To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Michael Hart entitled "Firestarter and Other Stories." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Allen Wier, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Charles J. Malamud

Accepted for the Council:

Interim Vice Provost and
Dean of The Graduate School

Firestarter
and Other Stories

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Michael Hart

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The stories in this thesis are dedicated to

my family, who always tells me to keep writing;

to the teachers who told me the same thing;

and to my favorite muse, who drives the creation of so much of my work.

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Abstract

This collection of fiction is compiled of stories written and revised while the author was a Master's candidate at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Among other subjects, the fiction considers the importance of obssessions, apathy, self-worth and responsibility and how those affect the characters' lives. Accompanying these stories is a brief introduction in which the author discusses some of the theories behind his writing aesthetic, various themes linking the stories in this collection and the individual representations and significance of some of the stories' emotional elements.

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INTRODUCTION

I have often told my own students that it is impossible, in any given paper, to include all of the information that relates to a topic. They should, I recommend, strive to pare down their information and provide the most useful, the most pertinent, the best. I have to keep that advice in mind as I write fiction. In my mind, much of a story is already written as I sit down to type it. I can see the characters and their lives in full relief, but to even attempt to completely relate all of that information to readers would be ludicrous. Therefore, I try to think of each story as a facet of the characters' lives, a series of moments in their respective histories that bears telling for its own importance. Sometimes these moments provide the characters with a chance for growth. Sometimes they miss those chances. For me, what becomes most important is that the reader sees the character's chance, even if the character misses it. I recently gave a reading of "Firestarter," after which a freshman approached me and asked how the story ended. He wanted to know if Ed could start fires with his mind, now. Could the old man really start fires? Did Ed and his wife reconcile? He went on at length. I asked him if any of Ed's questions got answered in the story. He answered that they did not. I suggested to him that the fact that Ed got no answers was important for us as readers. My ultimate hope, as grandiose as it sounds, was that a reader might take heed of Ed's shortcomings and discover answers to his

own questions. I later saw a review that the student wrote for his composition instructor in which the student railed against my inability to successfully provide an explanation for the end of "Firestarter" and noted that my future as a writer looked bleak if I kept relying on smoke and mirrors to wrap up my characters' lives. Still, for me the proverbial smoking gun is rarely as important as the events that led up to its firing.

The five stories in this collection are linked by the what I see as errors in the characters' life decisions. These stories examine what goes wrong in their lives as a result of their own obsession or apathy. In many ways I see the two traits as opposites and, through my fiction, I hope to suggest that either can lead to ruin. The first person narrator of "Carcass Sounds" is in constant conflict with what he percieves as his father's values and what he feels might teach his about tolerance. Similarly, in "Firestarter" Ed is convinced that he is behaving prudently, that his values and actions will result in a reconciliation with his wife. Both characters become so focussed on being right that they lose sight of the importance of the other lives around them. The narrator in "Refuse" is unable to accept his life, and he becomes so focussed on the idiosyncracies of his neighbor that the narrator loses his hold on what should have been really important to him: the woman who loves him. William, the namesake of "Rumbling William," tolerates his brother's often violent actions and, by doing nothing, condones that violence. Albert, in "The Weight of Heat," rarely feels good or bad about any

part of his life. Towards the story's end, he begins to distance himself from his loved ones and, by doing so, denies their importance in his life. His apathy and denial helps bring about his own downfall. The characters are linked by their inability to admit their own shortcomings and take real steps to improve the ways in which they comprehend the world around them. Their failures or successes come about because of their own action or inaction; it is important to see their decisions for what they are worth and to note how their problems are perpetuated as a result of those decisions.

When I wrote in college, I was greatly influenced by the terse language of writers like Ernest Hemingway and Richard Ford, as well as by the coupling of simple-minded characters with a sophisticated narrator, as in the works of Flannery O'Connor. By presenting a scene and letting it stand for itself, they managed to point the reader in a direction without bashing that reader over the head with "importance" and "meaning." More recently, I have come to appreciate the more verbose styles of writers writers like William Faulkner, Albert Camus, and Vladimir Nabokov. Still more recntly, I have become interested in authors that incorporate magical realism into their works, especially writers from the school of Spanish magical realism such as Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Julio Cortarzar. The distance between telling a good story that never really happened and one that couldn't possibly happen is negligable. Elements of the fantastic occur in many people's day-to-day lives

and I feel that, for the sake of a good story, it is acceptable to exagerate the possibility of those elements in my fiction.

I very much enjoy the ways in which fiction's sophisticated language can simultaneously reveal and conceal. I am fascinated by the gulf that can exist between a sophisticated narrator and the story's characters or, similarly, between a sophisticated reader and those same characters. For the party outside the story (reader or sometimes even a narrator), the source of the problem might be readily apparent, but that doesn't stop the problem from occuring. I am interested in combining two different styles of language, two different voices in my fiction. The one is the simple language of a potentially psychologically unsound character, the one who is overly focussed, apathetic, or emotionally unaware. The other is that of the sophisticated, pragmatic, but essentially nonjudgemental narrator. That narrator's complicated, analytical language sometimes functions as a moment of clarity in the awareness of an otherwise befuddled character, as in "Rumbling William," but it can also take the form of a kind of sympathy as in "Firestarter" and "The Weight of Heat."

"Carcass Sounds" illustrates the conflict between a father and son. The father is domineering and judgmental, but the son has a fundamentally flawed perception of the importance of his father's approval. Throughout much of the story, the son tries to distance himself from the world of his father, but by the story's end he is attempting to validate himself in his father's eyes by adhering to

the latter's values. By placing more importance on his father's approval and compromising his own sense of worth, he alienates both his friend Jack and his own father.

Put simply, the main character in "Firestarter" is a troubled man. His worry manifests itself as physical pain, which is probably common enough for many readers. But, when he walks into a surreal setting and is told a bizarre story by an old man, the possibility that his worry could overwhelm him suddenly becomes very real. Ultimately, the reader is left with some of the same unanswered questions that Ed, the protagonist, must have. Ed learns that whether or not the old man's worry could actually set fires is unimportant. What is more important is avoiding the possibility of letting worry and internal strife overwhelm his awareness.

"Refuse" offers a character who is unable to rewrite his life's plot, so he becomes focussed on what might, for anyone else, be simply a passing curiosity. The trash-filled life of a neighbor becomes more interesting, more emotionally demanding, to him than his real life. Rather than attempting to better himself and those around him, he is resigned to understanding the grotesque life of a collector of garbage. Because of his choice, he loses the love of a woman and perhaps his own sense of self-worth by implicating himself in the possible crimes of his neighbor. The abrupt ending of the story helps suggest to the reader a sense of the main character's unrest. He is as unable to provide an answer or

excuse for his actions as the reader is. Thus the reader is left to formulate those explanations independently.

Apathy and oblivion create the dilemma for the title character of "Rumbling William." By ignoring his brother's change from delinquent into murderer William is condoning violence. Ironically, his hyper-acute focus on the sounds around him stems from his inability to pay attention to the rest of his physical surroundings, specifically his brother. Then, by abetting and even defending Dickey, William allows his brother to take advantage of him, and the pattern of violence continues. Still, the story ends with the suggestion that William is taking steps to break away from his manipulator.

Finally there is "The Weight of Heat." The last of these stories to be written, its creation involved my greatest risks. Rather than present the purely fantastic or magical, I created a narrator that claims at length that a cloud above a young boy's head is existent, i.e. that the fantastic is normal and accepted. The reader is left with no other option than to believe that the cloud is real and is forced to navigate around several red herring details in an attempt to understand. The true focus of the story is Albert, but the boy, Horatio, functions as a vehicle for the pain of his parents by presenting a manifestation of that pain in a corporeal form. Still his parents create the pain by failing to recognize their own incompatibility. Albert, a character who seems at times to feel nothing, attempts to give his heart completely but does so at the cost of his emotional

integrity. Carolina is as much a force of nature as a person, and she thinks that she can accept being bound to one person for the length of her life. Young Horatio is simply stuck between the two and functions as a messenger who speaks against their union. As it exists now, the story is succinct but is really more of an indicator in terms of where these characters will finally go. I can envision a much longer version of this story, possibly as a novella. Still, the version of "The Weight of Heat" printed here serves to clearly demonstrate my work.

I have been told that many writers continue to edit and revise their stories years after writing them; I have no doubt that I will continue to revise these works as variations come to me. Most importantly, I think that these five stories successfully explore what I wanted to explore. They contain problematic characters who are hyper-sensitive or over-focused. Some of the characters are apathetic or oblivious to their own lives and the lives of those around them. I don't intend the stories to be didactic, but I think that they could serve as indicators against errors in judgment. The works in this collection are complete without necessarily being "finished." That is, I think that they examine the implications of the characters' failings without necessarily providing a moral resolution. My expectation is that all five stories can help point out how important nearly all aspects of these fictional lives are. What the characters succeed or fail in understanding is that the aspects of life deserve sincere scrutiny

and appreciation but not at the cost of any of the other discrete aspects around them.

