H e a r t L a n d

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

The thesis is a short novel, HeartLand, followed by a critical afterword.

The events of the novel constitute a reconstruction of the first-person narrator's past. Jeffrey Adam Wood is seven years old when he is orphaned and taken to live with his three spinster aunts, who are sectarian fundamentalist Christians of peculiar stripe. Juxtaposed to Jeffrey's episodic recollections are 'dreams' he invents and imposes on his aunts as a kind of apocalyptic and cathartic revenge. Thematically, HeartLand is a contemplation of how time alters memory, belief, and individual identity.

The required critical afterword is in two parts. The first provides a background to fundamentalism, with an emphasis on how American culture influenced its development. The second considers how, in literature, cultural forces encroach upon even the most sectarian individuals; this is done by focusing primarily, and briefly, on Theodore Dreiser's An American Tragedy.

Sommaire de thèse

Cette thèse comprend un bref roman intitulé HeartLand, suivi d'un essai critique.

Dans le roman le narrateur relate à la première personne certains évènements de son passé. A sept ans, devenant orphelin, Jeffrey Adam Wood se voit confié à la garde de ses tantes, trois célibataires d'un courant de fondamentalisme chrétien. Il se venge sur ses tantes en inventant des "rêves," interposés parmi les reminiscences épisodiques, d'où il tire un sens de justice apocalyptique. Du point de vue thématique, HeartLand s'applique à contempler: souvenirs, croyances et identité personnelle, soumis à l'effet du temps.

L'essai critique se compose de deux parties. D'abord, quelques faits de base sur le fondamentalisme chrétien, souligne l'influence exercée par la culture americaine sur son développement. On considère ensuite comment -- au sein d'une création littéraire -- les forces actives d'une culture en arrivent à influencer jusqu'aux individus apparemment les plus réfractaires. A cette fin, on se concentre brièvement sur l'ouvrage de Theodore Dreiser: An American Tragedy.

HeartLand

Never quite knowing how it does, or why, recollection escapes to the past through a room at the back of the mind's house. The walls as if of their own accord disintegrate and fall away, and recollection finds itself an eagle in the way of eagles, all sight and flight and dipping sovereign wing in the stirless air.

Where it ever learned to navigate the undifferentiated grays of sea and overcast sky, or why, when vivid islands of remembering rise into view, it will ride a perfect helix down to the howling wilderness, I don't know. It seems to be a thoughtless and involuntary skill.

What I want now, at this place and in this time, is to tell what that feeling is, and to tell of those narrow, inhospitable little places where belief once sustained a sense of mission, of purpose, and where faith conferred meaning on mystery and so illuminated the otherwise incomprehensible dark. I want to carry back a memory or two of how God inhabited the red earth, the yellowing sky, and perhaps above all, the black heart, for reasons unknown and unwished for, and how life was no less a wilderness, and no less a running away, for that.

For the pursuit of certain truths does make life a running away, and how remarkable it is that the mind will bend itself, in recollection, to the task of making this retreat seem otherwise, seem like a flying on ahead. Remembering, by nature, returns to the past,

but it's a trick, something the heart can do, this bringing something back again. Still, if one is to restore domestic tranquility, one must try by hook or crook to fetch recollection home again.

So I begin in the strange geography of a Saturday afternoon when I was eight and a half years old, which begs already an odd feeling of rupture since the man and the boy, who seem as if they could be only distantly related, are both named Jeffrey Adam Wood, and with the recollection of what I felt when they told me my parents were dead. All they had done was leave me with a babysitter to go to a baseball game, which proceeded without them as if the world had not just come to an end.

What God had to do, at that particular moment at that particular place, with a multiple-car collision on the San Fernando Freeway I never really, in my heart, understood, however many times in the years to follow it might be explained.

Here are two things from that day, which in most other respects stands blank: first, that I felt quite happy running to stand on the couch in the den to watch my parents back the car out of the drive, because they promised that when they got back we would go out to a restaurant, maybe Bob's Big Boy, for dinner, and second, how special I felt after the telephone call and the carrying on, by the distinction conferred on the only child in the neighborhood whose parents had been killed at all, much less in a car wreck on their way to Dodger Stadium.

And on the heels of this, as if to confirm that bestowal of distinction, there came my Aunt Vena, my father's until that moment estranged sister, whose night flight from Oklahoma City touched down so

surely, so gently, on the tarmac of Sodom that she would later, and often, declare that it must have been borne on the backs of angels, singing it to sweet and of course only temporary rest. Armed with an invincible faith in the God who visits judgement on apostacy, meaning on her brother and his wife, and armed for good measure with her battered Bible, the very breastplate of salvation, Aunt Vena dispatched my parents to their graves, the contents of the house to Goodwill, and the house itself to a realtor for sale with an alacrity that could only have shocked the neighbors. But her mission, and that was what she called it, lay clearly before her. Did Lot and his family entertain the filthy conversation of the wicked when the angel told them their cities would be destroyed? Did the Israelites tarry when Moses called them out of Egypt? They did not. They fled. Which was what we did, my Aunt Vena and I, for God's stupendous hand was moving in judgement against the earth, or would be momentarily. We fled to a sanctuary prepared beforehand for the protection of the saints, who were, sadly but fitly in that forever age of universal sin, only four, there being two more sisters waiting back in Oklahoma City, sustaining us, Aunt Vena said, with their prayers.

I could hardly take it in, for Aunt Vena, who I had never heard mentioned much less seen with my own eyes until she arrived in the small hours of Sunday morning, looked in need of no one's prayers. Mrs. Thompson, a neighbor who had sent her daughter home and had herself spent the night, opened the front door to a tiny grim fierce-looking woman who appeared even then, merely standing there, to have iron rods for bones. In spite of her new-looking suitcase and the

rose-colored cloth coat neatly folded over her arm -- for it was Indian summer and already hot -- Aunt Vena looked as if she could just as easily have risen up through the concrete porch as arrived by taxi from the airport.

She wore an odd black hat with its veil pinned to the brim, and wore below that a pale, gaunt face with cheekbones high and thin, like the arms of the Cross. Even now I remember recognizing in her a whitedly sepulchral version of my father, and she seemed no less fearsome for that.

'Mrs. Thompson,' Aunt Vena noted aloud and then walked in.

Mrs. Thompson, whose commiserating smile had vanished and whose hand had frozen at the bottom its welcoming arc, recovered only enough of herself to close first her mouth and then the door.

You would not be wrong to suspect from this beginning that what I want to bring will be colored by -- what? -- a sense of injury, perhaps, or betrayal. For these are not objective recollections I carry. This odd going back, to get them and bring them home, feels all over again like those ten years lost in the funhouse of God. If I seem unkind in imparting to what is remembered a movement, an apparent life of its own, that is because I sometimes wish, god-like, to savor the fullness, the splendor, of revenge.

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In the night, on the desolate floor of the red earth, in a solitary house, a barely perceptible fog drifted up the darkened stair, gained the hall, and paused where three naive doors stood ajar. Let it be a messenger angel, and let it contemplate revenge obediently. Let it invent dreams of annihilation and still tell truth.

The thriftless sun poured a pool of light on the rag rug at Vena's feet, filling it for the space of an hour, then two, as she pondered the familiar text. Adequate unto the morning and sufficient to the day is the light thereof, but when the radiance brimmed even at the brown toe of her shoe, Vena looked rather for internal light, which might, at any moment, break from the sacred page.

She read: And the king of Sodom went out to meet him after his return from the slaughter of Chedorlaomer, and of the kings that were with him, at the valley of Shaveh, which is the king's dale. And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God.[1]

She thought: Surely Father had been right when he said that if God taught anything at all, it was to differentiate in the face of chaos, in spite of this talent being a stolen, and so imperfectly understood, gift. In the beginning, the earth had been without form, and void. Darkness lay upon the face of the deep. Then, in one divine and magnificent stroke, He created darkness's opposite, light. The paradoxical unity of chaos had been sundered -- one had never signified until there were two. Then He created the firmament to divide the waters above from the waters below. He gathered the lower waters

together and caused dry land to appear. And finally, continuing to develop on this single greatest idea in the history of creation, He made all manner of life, ordering each after its own kind.

God had differentiated. He had created order and saw that it was good. Any rational explanation of the world must begin with this fundamental premise: difference begat order begat meaning.

[1]Melchizedek, type of Christ the King-Priest: the type strictly applies to the priestly work of Christ in resurrection, since Melchizedek presents only the memorials of sacrifice, bread and wine. "After the order of Melchizedek" (Heb. 6. 20) refers to the royal authority and unending duration of Christ's high priesthood.

Man, of course, became aware of God's idea through sin. Adam and Eve ate in disobedience from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, learning before due season of difference. God sorrowed, for they had partaken of a mystery for which they were unprepared. Not because He failed to see where curiosity and free will would take them, but because the result, which was the beginning of the great work of redemption, would require the sacrifice of His Only Begotten Son at the hands of an accursed humanity, who learned to differentiate without first having learned to --

Vena's heart began suddenly to leap in her chest, convulsing like a frightened rabbit trapped in a little pink straight-jacket. Merciful Father the angina, where is my nitroglycerin? Hot knives began carving at her from the inside out. She tried to call but couldn't.

She fumbled for her pocketbook through the searing she could almost see, but it wasn't there. Of course it wouldn't be, why would

she bring her purse downstairs. Focus, she ordered herself. But there was nothing to focus on except the pain.

Until, beyond that ambush vanquishing her unprepared, something else, and strange. A cloaked figure gesturing to her. But she could hardly be sure, for it was like trying to distinguish a boat against the dazzling hurt of sunlight reflected off water. And yet, a figure it seemed to be.

Without quite realizing when, or how, the pain, still insistently there, was eclipsed by something else, a kind of terrible wonder, and it made Vena think she was not behaving like someone having a heart attack, as if she were someone else. Yet there was recognition, identification in that.

Vena felt herself rising from her chair. She must go.

Stop this foolishness! her mind barked. We're not to go this way, Father always said so. But she couldn't stop herself from rising, rising.

She managed to turn around and saw herself, slumped down and to the side, presumably in the act of reaching for her purse, her chin resting on her chest, an unseemly grimace on her face that made her embarrassed for herself.

Even as she realized what had happened, and even as she thought I must tell Violet to cover that grease spot, where my head touches, with a doily (Why have I never noticed before?), Vena felt a yearning so strong it ached, more like emotional than physical heartbreak, and she turned to find the light-cloaked figure beckoning again.

She had been so sure that it wasn't to happen this way.

As she floated weightlessly, quite apart from any willing of her own, up to the ceiling and through, she felt at once an almost girlish sense of expectation, and disappointment because her rapture followed a script she had never read.

For the first time in her life, Vena was of two minds.

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We lived in the northwest part of Oklahoma City, the last house on the last street of a subdivision built on landfill. My aunts had bought the house new, eight years at least before I was born four states away and unbeknownst to them, for one reason and one reason alone: the builder had installed a red carpet on the stairs and in the hall and family room. I can see them now, perhaps because I heard the story more times than I can count, standing with a more than likely embarrassed, or perhaps just cagey real estate agent, as Aunt Vena, curling a finger to her lips to stay emotion, got a light that the carpet must typify Christ's blood, and would be to them a daily reminder of His sacrifice. Which clinched the sale as far as they were concerned -- how could they walk away from <u>that</u>? -- and they moved from Tahlequah with praise and thanksgiving, and wondered at the way the Spirit had used the developer, an unwitting instrument advancing His great purposes. Significance lurked everywhere and in every thing, for those with eyes to see, and it filled our vague lives with useful and prophetic point.

How they came to move from the eastern part of the state, where they had all, including my father, been born and raised, inhered in an equally stark, if more forward-looking concern. When their father, my grandfather, died staking tomatoes in his vegetable garden, his written instructions specified that he was to be buried in Oklahoma City where he had been born. And my aunts, who then made what must have been their greatest decision, moved too. For the truth is -- since Owen Wood had been more than a merely pious man, had been a great man, with a heart, like King David's, for God -- they didn't expect him to remain in the ground very long. The resurrections had to start sometime, and what more likely candidate than their father, who not only understood Scripture so thoroughly that he could open his Scofield Bible and show where the worthy Reverend's notes and other helps, especially as pertained to the Revelation, the most difficult book, were wrong, but who had been in his youth singled out from every other man on earth for an infilling of the Holy Spirit equalled only, perhaps, by the rushing winds and tongues of flame in the upper room at Pentecost. In short, they expected to be Martha and Mary to his Lazarus, Mary Magdalenes to his Christ.

Too, Aunt Vena needed to go to work since they hadn't much money, and Oklahoma City had more jobs than Muskogee or Tulsa. She started as a pool typist for a local oil company downtown and, because she was a perfectionist, had become the personal secretary for one of its vice-presidents within two years. For what reason I then didn't know, my arrival coincided with her leaving the oil company, with testamentary recommendations should she care to use them, to take up a life of study and government at home.

As to the resurrection, that had not happened, but faith held no commerce with disappointment and kept their spiritual appetites whetted the more for the day when it would. For what, to God, was the difference between a day and a decade but the wink of an eye.

And when, after fifteen years, they received from California a telephone call about their brother, who had on the afternoon of his eighteenth birthday walked out on his birthright as casually as if he were walking into town or to the creek to swim, my aunts knew that the Holy Spirit was again active in the land. What part I, the new inheritor in some as yet unspecified estate, had to play could not be underestimated. Hence my quick removal from the Babylon of the New World, the very center of civilization at its most corrupt, to the two-story buff brick house on 56th Street Terrace, and to that bedroom where I would spend so many blank hours.

From my window I could see across an arid dirt field, a miniature dust bowl, with ground too barren even for weeds and too soft for further development, to the twin water towers squatting on their manmade plateau, silently reminding us, so Aunt Vena ventured, of the two witnesses to Armageddon. The city had scattered the rusting appurtenances of a playground -- swings, a roundabout and junglegym, a line of weathering teeterboards and a baseball backstop -- bringing them together if only in name by a sign set amidst a dozen or so dead shrubs that read 'Seminole Field Park,' where I was allowed to play so long as I kept in mind the larger and prophetic significance of the place. And sometimes, early, I did, swinging with my back to the house, looking out over the red dust that passed for soil, imagining it

peopled with the multitudinous armies assembling for that last great battle on the floor of the Valley of Slaughter.

Before the neighbors learned to avoid my peculiar aunts, they were pleased to pass along the bad news that their new house had been built on the former sight of a garbage dump. But in that sleight-of-hand ratiocination at which Aunt Vena in particular had grown so adept, this information made God's hand all the more compellingly visible, for their City on a Hill had been cleverly built up from below, disguised by the slicker Spirit to appear as if it were the same height as everything else on the flat Oklahoma soil. As to the problem that their little New Jerusalem, with its population of four, sat on a heap of human refuse, Aunt Vena pressed into service one of her hundred explanatory aphorisms, saying 'God is not without His ironies,' meaning that our poor lives were a microcosmic exhibition of His great plan, a manifestation evident, as He meant it to be, to no one but ourselves. God might speak <u>to the elect</u> in every stick, stone, and organism in creation, but that didn't mean He wished to be universally understood.

Aunt Vena was the eldest of the four children, eldest of the grandfather I never met but whose spirit abided, I soon was told, in each of our hearts. She would only have been in her mid-forties when she flew out to California to get me, but I thought of her from the start as an old woman because her long hair, which she wore in a bun, was nearly gray, her matronly dresses and shoes were like nothing I had ever seen my mother wear, and because there was something desiccated about her, as if the womanhood in her had been baked prematurely dry in the ovens of Oklahoma summer and the heat of prolonged spiritual warfare.

But if she had no moisture in her, neither sweat nor spit nor tears it at first seemed to me, the effect seemed the opposite of brittleness or frailty, for her every iron bone seemed to be right there under her skin, making her seem as hard and yet, at times, as dependable as a bridge, seem as if she always had been and always would be exactly as she was then. An inorganic seeming that arose, as I learned to appreciate, out of her native determination, her rigidity of convictions that could brook no nay, and her sheer strength and intensity of will. Aunt Vena liked to say 'All life is a mystery,' but to know her was to feel an absolute security that there wasn't anything that wasn't certain. To a child, or at least to the boy I was, such authority commanded, perhaps even deserved, trust.

Suffer the little children, Jesus said, for as He well knew they are cursed with believing.

