the core conflict in Dark House mimics this dispute between advocates of a traditional epistemology and those who believe in an engaged "community" agent. In the story, a highly skeptical and private individual, seeking further privacy through a Walden-like retreat, ends up in a kind of forced participation in a community. I do not mean to suggest that the text allegorically represents the different views of knowledge, that it somehow dramatizes a philosophical debate. But I do hope that readers are encouraged to consider the action of the novella in relation to "knowledge-values." Ben, after all, goes to the trailer park to write an academic thesis; he goes there in pursuit of knowledge. As I have said, the explanatory contents of these different views of knowledge are merely guises; behind them are *ways of living*, not mere philosophical abstractions. And the conflict of Dark House is ultimately a conflict between two such "ways:" an individual's "way" of doubting and avoiding and a community's "way" of trusting and including. It is a conflict between private doubt and public faith.

The same conflict Stanley Cavell explores in Pursuits of Happiness, a study of what he calls "the Hollywood comedy of remarriage." Strongly influenced by Wittgenstein's thought, Cavell argues that these films deal with "issues of metaphysical isolation and the possibility of community" (80). The concept of "acknowledgment" is central to his interpretations, as it is in his later volume of essays on Shakespeare. It is largely indefinable. Cavell seems to indicate that it would be wrong to even attempt to define the term, and Nussbaum supports him in this reluctance (Nussbaum 281n.26). Such an effort would require one to succumb to the values of scrutiny and skepticism that have proved so inadequate. But I think it is safe to say that "acknowledgment" is a special mode of knowledge--what Nussbaum might call "love's knowledge"--one that does away with the rigorous evidence-demands of traditional epistemological equations. In fact, those very demands are what *prevent* the philosopher and/or skeptic from acquiring the "knowledge of

acknowledgment" as we might call it. It requires a surrendering of those values, a "learning to fall," to use Beattie's image.

Cavell prefers to let the stories of the films speak for themselves. "Acknowledgment" is a construct of human interaction; narratives, therefore--stories about people, not explanations or analyses--are its natural vehicle of expression. This is an important distinction that I will return to shortly. In It Happened One Night, acknowledgment is "the release from [the] circle of vengeance" that the film's drama enacts (109). While the symbol of this "circle" is the "blanket-wall-screen-barrier" that the main characters erect between themselves (Pursuits 80), its real fabric is something like the violence of privacy and skepticism, the damage caused by the denial of otherness. The title of Cavell's chapter on this film is "Knowledge as Transgression." Knowledge is not acquired through removed intellectual scrupulousness but through the transgression of the barrier in question, the abandonment of one's "fantasies of privacy" (74). It is gained through the basic elements of communication, through "talking together" and "spending time together" (88).

"[T]he failure of knowledge is a failure of acknowledgment," Cavell says elsewhere, "which means . . . that the result of the failure is not an ignorance but an ignoring" (Disowning Knowledge 206). In other words, the diehard skeptic, rather than being epistemologically meticulous, is in fact a willful avoider of knowledge, just as the characters in Capra's film willfully erect the barrier that separates them. The skeptic's unrelenting demand for "proof," then, results from a deep-seated *denial*. In Pursuits, Cavell claims that the main characters of the films in question are engaged in the process of overcoming such denial, a process that involves their "learning to speak the same language" (88). The films "trace the progress from narcissism and incestuous privacy to objectivity and the acknowledgment of otherness as the path and goal of human happiness" (102). Acknowledgment amounts to this: accepting and embracing the fact that one is reliant on a

community framework, and thereby recovering from the denial inherent in the solipsistic skeptical position.

I will consider one of his more specific examples in relation to Dark House. He dedicates much of his reading of It Happened One Night to a discussion of food and its connections with community and acknowledgment, making much of the following snippet of interrupted dialogue:

DRIVER: How about a bite to eat?

ELLIE: Oh, that would be love--

In this, Cavell finds an announcement of the film's subject: "love as the willingness to admit the satisfaction of hunger" (96). Much like laughter, food is a central element of acknowledgment, and "the refusal of food," as Cavell says, reflects a "refusal of love" (91). A similar theme exists in "Learning to Fall," in which the skeptical narrator consciously neglects to feed herself while Beattie frequently describes Andrew and Ruth in various stages of eating.

One of the central scenes of Dark House has Ben refusing food from Gwen and Doreen. He even *plans* to reject their offers, is predisposed to exclude himself from the realm of acknowledgment: "I knew I wouldn't be able to eat whatever was warming in that basket" (60-1). His use of the word "knew" in this context contributes to the knowledge/ acknowledgment dichotomy in question. Ben's convictions about himself, articulated as facts or "pieces of knowledge," are in fact disguises for the denial of otherness--thin, ridiculous displacements of his failure to *acknowledge*. When he accepts a single strawberry, under pressure from Doreen, he can only mock the gesture: "It had the vague taste of cigarette smoke" (65). At the end of that chapter Ben eats voraciously, but he is alone, has just avoided Bill and Shirley. A "piece of gristle . . . in [his] lower front teeth and a splotch of sauce on [his] chin" mark him as an outsider. As usual, his only communication with others is motivated by selfishness. It is a drain rather than a

contribution or an act of faith: "I bummed a post-meal cigarette from the waitress and smoked it in mammoth gasps" (68).