Firestarter and Other Stories

Carcass Sounds

The forest stood up all around me that morning. The trees were tall and silent and, without any leaves, they looked very old. The smooth sheet of grey in the sky made me think that one vast raincloud, rather than many small ones, floated high above. I stood there with my father and two other men while our horses shifted and snorted behind us. A deer lay in front of us and we watched it calmly; we were confident that it was not going to move. From where I was standing, I could see the bullet wound right on his shoulder bone. A slight breeze blew my hair into my face. My hair was a little longer than any of the other men's and I wasn't wearing a hat. None of us said a word until my father spoke.

"Right there, you can see where he ran through the thicket," he said, pointing to his right. I looked over at the dense mound of branches and vines that he was pointing at. The brittle old plants had a hole cut through them where an animal had run. "Had to have come from over that ridge, down this way from the field." One of the men with us, Jack, nodded his head.

"He's a good one. Best get the rack off, though, before the rain starts," Jack said. He turned to the man next to him and said, "Seen that buck out in the South Long field a week ago, you know, Bobby. Figure he's been running doe all through there "

Bobby, Jack's brother, responded without looking away from the deer, "Nah, too late in the season to be running doe. Probably just feeding." Both men were chewing tobacco and wearing camouflage jackets. They were the caretakers of my father's land and they always went with us to pick up game that we shot. They turned to me with quizzical looks on their faces, as though I could settle their debate. "He was feeding, right, Pete?" Bobby asked me.

"I can't remember," I said. "I don't know." My father moved closer to me.

"Well, he's a good one, anyway. Good eight-point." I nodded and shifted my weight because my rifle was heavy and cut into my left shoulder. I looked into his eyes; they were so blue that they were almost white. I knew that he thought the same thing about my eyes because they looked exactly the same as his. "Kind of a bad shot, son," he continued. "Right on the shoulder, like that. That's why he ran this far." Crunching brown and black leaves under his boots, my father moved towards his horse. I listened to his footsteps and knew that any deer could have heard him walking through those quiet woods.

It was warm that afternoon, unseasonably so for late January. I was wearing jeans and a dark brown shirt and I was sweating. Looking back I know I wasn't sweating because of the heat. I looked at the two men with us and then down at the body of the deer in front of me. I thought about how I had last seen the same deer, just a day ago, standing at the edge of a small field with a few doe. He had been turning his head to the left and right, smelling for danger, but

he never knew that I was there. At that moment, standing in the woods with my father and the brothers, I wished that he had smelled me.

My father got his big knife from the saddle of his horse and walked back towards where we stood, pausing in front of me. "You want to do it?" he asked calmly.

"No, sir," I replied.

Shaking his head, my father walked over to the deer and grabbed its thick grey antlers. When he pulled its head up, I saw its lifeless black eyes. So recently they had been wet and nervous, watching the edges of that field, but now they were just dry and empty. My father looked up at me for a moment, got a good grip on his knife, and cut cleanly through the deer's neck.

"Could at least cut up your own deer, Pete," my father said quietly.

"Jee-zus," said Bobby. "They get all puffed up like that if you don't find them quick enough. Makes 'em nasty to work with."

His brother chimed in, "Shoulda brought the saw from the house. Coulda just taken the horns instead of the whole damn head." I heard him walk on the dry, noisy leaves to come stand behind me. "Still a good deer, though. How come you don't seem real excited?"

I watched my father clean the blade of his knife and I didn't immediately respond to Jack. I wanted to tell him that I wasn't excited, that I was a little sick.

"Just kind of queasy about the carcass, Jack," my father explained. "He'll be excited once we get back to the house, won't you son?"

"Yeah," I said. "It's just all bloated up. Kinda gross, you know?"

The brothers both nodded their heads and Jack smiled weakly but I could see that they didn't really understand. I walked over to my horse, grabbed the saddle-horn, and pulled myself up. As the brothers went over to their horses, my father dropped the head into a large plastic bag which he then dropped into one of his saddlebags. I took my rifle off my shoulder and slid it into the sheath under my saddle. My father got on his horse slowly, and turned towards the direction of the house. I got into line behind him and the brothers followed, speaking softly behind me.

The "house" was actually just a small trailer that my father and I stayed in when we went to hunt on our land. It was small and shabby compared to our real home but we only lived in it on weekends and some holidays. The trailer was only five or six years old but its corrugated, white sides had miles of road-dust and mud on it. A few years ago the brothers had helped my father put a porch on the front of the trailer. It was similar to the porch that was on our home but much smaller. My father and I used to sit on the porch at home in the summers and he wanted to have one to sit on during the winters when we were hunting. He spent weeks making sketches before attempting to build one onto our trailer, with the brothers' help. It was on this porch that my father and I sat.

We hardly ever sat together on the porch any more. We hardly ever did anything together any more. He was holding up the newly cut antlers of the deer. He turned them around a few times in front of him before putting them down on a small bench.

"At least we got the horns but it's a shame we had to waste all the meat," he said, still looking at the antlers.

"We have plenty of meat in the freezer," I said, quietly.

"What?" he asked in a way that suggested he had heard exactly what I said. Not looking at my father, I hesitated for a few seconds.

"Nothing," I finally said. He turned to face me and I could feel his eyes trying to force me into looking at him. I continued to stare out into the forest.

Leaning closer to me so that he could speak more quietly he said, "Don't get smart with me, son. The point I am making is that we are not in the practice of wounding deer or wasting meat." His voice had become a sort of low hiss that he forced out between his clenched teeth. "If you're going to hunt this land, you're going to have to hunt responsibly." I wanted badly to remind him about the deer that he had wounded last season. About how the brothers and I had trailed drops of blood for a few miles but never found the deer. I wanted to tell him that I was a damn good shot but that even if I wasn't, no one cared: this was just hunting. I turned slowly to look at him. I could see the large vein in his temple standing out boldly and I thought I could smell his breath. I wanted to

tell him these things but all I said was "sorry." He looked at me for what seemed like several minutes but I know it wasn't that long. He could look at someone for a long time without blinking but not for that long.

When I finally turned away he said, "Well 'sorry' doesn't make the meat any less wasted." He got up and walked into the trailer. I sat very still on the porch and listened as the rain began to fall softly on the trailer's tin roof.

Jack and Bobby came to the house late the next morning. It was still raining so they knew that my father and I would have stayed in. I heard them as they stepped onto the porch. I could always hear the two of them when they were together because they didn't worry about walking softly and they were always mumbling to each other. I could hear them now just as easily as I had heard them two afternoons ago when I shot that buck. They came stomping through the woods, knowing that they didn't need to be quiet because I had just fired. As they came up to the edge of the field they acted as if they were trying to walk quietly but they still made lots of noise. I put my gun's safety back on and waved, signaling that they could come on over to me.

"Was that you that shot a minute ago, Pete?" Jack asked. One of them always asked that question even though the answer was obvious; my father and I were the only people who hunted our land.

"Yeah," I answered, still a little excited from seeing the big deer a few minutes before. "I think I hit him. A nice eight-point."

"Oh, yeah? Well let's go pick him up," Bobby said. The three of us walked over to the field's opposite edge where the deer had been standing. There were some bright red spots of blood on the ground.

"Looks like you hit him, all right," said Bobby. We continued on into the woods but didn't find any more blood. The brothers mumbled as they walked in front of me and I heard them say my father's name.

"What was that?" I asked.

"Oh, well we just thought that maybe we oughta get your dad to come help us is all," Bobby answered. We had stopped several hundred yards from the edge of the field and I looked back, trying to make out the bright green grass that the deer loved so much. I knew that if we hadn't already found the deer it meant that I had made a bad shot and that my father would not be pleased about having to trail a poorly wounded deer. I wouldn't have said it then but I didn't want him upset with me.

"All right," I answered reluctantly, my enthusiasm from the hunt quickly vanishing. "Let's ride back and get him."

Now, as I watched through the window as the brothers walk up the porch steps, I remembered that they had looked almost exactly the same when we had come back two evenings before. However, I knew that this time they had no bad news to tell my father. No reason for him to get angry this morning. They knocked loudly on the front door and I got up to open it

"Get that, would you, Pete?" my father yelled from the kitchen.

Already there, I thought to myself. I opened the door for the brothers and greeted them both with their first names.

"Morning," they answered as though making a declaration. They walked past me and towards the kitchen. "You got the coffee on yet, Mr. Jackson?" Bobby yelled as they moved into the kitchen. I walked in and sat down at the small table. As the men talked, I looked at the fading yellow wallpaper and the old cracked linoleum floor. I wanted to suggest fixing the place up but knew that to interrupt my father would create trouble. They talked about what to plant in the fields on our land and where the brothers had seen deer early this morning and what new guns were the best to hunt with but none of their talk was directed at me. I sat at the that small table and only looked at them when Jack finally mentioned me.

"Gotta cut Pete's shirt-tail, now," he suggested. Jack and Bobby both insisted that this was the tradition when someone shot poorly while hunting but I had thus far avoided this fate. I looked at Bobby and then Jack, trying to gauge their seriousness but I could see by their gap-toothed smiles that they were teasing me.

"What we need to do is to teach him to hunt more responsibly," my father said. "He needs to take his time when he shoots and make every shot a good

one." He spoke as though I wasn't in the room. He looked down at an egg that he was frying and then up at the brothers but not at me.