Her father had told Vena years before he died that she possessed, like him, the great Gift of the Word. There wasn't a sign she couldn't interpret, a connection to Scripture she couldn't make. She read the newspaper every morning before breakfast, her brow beetled over steely gray eyes, combing it for additional evidence of corruption and moral decay, what she called with impressive gravity the Signs of the Times. She knew from whence would come the Antichrist, and had watched with a combination of satisfaction and alarm as Nasser became first the president of Egypt and then the head of the United Arab Republic. She knew that the Bear of the North would make war on the Christian nations and noted Biblical parallels when Communist Russia announced the successful test of an intercontinental ballistic missile, adding to an

arsenal that already included the hydrogen bomb. The world trembled on the brink of Apocalypse, its players jostling themselves into their pre-ordained positions, and she knew the End Time was coming if indeed it had not already arrived.

When the Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional the recitation of prayer in public schools, Aunt Vena's scorn seemed ready to break the bounds of her face but for a restraining vindication (as she reported to us, who she thought it best should not occupy our minds with the too often trivial reporting in the daily paper) that surely, surely the premillennial seals of divine judgement were being broken even now.

Little in stature though she may have been, Aunt Vena ruled our domestic economy with a hawk's eye and a king's hand, directing the household on matters ranging from the state of the world and of our souls to telling Aunt Vera where the week's marketing specials were to be found. Her ambidextrous function, the Spirit had led her to know, followed Melchizedek's, both kingly and priestly, and to that latter end, having already a natural inclination to government, she devoted her afternoons to prayerful study of the Scriptures. That, mostly, is how I tend to remember her, reading in her chair by the living room window, looking up from time to time, gazing thoughtfully through the sheer curtains and across the street, beyond the red-dusted baseball diamond to the silent specters of the water towers, those two witnesses without eyes.

As for Aunt Vera and Aunt Violet, exalted supernumeraries in the great work of redemption, they cooked and cleaned, respectively, and cultivated faith.

Vera, two years younger than Vena, was, I suppose, my favorite. If I was Vena's star because only pupil, correctly answering the questions at the back of my Bible storybook with an accuracy she said surprised her for a child whose spiritual education had been completely lacking, then I was Vera's friend and she mine. Whenever I think of her she works in the kitchen, a cheerful room largely because of her, all sunshine and milk and eggs and fresh air, flour dusting her arms clear to the elbows while the smell of baking butter and cinnamon filled the house. Or she is in the back yard, puttering in her garden, feeding her petunias with, of all things, Miracle-Gro, until by mid-summer they would take on a parti-colored beauty so exaggerated as to be almost grotesque.

She, too, seemed old to me, for all three of my aunts wore nearly identical clothes, and wore their hair long and rolled up in neat buns because of Paul's injunction that a woman's uncut hair was a glory to her, given as a covering. But she had something that Vena didn't, an openness, a natural willingness to give of intangibles without reservation or recompense, like interest without a view to instruction, attention without impatience, and, perhaps, even love.

I could go into the kitchen of an afternoon, and Vera would listen to me prattle on about whatever came into my head while she rolled out cinnamon buns or, if it was a Sunday morning, rubbed a leg of lamb with garlic and rosemary, and then stop when I finished or paused to take a breath, saying something like 'Why, Jeffrey, I do b'lieve you speak your every thought.' And though she would pretend criticism -- Aunt Vena could not have pretended had she wanted to -- I could look in her

eyes and see them smiling. That first white-hot summer, when the alien screech of the cicadas would drive me discomfitted out of the blistering air to loll about the kitchen getting in Aunt Vera's way, that special, almost conspiratorial look seemed like a drink of water dipped from cool pools.

The morning after Aunt Vena and I arrived, with my bags yet unpacked in my new bedroom upstairs, Aunt Vera made her first gesture of friendship, though I didn't take it as that at the time. She made breakfast with what she thought a young man's appetite in mind -- fried eggs, potato chips, and homemade coconut macaroons. As far as I was concerned, it could have been food from another planet. I hated fried eggs with a passion beyond reason, and nearly gagged on the tiny bite or two I tried. The potato chips I managed, but left the macaroons, which I didn't mind normally except that their being served for breakfast reminded me that this was not my house, these women were not my parents. After a week of disorienting turmoil, to see them on that plate was to understand by some mysterious connection that those closed boxes lowered into the ground, as I had been told but failed quite to comprehend, had indeed contained my mother and father. Probably it was the strangeness, too, eating in the midst of these three odd creatures, who seemed to have a claim on me that I hadn't yet grasped. That everything was different meant that it was somehow wrong. But what I remember is Aunt Vena's urging me to eat my breakfast like a good boy, an urging that seemed to be tinged with threat, and Aunt Vera's saving me with 'Well, he just isn't hungry, is he?' And then adding, standing up to clear my plate when Vena reproved her with a look, 'And no wonder!'

If it turns out that the meek do in fact inherit the earth, then my Aunt Violet, with her thin face and sad, too-close set eyes, will surely come into a continent or two. That she existed at all seemed matter for perpetual and static surprise, her life a stretched moment of incomprehension, as if she were born and lived and would die in the space of time a car, travelling at night, will catch the eyes of a deer in that eternity before impact. She seemed always to be startled, always to be teetering on the brink of a very private despair, never two minutes in the same place unless it were her room, where she often retired to take a dose of tonic and lie on her bed, the very fact of life arraigning her daily as noon would a ghost.

She didn't have any regular household chores, but often undertook special cleaning jobs that always involved arcane procedures in combination with bleach or lysol or scalding water. Wherever germs congregated Aunt Violet seemed to hear them and was compelled as a matter of survival to attack. She most often focused her attention on the bathroom, and it wasn't long before she made Vena tell me to sit down when I went to the toilet because little boys, she knew. tinkled on the floor, and this was too painful to contemplate on a regular basis, even as a possibility.

Most of Violet's communication passed through her sisters like that, she being, I think now, something of an agoraphobe even in her own home, so often sequestered in her room when she wasn't flitting, or scouring, a half-cracked poetess bereft of words and so of art, with no identity unless it be in mourning.

One morning not long after I went to live with them, I found a

dead robin in the back yard. It reminded me of a mouse I had once found lying beside the garbage cans at the side or our house in California. I had taken it, trophy-like, inside to show my mother, who couldn't help laughing through her scolding. 'Oh, Jeffrey, that's so nasty.' She made me throw it outside, then stood behind me at the bathroom sink washing and rewashing my hands. I suppose that's what I thought when I took the bird, dangling by its claw, into the house to show Aunt Vera. She wasn't in the kitchen, but Aunt Violet was, on her hands and knees, surrounded by pots and pans, bleaching and re-papering the inside of the cupboard beside the stove. 'Look what I found,' I bragged, hoping for a reaction I regretted when it came.

For a long instant she just looked from me to it and back to me, an expression of horror welling up first in her pale green eyes and then flooding across her face like I was trying to hand her a sack of scorpions, though not before shaking it violently and untying the top. She uttered a series of whooping, ear-splitting shrieks and began to scrabble and clutch as if seized by convulsions.

I ran back outside, threw the bird into the bushes, and sat on the back steps to await the worst, which came shortly in the form of Aunt Vena carrying a yardstick. She spanked me grimly -- for corporal punishment, I learned, was Biblically endorsed and thus was to be a keenly felt responsibility -- on the spot and without a word, then sent me to my room with instructions to get my little heart right.

I cried more from misery at having been the cause of trauma than from the spanking, which hadn't really hurt, and when Aunt Vena came up later to ask if I was very sorry, I started crying again, though I had

meant not to, and said I wanted to go home. Exactly the right thing to say, as it turned out, because her sternmindedness against misbehavior metamorphosed in a twinkling to a buttress against distress. Sitting down on the bed, she held me, saying, 'This is your home now, Jeffrey. That's how God has planned it from before you were born, and He knows what's best. If we don't understand it now, we will in the fullness of time. But your home is right here now.' When she left me to meditate on God's great purposes, which I didn't know how to do but feared to admit, I heard her knock on Violet's door down the hall. Perhaps above all else, Aunt Vena kept order in our house, which can be a kind of peace. They talked, apparently, though the only word I could make out distinctly was Violet's 'Filth!', which flew high and thin down the hall and beat its wings in my ears.

Aunt Violet took her dinner in her room that evening, where she had stayed the rest of the day. Prompted by Vena, I apologized the next morning, but from that day forward whenever she looked at me, which wasn't often, I saw mistrust in her eyes. For a long time I thought she didn't like me, and only much later realized that, instead, she feared me, though I couldn't then imagine why.

All three of my aunts shared a concern for their health quite peculiar in women who believed they were about to be saved in a spectacular rising in air just as the last trumpets trumped. Aunt Vena never went anywhere without her heart pills, Aunt Vera took two aspirins after every meal, for arthritis, not because she suffered from it so much as because her mother had, and Aunt Violet had her cough medicine and all round tonic, a bottle of blackberry liqueur she kept

with a tablespoon in her bedroom. If they so much as had the thought of catching a cold, they doctored themselves by rubbing oil of eucalyptus on their chests before bed, and sometimes swallowed a benedryl for good measure. And every two weeks they trooped up the stairs to Aunt Vena's bedroom, treading the reminder of Christ's sacrifice, where they would give each other Vitamin B_{12} shots to correct whatever deficiencies ailed their forever tired blood.

Sometimes they forswore their medications, rededicating themselves to the things not of this world, and, peering over the rim of the toilet bowl, flushed their pills and syrups in a tremendous and gratifying rush of faith. Even the omnipresent pot of coffee plugged in on the kitchen counter would disappear for awhile, as my aunts purified themselves for the coming rapture. But then, little by little as the days wore on, they would take a cup after dinner, and Aunt Vena would start her exercises -- lying upside-down on the ironing board, one end propped on the couch -- to get fresh supplies of blood flowing to her brain. Which, because it only helped for a day or so, would end with her getting a leading that the Holy Spirit didn't mind the frailties of the flesh as long as they were recognized as frailties. Thus informed, and relieved, she would get in the car to go have their prescriptions refilled, and no sooner would she get back home than up the stairs to her bedroom they would ascend for injections all around.

After my initial period of adjustment, Aunt Vena reluctantly and in consultation with Aunt Vera determined that I should return to school, which was, she advised me, a nest of vipers but unavoidable. Unavoidable not because Aunt Vena wasted her faith on what secular

education might accomplish with her nephew, but because my continual presence in the house seemed to have a bearing on the increased frequency of Aunt Violet's spells, which found her arguing with herself when alone in her room and wafting barefoot through the house in the middle of the night.

On the morning of the appointed day, Aunt Vena's rose-colored cloth coat and odd veiled hat scarcely concealing the monolithic rectitude of the woman beneath, I learned the difference between embarrassment and shame. How an eight-year old, alternately running and walking in order to keep pace with the brown blur of his aunt's old-woman shoes, and eventually finding himself bending over his new workbook in a classroom bungalow with the morning chill still on it, can know he is absurd, can know that his existence there among his classmates must be teetering dangerously on the very brink of acceptability, and that because of nothing more than his aunt having made him wear his funeral suit to school, as one of God's exemplary, precious, and few representatives, I don't know. It was my first occasion for complaint, which delighted Aunt Vena since it gave her just cause to 'bend that little will.' An operation that would later, she claimed incorrectly, make me grateful.

That I made no friends in that school had less to do with my suit and tie, which in those first days I would happily have consigned to flames if I thought I could get away with it, than it had to do with the quickly circulated reports that I lived with those crazy women over in the subdivision, spread by the neighborhood children with whom I was forbidden to play. Aunt Vena conferred approval on my failure, saying

that I rather had a taste for interior things, the things of the Spirit, proof enough for her I had been blessed with a heart for God, who led me to withdraw instinctively from the world, the flesh, and the devil. 'We are in the world but not of it,' she counselled. 'We must be wise as serpents, harmless as doves.' But as would so often be the case in the years to come, this shared wisdom failed even to touch upon, much less explain or lessen what I felt. The wonder was that I learned to live with shame, given, like Adam and Eve I suppose, no other choice.

Around that time the nightmares started, vivid re-creations of abandonment that left me feeling cut off and forsaken. In one, I would awaken and throw back the covers to get out of the bed, a feeling of unspecified dread drawing me outside to the front of my old house. There I would look up at the roof to see the silver fuselage of an American Airlines jet pointing into my parents' bedroom on a nearly perfect vertical, illuminated as if by floodlights, people's faces pressed against the ladder of windows with expressions like masks of frozen, exaggerated pain. When I tried to see into my parents bedroom, where it seemed they must have been pinned to their bed as they slept, I could see only the glow from a fire, its flames muffled prettily in thick roiling smoke, like a sunset indoors. Sometimes Mrs. Thompson would be in the dream, standing down in the street holding a cigarette. 'Will you look at that,' she would say shaking her head, and then turn away as if I wasn't even there.

In another, I would be walking along a beach at night, and a black hearse would try to run me down, firework sprays shooting off rocks as

it ricocheted from boulder to boulder. Then it would speed off into the distance, and I, knocked breathless to the wet sand, would look up to see not the careening hearse, it was too dark for that, but the two yellow cones of its headlights being pushed up a hill. Always a dramatic hush fell over everything, even over the waves that broke and foamed and lapped against my side.

I reported these dreams to Aunt Vera, who listened with Mercy-me's and Well-I'll-swan's while she installed me at the kitchen table with a cinnamon roll or a sticky pecan bun that she let me dip in her coffee.

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Look at the fog in the darkened hall, opening and closing, spreading and gathering metaphysically, as a messenger angel would, just the faintest suggestion of a mouth where the face seemed to be, and where eyes, a shifting constellation of pinpoint stars, like fireflies rearranging themselves in shaggy grass.

Violet picnicked with her sisters in a green pasture, near a fence and a ditch full of standing water that looked as if it ought to smell but didn't. At a little distance, other people also enjoyed picnics, their gaily colored blankets and tablecloths sprinkled over the field with an effect, imprinting itself on Violet's mind, of unusual wildflowers. On a low rise, just beyond a windbreak of poplar trees, stood a rocket ship poised in its gantry.

Everyone had gathered tc watch the launch. Expectation hung pleasantly in the air as people smilingly spooned potato salad onto paper plates or nibbled at pieces of cold fried chicken. It always gave Violet pleasure, though she didn't know why, to watch people eat, a peculiar predilection in someone who herself did not much care for food.

She wasn't quite sure why the rocket launch was important. Were they actually going to the moon? It was American, of course, she could see the Stars and Stripes painted sideways on the white silo of the booster even from this distance. And she had a sense that there were men, astronauts, in the little black capsule at the top. In any event, she accepted that it was something important, why otherwise would they all be here?

As she lay back with her head propped on her arm, basking like a cat in the sunshine, feeling relaxed for the first time in what seemed must be years, Violet noticed a hobo making his way from group to group across the field. She saw people looking annoyed and waving him away. He, obsequious, retreated and made his way to the next gay square, this continuing until, almost before she really had time to prepare herself, he stood over them, filthy and in ragged clothes, raining unseen particles of his scurf down on the exposed food.

The tramp was hideously ugly, his unshaved face pitted with blackheads and inflamed by some kind of infection. The smell of dried excrement and vomit assaulted her nose and made her feel dirty inside. Vena and Vera seemed not even to notice him, and it made her uncomfortable because the tramp was focusing his gap-toothed leer at her.

From under the cover of his crusted and smelly brown sweater, he pulled a small batch of surprisingly pristine photographs. 'You'll want to buy these, I'll reckon,' he rattled at her.

Violet turned to her sisters for aid, but Vera was intent on slicing the pie and Vena's attention had been drawn to some commotion off in the distance. As she followed Vena's eyes to a group of children playing keepaway with a ball, the man thrust his photographs at her face. She took them, not wanting to be rude, assuming her customary role, victim of circumstance.

'This here's a snap of cars driving backward on the Jasper Turnpike. Nothin' special. But that next is of you.'

Violet, embarrassed that the old man had already been standing there longer than any of the other groups had let him, could not restrain her curiosity.

She slipped the top photograph to the back of the pile to find a picture of a woman, who looked perhaps like Cleopatra, riding a barge down the middle of a river. But it was taken from too far away and from too oblique an angle to be able to see the woman's face. Before she could object, the picture began moving, like a movie, the angle of the shot rising quickly and circling around and then down so that as it zoomed in Violet could see the bare backs of a dozen oarsmen, and herself looking down on them from a raised dais sheltered by gold-edged purple silk billowing royally.