In connection with the food theme, the final chapter contains some mild indications that Ben has at least partially overcome his denial-inspired unwillingness to partake in community rituals or celebrations. These signs are markedly incomplete, merely the indicators of a *potential* for character growth. In the scene at the hospital, for example, Ben gets Doreen a drink--one of the few occasions in the story in which the narrator offers anything to anyone--but he does so only out of nervous uncomfortableness; the gesture fills in where his communicative skills are lacking. Later, he accepts dessert but not a full meal during Gwen's dinner party--an improvement on his behaviour at the picnic but far from a complete surrendering to "the satisfaction of hunger." Through his interaction with Lorraine, the "vaguely erotic" (106) pie becomes a kind of emblem for the possibility of reciprocal sexuality rather than mere masturbation. In the epilogue, though, Ben manages to incorporate this incident into his solipsistic perspective on the world.

The clearest signs that there is hope for Ben when it comes to these issues of privacy and community, skepticism and acknowledgment, are contained in the "writing" chapters. Among other things, the footnotes indicate that he might have developed a healthily ironic perspective on his former self in the years between the writing and the commentary. But even without the ironic, sometimes self-effacing footnotes, I hope that the "writing" chapters cast him in a moderately sympathetic light. Which brings me back to the question with which I began: What do those chapters have to do with the rest of the text? How are they connected to the questions about knowledge that I have been discussing?

Like the sharing of laughter and of food, storytelling is an essential element in the community view of knowledge. Nussbaum claims that "the view of love and its knowledge" that Beattie puts forth in her story is fundamentally related to the narrative form (281). Cavell is especially emphatic on this point. For him, "telling" (the stuff of

narratives) constitutes the very fabric of "acknowledgment." Narratives derive out of activities of inclusion. They are products of counting, relating, partaking--all of which belong to his category of "participation," which is part of the groundwork for acknowledgment, an essential class of activities in the overcoming of skepticism. Part of the skeptic's denial is his very refusal "to tell, to recount his experiences" (Disowning Knowledge 207). It is in so refusing that the skeptic sets up the barrier of solipsistic privacy. Narratives are the pulleys that lift that barrier, one of the vehicles through which acknowledgment is acted out.

Gwen and Doreen's mode of communication is grounded in such "recounting." Throughout the story, the two of them engage in varieties of informal storytelling, from Gwen's initial encounter with Ben ("[I]t belongs to my boyfriend's father but he's driving across Canada for his honeymoon. We're taking care of it for him. Watering the plants." [4]) to Doreen's yarn about Fran Beardsley and The Lincoln. Ben is reticent and skeptical in his reactions to their stories. He is inclined to think of narratives as objects of intellectual scrutiny and, for him, this focus has overshadowed their function as tools of communication. This is evident in his cynical response to Doreen's narrative: "The story was glaringly mythic. Doreen had failed to account for the fact that I was trained in analyzing narratives, an expert at examining genre and convention and truth" (59). Rather than "falling" with this moment of shared communication--a moment of laughter and relating--he dons the mask of intellect and analysis. Under Cavell's construal, his reaction is an instance of profound skeptical denial.

On the next day, though, after he has made the discovery about Milt's papier mâché owl, Ben finds himself on the narrating end of a similar type of story: "I found myself embellishing. A few crude fairy tale details about how he offered me a drink, had whiskey on his breath, how I was terrified instead of just impatient." Like the few incidents at the end of the novella regarding food, this is an incomplete signpost of Ben's recovery. It is incomplete because he does not fully recognize that, in telling the story, he is doing exactly

what Doreen had done the day before--engaging in an act of playful communication, acting out acknowledgment. The women are more aware of its communicative value than Ben is: "Apparently it was less of a comedy than I had thought. They came over and patted me on the shoulder as if I had just told them about a family member's death" (85). Gwen's response is the most appropriate one imaginable. She tells a story of her own, about the Easter visits with her aunt Ruth. Her participation in the exchange is grounded in the values of acknowledgement. It is a sharing of experiences, a suspending of suspicion and doubt.

I have said that the clearest signs of Ben's recovery are contained in the "writing" chapters. Despite his skeptical behaviour during the four days of narrative time, when he is alone in Milt's trailer he composes stories rather than the academic prose he has come there to write. In so doing, he is more charitable with Faulkner's texts. He engages in a communicative interplay with them and thereby refrains from imposing an alienating foreign discourse. His writerly activities elucidate one of the guiding metaphors of Love's Knowledge, which Nussbaum borrows from Wayne Booth--the idea that "a relationship with a literary work . . . is a kind of friendship" (Nussbaum 231). It is through his active "friendship" with Faulkner's work that Ben comes closest to genuine "acknowledgment."

But while his narrative emphasis is very positive, it lacks the outward turn essential to all gestures of acknowledgment, because it takes place within a private domain. His decision a year later to annotate and publicize the fragments, in the context of a narrative about his skeptical condition and his experience with a trusting community, indicates that he has finally made this outward turn. The acts of writing that Ben performs from his apartment in Charlottesville represent the completion of his exercise in suspending skeptical doubt and denial.

So the two types of chapters in Dark House deal with similar sets of issues through very different styles. They each test what I earlier called "knowledge values." The narrative chapters do so through a conflict of attitudes; the "writing" chapters do so through a conflict of discourses. And, although the dominant voice in the text is that of its skeptical

narrator, I hope readers find that the story espouses the "values" of acknowledgment over those of skepticism.

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