I looked at my father and said calmly, "I've always been a pretty good shot. One mess up isn't so bad." Bobby looked at me for a second and then into his coffee cup.

"We did find the deer," Jack added, watching my father closely. "I was only kidding about your shirt-tail, Pete," He said to me with a small smile.

My father looked at Jack without smiling. Jack was almost never right to my father because Jack just wasn't "tough." At least he wasn't "tough" enough for my father. Jack painted pictures as a hobby. He would just get a picture in his head and he wanted to paint it. I understood why he painted but my father never could. Jack didn't work in an office or even in a factory and, to my father, that made him a little less of a real person.

Dad put the frying pan down on the stove and finally turned to face me. "If you are such a good shot then why did you miss that buck?" he asked in a scolding tone.

I looked at Jack but knew that he wouldn't be of much more help. "We found him," I said. "We just didn't find him quick enough." I looked away from my father when I noticed that his blue-white eyes hadn't blinked for a while. I looked at the photographs of past deer he had brought in and of geese that Jack had taken and done a painting of once and at the brothers trying to be

inconspicuous but I did not look at him. He stood there, for a long time, in his camouflage pants and his white T-shirt. When he finally spoke all he said was "We'll discuss this later, boy." After a few seconds of very piercing silence, my father continued frying his egg and the brothers began talking to themselves in purposefully loud voices. I got up and left the room.

* * *

The next morning we hunted again. My father went to some of our northern property and I took the land just to the south of him. I moved slowly through the forest, following a small creek that had become stagnant over the winter. I hunted until mid-morning and began to walk back out towards the main road. On the way I jumped two doe which had been lying under a fallen tree. I raised my gun and followed one of them in my scope, but I had no desire to shoot her. I reached the main road and had walked down it for about half a mile when I heard several quick shots. The sounds were made by a shotgun, not a rifle, and came from far behind me.

Damn duck hunters, I thought. Scaring up all the deer. I knew my father would have heard the shots and would have the same thing to say.

When I got back to the trailer, I saw that I was alone but Jack and Bobby had been there. There were fresh horse tracks in the dirt near the trailer and the

porch had been cleaned. I went into the trailer and made some coffee from the old coffee maker and then walked back outside. Sitting on the trailer's porch, I listened. I could hear hundreds of birds moving out in the forest. I heard the occasional tap of a falling acorn as it landed on our tin roof. I sat and listened for a long time and when I finally remembered the coffee, it had long since brewed and was a little burned. I poured a cup and sipped it as I walked back outside. I had been there for a few minutes when Jack and Bobby rode up.

"Morning, Pete," Jack said. He wore a dark flannel shirt and old jeans which fit over his boots. He had some fishing gear loaded on his horse and he wore a wide brim hat, something that none of us hunted in. My father might comment on the hat later. His brother rode over to the skinning area while Jack walked over to stand next to me.

"Got some coffee inside, if you want some," I said to him.

"Yeah, thanks," he said. We walked inside and talked while we sipped our coffee.

"Damn cold this morning," I said.

"Yeah but the sun's come out so it'll warm up a little by the afternoon. Thought about doing some fishing later, if you wanted to come," he offered.

I always liked going fishing with Jack because he didn't care whether I caught a trophy fish or not. We could just go up and down the lake, taking our time and talking; we didn't even have to catch any fish. Also, I knew that the fish

would be biting later today if the sun was out and that made me want to go even more. However, I told him that my father and I would be going home today so I had to stay around the trailer. It had been decided the night before.

"Oh, yeah? Well maybe next time you guys come out," he responded.

"Yeah, maybe," I said. Just then, Bobby walked into the kitchen, his heavy boots making loud noises on the thin floor of the trailer.

"You drink all the coffee, Jack?" he asked his brother. He didn't ask me because he thought that the trailer and everything in it belonged to my father. If the trailer needed fixing up, Bobby referred to "your dad's roof" or "your dad's porch." My father owned it all in Bobby's mind.

Picking a small black mug from a shelf, he poured some coffee and the three of us sat at the kitchen table. Jack and I did most of the talking; Bobby read a magazine and spoke only when one of us addressed him. I knew that he wouldn't have much to say until my father got back.

"You finish that picture of Long Field?" I asked Jack.

"Yeah," he said. "Took forever but I got it just like I wanted it." I remembered when Jack began to paint that vast, green field, my father had laughed and laughed.

"What the hell you want to paint it for?" He had asked.

"I just like the way it looks right now and I'd like to be able to see it like that forever," Jack said.

"That's pretty cool," I had said, trying to sound as masculine as possible while complementing an artist. My father had looked from one of us to the other and walked off without saying another word. I brought it up later that weekend when he and I were back at home. We were sitting at our round dinner table over two steaks. I could hear the big clock in the kitchen ticking and the television down the hall speaking softly. There were paintings of houses and deer and people throughout the house and these made me think about Jack.

"Dad, you've got a bunch of paintings here, you know?" I began.

"Yeah, so?" he said. He was peering down the hall, trying to listen to what the television was saying.

"Well how come it's ok for those old paintings to be here but it's not ok for Jack to paint?" I asked.

He put his fork down and gave me his full attention. "Pete, what are you talking about?" he asked.

"Jack," I said. "You give him all that shit about being a painter but we've got tons of paintings in the house."

"Pete, I do not give Jack shit about him painting. Besides, most of our paintings were done by your grandmother," he responded as he picked his fork up again. I didn't want to make him mad so I focussed my attention on the plate in front of me

* * *

Jack and I continued to talk and, about half an hour later, my father rode up to the trailer. I heard his horse but I didn't go out to meet him. He came into the kitchen stomping his feet and rubbing his hands although it wasn't especially cold outside anymore.

He was talking almost before he entered the kitchen. "You hear those damn duck hunters this morning?" he asked no one in particular.

Bobby answered first. "Yeah, probably down on the far lake. Don't figure they were on your land, though" he said.

"They still gonna mess up all the deer over there," Jack said.

Bobby cast an scolding look at his younger brother and said, "Yeah but if they aren't on the property, we can't do nothing about." He glanced up at my father, who was looking for a cup to drink from. After finding a cup and filling it with dark coffee, he turned to me.

"Did you see anything this morning?" he asked out of habit.

"No," I said. "Well, couple of doe but I let them run. I jumped 'em up."

"Just as well you didn't shoot," he said. "We might have been trailing another deer." He looked back at Bobby and smiled, as if the two were sharing some private joke. Bobby, cut short in a sip of his coffee, looked at me, then my father and smiled, although I don't think he knew why he was smiling. However, his brother had been paying full attention and added, "Or we might

have had a deer to skin this afternoon." My father's bright eyes tried to burn holes into Jack. He paused, maintaining his composure.

"Yeah," he said slowly, his smile still hanging on his face. "The boy might have hit one this time." I wanted to thank Jack for sticking up for me a little. I looked at him and nodded my head quickly in a short laugh. My father noticed this and moved towards the table.

"Well, guys," he said to the brothers. "I guess we're going home today. Bobby, that'll give you time to fix up that fence on the south border. You can get Jack to help you if he isn't too busy making pictures." Then he turned to me. "Pete, why don't you go help me load up the car?"

I looked at Jack, who hadn't even acknowledged my father's poke at him. My father must have thought that I was simply hesitating because he said, "Come on, Pete. Go load up the car while I put my horse up." Without waiting for a response from me, he walked out of the kitchen. I heard the front door open and close and I watched as Bobby got up and silently followed my father outside. I turned to Jack. I wanted to apologize but he didn't seem to care about what my father had said.

I watched him for a few seconds before asking, "You still want to do some fishing this afternoon?"

"Well, I guess so," he said. He looked through the kitchen door, trying to see the two men in front of the trailer. "I guess you guys are going home, though."

"Yeah, well, I'm not ready to go home just yet. C'mon, we can go fish for a while," I said. I smiled and got up from the table, my small chair squeaking loudly as I did. I left the kitchen, got a hat out of my room and went to find Jack. He stood near the front door, his fingers linked behind his head as though he was a prisoner being marched away.

"You sure your dad won't get mad?" he asked. I kept the smile on my face as I answered.

"Naw, man. He won't care. C'mon we'll just be gone for a little bit," I said, putting my hat on. Jack shrugged and walked through the door into the yard. "Look, I'll go tell my dad, ok?" I said reassuringly as Jack got onto his horse. Walking around the side of the trailer, I could see my father and Bobby near the barn. My father was winding up some rope while Bobby talked. Bobby stood with one foot off the ground and his arms resting on the fence. Both men were engulfed in what they were doing and neither one saw me. I stood where I was for a few seconds and walked back around to Jack.

"You got another rod up at your place?" I asked as I climbed onto my horse.

"Yeah," he said. "Got one of those new Rhinos."

"I'll use that one, then. You got any beer?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said

"Then let's go" I said as I started my horse into a gallop.