She saw her own face, serene under an elaborate gold headdress, the alabaster pillar of her neck embellished by a necklace of turquoise panels set in silver. Violet saw splendor clearly, sensed a serenity enabled by power, a perfect picture of her sometime idea of herself.

But then the angel-eyed point of view drew back until she could see that her queenly barge sailed at the brink of a cataract, and she could do nothing but watch as she and her thralls were swept over the boiling verge in a stupendous white spray, falling and falling until the merest disappearing speck in the misted distance below.

Violet felt sick to her stomach and wished she were home in bed. She wanted to run away from this tramp but felt rooted to her spot on the red-and-white checkered tablecloth. The man's shoulders started jerking up and down, his laughter grotesquely bubbling up through phlegm. But suddenly he stopped, turning to look at the rocketship standing on its launch pad.

'Quickie lookit here,' he rattled, grabbing back the photograph of the still moving waterfall, 'this next's of something that hasn't happened yet.'

Violet saw her own face again, smiling stupidly in the bottom left foreground, and in the upper right, in the background of cloudless sky, an exploding fireball. She didn't understand and looked up. The tramp said nothing, but motioned with a sideways jerk of his head toward the rocketship.

'No!' Violet shouted, the sound coming out of her, only with the utmost effort, like the roar of a lion. She threw the photographs away from her into the ditch, and every one of them landed face down on the green chickweed scum floating on the water's surface. When she turned back, Vena and Vera were staring at her as if she were crazy, and white smoke had begun to mushroom out from the base of the spacecraft. The ground trembled, shaken as if by tremors of impending disaster.

Everything had been spoiled, everything was backwards. The man had gone.

The next thing she knew, Violet was standing in an unearthly rose twilight, a vast and desolate landscape spread before her barren of anything except sharp hills made out of translucent pink quartz rubble. She looked down from where she stood, high up one of these peaks, and saw people in the valley below, small as ants, moving as a group away from her. She tried to call but couldn't. She knew she had said so, but she really didn't want to be left alone just now.

What, she wondered, am I to do?

Just above the now black horizon the moon bobbed like a ball on a rainbow fountain of fireworks, as if for her entertainment, but it didn't help.

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Let recollection swoop now to another island of remembering, for by nature it is too inured to strange geography to fill in those vast expanses of blank gray sea, proceed to a certain morning when I was thirteen, which is to say halfway through my ten years of waiting for the world to be judged, which never happened, ten years of waiting for rapture, which never came.

'Can you see him, Jeffrey?' Aunt Vena asked, her arms sphinxed flat on the breakfast table.

Aunt Vera had cleared the dishes, set more coffee to perk, and now sat looking at me with what I hoped was sympathy. Across from her, Aunt Violet concentrated on her fingertips, which worked in tiny brushing motions at a host of invisible crumbs despoiling the new oilcloth. She had already scrubbed and bleached its blue roses to phantoms.

Vena replaced the question, hooked on the almost palpable smell of bacon and biscuits, and hanging before no one but me, with an exhortation.

'Can you see him, Jeffrey.'

Not given to outright lying, I answered, sadly, 'No,' and wondered not whether the fault were mine, because I figured it was, but whether and to what degree the fault would be held against me.

Aunt Vera nodded her acceptance of the fact, a comfort, and Aunt Violet turned suddenly with a look of surprise toward the unwashed dishes stacked on the drainboard, as if they had gained her attention by tapping her on the shoulder. But Aunt Vena sat motionless, her sharp eyes fixing me with a look that seemed to demand 'Why not?'

Finally, she said after taking a deep breath, 'We are feeling our way. It will take time. Let me meditate on this a spell.'

I knew my exoneration was complete when she excused me from the table to go outside, because if she had suspected any perversity of spirit in her newly apprenticed visionary she would have sent me to my room to get my heart right.

All through breakfast Aunt Vena had expounded on her revelation, which had penetrated her sleep like a beacon piercing night. In the

last days young men see visions, old men dream dreams. And where there is no vision, the people perish. Being then, at thirteen, of a certain maturity, Aunt Vena said that I was old enough to get a revelation, though young enough, she did not say, to require her guidance as to its content.

The spiritual wheels had been set in motion, Aunt Vena proclaimed, and we could but know our places and attend them.

What she expected me to see, specifically and quite improbably, was my Grandfather Wood, who had died in 1944, three years after his son had walked away, seven years before I was born. For my aunts, assisted by Aunt Vena's gift for reading the meaning of inerrant Scripture, had been growing to the idea that their father, the soil of whose grave had remained unbroken for all of twenty years now, must have ascended at his death not merely to the right hand of God, thus rendering unnecessary a bodily resurrection, but to the office of the Holy Spirit, an event in the long history of the Plan of Redemption second only, perhaps, to the resurrection of Christ himself. Such was the light with which God rewarded application and faith.

The wonder was that as many as three, albeit a peculiar three, could be persuaded that a man who died of a stroke while staking tomatoes in his victory garden now wielded the sword of the Third Person of the Trinity. And it hardly matters, except as an allusion to the boundless reaches of imagination, credulity, and I suppose hubris, the mind can muster when it will.

Too, though, there were messages, if few and far between, which had begun soon after the Armistice. Earlier, when their father was

alive and they still lived in Tahlequah, he would speak at their regular Saturday evening meetings, sometimes a lesson from Scripture, sometimes extempore, but always under the inspiration of the Spirit. Then, with his passing, as my aunts referred to his death, his teaching from and of the Word passed too. The meetings ceased, meetings to which some fifteen townspeople, hungry for the food of the Spirit, regularly came. But then, after three years of darkness, of wondering what it could have meant that he who developed for them the timetable of God should be taken away, the messages began.

As their devotedly inflexible habit had been, my aunts gathered one Saturday evening in the living room of their yet-new home, to play hymns on tne piano and read aloud to one another from their Bibles. Vena sat at the piano, playing 'The Holy City,' their mother's favorite, when she perceived in merest outline a spiritual communication, sensed the first hovering presence of thoughts not her own. They were so vague that she didn't even know what the thoughts were. The moment passed, and she didn't speak of it to her sisters until the following week when it happened, a little nearer to consciousness, again. 'Oh don't you see, I've set you free!' orbited knowing like words turning on the rim of a wagonwheel. 'Oh just be true, I'll come for you!'

Once, when she still worked, Aunt Vena had even gotten a message while typing contracts for her new boss Mr. Stevens, proof enough for her that this was a true communication since she had been concentrating on something else at the time.

At first the simplicity of the messages embarrassed her, but she

soon discerned that she and her sisters were as but children to the Kingdom of Heaven. Maturity was wanted, but it would come.

It seemed fit that the Holy Spirit, whose first recorded manifestation came as the sound of rushing wind and in the appearance of tongues of flame upon the apostles' heads, would choose to reveal himself through the intellect, the seat of agency and knowledge. Without knowing, I am sure, anything about the character of metaphor, Aunt Vena meant that the mind, flawed as it might be by the perversities of untold generations living and procreating under the curse, was that fated chamber, the upper room of the apostles at Pentecost.

So Aunt Vena trained herself to be not an oracle, she could never be that, for she believed in the necessity of clear diction, grammatical and complete sentences, believed in the power, the inerrancy, of the literal and inspired Word, but trained herself rather to be an instrument, a conduit for the exhortations and instructions of the Spirit in the final days, which were at hand. To unmake portentous divine riddle seemed a kind of creative exercise for her, her mind seeing whole cloth in what it had pulled apart, comprehending the art of answer in the bent logic of unravelled knots.

And so if, for a long time, my aunts were stymied, it remained for Aunt Vena to apply herself to solution. Scripture must be consulted, my grandfather's writings must be studied, interdependent references must be chased, treed, and then hounded into yielding their significance. But that was not all.

For there were certain things they knew, certain connections they

could not escape had they wanted to, or at least not if the fidelity between truth and experience were to be preserved, which of course it must. They all remembered their father's experience of 1937, didn't they, the manifestation rendering them all afraid not, though they didn't know what, to believe.

I heard the story so many times it seems as if I had been there, for to grow up with an often-told tale is to reach back and touch an image of the past. Whether it is true, or perhaps I should say to whatever degree it is true, hardly matters when the actuality cannot be verified. What interests me more is the way the mind will make a story I had no part in rise up unbidden, as if it, too, were one of those vivid islands of remembering, but peopled with faces I never looked upon, never knew, an island orienting me in those otherwise undifferentiated grays of the mind's sea and overcast sky.

Civil war had erupted in Spain, Stalin was murdering his adversaries in Russia, Japan was invading China, and the fascist powers of German and Italy had allied, possibly against all the free powers of Europe. But God in His Wisdom, working among His flock in an otherwise obscure corner of the American heartland, had cast His omniscient eye on a few humble students of Scripture who were troubled by the encroachment of a supposedly informed revisionism in the churches, evidence enough of a festering rot in the moral gut of the nation.

And so He gave them a ledge, if narrow, upon which they might in trembling dwell above the empty depths of the modern world. He gave them the gift of tongues, possibly biblical languages whose alien articulation, for some reason, persuaded the more for their patent

incomprehensibility. He gave them healings, eradicating anything from hay fever to cancer, sometimes, when they flung their prayers upon the porch of His ear, and He had a mind to attend. He gave them the second baptism, which meant nothing if not death without death, and He gave them Owen Wood, who it hardly seems could be my grandfather when I think of him in this light, who had the gift of the Word. But the greatest gift He gave them He bestowed on the fifteenth of December 1937, a miracle that became, as miracles must, a touchstone for them to return to again and again.

Perhaps He had been too early too open-handed, for to witness the sheer impossibility of a miracle is to hunger for another, and that He reserved, in His Wisdom, for another, future time. And if his flock fell away in the course of waiting, it happened not because the flesh was weak, for all flesh is, but rather because faith was. And that made them backsliders, to hear Aunt Vena tell it, culpable when they might not otherwise have been. In this, I thought she quite looked forward to the wrathful days of reckoning, seeming to despise her former neighbors instead of pitying them.

The shepherd will leave his entire flock to search out the one lost lamb. But when the flock is lost and the lamb remains, the shepherd can but repair in lamentation to his tent or, if the shepherd happens to have the spleen of my Aunt Vena, with high indignation ever so righteously expressed. Not a single one of those once faithful believers had bothered so much as to visit much less move to Oklahoma City when she telephoned with the news of spiritual activity. Not the Smalleys or the Moores, not the Strattons or the Sheehans. Not one.

But that night in December, a meeting night and cold, when the rain seemed on the verge of turning to snow, the preparations inside proceeded as they always did, Vera laying out sandwiches covered with waxed paper until they were needed and setting the aluminum coffee urn to perk on the counter. My father, who would then have been about fourteen, brought the dining room chairs into the living room, ranging them in the spaces between the sofa and two upholstered chairs to approximate a circle. As the others arrived he took their raincoats into the kitchen and set their open umbrellas on the linoleum to dry.

Grandfather Wood sat in one of the big chairs, leaving the other empty, as was his habit, to signify the presence of the Holy Spirit in their midst. Vena started with a hymn, playing on the upright piano that had belonged to her mother, as they settled in their places and meditated silently in preparation to receive the lesson. 'Tonight,' he began, standing when Vena had finished and taken her place, 'I am going to speak about atonement.' He pronounced it 'AT-ONE-ment' to make the object plain. He moved behind his chair, resting his Bible on its tall back, and in the short pause while he thumbed for the opening reference, there came a sharp knock at the front door.

A Mr. and Mrs. Palmer, of Little Rock, who were strangers passing through town, apologized for interrupting when they saw the gathered faces puzzling at them and said that they believed they had been led by the Holy Spirit to this place, though they admitted they didn't know why. They were on their way from Arkansas to minister at a Bible convention in Tulsa when, as they crossed the State line, they got a leading that they should go to Tahlequah.

Arriving late in the afternoon, not knowing what else to do in the absence of any direct inspiration, they went to the doors of several churches, all of which were locked. And while they still felt that the Spirit had instructed them to come here, they decided over dinner that perhaps going to the churches had been enough, and they set out again for the highway. But they got lost, and it was peculiar but as soon as they saw this house through the rain, with the cars parked in front and light buttering all the windows as if in welcome, they wondered if perhaps the reason for their detour had just then been thrown in their way.

The little congregation deemed this too astonishing for mere coincidence. The Palmers were invited to stay for meeting, where they might all wait on the Spirit's pleasure, and they, humble, accepted.

Each of my aunts cherished her own version of what followed, a variance endorsed by no lesser authority than the four differing versions of the Holy Gospel. Aunt Vera tended to include a description of the Palmers on that night, the 'missus' tall, not very attractive, with eyes pale and keen and her face full of point, and the husband mild, wearing a rumpled suit not very well made, the top of his bald head coming just even with his wife's chin. Vena eschewed physical description, cleaving instead to the import, the meaning, the application of events as pertaining to ourselves. Since Aunt Violet refused to speak of that night, regardless of any inquisitive coaxing my curiosity could invent, her version remained the most mysterious. Vena could not brook mystery, though she claimed otherwise, and so dispelled it, Vera saw mystery but never knew what do with it, and

Violet, always apparently grieving for the loss of the concrete, apprehended mystery less than she floated through it, a little boat lost and adrift on the fog enshrouded deeps.

My grandfather had gone back to his Bible, which remained balanced on the back of his chair. But no sooner had he opened his mouth to speak than Mr. Palmer, awash with the Spirit and, according to Aunt Vera, with perspiration, raised the heel of his hand ceilingward and began to speak in tongues. Aunt Vena said their father found this disturbing, because he had long felt that valuable as the charismatic gifts might be, tongues were not a substitute for plain and meaningful instruction. As no lesser authority than Paul had averred, tongues gave evidence of the Holy Spirit, but they did not teach, for, as in the tumult succeeding the judgement at Babel, no one could understand what was being said. Still, under these unusual circumstances, their father did not wish to interfere. He closed his Bible and withdrew from the circle to lean against the windowsill and observe, his back to the December rain.

Mr. Palmer spoke quietly at first, the rhythmic clicking of almost beautiful syllables articulating a message beyond comprehension. But soon he grew louder and more emphatic, until, abruptly, he stopped and was silent. His wife, who had been growing increasingly agitated as he spoke, rose to stand beside him, then raised her voice and said, as if translating, 'There is one among you here who must set the wheels in motion! "Let there be time no longer!" sayeth the mighty angel!' She repeated this exhortation once, twice, as if it were a challenge for the angel to appear.

Even the children knew that the woman could only be referring to the mighty angel of Revelation Ten, who leaps to earth from the heavens, rainbows in his hair, his face as the sun and his feet as pillars of fire. He commands that a little book, open in the vast chalkplain of his hand, be eaten page by page, chapter by chapter, until it is consumed. First there is an indescribable sweetness as the words melt like honey on the tongue, but then comes the bitter bile as the belly twists upon itself to assimilate the meaning of a mystery no one knows.

The key to the interpretive lock of this holy chapter for years lay unused in my grandfather's writings, of which there were many in small black and eventually tattered spiral-bound notebooks. Only much later would Aunt Vena use it to make her greatest connection.

'The clouds with which the angel is clothed denote judgement,' I memorized from my grandfather's cramped hand, following Aunt Vena's injunction that memory work sharpened the mind and provided a base of knowledge from which wisdom might grow. 'The seven thunders further indicate completion. Hence, the mighty angel oversees, perhaps even orchestrates, the events attendant on the breaking of the seven seals and the outpouring of the seven vials.

'John here speaks for the dispersed Jewish nation. That they must take up The Word to find it sweet to the taste but bitter to the belly surely means that the note of deliverance here expressed must lead to (through) the complete destruction of the Natural man.

'Further, I am persuaded that whoever this mighty personage may be (for he is clearly an individual with a function if not a name), his

place in the Godhead must be very high. The abjurations of Scripture require us to look forward to his advent; however, since he comes in judgement, and since only the manchild, born of the Woman, the true church, escapes tribulation, fear and trembling and dread must attend that expectation (cf. Joel 2.1,2; Amos 5.18).'

It was a terrible moment, then, to imagine the mighty angel in their very midst, for they knew the story and they knew my grandfather's view of it, and they all wondered if the world as they knew it might actually end in the cold December drizzle, bringing judgement, war, and ruin, the stranger almost shouting a renewed torrent of words mauled to foreign incomprehensibility, and his wife, who now had moved to the center of the room, pointing at the carpet, almost angrily, as she repeated her message, her actions nothing if not gestures of command. How could it be possible to forget, even years later, the way their father, without warning, leapt into the middle of the circle as if catapulted there, roaring like a lion in awful dominion?