* * *

Where Jack and I were fishing, the sun was high in the sky and it shined down onto the flat water, shimmering warmly. We were going to fish up one bank of the river and back down the opposite bank so I figured that we had a good bit of time to kill. Jack and I got along pretty well though, better than Bobby and I, and I was happy to be out fishing with him. We didn't talk for a while; the only sounds were the repetitive plops of our baits into the shallow water. We floated along slowly, Jack paddling occasionally as we went. We had both caught a few fish and had a few beers. For a while I felt pretty good about having left my father back at the trailer. I felt like he would have to take responsibility for his gear and his trailer since I wasn't there. Then I thought about how angry he would probably be when I got back. I remembered how much my father hated to fish; he always sent me with Jack if I wanted to go fishing. At least, he always sent me when I was younger. My father hardly ever sent me anywhere anymore. I think he considered us equals. Surely some of the time he did.

As Jack and I fished, I looked out over the brown water of the thin, long lake. I remembered the shots this morning.

"Hey Jack," I said. "You figure those duck-hunters were up north on this lake, huh?" Jack took a sip from his beer and continued to look at the point where his line disappeared into the water.

"Yeah, probably," he said. "Ya'll's property goes up north a ways and then ends, you know?"

"Yeah," I said. "What if they weren't past our border, though?" I asked. "I mean they could have been hunting on our land, right?"

"Well, yeah, but. . ." he began.

I interrupted, saying, "You want to go up to where they were shooting? Maybe they were on our land." Jack reeled his line up and turned to face me. He looked at me for a few seconds and said nothing.

"I guess we could," he finally said. "They're probably long gone, though."

"Yeah but they might have come south if the wind picked up. Anyway we could just go up there and have a look," I said, secretly hoping that we would find strange men in a small boat hunting ducks on our property. I could imagine the look on my father's face if Jack and I brought two poachers to him. He would be so proud of me; I would have caught two men illegally hunting his land. Jack put his rod down and turned his hat backwards so that it wouldn't be blown off. As I started the boat's engine, I thought I heard him say something about the property north of ours but I didn't pay any attention to him as the boat edged forward and picked up speed.

* * *

There were fewer and fewer trees along the lake as we got closer to the northern edge of our property. The lake began to widen and there was a much wider bank on either side of us. I would have missed the shotgun shells if Jack hadn't pointed them out to me.

"Hold up, Pete," he yelled over the clamor of the engine while pointing over at the left bank. I slowed down and eased the boat over to the left side of the lake. As I approached, I could see that the bank was littered with small, red cylinders. Someone had been doing a lot of shooting. I ran the boat up onto the shore. Jack looked back at me as if he was unsure whether I was getting out or not.

I stood up and said, "Let's go." Jack appeared unsure. "C'mon," I said. "We'll just look around." Jack took his hat off his head, ran his stubby fingers through his thin brown hair, and hopped onto the shore. His boots made a deep print in the soft ground near the water's edge. I walked to the front of the boat and stepped onto the spongy shore. Jack went up to the edge of the woods while I tied the boat to a small stump. I walked over to one of the shotgun shells and picked it up. "Six-shot," I said to Jack. "These are all bird shells. They were hunting here this morning."

Jack came over to where I stood and picked up another shell from the bank. "You know, if the water goes down any more this year, we'll have a terrible summer." He looked up from the shell in his hand as if he really wasn't aware of what we had found. How could he deny it?

"Jack," I said angrily, "they were here, right here." I waved my hands out at my sides to indicate the very shore we were standing on.

"Hmm? Oh yeah," he said, frowning slightly. "They're not here any more, though." I couldn't believe that Jack could act so casually about poachers on our land. "Hey, Pete," he said, "I think your property ends back down the lake a ways. You know, where that beaver dam used to be." He pointed in the direction we had just come from and shrugged, but I was sure that he was wrong.

"No, man, it goes up the other way for another half-mile or so," I said. "These guys were poaching." Jack contorted his face into a questioning smirk. "They were shooting ducks on our land," I said.

"Pete, I'm pretty sure. . ." he began,

"C'mon," I interrupted, "let's go back to the camp. I want to tell my dad about this."

"Serious, Pete," he began, "I really think. . ." but I was already in the boat. I started up the engine and signaled for Jack to untie us and get in. He paused for a moment and then we were cruising back down the lake.

* * *

Jack and I rode up to the trailer about a half-hour later. Bobby was sitting on the porch but my father was no where to be seen. I could feel my heart

beating as I hopped off my horse and ran up to the porch. Bobby sat in the spot where my father usually sat and he had a questioning look on his face: his eyebrows raised, his eyes opened wide.

"Your dad's been waiting for you, Pete," he said. "Wants to talk to you. He's inside." I looked into Bobby's dark eyes proudly. I knew that what I had to tell my father would outweigh any anger he might have towards me. As I walked up to the front door, Jack sat down in the seat next to Bobby, my seat. I walked through the door.

My father was sitting in a black, vinyl chair. Both arms were stretched out on the high arm rests and his two large feet were flat on the floor, as though he were rooted to that spot. His bags and mine lay next to the chair.

"Where have you been?" he began slowly but sternly.

"Dad, I know that I shouldn't have gone off without telling you and I'm sorry," I said quickly, a little out of breath. He leaned forward, the chair making loud creaking noises as he moved.

"I told you that we were leaving today and you went off with Jack? You two went fishing, didn't you?" he asked, his voice becoming a little louder.

"We went fishing, Dad, but we also went up north on the lake to where those shots came from today," I said, deciding that my best chance lay in telling him about my discovery as soon as possible.

"I can't believe that you left," he said, "after I told you that I wanted to leave today. This is exactly the kind of thing I'm talking about, boy. You never take any responsibility."

I could sense my father's anger growing quickly so I said, "Dad, those duck-hunters were hunting on your land. They were poaching."

He faltered for a few seconds, as if weighing what I had just said, but started in again with, "Do you have any idea. . ."

I felt empowered by my news so I interrupted by saying, "They were poaching on your land. Jack and I saw where they had been." I moved closer to his chair and looked down at him, waiting for a response. He continued to look at me but said nothing.

Finally, the severity of men poaching on his land must have hit him because he stood up and looked into my eyes. He raised one hand and pointed a long finger directly at me. "I'm going to go talk to Bobby about these poachers but I'm not through with you." He walked by without touching me and went out onto the porch. I smiled because I knew that my father was happy with my discovery; he had to be. He just didn't want to show it because I had run off this morning. I walked into the kitchen and started to fix supper. I knew that we wouldn't be leaving today.

* * *

The next morning, I woke up before there were any sounds outside. I walked through the trailer, the thin floor groaning under my weight. Looking out a window, I decided that we had a long time before sunrise. I went back into my room and got dressed anyway; duck-hunters went out early and if we were going to catch these poachers, we had to be out earlier. I was excited about going out this morning and I knew that my father would be too. I remembered how he had acted last night as he and I talked with the brothers.

"Poachers," Bobby had said. "Hell, I've never even heard of poachers coming this far out." My father looked at me and tapped his foot slowly.

"Well, Pete said that he and Jack saw where they had been. He said they saw the shells, didn't you Pete?" he asked, turning to me.

"Yes, sir," I answered. I knew that he must be excited even if he didn't really act like it. He was probably just still upset with me for going fishing. Looking at Jack he continued.

"Jack, you saw the shells, right?" he asked. "They were on my land?"

"Uh, I think they might have been," he answered slowly. I looked at Jack with confusion welling up inside me. We had both been there; we had seen the shotgun shells.

"Well, Jack," my father continued, taking on a more admonishing tone, "Were they or weren't they?" He stepped closer to Jack and peered down at him. For a second I was reminded of when I was young and he would question me about something I had broken or forgotten.

Jack cast a glance towards me but I would give him no aid. We had both been there.

"Well there were shells all over the north end of the lake," he said.

"We can just go up there and look tomorrow," said Bobby, trying to draw my father's glare away from his brother. Jack squirmed under the weight of my father's blue-white stare. He finally stood up, adjusted his hat, and walked away. My father turned to me as if daring me to go with him. I raised my chin a little. Looking at Bobby, my father agreed.

"Yeah, we'll go up there early tomorrow and look around," he said. He acted calm but I knew that he was excited deep down.

By the time my father finally woke up, I was ready to go out on our expedition. He took his time, though, sipping a hot cup of coffee, putting on his clothes, and picking out a hat. I think he was taking so long on purpose, like when I was a kid, just to see me nervous. When he was ready, we got on our horses and rode down to Bobby and Jack's house. Bobby came out and got on his horse. He said that Jack was still sleeping; he wouldn't be coming with us. My father looked back at me.

"Let's go," I said and we rode on towards the lake.

The three of us in the boat slowed it down a little but we cruised along the lake diligently. It was still very dark and we had to watch the water just a few feet ahead of us to make sure that we stayed on the lake. Finally we got near the spot where I thought that Jack and I had been the day before. We grounded the

boat on the right bank and waited quietly for a what seemed like a long time. I think I was the first one to hear the boat coming up the lake from the other direction. I nudged Bobby, who might have been dozing, and he nudged my father.

"There's a boat coming," I hissed. He stood up and faced the direction that the sound was coming from. In the early-morning light all we could see was what looked like a large black pyramid floating down the lake towards us. Bobby whispered that they must have their blind mounted on their boat. I looked at the boat as it got closer and decided that he was right. Then I noticed that they weren't going for the opposite shore, the one they had hunted yesterday. They were coming for our shore. I shifted nervously in my seat.

"Be still," my father said. As the boat landed about ten feet from us, we could hear the men talking in their floating blind. They weren't whispering like they should have been; they were talking. They must have seen us. My father continued to watch the boat before looking down at me. I couldn't see his face because of the faint light but I know that he must have been smiling at me. I had led him to these poachers. He stepped out of our boat and yelled a greeting.

"Hello," he said and his echo seemed to shatter the early quiet of the lake. First one silhouette and then another popped up from the top of the pyramid. The first one spoke.

"Morning," it said in a deep voice. My father continued to walk over towards their boat until he was standing right next to it. Then he began to speak

with both of the heads and Bobby and I sat very quietly trying in vain to hear what was said.

I imagined my father asking these men what the hell they were doing on his land. They would make up some excuse involving confused boundaries and bad directions. We hadn't actually seen them poach so they would probably get off with only a trespass charge. I could see my father, now, as he nodding and gestured. He even laughed quietly once, no doubt at the poachers pathetic excuses. Finally, he moved away from the boat at and said "Ok." He began to walk back towards the boat and I thought for an instant that he was just going to let them go but I knew that he would never be that irresponsible. He walked over to the boat and stopped next to it. He looked only at Bobby as he spoke.

"Seems they're hunting their own land. Mine ends back that way about two-hundred yards," he said, pointing behind us.

"What," I said. "That can't be. I know where the boundaries are." I couldn't believe that dad was falling for their trick. He turned to me slowly. The birds were just starting to make their first sounds of the day and a bright line of orange above me promised that the sun was on its way.

I was barely able to see my father's face as he looked down at me. His expression was one of shame and disgust and, as he spoke, I thought about what it must feel like to be wounded and scared, like a deer, simply because you were in the wrong place at the wrong time. That's how I felt looking at my father.

"I know where the boundaries are," I repeated quietly, more for myself than for Bobby or my father.

He looked down at me and said, "No, boy. You don't." Then the boat engine started and the sound drowned out my thoughts altogether.

Firestarter

Inside the bar, haphazard positioning of lights created a play of light and shadow. The alternating areas of visibility and dimness made the bar seem as though it contained two different worlds that had been forced together. One of the worlds was accurate and illuminated but shabbily appointed; the other was obscured by the soft, colored glow of electronic devices or a complete absence of light, these occasional patches of darkness hiding the late-night secrets of the bar. The juxtaposition of these two worlds had the tendency to evoke equally divergent emotions in the bar's patrons as the night progressed: exhilaration and depression, stability and vertigo. It was into this bar that Edward Harrison found himself on a night that had real potential for being his worst ever. He and Clara had been fighting consistently for three days and he had finally had enough. During a lull in the shouting, he had gone into the kitchen and emptied the coffee tin, the one with a wad of money in it. He had then walked down the hall to their bedroom, his heavy boots hammering the worn carpet. Throwing open the door he had announced that he was leaving and, by God, this time it might be forever. If she wanted to stop this fighting and try to redeem their marriage, she could damn well come get him at that bar down on the corner. That is, *if* she wanted to. Ed had walked back down the hall towards the front door, his stomach seizing up a little more with each step. He had slammed the

door so hard that it swung open again, and he had closed it a second time with less force. Quickly downstairs, onto the street and down towards the bar, the one with the name he could never remember. There it was: the *Two Way Inn.* Hoping that Clara was following him, he had walked through the front door and into an illusion of two distinct but juxtaposed worlds.

As though performing a familiar ritual, Ed took a seat at the bar.

"Lemme get whatever you got on tap," Ed said to the bartender. The man walked over to Ed. He wore a stained green t-shirt with something written on it. The text was so faded now that it bore no resemblance to any language Ed knew. The bartender was tall, thin and clean-shaven. His brown hair shot out in wisps.

"What do you want? I got . . .," the bartender began.

"I don't care," Ed said. His quick words and wide eyes sent the bartender towards the taps. Ed looked up at a clock behind the bar. *Jesus,* he thought, *is it already quarter to ten*? He looked down at his watch for confirmation. A few minutes difference but close enough. He looked behind him towards the front door, trying to open it with his will alone.

"Two bucks," said a voice from the bar. Ed turned and looked only at the beer in front of him. He pulled money from his jacket pocket. He looked at the crumpled wad of bills and thought about the empty coffee can in the kitchen.

"Here," he said, pulling two singles from the cash. The beer was cold and tasted metallic, but Ed didn't notice. Instead, he began to think back to happier times of he and Clara together. There was that vacation they took to . . .

"I know a man with woman problems when I see one," a voice said, interrupting Ed's nostalgic trip. Turning around, Ed found a man sitting next to him at the bar. He was an older man, maybe sixty, with neatly combed white hair. He smelled of cheap-aftershave and alcohol. He had a very thin, white beard and wore navy-blue sweater. Ed registered these details, as he might upon first seeing any other essentially nondescript human. But it was the stranger's eyes upon which Ed focussed. They were light brown with flecks of black and gray around the edges like day-old ashes. As the stranger nodded his head, these eyes reflected the odd light of the bar in a way that made orange and red tongues dance across his dark pupils.

"Am I right, friend?" the stranger asked. Ed's face compressed into a frown. He spun on his bar-seat to look around the bar at the other patrons. He hadn't noticed this man and wouldn't have taken a seat next to anyone. There was a couple in low conversation in a booth and a group of four guys watching something on a television across the bar. A game. He turned back around to face the man.

"Well." the man said.

"Nah," Ed said. "No worries; just drinkin a beer, y'know." *Go the fuck away*, he thought. He looked up at the clock again. Nine fifty-three. Ed sighed.

"Well, I'm usually pretty good at sizing up worry, having known a fair amount of it myself," the man said. "I also know how therapeutic it can be to talk about it. See, when I was a younger man I was filled with worry and . . ." Ed

sipped his beer and tried to not hear this stranger. He tried to think about anything else. About his childhood, his parents, Clara. Why wasn't Clara here yet? How had they gotten so screwed up? Hadn't they been happy that time in . . .

". . .so then one day BOOM!" the stranger roared. Startled, Ed looked at the old man. "That's what I'm talking about, son. You store that worry up in you and it'll blow up like a damn bomb." The bartender walked over to them, colors of light passing over him and making his lanky swagger into an almost liquid flow.

"You want another?" he asked the old man. He looked over at Ed but didn't ask anything.

"Don't mind if I do," he responded. Ed saw an opportunity and took it, getting up and walking in long fast steps towards the bathroom. Afterwards, he walked back into the bar but this time sat down at a table. He looked around the bar but didn't see the old man anywhere. Catching the bartender's attention, Ed held up his index finger. The bartender moved towards the taps but not very quickly. Ed looked up at the clock again but saw that it only read twelve minutes after ten. He looked at the door and then down at his watch. His watch read nine-forty two. *Shit,* he thought. *Piece of shit stopped; typical.*

He heard a nearby chair scrape the tile floor. Looking up, he saw the old man sitting down with him at the table. *Son of a bitch,* he thought.

"Lissen, I know what it's like," the old man said, continuing his previous monologue as though no time had passed. "You get all caught up in worrying about this or that: what am I going to say to her, where am I gonna work, what can I buy, am I a good man, am I gonna burn something down? Sure, you can worry about all that stuff, but what you need to do is live your life and . . . ." Ed tried to listen to the juke-box. There was a blue-grass song playing. An honest-to-God blue-grass song, the high tenor vocals pining away about something.

"My name's Marcus," the stranger said.

"Paul," Ed said.

"Well, good to meet you, Paul," Marcus said, reaching out with a callused hand. Reflexively, Ed shook his warm hand. He glanced again towards the door. Surely Clara was on her way.

"What are you, Paul? Late twenties, early thirties?" Marcus asked. "Look at yourself, hung up and anxious. Do you feel it in your stomach? The heat?"

"Look, buddy, I don't mean to . . ." he started.

"Your stomach." Marcus said, rubbing his own belly and grimacing.

I should just leave, Ed thought. *I don't have to stay here.* Then he remembered his words to Clara. When she came, and she would come, he had to be here. He looked up at the man. Marcus.

"Yeah," he said. "Sure, I feel it in my stomach. Everyone does." The bartender finally came over with a beer. Ed gave him exactly two dollars and the tall, thin man walked away.

"Nah, not everyone feels it like you do," Marcus said. "You feel it like a heat in your gut, like if you open your mouth smoke might come out, right?" Ed patted his stomach with his left hand but quickly looked back to Marcus.

"No," he said. Of course his stomach ached now, a low, nervous burn inside him.

"Of course it does. It aches now, doesn't it?" Marcus asked. "That heat you feel is a bad thing. It can be a bad thing. It's real." Had Ed been religious he would have prayed for Clara to walk through the front door now. Sure, so that they could be together but also to get him away from this crazy drunk.

"It's real," Marcus continued, "and it can manifest in your life in real ways." Marcus punctuated this last statement with a long tug on his drink. Ed noticed that the old man was drinking a boilermaker, a shot of whiskey submerged, shotglass and all, into a glass of beer. The mixture was supposed to be finished quickly but Marcus sipped his in long, slow drinks.

"Yeah, like ulcers and whatnot," Ed said. "I don't have an ulcer." Marcus grunted and drew the back of his hand across his mouth.