Always a modest and retiring man, he told them later he was as surprised as they were, and that what he had been thinking as he stood up was that things had gotten out of hand, that somehow order must be restored. He had always suspected the edifying value of the usual revival tent bedlam and certainly had never allowed it in his home, and he wasn't starting now on account of a couple of absolute strangers. As far as anyone knew for sure they could as easily have been emissaries of the Devil sent to disrupt progress as messengers of the Spirit sent to promote it. But the next thing he knew he stood in the

middle of his own living room roaring from the darkest depths of himself. He had never in his life, he told them, been as full of rage as at that moment, a rage so pure that it needed no direction, no object. In an instant it had consumed him, obliterating awareness, and in another instant it had gone.

Aunt Vena guessed that even he had not then known what she now knew, that her father had not been bodily raised because he had in fact ascended into heaven and, more to the point, held no lesser office than that of the mighty angel itself, the harbinger and orchestrator of End Time judgement.

To me, then, the prospect of seeing such a man, who I supposed would be clothed in white, his feet on fire and his hair wild and strewn with stars and rainbows from brushing against the heavens, held a certain fascination. Could our kitchen hold such a being? If only I saw him, would that mean he wasn't really there? Would not the merest tip of his toe immolate our house and yard? Would he know that I was his grandson and that these were his daughters?

But these were the wrong questions. Aunt Vena claimed that reason of any quality foiled faith and impeded divine revelation. Only the king-priest, of which she hazarded to opine I might eventually be one, could both commune with the Spirit and interpret, if in my case only with appropriate guidance, what He mysteriously conveyed. Her ruminations along these lines had led her to conclude that I, as sole male heir to my Grandfather Wood's spiritual legacy, must be something of an angel-prince in training, for if the world teetered at the brink of cataclysm, we were on our way to glory.

Aunt Vera, I think, found this idea of my being an angel-prince amusing when Vena first laid the thought rather abruptly on the breakfast table one morning. As if reading her mind, Aunt Vena turned to her, glared, and said, 'I am speaking in earnest, Vera. If you can't contribute you can at least keep still.' Convincing evidence, I thought, of Aunt Vena's spectral eye. Aunt Vera, offended, shuddered a voluminous 'Oh-h' and left the table. But Aunt Vena obviously prevailed -- she didn't seem to operate in any other mode -- because only a few days later she came to breakfast with the news that without a vision the people perish, and, as I say, Aunt Vera may have sympathized with my plight, but she didn't balk.

My Grandfather Wood began his career on earth, professionally speaking, as a lawyer, maintaining both an office and a partner in Muskogee, to which he commuted the thirty or so miles from Tahlequah. His moral scruples prevented him from taking on the shadier, hence more lucrative cases, and after a series of losses in the courtroom as well as at the bank (he had even gone so far as to defend unsuccessfully an Indian tribe, who never paid him a cent, against a coal trust trying to cheat them out of their land), he decided to let his partner buy him out. He might be judged a fool by his fellows, but Owen Wood had the courage of his convictions, and at the age of thirty-three, with a wife and four children to support, he threw it all over to start again. He was too good a man for the legal profession and, to hear my aunts tell it, could not do the wrong thing even if he tried.

Aunt Vera said that their father had little energy, being constitutionally if only vaguely unwell, and even less optimism. But,

long an avid student of Scripture, and with one or two connections along the Midwestern Bible circuit, he took up preaching, carrying the message of salvation and making a difference in untold numbers of lives.

Falling doctrinally somewhere between the Pentecostals and the Charismatics, which made him popular with neither, he trudged the chatauqua that cloverleafed over five states. From Muskogee to Amarillo and around to Abilene and Wichita Falls, from Enid and Liberal and Dodge City to Joplin, Springfield and Little Rock, he took his message of renewal along with the ledger of its spiritual cost.

But he wasn't blind to the signs of the times. Small successes aside, salvation was not wanted in the land at large. America, where one now saw crime and drinking and sabbath-breaking openly flaunted in the streets, declined as a civilization. Its moral foundations were crumbling as even a glance at the newspapers confirmed. And he began to see that he could not, ought not try to forestall the inevitable arrival of the Millennium. The Bible did not speak directly, of course, of railroad and mining trusts, of corrupt land deals cheating the Indians, of men trying to earn a living while the unsafe coal mines in which they worked collapsed on top of them. It did not speak of landless tenant farmers. But the imagery was there, it didn't take much imagination to reformulate the picture to equate industrial monopolies with a wholesale embrace of Mammon, or to see, especially in the cities, the apostasy of the churches as they drifted into a lukewarm revisionism, especially as concerned the lying Darwinian heresy, which surely was the Baal of the modern world. Or to see,

should even more evidence be needed, how women had gone from bending their knees, like proper Christians, to baring them, like harlots. But these were merely tremors of the great cataclysm to come, and must be expected if deplored.

Too, there was something about the blank faces of the many not very prosperous people in the revival tents and auditoriums, people who were there because in all likelihood they could not afford the price of a ticket to the picture show, and who wouldn't have been half so glad to be born again without the homemade liquor in them, that made my grandfather wonder whether his fanning the flame of revival did not in fact retard the final work, that great and prophesied redemption of man through the intercession of Jesus Christ.

One night, at a rented hall in downtown Shawnee, outside Oklahoma City, it came to him as he sat at the front waiting his turn to speak. The main evangelist, who had been engaged for his colorful manner that more souls might be won to Christ, which meant that the rest of them might have something left over to take home with them at evening's end, presided over what my grandfather could only describe later as chaos. The capering minister had whipped the front seats into a frenzy of tongues and anointings by the Spirit. Several people, one among them a tall thin woman who writhed on the floor while conveniently managing to hang onto her pocketbook, fell to apocalyptic fits. People were standing, their palms lifted to the florescent lights, shouting praise. But worst of all, for none of this fell out of the ordinary except perhaps for its degree of intensity, my grandfather looked out toward the back rows and saw the craning necks and ghoulish faces of

spectators apparently come for nothing more than an evening's cheap entertainment, men with their hats pushed back and their arms around women whose last names they probably didn't know, women who by all appearances got their faces from vanity table drawers, and all of them looking not just dumbstruck but utterly without shame or personal involvement, as if it were all the same to them, these would-be city people, whether what they witnessed took place in an auditorium or an asylum.

But amid the tumult of what struck him as Babel relived, amid the saving that looked for all the world like a drunken orgy of sin and shame, with filthy vice looking on, there came to him a still small voice.

Without quite understanding how, he knew suddenly that, while it could not be wrong to bring as many souls as possible to Christ, it was a mistake, it was error, to imagine that this present bedlam could somehow arrest the prophesied decay of world systems. And he had a vision, for he remained then a young man give or take a few years, of the Woman in Revelation, Chapter 12, the Gentile Bride of Christ, fleeing into the wilderness with the moon as her steppingstone, preparing to give birth to the Manchild even as Satan waged war in the heavens.

It could no longer be a collective work. Henceforward, he and his might be in the world, but they would no longer be of it. So sure was he that the Lord in His wisdom now but looked for a few individuals to enact his work on earth -- and indeed, would not <u>one</u> be enough? -- that he excused himself to his neighbor and left by a back fire exit, went to his car in the parking lot, and drove home to Tahlequah.

God was separating the wheat from the tares.

Aunt Vera told me that their lives were made hard by their father's decisions, told me this matter of factly but always with a pause afterward, as if the words brought more thoughts than they themselves conveyed. He applied himself in earnest to the Scriptures, especially the Revelation since he was convinced that it held the key to all the other books, withdrawing to his study where he read and wrote for the better part of each day, while the little money the family had saved dwindled away to nothing. She would tell how, in answer to the grocer's or the mechanic's bill he would speak of the tests and trials of the Lord, which burned the believer clean and then strengthened him through annealing grace. And she recalled that, although their mother was pregnant with her fifth, she began taking in washing and ironing to help with expenses. This by itself evoked little more than sympathy for what seemed to be hard times in a hard place, except that, later, on another occasion, she told me almost parenthetically that the fifth Wood child, a girl born in 1931, had only lived long enough for her mother to die first, as if by unspoken agreement, and that their father, for reasons of his own, hadn't even given the child a name. Mentioned this parenthetically as if there were no connection between her supporting the family by scrubbing other people's clothes and her delivering her last child two months earlier than it was meant to come, parenthetically, as if it were a mystery why her mother hadn't waited for the fruits of her husband's spiritual scholarship, which she herself had worked so hard to sustain.

In fact, Aunt Vera was telling me this in another context

entirely. She divined a connection between the way the two of them, her mother and the unnamed child, left the world without so much as a whisper, and the way my father, not so many years later, did the same. He took nothing but the clothes on his back and the four hundred dollars from what was supposed to be its hiding place at the back of his father's top desk drawer, without so much as a note. And it hurt, she remembered, not knowing what on earth had happened to him, because their father only discovered the missing money when, six months later, four one hundred dollar bills wrapped in a blank sheet of paper and enclosed in an envelope without a return address arrived in the mail, postmarked Los Angeles.

We were sitting at the kitchen table when she told me this, drinking coffee while she waited for her cake to bake so that she could set it aside to cool and start dinner. She needed an audience less than a catalyst, to spark memories that then flared up of their own accord, and spoke to the wall as if I wasn't even there.

'It wasn't hard to see that Daddy (she was the only one of my aunts who stooped to anything more familiar than Father) had set his heart against Victor. I never knew why, I only know that when Vena came to supper one night and said that Victor must have sold his birthright, like Esau, for a mess of pottage, he just folded his napkin and excused himself from the table without eating a bite.'

There wasn't anything to do but seek their new equilibrium where they could find it, learn not to think about him when they passed the closed door of his bedroom or looked at his empty place at meals, and ignore the interstices of silence where his voice once had been.

By that time I knew more about my father's backslid life than Aunt Vera herself, for I suspect that her governmental sister never made a fuss about the single, pitiful box of personal effects that had been sitting unmentioned in the garage for so long, a box I had discovered in my routine researches into what was none of my business, or at least was none of my business until I opened it.

Of my curiosity, I had been trained to know it was a vice. But on the other hand, I told myself, even Jesus will come as a thief in the night. I progressed from examining the contents of purses, and the hairpins, dandruffy combs, and other debris in bathroom drawers, to artfully opening and then re-sealing everything from menstrual pads to Christmas presents, the last easy because few, hidden in the hallway closet. All three of my aunts were seldom out of the house at the same time, thus adding the pressure of time to guilt, but one afternoon when Aunt Vena had driven Violet to the doctor's, and Aunt Vera applied her green thumb to the flower beds out back, my greatest discovery presented itself as this same cardboard box, in the garage, one I had often overlooked in favor of others more accessible, since this one had been sealed with cellophane tape, hard to put back once peeled away. But on this one afternoon, lolling about with nothing to do, it struck me that if I opened it from the bottom, which had not been taped, I might more easily conceal my intrusion.

The decision made, and exercising a skill I thought should be the envy of surgeons, I slid a kitchen knife under the bottom flaps and gained illicit entrance to something that in turn gained entrance to me, reaching inside and twisting my stomach until a hot flush that I

could feel bloomed in my face. Perhaps, I thought later, like the eaten pages of the angel's mysterious book.

At first I hadn't known what I looked at, but it dawned on me when I opened a small Hallmark stationery box, with a clear plastic lid, and found inside a curl of hair wrapped in tissue paper, a tarnished baby spoon, and a blue and white baby bracelet that spelled my name in little plastic beads. There was a hospital wristband with my mother's name on it, and a clipping from the Glendale News Press that announced my birth, May 1, 1951: 'It's a Boy! Born to proud parents Vic and Stella Wood, a boy, Jeffrey Adam, 7 lbs. 2 oz., at 4:30 a.m., Glendale Memorial Hospital. Special thanks to Dr. Ray Cronemiller and all the nurses!'

In the larger box I found a cancelled passbook with Bank of America stamped in gold on its dark blue cover, a folded piece of paper, dated October 1948, discharging my father from the United States Army, 5th Infantry Division, and a diploma from U.C.L.A. in mechanical engineering. And that was all.

But it proved enough when Aunt Vera, bless her heart, told me how my father had run away from an entire life, for I knew that he had made another. And that, I suppose, was the moment when I first entertained the devil's very own thought, though a thought like Aunt Vena's messages orbiting just out of reach of conscious grasp: I might emulate the man who by then was almost faceless, only ever looking up at me from the bottom of memory, a pebble worn smooth by time's running stream.

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Vera stepped out onto the back porch carrying, along with her crockery mixing bowl, a comforting sense of pastness, a sense of a green spring that had climbed, in a lovely rising succession of hollyhock days, to yellow summer. She seemed to remember Vena saying wouldn't a hearty vegetable soup be nice for lunch, seeing as how the day was so pleasant and cool after last night's rain, so she felt that she must be on her way to the garden to see what might be ready to pick. Then the screen door clapped shut behind her with a severing report, and at that instant there leapt an apprehension, ahead of any rational thought, that something was wrong.

Perhaps it was the odd quality of light, too insistently transparent after rain, that made everything look different, farther away than she knew it really was, as if she were observing the yard and the sluggish river beyond in an immaculate mirror. She hesitated, her mixing bowl crooked in one arm, scrutinizing first the yard and then the mountainous clouds printed on the sky like an unfurled bolt of calico, startling blue and white.

It was the yard, she decided, something not quite right about the way things lay open and so familiar, perceiving a difference where none had been the day before, and, as far as she could think, where none ought to be now. Nature, for what reason she couldn't imagine, seemed to have donned a mask, but a mask cunningly identical to itself.

Vera made her cautious way along the path beside the ancient lilac

hedge, with its twisted black branches and stunted though still-fragrant blossoms, cones of lavender and white, and began to notice something even odder than the preternatural and backward light. Everything around her was growing hushed, hushed beyond the usual peacefulness of the country quiet. She realized that she couldn't hear a single bird, could not detect the snick, rasp, or buzz of a single insect. And although a light breeze stirred the young cottonwoods crowding the edge of the yard, making them shimmer their familiar silver and green, there wasn't so much as a whisper to be heard from them. On the other side of the river, beside the deserted woolen mill, the low, wide waterfall gave up its low sigh even as she stood looking at it.

She looked again at the yard, the weedy lawn a dazzling carpet of dandelions that declined uninterrupted to the river save for the crescent-shaped swath of tiger lilies bristling at the water's edge. She studied and grew suspicious of the wrestling tangles of honeysuckle and blackberry tumbling over the stone wall at the property line, pushing against the hawthorn hedge which refused to yield, and wondered at the sycamore and blackjack on the other side of the lawn, which waved prettily, meaningfully, silently in the breeze. Sound had fled to echo, and Vera could just make out the dispersing particles of it, which faded, slipping away. And in the place of sound, in the morning sun and crisp clear air, a speaking sheen she ought to understand but could not.

So Vera waited, wondering, and watched, until a sudden bumblebee careened without warning around the corner of the hedge, zig-zagging

toward her silent and malefic. She swatted at the black and yellow blur, grimacing at the possibility of contact, but it tacked past, heedless, and was gone.

It made Vera think of the carnival ride her father had once put her on when she was very small, carrying her along its crazy windings, nothing to be done, hurtling through dark passageways rigged with sudden terrors that flipped themselves in her way without warning. And though she had felt betrayed -- had he not told her there was nothing to be afraid of? -- she had also felt that to shut her eyes along the way would be to rob herself of anger, of an essential violence. Fear had become, through some dark transformation, courage.

She reached the edge of the vegetable garden and stopped, wondering what on earth was going on, feeling at once that everything was normal yet nothing was, and it came to her as she stood looking at the rising ranks of orderly vegetable rows, crowned there at the back by the sunlit and goldening silk of the young corn, that she had never felt more alone. In the intensifying and subtractive silence, one sound after another seeming to turn from her and flee, it almost seemed a plot, something known, but not by her. What could possibly still the joyful racket of birds, the susurrous vanity of trees? What were they doing, the bluets and the sweet william, if not feigning their naturely innocence, nudging and winking at each other, betraying a knowledge of something withheld?

There was a corner of Vera's mind saying how foolish it was to feel fear in your own back yard, but there it was, a sense of something not personally menacing, perhaps, but malevolent in its withholding of meaning nevertheless.