"You should hope that it's only an ulcer," he said.

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?" Ed asked, the volume of his words coming up a little. Where was Clara? He looked over at the clock. Ten thirty-something. Beneath the clock, the bartender picked at his teeth.

Looking around the bar slowly, as though about to offer an investment tip or an admission of guilt Marcus said one word.

"Pyrokinesis."

For a few seconds, Ed wasn't sure exactly how to respond. "Pyro-what?" he asked. Another fast glance at the door. Marcus sat up in the pleather bar-seat and suddenly assumed the air of a physician.

"There are documented cases of times in human history," he said, as if from memory "when the internal workings of a person have been made manifest in the outside world around them." The bartender walked over and placed a beer and a boilermaker on the table.

"Uh, I didn't . . ." Ed began.

"Not to worry. I got it," Marcus said. He waited for the bartender to make change and walk out of ear-shot. Then he continued.

"For instance, many cases of objects that move inexplicably in people's houses have been blamed on ghosts, poltergeists, whatever you want to call 'em. However, what was really going on was that someone in the house was undergoing tremendous emotional turmoil and this was causing vases to fall off shelves, pictures to drop from the walls, doors to slam, that sort of thing." Ed watched Marcus carefully. He thought of the way impalas and gazelles on nature shows looked when a lion came up to the water hole: precisely calculating distance and opportunity.

"That's great, but it's about time for me to go. Two beer limit and all," he said, looking down at the new beer in front of him.

"And what if she comes through that door while you're gone?" Marcus asked. Ed felt his stomach tighten and took a deep breath.

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"You got woman problems. You keep looking at that door and the clock. 'What time is it? Where is she?' you're asking. If you leave now, what have you accomplished? If you sit, what does it cost you? Sit and listen to these things. I'm basically harmless now."

Marcus reached out and put his hand on Ed's arm.

Ed thought about his options. He had told Clara to come to *this* bar. He knew she would come. He had only been here (the clock said ten forty-something) for roughly an hour. She was probably cooled down by now and was going to come through that door any minute. He looked down at the rough, old hand on his arm and then at Marcus. Those light brown eyes danced with orange and yellow reflections, probably from the jukebox and colored lights in the bar. From Ed's position, the rest of the old face was partially hidden in shadow. He sat back down slowly. After a few seconds Marcus withdrew his hand. Ed picked up his beer and sipped it. The cool felt good in his throat. His stomach gurgled. He did not know why he said the next statement, but there it was.

"You were saying . . ."

Marcus continued . "These examples of things *moving* because of people are not isolated events. Ever hear of spontaneous combustion?" Marcus raised his eyebrows and looked at his audience. Ed had.

"Yeah, I guess," he said, no sarcasm in his voice.

"Same damn thing," Marcus said, laughing a little. "I tell you, show me a person who's spontaneously combusted and I'll show you someone who had *tons* of worry. Hell, they go up like a gasoline bonfire, melt metal, stone around them burns. All that's left is ashes and not much of that. That's what I'm talking about. I know 'cause I been there." He sipped his drink. *What is he talking about?* Ed thought.

"What d'you mean you've been there? You haven't spontaneously combusted 'cause here you are." It sounded stupid to Ed as soon as he said it. Marcus looked at him with the reserved disappointment of master to student. After a stare and a sip from his drink, he spoke.

"Well, of course I haven't, son. What I'm talking about is pyrokinesis." That word again. Paul tried to sound out the syllables in his head, to extrapolate some sort of meaning. "Pyro" was fire, he thought. "Kinesis" meant something. *Like kinetic or . . .*

"Your silence speaks volumes," Marcus said. Ed worried that he might be blushing a little. He hoped that the play of color on his face obscured any visible embarrassment.

"The ability to start fire or move fire with your mind "

Ed decided that he might have had just about enough. "'The ability to . . .' Uh-huh. Ok, well this has been great but I really gotta go, so thanks for the beer and the . . . whatever." He stood up in a quick, fluid movement. Marcus didn't even look at him. Ed looked down at the old man and then over at the bartender, still as a post behind the bar. The group of guys behind Ed yelled in unison. *Someone must have scored.* Ed turned towards the door but stopped a few feet from it. Clara. Would she be the next person into the bar? Would she come looking for him here? Rather, she *would* come looking for him and he would be gone and that would be that. *Son of a bitch.* Ed labored over the words in his mind, imagining the emphasis he would use if he were speaking them. He turned around. Marcus was watching him but apparently without much interest. Ed walked back over to the table and grabbed his beer. He finished the rest of it in one gulp.

"What's his name?" Ed asked, gesturing towards the bartender.

"Toby," Marcus said under his breath.

"Toby," Ed yelled. The bartender moved only his eyes towards the summons. "Get me another beer," he paused, "please. And a book of matches." An Iggy Pop song played on the jukebox, anthemic rhythms pulsing into the bar. Then he sat down.

"I first discovered I had the ability to start fires when I was about your age," Marcus said. Ed wondered if the old man was even paying attention to him. "I don't remember all the details, but I got enough of them. I was thirty-

one, full of worry over women, my job, my life. It seemed like all I did was worry. Even when I had some satisfaction in those things, I worried about them. On the way *to* those things, I worried. The worry balled up in me like a fist or a stone inside my belly. Then it became heat. I actually felt heat from my own stomach. Sometimes I would lay my hand on my gut, underneath my shirt and try to feel the heat." Marcus had been speaking quickly but with focus. Ed noticed that he wasn't slurring or stuttering. The bartender came over with Ed's beer.

"Hey, what about those matches?" Ed asked and produced a pack of cigarettes. The bartender looked at Ed and then shot a look towards Marcus.

"I'm out," he said. Marcus raised his eyebrows and sipped his drink. The bartender walked away.

"Well, for the love of . . ." Ed started.

"One night I went out to a bar, alone I might add," Marcus continued. "I drank some and moped some and drank some more."

"Which bar?" Ed asked, amusing himself.

"I don't remember. It could have been this one. Point is, I wasn't exactly in my right mind and I went out of the bar and went walking. I walked for a long time, almost the whole rest of the night. Right about dawn I came up to the factory where I worked. It was that time just at dawn, you know? The sky traced down from blue to baby-blue then pink then deep orange," Marcus said looking up into the colored, smoky air of the bar.

"I got it," Ed said, rotating his hand in the air as if turning a crank. Marcus continued.

"Well, anyway, there I was standing in front of this factory. I thought about how sorry my job was and my girl," Marcus put a hand to his forehead. "What was her name? Gloria. About how she and I weren't working out on account of how she didn't want to be serious about anyone right then. And I thought that I didn't either, only maybe I really did because I worried about it all the time. So there I was, worrying about all this and feeling my stomach turn and pinch and heat up. It got hotter and hotter. It was cool out but not nearly cold. I remember that because all of a sudden I could see my breath, white wisps flowing out from my nose and mouth as I exhaled." Marcus took a sip from his drink. Ed held an unlit cigarette between his lips and listened despite himself.

"I felt the heat rising in me. At the time I had never heard of spontaneous combustion or pyrokinesis, mind you. I just felt this heat and wanted it out of me. It rose from my belly and caught in my throat like a sneeze or gag. And then . . ." he stopped and looked around the bar. Ed actually sat up straight, waiting. "Then it was gone." Marcus looked up at Ed for the first time since he began his story. Automatically, Ed took a sip from his beer.

"What do you mean 'it was gone'?" he asked.

"I couldn't feel the heat so badly any more. It just wasn't in me."

"Where the hell could it have gone?" Ed yelled. Conscious of his volume, he looked around. Nobody seemed to be paying attention to them. The couple

was talking, although neither one of their faces was fully visible because of the strange lighting. The guys at the other table continued to watch whatever game they had cheered about. They were bathed in tints of red and blue and gold. He looked back to Marcus. Ed sat back in his chair and a single track-light shone directly into his face, clearly illuminating his features.

"It had gone into the factory," Marcus said. His voice was calm. He didn't sound embarrassed to Ed. "Into the factory," he said, simply listing detail. "At first I could just see a soft glow in the top windows of the building. Then smoke came from the roof. For ten minutes I watched. Windows began to explode and flames licked out from the inside. Fire began to eat away at the walls, even the concrete. A huge groan and the whole roof collapsed. Black smoke billowed into the air. Well, I'm no genius but figured out what had happened. Hell, I took off running and didn't look back." Ed listened now without skepticism or reservation. He looked quickly at the door but not at the clock.

"How could you have started the fire?" Ed asked. "Couldn't it have been wiring or machinery? A gas leak or whatever?"

"Nope. I asked my foreman the next day when he called me to tell me about the fire. Nobody could figure out a cause. Not the firemen or the police. Not the insurance men who came later. Just burnt up, they said. But I knew," Marcus said, leaning towards Ed. "And that wasn't the only thing I burnt up, no sir."

"What else did you get?"

Marcus sat back and finished his boilermaker. He waited a few moments as if measuring out his words. "That ain't important. What *is* important is that they all happened the same way and for the same reason. I would get so caught up in worrying that I would wander, not paying attention to where I was going. I would end up somewhere that was related to my worry and it would well up in me like a fuse getting ready to set something off. Then it would be gone, as strangely as it had come. Then there would be a fire that consumed everything it touched."