So Vera tried retaliating, not sure if she was supposed to, with curiosity. She opened herself, concentrating hard as an oracle, her empty mixing bowl still tucked under one arm. But all that came to her in the absolutely still quietude was the oddly banal burble of the garden hose running somewhere back by the tomatoes. She followed this single clue, down among the ranked, expectant chorus of lettuce and broccoli and okra, of chard and kale and hills of summer squash, to the body of her father, which lay in a puddle of water and mud as if he had risen from it, his clothes wet and soiled, dirt caking his hair and face and hands as if there had been a struggle. And in his mouth, which stretched open as if unhinging itself in a colossal shout, wadded pages ripped from a Bible and crammed down his throat, the more disturbing since Vera felt a tingling reminiscence that she had done this last herself.

She ought to run for help but did not, curiosity making her rather bend toward the two lenses of polished obsidian commanding the muddy acre of his face. And in that moment, when she caught in his dead eyes a glimpse of her own reflection, a black nothing with its edges outlined in light, and in that moment when she thought, inexplicably, it isn't my fault, his hand tore itself from the mud, caught her at the throat, and began to squeeze.

Without even having to think about it, Vera smashed her crockery mixing bowl to pieces on her father's face, and ran.

Only by sheer force of will was she able to strain past the lilacs and up the back steps, because her heart had taken the hook, again, and she could feel it, like a trout on a line that her father, sitting back there in the mud, reeled and played as if an angler of human souls.

Having gained the porch, where safety seemed to come with the recollection of bread dough rising on the kitchen counter and covered by a tea towel, Vera noticed that the spell of silence had broken with her bowl. Sound was flooding back into the yard. The birds had begun again to sing, and the starlings to argue, as if they had never stopped, and the breeze rustled audibly through the leaves of the cottonwoods, like a green-and-silver tongued rumor of life.

She decided to make something else for lunch, creamed chipped beef, maybe, served on toast.

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The days were now long gone when I could amuse myself by snooping through the house or reviewing the week's accumulated garbage at the side of the house. At the wise and advanced age of fifteen only one of Aunt Vena's pitiful handful of secrets continued to claim my attention, and I not only knew all of Aunt Vera's stories by heart, I had begun to feel sorry for her that their telling and retelling never seemed to yield either of us any more light. I had long ago abandoned as fruitless my invented back yard hobby, which aimed for the subjugation of nature, since the tricks that honey bees could learn harnessed into thread leashes had proved few, the satisfaction of punishing the ants who strayed from my spoon-bulldozed highways had diminished with the realization that they could overnight return to their business as if

unacquainted with catastrophe, and frying the brains of grasshoppers, which had been the scourge of Israel, with a magnifying glass, had somewhere lost the cachet of science. If late and without quite realizing it, I spent less and less time outdoors and more in my room, devoting my requisite hour to Bible study and then two or three to escape, which came in the form of books borrowed at random from the school library.

Aunt Vena did approve of education in principle, since God disliked stupidity if not innocence. And while she was not clear on whether I might be called upon to supervise the End Time conversions, where even the Hottentots of Africa would be given an opportunity to accept or reject Christ through the Holy Spirit, it seemed best that I be prepared for such a possibility through selective reading. Not being much of a reader herself, she could recommend only her father's little black books and The Pilgrim's Progress, noting of the latter that to remove the apostrophe from the title improved it by making the static noun into an active verb. But if I could only read these books with one eye on the clock, whole hours melted away unnoticed when I entered the profane labyrinth of library fiction. I envied Frank and Joe Hardy their crime-solving adventures and their impossibly wonderful father, I found commiseration for thwarted hopes, with David Copperfield, in the love and company of good and in my case nonexistent friends. I wished for myself the innocent stupidity of a Huckleberry Finn, who was lucky enough not to understand the difference between right and wrong, and I felt the loneliness, which had a kind of beauty to it, Jim Burden felt growing up in the Nebraska prairies, where the winters were like Oklahoma winters, blustery and with little snow.

In the summertime, though, even when I stayed mostly in my room my being too much home would begin to tell on Aunt Violet. It would take her more and more time, using more and more militant measures, to achieve an acceptable standard of cleanliness. If I counted hours by chapters, she struck them off in ounces of bleach and sponges worn to tatters, wiping down walls and rubbing surfaces to a fare-thee-well. If she could have figured out a way to purify the bathroom by fire, surely she would have, for failing fire she had but scouring powder and disinfectant, which she used almost in secret, sequestered behind the bathroom door with nothing but the ceaseless drone of water running in the sink. Then she became conspicuous by unremarked absences from the dinner table and, eventually, by spectral waftings through the empty downstairs at night, her voice coming up to me in the dark, in bed, in querulous contradiction, as if arguing with someone whom she already knew would prevail.

If I couldn't feel sorry for her, it was because afternoons of invented errands would then be assigned me, errands into the world of which we were not a part, prescriptions to be refilled at the pharmacy, discount coupons clipped from the newspaper by Aunt Vena to be redeemed at the supermarket, anything to get Jeffrey out of the house for a spell. And following close on the heels of these, because dispatched with calculating alacrity, would come permission to go swimming at the Wedgewood pool.

I had first been taken there when I was ten, for my evening baptism into the Holy Spirit, though at the time I had in my as yet untutored view of spiritual things been more taken by the spectacle of

my aunts in bathing suits than by the ceremonial symbol that was not a symbol. Out onto the deck they emerged from the change rooms, Aunt Vera in a russet swimsuit that made her look like an apple with human appendages, Aunt Vena clad in a purple the shade of impotent rage, her child's frame dimpled and puckered by the robber that is age, and Aunt Violet, having to be coaxed out of the house even in those days, her skin so white it out-shone the immaculate white she wore, making her seem to glow in the deepening dusk, her luminosity drawing to herself the attention she neither wanted nor could accept.

I asked Aunt Vena later if I might already have been baptized, because what she did to me had been done to me before, by a man named Corky at the Aqua Oaks Swim School except that all he said was to relax and float, and she said no, you had to go all the way under in the first place, you had to be aware of what was happening or else it didn't count in the second place, and in the third God would sanction no common and probably unbelieving swimming teacher, and in California of all places, to officiate at holy baptism.

As to the pool itself, Aunt Vena had gotten a light that the developers of this carnal acre, for the pool was only a part of a vast amusement park, had been used unwittingly, like the builders of our house, to advance His great purposes even here. What they were thinking when they named it Wedgewood, what they supposed it to mean, mattered nothing in the face of divine appropriation. 'That's what your grandfather is, Jeffrey,' she said in as close to intellectual discovery, as close to the rapture of knowledge, as she ever got. 'He is our wedge-Wood, holding open the door to the house of God. And we

enter through baptism, which is the very threshold of life out of death.'

Normally I hadn't the pocket money to buy myself admission, and was forbidden to pass under the midway arches in any event. But with the arrival of summer Aunt Violet's troubles translated not merely into pocket money, but into the charge, when I would be shooed out the door after lunch, not to show my face again before supper. I could ride my bicycle, the bicycle Aunt Vena had bought me after she got the light that the wheels had been set in motion, and spend all afternoon, provided only that I observed all the usual injunctions not to speak to any strangers, which meant I could speak to no one, and to bear in mind the charismatic, death-defying significance of submersion. Not that every turquoise submersion was a baptism, for one wouldn't want to be guilty with Moses of striking the rock twice when once would do, it was more a matter of concerned attention to baptismal type, allowing awareness of the Holy Spirit's great charismatic gifts, while the lost cavorted all around. And I did try, though intermittently I suppose, but usually succeeded only at keeping nothing in mind, which was a relief and easier.

At the deep end of the pool stood four diving boards, two high ones flanked by two low ones, their traffic of the graceful and the foolhardy presided over by two lifeguards with red megaphones, one on either side, who from elevated chairs barked out warnings and exhortations for the safety of their charges.

The summer before, when I had set for myself the nearly insuperable hurdle of diving head first off the high dive, and had

succeeded to the point of beginning to dive and then losing courage, which brought my stomach down with a sharp slap on the surface of the water, one of the lifeguards spoke to me as I pulled myself from the side of the pool. 'That'n hurt, dinnit,' and when I said 'No,' he shrugged and looked off, and then turned back. 'That's okay, but I'll tell you something. You go back there and do it again, right now, or you never will. 'Cept this time, don't jump, just stand at the end and fall. Your head can't help but be the first thing goes in.' And I did, because of him, feeling in the line-up of dripping, laughing, pushing children not encouraged to succeed in what seemed doomed to fail, and not grateful that attention had been paid, but fear that by obedience I would further humiliate myself. I stood at the end of the board, looked down to where the lifeguard was watching me with a grin under the white patch of sunscreen on his nose, and did what he said and it worked. 'Way to go,' he said and gave me a thumbs up sign, and never so far as I knew looked at me again. But it hardly mattered, for I had discovered, if not exactly on my own, the potency of doing, which is nothing if not the wordless greening of the young soul.

Toward the other, shallow end was an attraction, new that summer, the summer after I turned fifteen, a turntable you could swim to and rest on that rotated like a slow carousel, a kind of mechanical lily pad. I would climb up on it when tired of the diving boards and sit watching, apart, always apart, in the sun. I could see the taller rides off in the amusement park, the Ferris wheel, the two roller coasters, the stem of the chain-hung passenger tubs that would bloom slowly outward when they spun, all hoving huddled into and then out of view as I sat motionless and turning.

I don't know what to call my feelings then, unless they came together under simple adolescence, a kind of vague nostalgia for days that had known no despair, mingled with a feeble hope for something important, but that refused formulation. I didn't know it then, but if hope deferred maketh the heart sick, it is because futurity cannot supply what the heart lacks. So I would sit on my little island, revolving there as good as alone despite the dozens of others it would hold, measuring off how lonely freedom was, once around, then twice, then again, moving through time as I remained in the same place.

And I watched clouds, the fat white pachyderm clouds of summer skies in caravan across the horizon, the smaller scudding clouds with appointments far away, never once seeing in any of them the face of God. I watched mountainous thunderheads piling up higher and higher, pylons for birds wheeling so high up they looked like specks, and I watched everyday and wind-buffeted clouds colliding into and out of shapes I would recognize then immediately forget.

But on one particular day at the Wedgewood pool, late in the afternoon when it was nearly time to go home for dinner, though I didn't want to, the Lord, in spite or perhaps because of my inattention, moved His hand, or at the very least permitted a gruesome little accident that would reach inside of me as the Holy Spirit never had.

Among the score or so people populating the island, as everyone seemed to be calling it, was a group of roughhousing teenagers. One of the boys kept trying to pull the others off the edge and into the water. He would seem to disappear, swimming underneath the turning

deck, and then burst up in front of one of his friends, pulling at flailing arms and legs amid tempests of spray and shrieks of terrified glee. I noticed one of the lifeguards, watching, frowning, raise his bullhorn then lower it again without calling one of the usual reprimands to settle down, perhaps because no one really seemed to be bothered by the commotion or, perhaps, because it was simply preordained that he would do so.

What can be said about this boy, this strong cruel buoyant youth whose life would so irremediably change in the course of a single afternoon, except perhaps that he gave to me in that time and place the possibility of imagining a life other than my own. And without realizing quite what it was, I felt a joy out of all proportion to the gift, as if he were some sort of answer to a question only half formed, an unconscious joy such as flowers might feel when they exhume themselves in spring.

His terrorizing continued until, one time, he snatched at one of the younger girls' bathing caps and pulled it off, which made her start crying because she said it had hurt. She had long black hair that fell almost the full length of her back. The boy told her to shut up or he would pull her into the water for sure, but she wouldn't. Her friends were laughing at her for being a baby, and the boy, muscular and who I was thinking looked handsome and energetically, enviously brutal, pulled her off the turntable and under the water.

Their friends collapsed on themselves in laughter, which subsided quickly enough when after long seconds they didn't return to the surface. Then, with a jerk, the deck lurched to a halt. People looked

over the edge into the water, then at each other, working to make a connection their minds refused, until a split-second later the boy's head and shoulders and torso erupted from the water, his face a personification of terror for an instant encased in glass, choking and gagging on a howl of panic that seemed to have begun miles and miles below the surface to emerge finally, physically, in the form of himself. Then he flipped sideways and disappeared.

The two nearest lifeguards leapt from their towers and plowed to the spot before he re-surfaced, but they, like him, possessed no training, no skill, no power of reversal such as was called for here, and it was twenty stopped minutes before someone found a knife to cut the girl's hair free of the turning mechanism, a part of which, it turned out, whether by an error in design or in maintenance, had been left exposed. No one had had the sense in the interim to clear the pool, and at least a hundred people witnessed her removal. At first, they laid her on the concrete deck, her body balanced on a stockaded crescent of onlookers' shadows, her face pale as the moon in an afternoon sky. Blood, I remember, trickled from her scalp.

Inspite of my breeding not to feel sorry at what the Lord in His wisdom will allow, I did feel pity for the girl. If not at first, amid the commotion attending her removal from the water, then in the silence afterward, when no one seemed to know what to do next, and when someone behind me whispered to another that it was a freak thing, an accident, which I recalled our neighbor Mrs. Thompson saying when she told me my parents had been in an accident on the freeway. But what I felt for the boy was of another order altogether.

He sat nearby, but apart from the press, surrounded by a consoling friend or two and a thin, discomfitted policeman, who held a notebook in his hand but couldn't seem to think of the questions he needed to ask. The boy, with his drying hair hanging down in his face, hugged his knees and kept making sounds like an animal might if it were trying to sing. And, as seems to be the way of this world, though I suspect I'll never understand why, the moment when I most felt as if the boy's burden were mine, that he and I were, in some stunning confusion of physical boundary, one, was the moment when one of his friends stepped forward and, picking me out from among all the others, said, 'What are you staring at?'

Pity shriveled to shame and I could but turn and take it home.

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From just beyond the horizon, dawn bowled perfectly silent pearls into each of the sisters' bedrooms, filling their centers with the impossible suggestion of morning but leaving their corners in darkness. And the Wood sisters, those latter-day daughters of Lazarus, opened their stone-lidded eyes from the eclipse of sleep, meek unto another resurrection.

Let them, dolled like idols in silk wrappers they have never seen, seat themselves in the kitchen to breakfast on oranges and macaroons, and let their steaming coffee scribble curious white feathers in the

air above their cups. And let them consider, let them suspect and begin to understand, that a challenge to faith will make this no ordinary day.

For tumbling into the kitchen from the hall, where lies the daily reminder of Christ's blood sacrifice, are three smiling white rabbits, who push and pull at a little red wagon loaded with baskets full of sunshine. An overabundance of light slops onto the carpet, and then the linoleum, and cannot be picked up. Violet sees them first, sees that they are not actual rabbits, since they walk upright and wear little green trousers with suspenders fastened by big yellow buttons. Their mouths move as if in speech and laughter, and they act as if they have never pushed a wagon in their lives, falling all over one another as they cheerfully work at cross-purposes.

Vera notices Violet noticing, and turns. Vena, as intent on her meditations as a judge hearing some awful testimony, notices the rabbits only when their wagon bumps her chair. She narrows flinty eyes when a plop of sunshine spills on her shoe and adheres.

Let her will them back to their creator, it hardly matters, for I am a god, a god precipitating sudden night in their big flask of new day.

Cinders and ash blacken the bending sky, and the hot breath of ovens lifts off the roof like the lid to a box and blasts the trees outside into fat mushrooms of inward-curling bile-colored smoke. Dishes in the cupboard rattle and spill crashing to the floor, furniture tips, falls, and disappears. Then the whole house shudders an apocalyptic fit of screeching nails and splintering wood, for I am a god, and I walk through walls.

The fearful moon, luminous fugitive from heaven's destruction, peeps down pale through black cloud, trembles, ruptures, and falls in mountainous chunks the size of neighborhoods. For this is nothing less than the end of the world, replete with shouting trumps of tumult and despair, wrung from the clarion air.

But let the three sisters not go without solace, let them not be cut from grace. I give them, standing on the smoking ruins, the smiling toiling rabbits, who move their mouths as if in speech and laughter and who push their little wagon full of light, which, in the dark, lights their faces weirdly from beneath. And I give them this question as they pick their silent way through the sudden valley of the shadow of death. Must we now cease to believe?

Yes, they think. No. For even in death, fair god that I am, I allow them faith in a future day.

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Imagine a character in an allegory who finds himself host to the disturbing premonition that somewhere out there a world exists quite apart from his own, a parallel world where the hills and the water towers are just hills and water towers, a world where subdivisions built on landfill are nothing more than that, and walking on a red carpet signifies not Christ, not redemption made possible by a King who stooped his anointed head as low as death, but just floor covering, or

bad taste, or even signifies nothing if that is what he wants. How could such a character not succumb to the idea that his life might be less a burden of meaning than all his previous experience tells him it is? And how could such a character, having thought the unthinkable, not begin to wonder further if he might perhaps be able to know the joy of surcease?

I don't know what my father thought to accomplish or discover when he walked away from his family in Tahlequah on the afternoon of his eighteenth birthday, or if he had any thoughts at all beyond just getting away, since I myself had none, or none other than that question of whether I would be able to succeed at escape when, following his lead, I did the same. Not that I no longer believed, for I would not have been surprised had God, in His wisdom, struck me down. Aunt Vena had known for years that her brother had, if in God's good time, himself been dispatched in retribution by the very Hand he had betrayed, because the very elect could not, as she had once thought, renounce their birthright as Esau had done. 'Look to the fields,' she used to say. 'If you are created as wheat, nothing you can say or do will make you as the lesser tares.' Not that she consigned him to flames, however, since there would be greater and lesser positions in the many mansions of the Lord, and she saw herself and her sisters as spiritual chatelaines to my father's butler, they singing and he working all the endless day.

Through the filter of years, my then quest for some stronger because unsupervised experience looks to have been a noble experiment, but at the time there was nothing but misunderstood compulsion, guilt

springing from the practice of deceit, and a numb certitude that to have thought of running away made it concretely and already true. It only later became clear that my search was for an identity apart from what had been assigned to me, and by no lesser authority than divine revelation. Only later became clear that the human spirit withers without a little meaninglessness, a little chaos. But the moment itself, to which only recollection can return, and even then only when the walls fall away and memory becomes an eagle in the way of eagles, that particular moment of quitting the house and pulling shut the door for the last time felt like nothing but a lump of gauze in my head and heart, for to live so long in a dream of future hopes and present connections, in a dream of angels singing all day while some souls sit and other souls work, and the souls of your neighbors perish in lakes of fire, is to make the possibility of life apart from God seem itself a peculiar and improbable dream.

It had taken years of stealth and curiosity to discover the final secret, to suspect the connection between two particular drawers in our house, the one downstairs and the other up, the one locked and the other containing a small brass key lanced on a safety pin, the one in my grandfather's desk and the other in Vena's dresser. And it had taken weeks more, waiting for one of those rare moments when all three of my aunts would be out of the house, which only happened when Violet's need for a doctor's prescription outweighed her need for sanctuary, and that on a shopping day. But when finally I sat in my grandfather's chair, when finally I turned Vena's key in my grandfather's lock and pulled open the deep oak drawer, I understood

for perhaps the first time what receiving a revelation must have been like for Vena. For I found not only the fabled cufflinks box, opened and empty as it perhaps had been for nearly thirty years while Vera told and retold its story over coffee in the kitchen, but found beside it an envelope, fingered and yellowed and postmarked Los Angeles, and inside that, wrapped in a blank sheet of paper, the four one hundred dollar bills my father had sent to replace the ones he had taken, not to atone for his theft, if that was what it was, but to sever the last tie binding him to his past.

And as I sat there motionless, for a long moment too startled even to draw breath, holding the envelope as my grandfather had obviously and often done if with thoughts planes away from my own, it struck me that a prisoner who fails to seize his opportunity is a prisoner who fails to escape. The decision exploded in my head as if it had been there, a bomb, all along. I took the money, restored the key to its hiding place, and left.

It would not do to tarry, as Lot and the Israelites in Egypt had not, for I feared the spectral eye of my Aunt Vena, who could peer in at a heart whenever she chose to see what vice and weakness might be festering there. I wanted to leave without a word, exactly as my father had, but feared Vena for that, too, feared what she might do if she became immediately alarmed, for I conceived this as a contest in which my adversary, who after all had God on her side, might seat herself for a moment in her reading chair and cast about for the particular Scripture prophesying my betrayal and my plan and then telephone the police with the news. So I penned a note, that I had

gone swimming at Wedgewood and would be back before supper, a note just breezy enough to put her out and to set her deciding what my punishment should be since ideas not her own smelled of antinomianism.

On the off chance that she might check, I stuffed my trunks and towel in my backpack, along with a change of clothes, and set off down 56th Street Terrace for what I hoped would be the last time, on my bicycle, as casually as if I were running an errand or indeed going to the pool for a swim.

I locked my bike in the rack at Wedgewood, and then instead of turning toward the turnstiles to the pool I walked across the street to the on-ramp of the expressway and hailed a taxi, because I didn't know where the bus depot was and because it seemed fit that I would ride away from this home the same way I had ridden away from my first.

I hadn't enough pocket money to pay the driver, who took a long time getting to the depot, and he refused to take a hundred dollar bill. He gave me a sly look and came inside while I bought a ticket on the next bus out and got change. He just stood there when I paid him, grinning, then said, 'A young kid like you, no luggage, a hundred dollar bill, I reckon there's somethin' not quite right here, if'n you'll pardon my noticing.' He scuffed one shoe with the other, like he was thinking this over, then added, looking at the pocket with my hand shoved in it, 'How much you got there, anyhow?'

Caught up, perhaps, in the drama of the moment, I thought, ridiculously, I will not let them take me alive, not when I am this near to getting away. Had the earth cracked open beneath my feet or lightning split the depot in two, I would have understood, would have

accepted defeat. But not this, not defeat at the hands of a humanity I had half expected to embrace out of sheer joy for my having cast my lot with them, and so I ran, not looking back, not thinking anything but how much distance I could make myself cover in one long stretched instant, which is what fear will do to time.

But I crept back, not knowing how else to get away, around back of the depot where the buses came and left and the people waited in patient bedraggled lines, and where the heavy diesel exhaust of a thousand departures smelled like palpable flight, expecting to see either the cab driver or a policeman, yet finding neither. Fear holding hands with relief for company, I took my place in line behind a man in a brown suit reading a newspaper, and by suppertime, when my aunts would be watching for me, I was in Dallas.

I bought a ticket to Los Angeles and by morning was in Amarillo. Then Albuquerque. Then Flagstaff. Three days and three nights as good as alone, which differed from all those blank preceding days and years alone only in the burgeoning but fragile sense, growing with the distance, that a fugitive must feel when he begins to let himself believe he has made good his escape.

In the end it is not arrival I come to when recollection dips a sovereign wing in the stirless air, not the finding a place to sleep, not the showering and shaving to make myself presentable for reporting to an Army recruiting office, where they told me I was two and a half months late registering for the draft even though I stood there volunteering for three years' active service, but a later moment, the morning of the day I reported for induction.

I had used up most of my money by then, a large portion of it going toward cab fare out to Glendale to see my old house. I wouldn't have thought it the same house if I hadn't remembered the address, perhaps because it had been repainted or perhaps because memory alters the fixedness of things while seeming not to. I had even braved a call on an older but no less stoical Mrs. Thompson, who assured me that yes, everything about the neighborhood was just the same, what a treat it was to see me, and would I excuse her because she was late for her Tuesday Afternoon Club bridge tournament. So all that remained, I thought, was a visit to the beach, where my parents had taken me as a child, and where I remembered often finding myself, at night, in earlier dreams. And that, as I say, was the morning of the day I reported for active service, service quite unlike anything my aunts associated with the word.

I sat on the sand where I had slept, shivering and eating breakfast, a couple of apples. The sun had yet to clear the rounded, lion-colored hills reclining up and down the coast, so the air and sand retained the night's damp chill. But light already deepened the sky with impossible blue, a sign that the day would be cloudless and hot.

A little way down the beach a lone fisherman stood up to his knees in the surf, casting and re-casting his line, and farther along, toward the cliffs at one side of the bay, a man on a tractor had begun to groom the sand with a sieve and looped chain harrow. The beach lay empty as a magician's hand except for me and these two.

And the feeling was one of loneliness, or rather, aloneness, for there lingered a pleasant, anticipatory sense of people soon arriving,

setting up their striped umbrellas and little canvas recliners, of enclaves formed by friends and acquaintances, of mothers handing out peanut butter and jelly sandwiches only to worry a half hour later whether it wasn't too soon for the children to be going in the water. A sense of swings and volleyball courts and people in them, playing with a kind of intensity across the hot sand, and of suntanned lifeguards, watching on their crisscrossed white towers and likely smelling of Coppertone, alert to the sight or sound of extremity among the anonymous throngs bobbing in the waves like corked bottles.

And a sense of, an image of, oleander and bottle-brush bushes, of tall Washington palms with their lion's-mane collars of dead brown fronds, all crowding the edge of the beach to languish like sun worshippers in the heat of another summer day. By which I mean that even the littlest things seemed worthy of notice and attention. Habit had not yet dulled perception, and best of all, there was no one to tell me what it meant, or rather, <u>that</u> it meant. To watch was enough. To see became to know.

The waves, slate-colored before the morning sun penetrated and turned them transparent, raced and swelled like saltwater mountains, buckling and breaking themselves in violent turn, one concussion after another, and then ended, surprisingly, gracefully, in a delicate, foam-laced fan of clear water arcing open across the sand, sweeping along little bits of broken mussel shell to make them twinkle as they tumbled, blue and white.

And it still seems as if there was a kind of knowing in that.

Looking out to sea that morning early, alone but for the fisherman

and the man on the tractor, I finished my apples and considered the world at my back, the world I had left a half-continent away. And as the sun climbed above the brown Laguna Hills, I saw first the cliffs embracing the bay turn ruddy gold, and then the waves, rising up one after another, go transparent green where they reached and caught the light. Then, as the light began to burnish the sand, I felt the morning anoint my head and my shoulders with that same oblique but warming light and thought not of the green reaching moments repeating before me but of the kingdom at my back, that world of daily static habitual expectation of apocalypse.

In the years following that morning, years in which I grew to the conviction, perhaps as my father had, that there wasn't a shibboleth I couldn't pronounce, I believed that the poor pilgrim progressed indeed across the bridging equations, pausing in his journey toward the real world only long enough to turn and burn them after he had. Only later, after failure upon failure to engage the world around me, did I realize that recollection will fly back when it will.

There is no escape from memory's book, but to know it is one thing, to accept it another. I invented this new if sentimental little book, perhaps as my grandfather invented his, as a way to bring forward into the present what the perverse heart would rather itself return to in recollection. It hasn't worked, I suppose, for I feel no nearer now than I did, this carrying something back from the past being one of those tricks the mind can do. But I am not sorry for the trying. No prisoner worthy of the name will fail to leap at the opportunity of escape.

CRITICAL AFTERWORD

American Fundamentalism and the Urban Wilderness

Whatever else a novelist may see in a given subject, literary potential -- sufficient breadth to allow for the development of artistic aims and ends -- must bulk large. It would seem reasonable to suppose that, beyond possibilities for caricature and ridicule, the narrowness of American religious fundamentalism would fail to supply room for such development in a contemporary setting: its marginal and obscure adherents are too extreme, too far away, and the tenets it holds dear sound either foreign or absurd, or both, to uninitiated ears. On the other hand, however, fundamentalism constitutes a part, if a small part, of both late-19th and early 20th-century American history and, consequently, a part of the American psyche. If fundamentalism may be characterized as deeply conservative, strongly 'anti-culture,' and highly suspicious of anything that smacks of the intellectual, one can nevertheless see in it a potential, both for commentary on the world (of which it believes it is not a part) and for exploring themes of alienation and identity.

Largely, fundamentalism is perceived in starkly negative terms, thanks in no small way to its defeats in the public arena. Americans may be fascinated by losers, but they seldom identify with them. But the historical development of fundamentalism as a movement, its vociferous anti-modernist stance necessitating self-marginalization and opposition to just about anything popular, tells something important about the nature of culture: it allows even the most sectarian of individuals and groups to believe they have escaped its flux when in fact they remain a part of it.

The plan here, then, is to look at the development of fundamentalism, both to provide a historical background and to suggest

how literary themes have been and continue to be relevant to it. The first part of the Afterword looks into this history in some detail, with an emphasis on how an apparently fixed theology has in fact evolved like any idea, and the second considers how the novel has integrated aspects of this American phenomenon into the realm of literature.

Doctrine Versus Culture: A Background to American Fundamentalism

H. L. Mencken, who in his long journalistic career d veloped "a friendly interest in quacks of all sorts" (Mencken [a], 279), found himself in his element in July, 1925 when the Baltimore Evening Sun assigned him to cover the Scopes Trial in Dayton, Tennessee. His quarry there was 'The Great Commoner' William Jennings Bryan, former Secretary of State to Woodrow Wilson and three-time contender for the Democratic presidential nomination. Bryan, who enjoyed a national reputation as a moral reformer and as an outspoken critic of the Darwinian heresy, had offered his services to assist in the prosecution against John Scopes, a high school biology teacher charged with violating the State ordinance against teaching evolution in the public schools. Anxious to capitalize on Bryan's prestige, the prosecution made him their honorary head counsel. Heading the defense, and provided courtesy of the American Civil Liberties Union, was Clarence Darrow, who also enjoyed a wide reputation, but as a trial lawyer and, more significantly, as a self-avowed agnostic. Thanks in large part to Mencken's reporting, the debacle that followed not only humiliated Bryan in the eyes of the nation

(he died a week after the trial ended) but altered dramatically and irreparably the reputation of American fundamentalism in the popular view.

That Bryan was neither a fundamentalist in the strict sense of the word nor a particularly representative spokesman for the movement hardly mattered. In fact, Thomas Scopes hardly mattered. The trial in Dayton was widely heralded rather as a contest between the old and the new, between conservative and liberal ideologies. And as it turned out, fundamentalism as a movement wagered too much on what was to it the essentially peripheral cause of anti-evolution. In the public mind, Bryan's humiliation at the hands of Darrow proved to be fundamentalism's humiliation too, and that translated into a stunning devaluation of the conservatives' authority in the evangelical Protestant denominations.

To understand how this conservative, once popular, and even in some circles influential evangelical Protestant movement managed in a stroke to relegate itself to the margins of American religious life, one must look to the intellectual and social background of this drama. For fundamentalists the issue hinged on the nature of truth, which, for respectable if increasingly unfashionable intellectual reasons, they held must be unchanging to hold any meaning at all. Modernist (and usually liberal) critics of fundamentalism considered this view stubborn and irrational, arguing rather that the perception of truth inevitably must be shaped by prevailing cultural circumstances.

On a wider front, and more significantly in the long run, the proceedings at Dayton captured public attention because they were symbolic of a contemporary collision of two worlds, the rural and urban

(Commager, 182; Leuchtenburg, 223). "In the popular imagination," writes George Marsden,

> there were on the one side the small town, the backwoods, half-educated yokels, obscurantism, crackpot hawkers of religion, fundamentalism, the South, and the personification of the agrarian myth himself, William Jennings Bryan. Opposed to these were the city, the clique of New York-Chicago lawyers, intellectuals, journalists, wits, sophisticates, modernists, and the urbane agnostic Clarence Darrow. (28)

Millions of Americans had beat an escape from the former to the latter, and although contemporary literature reflected this movement -- Dreiser's Sister Carrie and Lewis's Main Street to name two novels -- Dayton surpassed all fiction in dramatizing the symbolic last stand of rural America against the twentieth century.

The intellectual and theological underpinnings of the fundamentalists' platform of fixed truth, supernaturalism, and Scriptural inerrancy were established well before 1925. Indeed, it was not until after World War I that the term 'fundamentalist' was even applied to these theologically conservative and often well-educated evangelical Christians. Their doctrine developed throughout the nineteenth century, and until after the Civil War was for the most part indistinguishable from mainstream American evangelical Protestantism.

Consensus, however, became harder and harder to find in evangelical denominations in the late 1800s with the introduction in America of dispensational premillennialism, an influential doctrine whose principal and ultimately self-defeating feature was its demand for a basic pessimism concerning human civilization. Most commentators treating this

doctrine agree that it would be difficult to overstate the shaping effect dispensational premillennialism had on the fundamentalists' world view. Until this time the more prevalent, longstanding, and optimistic view of civilization, called postmillennialism, held the theological field virtually without contest. Since the other, perhaps more recognizable features of fundamentalism -- the insistence on Biblical inerrancy to name one -- tend to be subordinate to premillennialist doctrine, what follows will focus on the growing chasm between it and postmillennialism.