Ed smiled. "So you can catch things on fire?" he asked.

"Nope. The worry can. Anyone's worry can. It can well up inside you until it overshadows everything else you do: your ability to create, to mourn, to care. All that exists is the worry and its heat in your belly." Marcus nodded his head in apparent approval of his own realization. As his head moved, orange and yellow reflections flickered in his eyes. Ed thought about Clara. His eyes opened wide as he looked from Marcus to the clock. Eleven-thirty-five. *Bet she's on her way,* he thought. *Bet she's walking this way now. Or maybe she's waiting at the apartment.*

Standing up he said, "I'll be right back." The old man smiled and nodded but didn't look up from his empty glass. He waved a hand in front of his face as though shooing an insect or an odor.

"Sure thing, Paul," Marcus said.

Ed paused for a second, then turning, walked towards the bathroom. When he came out he looked immediately towards the door. It was just swinging shut, its thick piston hissing from the movement. *Was that Clara?* He thought. He looked over to where he and Marcus had been sitting. Marcus was gone and the bartender, (what was it?) Toby, was wiping clean the table.

"Where'd he go?" Ed asked, pointing to an empty seat.

"Dunno," Toby said without looking up. As he finished wiping, he asked, "You want anything else?"

Frowning, Ed looked at the door, then the chair, then Toby. "No," he said. "No thanks."

Toby turned to walk to the bar. As he moved, he passed through alternating pools of light and dark. The soft glow of colored lights tinted the parts of him that it touched, making them seem more like plastic than flesh. The dark simply obscured the pieces of him that it touched.

Ed produced the coffee-tin's wad of money. He pulled out a couple of bills and dropped them on the table. Then he walked out of the bar. The air was cool but not cold enough for him to see his own breath. He zipped up his jacket and walked towards his apartment. He could feel the heat of his body as flames of guilt and worry licked at his insides and threatened to burn their way into the world.

Refuse

It was the smell that first drew my attention. The smell was of old french-fries with a mild chemical aftereffect. Of wadded-paper that had gotten wet and Coke that had reduced down to syrup in the insulated heat of a car. The car sat in the parking lot of my apartment complex with its windows not only rolled down but set at odd angles, suggesting perhaps that they had been forced down, that the mechanisms responsible for the windows had failed unexpectedly but that the driver had needed the windows down. It was a blue car, not baby-blue but a sort of dull, powder-coated sky-blue. There was a little rust along the bottom of the car and along the top of the hood, like liver-spots on the aged. It was from the car that the smell first hit me. And yet I found myself drawn closer to the partially open windows. The smell was by no means pleasant, not fresh-bread pleasant, anyway. But it was not entirely bad. The sometimes sweet odor of decay or of old foodstuffs filled with preservatives filled my nose and mouth. I walked over to the car and looked in on an impressive mound of garbage. The back seat was completely covered in garbage. There were wrappers and fast-food bags, empty plastic cups and hundreds of wadded balls of paper. A sun-bleached carton of Quik was wedged in the mound, dried brown milk clinging to its surface. The occasional article of clothing peeked out from underneath the recycling nightmare. But not just a T-shirt or a shoe; those were present but there

were also pairs of old boxer-shorts and a voluminous bra wedged in at different intervals within the mound. The front seat held slightly less trash but it had all the makings of a really magnificent mound. Structurally, the young pre-mound was almost exactly the same as its larger counterpart except that it seemed to contain more glass objects and less clothing. There were also a number of pens thrown randomly into the trash, some of which had pierced the mound and some of which had come to rest on the car's upholstery. Their ink, drawn out by the fibers of the floorboard, had long-ago bled out, congealed and dried into permanent amoebic shapes. Only the driver's seat seemed immune from the threat of the mound. The garbage had been pushed over far enough so that no part of it threatened to touch the driver of the car. While the garbage in the back seat would surely have obscured the scenes from the rear-view mirror, no part of it quite touched the seat in front of it; no loose wrapper or haphazard plastic could have loomed over the driver. And, hovering over all the history of the trash was the smell, not wholly unpleasant, but odd enough that it suggested misfortune or jeopardy.

As I walked around the car, continuing to stare through the leaning glass of the windows, I became aware of a reflection staring back at me. I spun quickly, already framing the words that could exculpate me from rudeness. Standing only a few feet from me was a thin man with wispy hair peeking out from under a black beret. Although he was only a few feet from me, I guess I had been so focussed on learning the secrets of the garbage that I had not heard

him walk up. He wore jeans with a few holes in them and a jean jacket with the sleeves cut out. From underneath the jacket, the sleeves of a sweatshirt covered his thin arms. Blinking rapidly, I looked at my own shorts, up at the early summer sun and then back at the man. It was only after a couple seconds that he spoke.

"Hey there," he said in a lilting drawl. He spoke softly and calmly and I was so surprised that I could barely even stammer out a return greeting.

"Morning," I said, suddenly unsure what time of day it actually was. I did notice, however, that I immediately re-adopted my own slight twang, something I regularly did both to stay in practice and because I thought that it could create identification between myself and the people for whom it was a singular form of speech.

"Yeah, I guess it still is," the man said, responding to my question. "Already warming up. Supposed to get hot as all hell this year. Heard the winter's supposed to be a cold one." There must have been a time in the past of my life when I was at a greater loss for words but, standing in the parking lot in the presence of the mighty garbage and this thin man, I couldn't remember it. He produced a long key and, nodding a little, pointed at the door.

"Scuse me," he said in his soft drawl.

"Hunh? Oh, yeah sorry," I responded, punctuating my words with a little nervous giggle.

The man turned the key, opened the door, slid into the driver-seat, closed the door and started the car with a series of fluid motions. As he drove off without looking again in my direction, I imagined the smell that had initially drawn me, the smell of that hulking garbage, trailing behind the car in cartoon-like fashion. I stared dumbly in the direction of the road for a few moments, only then remembering why I had come outside. I looked down and there, near my feet, was my own bag of trash. I picked it up quickly and looked around me, suddenly very self-conscious. I threw the bag into the big dumpster, hopped into my car and drove off towards work, the odor of rot and soil still hanging in the air in front of me.

On the way to work I found myself noticing, as if for the first time, how dirty the streets were. Litter was everywhere; none of the other drivers seemed to notice as they sped towards various destinations. There were wrappers and cups and cigarette butts and who knows what else every hundred yards or so. Well, maybe more often than that, but it seemed like a lot, maybe more than I was used to seeing.

As though my own tardiness could have caused the downfall of our parent corporation, I clocked in ashamedly. The structure of Lowe's was huge and complicated; still I felt like my own presence might have been noticed among the hectic pace of the shoppers. Forcing myself to relax, I thought of how silly a possibility that was: just me walking in a few minutes late, a herd of shoppers surrounding me.

"Jesus H. Christ in a caddy, Parker. Do you work here?" I heard. I prayed quickly, and without the right to do so, that my last name wasn't Parker.

"Yes, sir," I said to one of the managers. I grinned confidently, hoping that my façade alone could ward off his attack.

He spoke calmly but sternly. "Oh, cause I wasn't sure, cause you were s'posed to be here like ten minutes ago. Merle has kids to go home to so when she don't get off on time, she comes to get a manager. When she does, one of us comes looking for you."

"Got it," I said before I thought about it. Instant regret welled up inside me.

"Well, if you 'got it,'" he said, gesturing in the air to make invisible quotation marks around my words, "how come you're still late?"

"I don't know; I'm really sorry; I should probably get out on the floor, now hunh?" I responded quickly, hoping that by suggesting my own punishment, this man's anger could be appeased. In an instant lapse in control over my own mind, I found myself picturing the trash in the back seat of the car.

"Yeah, I guess you had better get out there," he responded with what he probably thought was the voice of the just.

"Yes, sir," I said as I walked away.

I worked for seven hours before I got to go to lunch. When I came back, the store was just about to close up but I already knew that I would have to work late. I ended up with a little recovery duty for one of the departments and then

some trash pick-up. After going through a few sections of the store and picking up trash, I went to the back, into storage towards the massive compactor. I threw boxes and strapping and a broken palette and some food trash into the machine, closed its gate and turned it on. Occasional snaps and crunches punctuated its steady mechanical voice. I lit a cigarette, drew in deeply and thought about how I shouldn't be smoking here. When the machine was finished with its work, its safety gate popped open automatically. I knew what the thing did, but I found myself looking in its gaping maw anyway. The trash was in a tightly packed, flat layer on the bottom of the compactor. As I looked down, ash from my cigarette fell down onto the trash. I couldn't even flinch as I watched the glowing ember float towards the trash. The ash hit a big flat section of cardboard; it discorporated and a fire did not start. I backed away from the machine and looked around. There was nobody nearby. I grabbed the handles on the trash cart, smiled, and grunted once. My work was done.

It was late as I drove home; there were few people out in the city. I passed two street sweepers and thought about how they must enjoy a lot of job-security. For them, tomorrow's streets would be as ready for cleaning as tonight's were. There is an assurance that comes with the constancy of certain jobs. I don't think my job offered me that.