Postmillennialism was an early seventeenth-century import from England based on the thousand year imprisonment of Satan predicted in Chapter 20 of Revelation. Adherents, among whom were the Puritans, considered that their present era was a part of this millennium and that events were thus leading to the golden age of Christ's return in glory, when history would be brought to an end (hence, postmillennialism). The Puritans, particularly, found postmillennialism congenial to their Calvinist theology, since the arrival of the golden age, though inevitable, could be retarded by wrong thinking and living, and thus provided support for authoritarian religious and political institutions.

A notable early advocate of postmillennialism in American was Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). He brought to the highly intellectual theology and stern piety of the Puritans a new style of emotional intensity that made him a leading figure in 'The Great Awakening.' But toward the end of his public career this intensity took the form of increasingly fire-and-brimstone pronouncements, which eventually included naming backsliders from the pulpit. In terms of postmillennial theology, these condemnations over-emphasized the pessimistic at the expense of the

optimistic, and eventually led to his dismissal from his Northampton, Massachusetts church. (Even here one sees that doctrine is most often subordinated to culture and popular opinion, since Edwards was silenced by the democratic vote of his congregation, but more on that in its place.)

Premillenialism, in its early nineteenth-century beginnings, could barely be distinguished from postmillennialism, and is arguably the more Calvinistic of the two (Marsden, 46). Both doctrines emphasized piety and correct belief and both viewed history as the continuing struggle between the cosmic forces of good and evil. But premillennialism, especially in its late nineteenth century formulations, tended increasingly to discount human ability in favor of divine sovereignty, and to apply more doctrinal rigor to the interpretation of Scriptural prophecy. This rigor was supplied by dispensationalism, a scientific (many said scientistic) system for interpreting the Bible as a divinely inspired guide not only to history but to the future.

Briefly, dispensationalism divides the Bible into seven eras, or dispensations. According to C. I. Scofield, who systematized and then institutionalized dispensationalism in America with his 1909 Reference Bible, "a dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God" (Scofield, 5, n.4), and each ends by necessity in human failure and catastrophic divine retribution. The expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden ended the dispensation of Innocence, the Flood ended the dispensation of Conscience, the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel ended the dispensation of Human Government, and so on. But the key

to understanding the whole dispensational system, and to understanding its appeal to premillennialists in the late nineteenth century, turns in the interpretive lock of the prophetic ninth chapter of Daniel.

In verses 24 through 27, Daniel is given to understand the precise schedule of, among other things, the destruction of Jerusalem and the coming of the Messiah, with a total elapsed time of seventy weeks. The ingenious dispensationalist interpretation relies on two strategic points. First, these weeks are not weeks but, "more accurately, sevens of years; seventy weeks of seven years each." Second, there is an "indeterminate period" between the first 69 weeks and the last week. "When the Church-age will end, and the seventieth week begin, is nowhere revealed. [But] its duration can be but seven years [because] to make it more violates the principle of interpretation already confirmed by fulfillment" (Scofield, 914, n.1). Thus, in the last seven years prior to Christ's return (Daniel was not made privy to New Testament events) there remained a host of Biblical prophesies to be watched for and fulfilled, among them the return of the Jews in unbelief to Palestine, the appearance of the Anti-Christ, an ecclesiastical tyrant supported by the apostate churches, and the emergence of the Beast, a political leader who would reunite the fragmented Roman Empire.

All of this seems less bizarre, perhaps, in the context of nineteenth-century thought. Not to make too fine a point of the parallels, Darwin, too, modeled natural selection on a principal of development through conflict, and Marx similarly divided history into distinct periods, each with a dominating principle or characteristic and each ending in failure and conflict until a final age of peace arrived.

Contemporary views of geology came even closer to dispensationalism with the discovery of the fossil record, which offered indisputable evidence that the history of the world had proceeded from epoch to epoch, catastrophe to catastrophe. And finally, it is worth noting that the dispensationalist preoccupation with study and interpretation of history through scientific division and classification has hardly been discredited today. On the importance of the history of science as a discipline, Stephen Jay Gould, in his Wonderful Life (1989), writes that the "taxonomic activity" of the "historical scientist focuses on detailed particulars...because their coordination and comparison permits us, by consilience of induction, to explain the past" (Gould, 281).

Gould would undoubtedly howl at this appropriation, but dispensational premillennialists believed they were behaving precisely like such "historical scientists" by dividing and classifying increasingly minute scriptural details to find consilience through induction between the Bible and history (which of course, for them, included the future). The emphasis on induction is necessary because dispensational premillennialists would use it as a bulwark toward the turn of the century to hold back the new and to them dangerous inclination of science to hypothesize rather than to observe, classify, and infer general laws. Evolution was bad enough, of course, since it did quite well entirely without God, but much of the fundamentalists' outrage was intellectual, springing from Darwin's denial of Baconian induction in favor of mere hypothesis. And if that was science, went the early view, then it was incompatible with Christianity (Claudill, 114).

Dispensational premillennialism thus offered an attractive and

influential alternative to postmillennialism, particularly in the two decades after the Civil War. Earlier in the century, there had seemed cause for optimism. Revivals and missions were often successful beyond expectations, technology seemed to promise civilization undreamed-of advancements, and resolution of the slavery question seemed to indicate the nearness of an end to oppression and war. But after the Civil War many found the looked-for golden age rather to be gilded, and underneath that bright surface lay materialism, corruption, and capitalistic excess. Disillusionment as to the actual progress of the kingdom left many Protestant evangelicals uncertain about their doctrine. That dispensationalism explained this problem within a more or less orthodox framework, appealed to those interested in the intellectual side of evangelical Protestantism; civilization must deteriorate, in accordance with Scripture, until the last "week" commenced. Additionally, dispensationalism attracted Calvinist-inspired denominations particularly, because it made clear that the true church was not an institution but a coalition made up of individual true (and undoubtedly American) believers, a notion that reaches back to the founding of the Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth Plantation Colonies by the Puritans. Every group could see itself as the wheat growing among the tares.

But while some turned to dispensational premillennialism for an explanation of troubling times, others in the postmillennial camp revised their expectations. They began gradually to abandon dramatically supernatural aspects of their doctrine, particularly on the point of momentary divine intervention, in favor of the suspicion that the kingdom was not future and otherworldly but here and now, not external but an

internal and ethical ideal. The significance of this doctrinal revision is twofold: first, it signals the emergence of liberal modernism within the evangelical denominations of America, a retreat from orthodoxy that would soon greatly enhance the position of conservatives; second, it is a clear instance, seemingly unrecognized at the time, of culture shaping Christianity rather than the other way around (Marsden, 50).

At the close of the century a liberal or a conservative might be either a postmillennialist or a dispensational premillennialist. Within the seminaries where such issues were most debated, these doctrinal categories took less precedence than questions concerning growing social ills (secularization of American life, especially in the schools, corruption, Sabbath-breaking, alcohol, and other vices). But it would not be long before the essentially liberal and positive formulation of postmillennialism, and the essentially conservative and negative formulation of premillennialism, precluded the crossing of doctrinal lines. It should be noted, however, that all of these doctrinal disputes took place within the individual denominations: Presbyterian, Baptist, Reformed Episcopal, Methodist. Separatism had not yet become an issue, though it soon would.

It was around this time, in 1910, that the Presbyterian General Assembly, dominated by conservatives at the Princeton Theological Seminary, passed the resolution that would give fundamentalism its name. The five-point "Fundamentals," which were reaffirmed in 1916 and again in 1920, were 1) the inerrancy of Scripture, (2) the Virgin Birth of Christ, (3) his substitutionary atonement, (4) his bodily resurrection, and (5) the authenticity of miracles (Sandeen, 202-204; Dollar, 175). For the

purposes of the present discussion, it is enough to note that the two principal issues covered here are the infallibility of the Bible and reaffirmation of the supernatural, both of which were and would increasingly become the issues separating orthodoxy from the new modernism. Inerrancy can be seen as a necessary claim for those advocating a dispensationalist view of the Bible as a compendium of facts to be scientifically studied and classified. For the conservatives, liberal laxity on this head signaled a disturbing willingness to devalue Biblical authority (Carpenter [b], iii).

A number of issues being debated concurrently, and which can only be summarized here, helped fracture the unity of evangelical denominations, thus allowing conservatives an organizational edge. First, there was the deepening interest in Holiness teachings from England, which emphasized the individual and experiential relationship of the believer to the Holy Ghost. (Pentecostalism was a more extreme version, with internal disputes of its own.) Second, the antipathy of Southerners, particularly in the Baptist and Presbyterian denominations, to all things originating in the North continued to split churches geographically. And third, the proliferation of Bible Colleges and Institutes, which were often founded by popular revivalist preachers whose egos were large and whose theology was vague.

Midwestern evangelist Billy Sunday, a nominal Presbyterian who was the first to incorporate vaudevillian techniques into his preaching, provides a conspicuous example of the third. To the consternation of Presbyterian intellectuals, particularly at the Princeton Theological Seminary, much of Sunday's fame centered on pronouncements such as, "I

don't know any more about theology than a jack-rabbit knows about ping-pong, but I'm on my way to glory" (McLoughlin [b], 123). Embarrassing as such statements were to the Presbyterian establishment, it was hard to argue with Sunday's success. By 1913 he could claim more conversions than the great Dwight L. Moody himself (Marsden, 131). Ten years and a World War later, however, with the conservatives (and thus the fundamentalists) more or less in control, the doctrinal costs of such departures from orthodoxy would be considered too high. Official censures became widespread and, after the public spectacle at Dayton, the weariness of congregations over such technical disputes probably had much to do with their readiness to restructure the hierarchies of fundamentalist-dominated churches.

But if the field of controversy was held by the conservatives, who by the 1920s were almost uniformly dispensational premillennialists, the liberals were organizing an offensive that would prepare the way for their defeat. World War I aided the liberal postmillennial cause, since it could construe the conflict as evidence of improvement: the war to end all wars would make democracy safe and usher in the kingdom. Premillennialists, by definition, placed no such faith in civilization, a position that left them open to the charge that they were unpatriotic. Indeed, as early as 1917 the University of Chicago Divinity School attacked dispensational premillennialists (to wit, their cross-town rivals at the Moody Bible Institute), with allegations that their doctrine bred a lack of patriotism and hence was a threat to the national security (Marsden, 146; Carpenter [b], ii). This was an early and extreme case, however it opened the door for an attack on what was seen

as a "long-standing paradox" of the premillennialist position: "as premillennialists, they had to say that there was no hope for culture, but at the same time they were traditional American evangelicals who urged a return to Christian principles as the only cultural hope" (Marsden, 149). Premillennialists retorted that they were simply holding the fort, but the apparent contradiction, and the vigor with which the liberals prosecuted their point, tended to polarize the dispute, thus undermining some conservative support. That the conservatives rallied together in common defense to the degree that they did, leads some to suggest that this issue more than any other provided the "transition from conservatism to fundamentalism;" conversely, the liberal offensive led that camp sooner rather than later to a modernist formulation of Christianity as "more ethical than metaphysical" (Carpenter [b], iv, viii).

Three contemporary developments worked in the premillennialists' favor. The first was British General Allenby's capture of Jerusalem in 1918, which was widely seen by students of prophecy to confirm dispensational teachings, clearing the way for the predicted return of the Jews to Palestine. The second, similarly based on prophecy, was the conservatives' more or less successful identification of the fledgling Interchurch World Movement not only with the perniciously modernist Social Gospel but with Scriptural predictions of a worldwide apostate church in the end-time. And the third was a new correlation drawn by many evangelists between Darwinian evolution and German 'might is right' superman philosophy (Dollar, 126; Marsden, 149; McLoughlin [a], 268), which helped draw public support to the societal, though not theological, concerns of the fundamentalists.

By the time Thomas Scopes was arraigned in 1925, anti-Darwinism was irretrievably identified in the public mind with fundamentalism. That evolution had been a peripheral and largely concessionary cause mattered little when public support evaporated after the Dayton debacle; fundamentalists were left not only with fewer numbers but with an eroded doctrinal base that would make it impossible for them to regain denominational control. In rapid succession, fundamentalists found themselves

> eased out of the colleges and [they] lost control of most theological schools; those which they retained, or founded, lacked prestige and good students. Heresy trials, painfully frequent even in the nineties and the early years of the century, were abandoned, and heretics went their way unmolested if not unrebuked (Commager, 180).

The fundamentalist heyday was over.

With this broad sketch of the backgrounds of fundamentalism, the events of the famous "Monkey Trial" should acquire more than just a sensationalist cachet. They should reflect the shaping importance on fundamentalism of the public mood, a cultural influence anathema to dispensational premillennialist doctrine, and they should provide an understanding of how those stalwart fundamentalists who would not cut their consciences or their theology to suit the fashions of the day could continue to believe that in defeat they were in fact vindicated.

A Presbyterian, Bryan's doctrinal position lay somewhere between Princeton Theological Seminary's and Billy Sunday's. He averred that he really lacked time to study, and he excelled at and preferred oratory to

theological debate. More reformer than preacher, his standard answer to exegetical questions concerning Scripture was that "if we will try to live up to that which we can understand, we will be kept so busy doing good that we will not have time to worry about the things that we do not understand" (quoted in Marsden, 134). Such a response is characteristic of Bryan, since it implies first that one need not be too concerned with doctrinal niceties such as were currently being argued by his Presbyterian brothers at Princeton -- always a relief to the average American (Commager, 161-3) -- and second that Christianity shaped civilization, not the other way around. By 1925, many of the more liberal Presbyterians were more clear than Bryan was that this was so, yet he appealed to them because his basic optimism about transforming culture offered a softer, less strident position than the conservatives held. Further, his popularity and prestige could not be denied, and in both liberal and conservative camps his presence at Dayton was almost unanimously viewed as a guarantee of victory.

By the time Bryan took the stand as a material witness -- one of many irregularities, considering his role as chief counsel for the prosecution -- the issue of whether or not John Scopes had taught evolution in his classroom had been left behind. Darrow had managed to make it appear as if fundamentalism itself was on trial, and Bryan rose to meet the challenge. Unfortunately for him, and surpassing all Darrow's expectations on this head, it turned out that Bryan could not answer straightforwardly the typical questions that a literal reading of the Bible raises. He could not say how Eve was created from Adam's rib, where, if Adam and Eve were the first humans, Cain had found a wife

unless he married his sister. He had never contemplated the physical consequences if the world had indeed stopped revolving for Joshua, he accepted Bishop Ussher's calculation that the world was approximately four thousand years old, and he admitted that he had never found the time to study comparative religion or critical accounts of the origin of Scripture, because the Bible itself was authority enough (de Camp, 369 passim).

A characteristic exhange followed when Darrow pressed him concerning the date fixed for the Flood. Bryan did not know the method employed to calculate the date, even though he said he accepted that it occurred in 2349 B.C., so Darrow asked what he thought that method might be. "I do not think about things I don't think about," Bryan replied. "Do you think about things you do think about?" Bryan answered, "Well, sometimes" (de Camp, 390). The judge and the courtroom appreciated this little joke, as intended, but Bryan's rhetorical retreats cost him. He proved unable to give the agnostic Darrow the dressing down fundamentalists knew he deserved, resorting more often than many thought mete to speechless outrage, evasion, and even buffoonery.

By the end of the trial, nothing of theological import had been conceded or won by either side. But the effect of this confrontation on the public perception of fundamentalists, considering that Bryan was supposed to be one of their greatest spokesmen, brought irreparable damage to the movement. Essentially, Darrow used little more than ridicule, but it proved to be more than enough. Bryan not only disappointed his supporters in the courtroom, he cost fundamentalism whatever popular support it had enjoyed in the post-War years.

H. L. Mencken's gleefully derisive accounts from Dayton no doubt assisted Darrow on this front, particularly in his descriptions of the local citizenry. Of a "young country girl...coming into town for her semi-annual bottle of Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound," he reported that "Coca-Cola...was prohibited by the country lady's pastor, as a levantine and Hell-sent narcotic. He also prohibited coffee and tea -- and pies! He had his doubts about white bread and boughten meat" (Mencken [b], 155). After a visit to see some "Alpine Christians" in the nearby Tennessee hills, Mencken described for his readers a typical specimen: "The fat harridan in gingham sweated like a longshoreman... She fanned herself with her skirt. A powerful old gal she was, plainly equal in her day to a bout with obstetrics and a week's washing on the same morning" (Mencken [b], 155, 160).

Such characterizations are not without precedent. In her The Domestic Manners of the Americans (1832), Frances Trollope regaled her English readers with droll descriptions of revivals and camp meetings, whose bizarre and enervating proceedings must necessarily, for the unaccustomed witness, be followed by an abundance of strong tea. Significantly, however, the catholicity of Mrs. Trollope's contempt embraced city as well as country dwellers. The highlight of a typical Philadelphia housewife's day, she reported, was the arrival of her husband home for dinner. "He comes, shakes hands with her, spits, and dines. The conversation is not much, and ten minutes suffice for the dinner; fruit and toddy, the newspaper and the work-bag succeed" (241). Of her departure from Cincinnati, she says, "The only regret was, that we had ever entered it; for we had wasted health, time, and money there"

(150). From a European perspective, all Americans were uncouth country bumpkins. By 1925, this same contempt could be directed by Americans themselves toward their rural cousins.

In a mock eulogy to Bryan, who died a week after the trial, Mencken further maligned fundamentalism as a popular cause by observing that the "Great Commoner" loved even "the gaping primates of the upland valleys," delighting in "the greasy victuals of the farmhouse kitchen, country smells," and "the tune of cocks crowing on the dunghill." More, Mencken was clear as many were not about just how many fundamentalists there were in the rural backwaters. "Heave an egg out a Pullman window, and you will hit a Fundamentalist almost anywhere in the United States today...They are everywhere where learning is too heavy a burden for mortal minds to carry, even the vague, pathetic learning on tap in the little red schoolhouses" (Mencken [b], 161, 167).

It would be hard to overstate the impact of Mencken's characterization of fundamentalists on American evangelical religion. Although the various denominations were almost without exception dominated by educated men (individual evangelists' empires and various Bible institutes excepted), a radical softening of doctrine was required to minimize the subsequent stampede of congregations away from the churches. Most Americans did not want to be seen as gullible country bumpkins, regardless of their beliefs. Indeed, the conception of fundamentalists as backward and invariably poor rural yokels (who could see no contradiction in denouncing vice even as they bottled moonshine for the Sunday barn dance) was virtually branded into the popular imagination, and the image remains there today. From the Scopes trial

on, "American historians have tended to neglect the fundamentalist constituency or to see it as vestigial" (FitzGerald [b], 130), since it became virtually invisible after the retreat from the larger evangelical denominations into much smaller sectarian worship and Bible-study groups.

Reporting on the characteristics of the small sects, Elmer T. Clark writes that "premillenarianism is essentially a defense mechanism of the disinherited" (218). Besides being "refuges for the poor," separatist sects such as fundamentalism became in the 1930s and 40s were "refuges for the emotionally starved" and for those "craving" a certainty that the Bible authoritatively supplied (Clark, 220-2).

Although fundamentalism today has been hybridized to the point of doctrinal incomprehensibility, it is clear that, since Clark, these demographics have changed dramatically (if, indeed, they were correct in the first place). First, and thanks largely to the advent of television, fundamentalism became a much more visible phenomenon in the 1950s. Through this medium, Billy Graham first televised revival crusades to a national audience. And although Graham eventually abandoned the more dour aspects of his fundamentalist message in order to attract and win greater numbers of souls to Christ, he was the first to realize that Americans were willing not only to listen to a fundamentalist message, they were willing to pay for it.

The poor widow being rooked by evangelistic swindlers into emptying her savings from the proverbial cookie jar remains, of course, a popular image. But in the 1980s, when national attention was drawn to the financial and sexual scandals involving Jim Bakker, a popular, nominally Pentecostal evangelist with his own studio and distribution network, the

staggering amounts of money involved precluded such a characterization of contributors. As FitzGerals notes, "How a minority of poor rural folk managed to contribute such huge sums to the telepreachers -- the total had risen to a billion five hundred million dollars by 1986 -- was a question that most theorists never bothered to address." At his trial, where Bakker was arraigned for (among other crimes) fraudulently selling "partnerships" in his Heritage, U.S.A. theme park, it was clear enough that "well over a hundred thousand of his supporters were able to contribute a thousand dollars apiece in a lump sum" (FitzGerald [a], 48). That the highly conservative religion of rural America, particularly with its emphasis on the end-time and the supernatural, had again found an audience that must surely include a great many urban Americans, came as something of a shock to many. But even as recently as 1982, a New York Times poll indicated that only nine percent of respondents "favored an evolutionary process in which God played no part," and that a striking forty-four percent believed that "God created man pretty much in his present form, at one time, within the last 10,000 years" (Caudill, 114).

The motivating force behind renewed interest in fundamentalism may well have to do with the ambivalence Americans have long felt for urban life. In a study of the city as it is perceived by intellectuals, Morton and Lucia White aver that, because we lack a "persistent or pervasive tradition of romantic attachment to the city in our literature or in our philosophy," the American city has inspired "fear" more than "enthusiasm" (White, 13-14). Whatever other factors may be at play in a resurgence of interest in fundamentalist thinking -- and undoubtedly they are many -- the increasingly middle-class constituents of televangelical audiences

would seem to support the idea that the "howling wilderness" of the Puritans, and the bleak dispensational premillennialists' view of civilization, continue to live in the American imagination as a metaphorical description and condemnation of modern life. Doctrinally, of course, the evangelists who attract such support are far from fundamentalism in the strictest sense, particularly with their emphasis on God's desire for them to be prosperous at the expense of God's desire for them to live apart from society. But in hewing to the basic fundamentalist doctrines of supernaturalism (healings, answered prayers, etc.), Biblical inerrancy, and profound pessimism concerning the future prospects of civilization, evangelists strike an old chord that resonates still in the popular mind. Against the flux of modern life, here are apparently fixed principles, here a doctrine -- such as it is -- explaining that the worse things get the nearer we are to rapture. But here, too, is a doctrine whose eternal verities have evolved and adapted to the times.

Culture Versus Identity: The 'Religionist' in Literature

Few American novels explore the tensions between society and sectarian religious impulses with much sympathy, perhaps because the real-life proliferation of the grotesque characters associated with fundamentalism, so accessible in the age of televangelism, seems to transcend the necessity for, indeed the possibility of, fictional re-presentation.

When characters with a fundamentalist bent do appear in fiction, they generally provide little more than background color, something to be observed but from a distance. The early reportage of Mrs. Trollope, followed later by Mencken, appears to have set the fictional agenda in this regard by offering voyeuristic descriptions of camp meetings, using language that keeps the fervid ruckus at a great enough distance to allow plenty of room for ridicule. When this is not the case, when the narrative draws closer to fundamentalist characters, it usually is to make ironic dupes of them.

In Some Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs (1845), Johnson Jones Hooper sends the good captain, an Alabama confidence man whose motto is "It is a good thing to be shifty in a new country" (Hooper, 1480), to a camp meeting. Suggs there fakes a conversion before the credulous yokels of Sandy Creek in order to fleece them of their money, which they contribute so that he can "prepare himself for the ministry, which the preacher didn't doubt, would be in a very few weeks, as brother Suggs was 'a man of mighty good judgement, and of a great discorse'" (Hooper, 1488, emphasis as found). Mark Twain is famous for lampooning fondly held beliefs, religious or otherwise, from Huckleberry Finn's speculation concerning his guardian the Widow Douglas, who at suppertime would "grumble a little over the victuals, though there warn't really anything the matter with them" (Twain [a], 3), to Letters from the Earth, where a "scientist and theologian" speculates in good scholarly fashion that "Man has been here 32,000 years. That it took a hundred million years to prepare the world for him is proof that that is what it was done for. I suppose it is. I dunno" (Twain [b], 170). Not surprisingly and for

reasons suggested earlier, most religious characters in fiction are rural folk, who, if they are not dupes, are either backward or hypocritical or both, as Elmer Gantry and the principal characters in Flannery O'Connor's The Violent Bear It Away might suggest.

An exception to the above, of interest because it presents conservative fundamentalist characters in a more or less sympathetic light, and because it places them in an urban context where the forces of culture are brought to bear on those who would separate themselves from it, is Theodore Dreiser's An American Tragedy. He wrote this novel during the heyday of fundamentalism -- it was published the year after the Scopes trial -- though he avoids the presumably tedious exposition of fundamentalist doctrine. Clyde Griffiths, the young protagonist who, over the course of this long novel, rises from bitter poverty to social advancement and the electric chair, is the product of evangelical parents who run missions in various Midwestern cities. It would be difficult to call Clyde's parents fundamentalists in the strict sense, since Dreiser kept their theology vague -- presumably because he wanted to indict all "religionists": "people whose testimony to the word of the Lord is overt, perpetual, and boring" (Moers, 298). But while Asa and Elvira Griffiths's preaching seems to avoid denouncing sin and vice in favor of a more general Christian love, they do subscribe to fundamentalist tenets insofar as they are "opposed to the theater and motion pictures" (27) and are "innoculated with the virus of Evangelism and proselytizing" (16). And, on the whole, they embrace "self-abnegating and self-immolating religious theory" (20).

Dreiser, "who was nearly always to find his subjects in the new big

cities" (Matthiessen, 7), drew on several models for the Griffithses. In 1906, as a magazine editor in New York, he followed with interest the newspaper reports of a murder trial that would become, years later, the plot of An American Tragedy. Chester Gillette, a young and socially ambitious rake, was tried and found guilty of murdering Grace Brown, his pregnant girlfriend. Many, if not most, of the circumstances surrounding the Gillette case found their way into the novel, including Gillette's parents. Mr. Gillette had been described in the newspaper accounts as "fuzzy-minded" and Mrs. Gillette as "a rough bulwark of strength;" the family had been "footloose during Chester's boyhood," and, in addition to running a mission, they had been "followers for several years of the Reverend John Dowie, a faith healer" who lived near Chicago in a sectarian community established by himself (Pizer [a], 211; Warren, 271). It was not until Dreiser imported characteristics from his own parents, however, that the early draft portions of the novel's first section took final form.

Dreiser's father was a failed man much like Asa Griffiths. After a factory accident in rural Indiana, where the Dreiser's lived, he took refuge in a stern German Catholicism that for Theodore amounted to nothing more than a mask for his ineptitude in providing for his family. According to him, his children's sins included "dressing up, drinking, loafing, theater-going, fiction-reading, dating, [and] roller skating" (Moers, 297), to name a few. Dreiser's mother, born and raised a Protestant in the Anabaptist tradition, provided, like Elvira Griffiths in An American Tragedy, the stalwart affection and uncritical support her children missed in their father.

More important in the context of this essay, however, the novel's opening makes clear that the Griffiths are in minority opposition to the urban culture surrounding them. The "unimportant-looking" family group "seemed unconscious of anything save a set purpose to make its way between the contending lines of traffic and pedestrians which flowed by them" (7), and set up their portable organ at "an intersection this side of the second principal thoroughfare -- really just an alley between two tall structures" (7). They pass out ragged hymn books and sing of the love of Jesus, "between the towering walls of the adjacent buildings" (9). Where they excite any interest or sympathy at all, it is because of the "peculiarity" of their raising their voices "against the vast skepticism and apathy of life" (8). As Robert Penn Warren writes, "The image of the boy Clyde looking up at the 'tall walls' of the world is the key image of the novel. And of Dreiser's life" (Warren, 278).

Mrs. Griffiths is of particular interest here. While her husband is dismissed (in typical Dreiserian prose) as being of "impractical and materially inefficient texture," she stands out "as having that force and determination which, however blind or erroneous, makes for self-preservation, if not success in life" (8). Indeed, "if you had watched her," Dreiser interjects, "you would have said: 'Well, here is one who, whatever her defects, probably does what she believes as nearly as possible'" (8-9).

But this air of conviction-put-to-practice results in a self-marginalization that puts their son Clyde in the exact position they had meant to avoid: an outsider, he begins to crave the material benefits of an urban society he is rather meant by training to renounce. As

Dreiser puts it, "life interested him" in a way that his deprived circumstances did not; "his father and mother were constantly proclaiming the love and mercy and care of God for him and for all, [but] plainly there was something wrong somewhere" (9). Like so many of Dreiser's characters, Clyde must of necessity abandon his essentially conservative values -- must, that is, if he is to discover as he matures a valid sense of identity -- because the urban culture surrounding him renders those values outmoded and hence ridiculous. But the problem for Clyde, and Dreiser believed it was a problem for many of those who moved from the country to the cities, is that, as Grebstein notes, "he belongs neither to the old theistic world, with its assurance of certain certainties, however harsh, nor to the new existential one" (Grebstein, 317). The result is alienation and loss of identity.

In Clyde's case, this drift begins when the materialistic splendors surrounding him awaken in his already susceptible nature an amorphous, powerful desire to partake and to belong. And if this is the lure of 'the world,' it is personified by the city. Dreiser is superb here, because he shows not merely the encroachment of culture on a family supposedly outside of it; he shows its almost mystical transforming power as it operates on the individual. And in Clyde's case, he shows that this force alienates at the same time as it appeals.

The alienation experienced by those seeking a new identity, particularly in the early part of the century when unprecedented numbers moved to the great cities, is an enduring theme of 20th-century American literature. Despite his faults as a stylist, Dreiser's genius inheres in his ability to examine what is most pitiable about human experience

without giving in to a denial of its worth. As Irving Howe observes, he is "marvellous in his conviction that something sacred resides even in the transience of our days," even in "the grimmest of lives" (Howe, 827).

Young Clyde, given the inadequacy of his circumstances and "still very dubious as to how one went about getting anything in life," becomes "driven by the necessity of doing something for himself" (31, emphasis added). Which is to say that he is motivated by a desire as powerful as it is undefined, which sets him at odds with the values he has been bred to. When Clyde acts on this desire, as Dreiser's characters most often do, the result becomes a quest for identity, new and apart from what he has inherited. That he finds his new identity in the possibility of acceptance into the upper-class social milieu of the rich Sondra Finchely, and that he fails spectacularly to acquire it, has everything to do with Dreiser's vision of American culture. Clyde embodies "the nothingness of our social aspirations," Howe writes, "the futility of misplaced desire in a society that offers little ennobling sense of human potentiality" (Howe, 822). Clyde ends up in the electric chair at the novel's end, unsure whether he is guilty or not; this is a part of Dreiser's indictment of society and its institutions, which share no such uncertainty. But Clyde's fate, too, is a result of what Julian Markels has called "inarticulate human experience" (Markels, 188), a compelling desire not merely for wealth out for acceptance in society, to be a part as opposed to being alone.

The novel ends as it began, in a brief section titled "Souvenir," with the now older Griffiths setting up their organ in the streets of San Francisco. The walls of the buildings surrounding them are "tall and

gray," as before. Also as before, passers-by are moved to comment about Mrs. Griffiths, "'Well, here is one, who, whatever her defects, probably does what she believes as nearly as possible'" (813). Clyde has been replaced in this final scene by his nephew Russell, who was born out of wedlock to his sister Hester. When Russell asks his grandmother for a dime to buy ice cream, she gives it, thinking how he is "the light and color of her declining years. She must be kind to him, more liberal with him, not restrain him too much, as maybe, maybe, she had--" (814).

It would be hard to disagree with Grebstein, who avers that everything Mrs. Griffiths has learned "can be summed up in the dime for ice cream" (Grebstein, 319). Her faith sustained her throughout the ordeal leading up to her son's execution, and afterward, but that contest with the world at large, particularly as represented by her foray into the public realm of fundraising, for Clyde's appeal, and her dealings with the Governor's office, have not left her faith unaltered. She may cling yet to her fundamental beliefs, but a new liberality, if small, has been thrust upon her, a liberality to which she is afraid not to capitulate. And that, by and large, must be the human response to the encroachment of society on fixed principles of belief. Whether she recognizes it or not, Mrs. Griffiths adapts to perceived necessity by liberalizing her formerly fixed principle of self-denial. One wouldn't want to stake too grand a claim on such a small territory, but, in the context of this essay, the implication seems clear: culture is too powerful a force to ignore or defy.

If there are any parallels of contemporary interest to be drawn at all between fundamentalism, as defined in the first part of this

Afterword, and literature, as touched upon in the second, they must surely have to do with culture's perceived encroachment on individual identity. If secular urban life is the 20th century's equivalent to the howling wilderness of the Puritans, then the inefficacy of fixed principles of belief must set the self to wandering, disoriented and perhaps lost, in uncharted territory. Or to say it another way, for many Americans the culture at large seems to have acquired a life of its own, a life without much regard for the individual, who looks for and fails to find something understandable in which to believe.

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