As I drove into my parking lot, I saw my girlfriend's car. It had a vanity plate that read "Nell." But, when I hopped out of my car, I also saw a familiar dull, powder-coated sky-blue car. It looked no duller now than it had in the

daylight. I quickly looked in through the windows which were still hanging haphazardly in the doorframes. There it was, as though it had been waiting on me or perhaps an archeologist. The mound of trash loomed in the darkness and continued to belch out its smell of sickly-sweet decay.

* * *

"Hey," I called as I opened the door to my apartment.

"Hey, baby," Nell answered. She stepped out of my bedroom and into the path of the front door. She was wearing one of my t-shirts and an old pair of boxers but I could still make out her curves. I didn't know why, but that night I didn't go over to embrace her. I found myself thinking about the dark garbage piled up in my neighbor's car. I walked into the kitchen and got a beer.

"How was work?" Nell said, hopping up onto the counter next to me.

I swallowed my beer. "Mm, you know. Work, I guess," I offered. "Sorry I'm late; I had to clean up and stuff. That asshole Gibson was on me today about . . ." but I wasn't listening to my own story. Instead, I was looking past Nell and into the kitchen closet where I kept the trashcan. I had just emptied the damn thing today and here it was, half-full again. "Nell, how long have you been over?" I asked, interrupting myself.

"Hunh?" she asked. "Um, I don't know. I came back from work but Nicole had gone out and I didn't want to stay at my place alone. Parker, are you ok?"

I continued to stare at the trashcan, wondering if I could watch it fill up given time. "What? Yeah, nothin'. I'm fine," I said a few seconds too late. I didn't ask Nell how her day was.

As we lay in bed that night, she rolled over towards me and kissed my bare shoulder, Nell's clear sign of amorous intention. I paused, thinking about how to handle the fact that I wasn't even remotely interested tonight. I faintly slowed my breathing to suggest sleep and managed a groggy "Hmm?" as though her kiss woke me. "Nell, I was asleep," I slurred, hoping that she wouldn't call my bluff.

"You don't like my kisses," she whispered. Her arm curled around mine as she scooted over to my side of the bed.

"Baby, I do, but I'm real tired, y'know."

Nell was suddenly as still as a snake. "Ok then; sorry," she said softly. It seemed that we had been arguing more and more lately, but I really wasn't in the mood just then. I didn't look in her direction but I could feel her stare on the side of my face.

* * *

There have been few instances in my life when I woke in an actual sweat. However, that night, I woke up with an audible gasp and fairly covered in sweat. I looked around to see if some sound had awakened me but couldn't see or hear anything out of the ordinary. Nell produced a faint gurgle that might have been my name. I waited to see if she would wake up but she didn't. I stealthily crawled out of bed and put a pair of shorts on. Going over to the front door, I gripped the dead-bolt. I turned it slowly, so slowly, hoping that it wouldn't click too loudly as it disengaged. I guess it didn't.

I went down he stairs and towards the parking lot, wondering if late night might have changed the car and its trash. There was enough of a chill in the air to remind me that summer had only recently begun. Between the dew in the air and the cool night, my bare torso was soon covered in goose bumps. The car was in the same spot and, history of the trash in mind, might have been there for all of its life. I turned around for no reason, as a stranger in darkness sometimes will. I knew that the man I had talked to earlier today, the keeper of the trash, lived in the apartment just in front of his car, on the ground floor. The big, sliding-glass door of his little patio should have been covered by its protective layer of hanging blinds. However, the blinds were in a state of disarray; rather than hanging in their uniformed pattern, they jutted out in strange and scattered angles. The spaces between allowed me small glimpses of the inside of the apartment.

There was trash, to be sure. But, from where I was, it looked like much less trash than the car contained. I could see some loose papers on a shabby couch and more wrappers on the floor. I wondered briefly how much fast-food one person could eat. I moved a little to the left and then a little to the right, trying to get a better view into the room. The moon was low in the sky; dawn was only an hour or so away. The blinds parted slowly, calmly, and there was the thin man, still in his beret. I immediately stopped moving, praying that he couldn't see me.

He seems to be looking past me, maybe to the left of me. He brings his hand up slowly to his face and it is only then that I notice the camera. He snaps a picture of the night, the camera's flash stabbing my widely dilated eyes. Then I am running through the cool night. I run as quietly as I can up the stairs and towards my door, certain that any second I will hear another door open beneath me and that the thin man will be on top of me, beating the crap out of me for my half-assed peeping-tom routine. I open my door quietly, shut it, lock it and breathe for the first time in a few seconds. I go into the bathroom to splash some water on my face. As I crawl back into bed, I know that I wouldn't be able to get back to sleep. Nell produces a faint gurgle that might have been my name. I watch the ceiling and think of garbage.

* * *

I didn't have to go into work until later the next day. Nell woke up early, I think a little irate. Maybe she had heard me go out in the night. Just as she closed the door, I thought about kissing her goodbye. I don't know where my head was. Love can present itself at moments that are completely inopportune but the feeling is just as real. I suppose Nell and I were in love; I know that we were very similar. She took care of herself, even though her family was pretty wealthy. We met about a year earlier and hit it off immediately. I was dating someone else at the time and she had just gotten out of a very serious relationship with an exceptionally demanding guy. Inopportune but no less real. Maybe it wasn't ultimately meant to work out but it had been really good so far.

I went to work that afternoon; I had to close again. What got me on my way to work was the actual number of dumpsters between my apartment and work. There were one hundred and forty-four dumpsters at various businesses just down one stretch of road. I don't mean trash cans; I mean those big-ass dumpsters with corporate logos on them. A hundred forty-four. That seemed like a lot, to me. It seemed like a lot of trash, literally tons of it, fermenting, rotting, reducing itself to its elemental factors. I rolled down the windows of my car but carbon monoxide overpowered any smell the garbage might have had.

Work came and went. There are times when, without the intervention of eventfulness, parts of a day or whole days can fuse in the mind that controls recall. My day at work came and went without any event to commit it to memory.

Two guys from work were going out to get a beer at this place across the street and they wanted to know if I wanted to go. I said "sure" and hoped that Nell wouldn't be waiting up for me. I didn't call her.

We had a few beers and as certainly as the tide comes and goes, the philosophy of late-night bars came to pass.

"Parker, the thing with you is that you're too damn smart to be working here," a guy named Kevin suggested. He was tall but solid, as though he had the potential for great fatness later in life but currently had a high metabolism. There were fresh scabs on his right cheek and, as he spoke, I wondered where they might have come from. "I don't mean you're like fuckin' Einstein or anything but you've gotta handle jobs like this without thinkin' too much about it. Like those civil service exams? My step-mom took one of those and couldn't get the job or whatever because they said that it would drive her crazy, or somethin'. They said that if she couldn't do the job she wanted 'cause she'd always be thinkin' about it."

"You don't know what the hell you're talking about, man," I said. I wasn't mad at all.

The other guy with us, Petey, I think, offered his wisdom. His wispy hair stuck up from his head like that of a crazy-person, odd angles and intervals combining. "You gonna get hung up on shit that ain't got nothin' to do with yer job, dude," he said to me. "You haveta just come in and do the job without too much thinkin' about it."

I took a long tug on my beer. I hated thinking about how much smarter than these guys I may or may not have been. I didn't want to consider the possibility that another life might be waiting for me on the periphery of this one, that although I had been to college and these guys hadn't, I might be less qualified for a certain type of job. I figured then that I could not-think as well as any other grunt. Why would I get hung-up on stupid aspects of the job? I finished another couple beers; the conversation moved to other topics. I left some money with the guys and flipped them off, good-naturedly, when they taunted me about having to go home to "the woman." As I drove home, I tried not to see any dumpsters, filled with trash or otherwise.

Nell wasn't at my apartment. At first I was a little upset, but I think that it was just because of the beers. I sat down on my little couch and stared off into the nothingness of tipsy, late-night thought. In my peripheral vision, I noticed a small red light blinking near my television. I turned my head a little and saw my answering machine. Nell had seemed pretty mad this morning. Nell wasn't here now. The red light winked on-off-on-off. Beckoning, demanding.

I walked over to the machine and reached out to the little, red beacon. After a second or two, on-off-on-off, I touched it and heard the tape rewind. Then a heavy click. I thought about how the click was probably not pregnant with meaning.

"Parker, this is Paul Gibson," the message began. He was one of the managers at work. "We wanted to tell you that you need to come in early

tomorrow on account of Merle's boy has a doctor's appointment and she can't come in." That son of a bitch, I thought. Why hadn't he just told me that shit when I was. . .

But then the second message began. It was Nell.

"Parker, it's me and I think we need to talk." Holy Christ, I thought. It's always bad when you need to talk. Damnit. How's she going to call me and tell me this. . .

"It's not about last night or today but it's really more like the last few weeks, y'know. I just think, I don't know," she said, her voice trailing off softly at the end. "Look, I'm going to my parents for the weekend and when I get back I think we need to try to figure out some stuff."

Most probably in search of a diversion, I closed my eyes and tilted my head back. I breathed in deeply and thought of the sickly-sweet smell of decay. Nell continued to talk but I couldn't listen. Hell, maybe she was just pissed off about last night or whatever. Despite myself, I tried to imagine the way Nell's hair smelled but something got in between the kernel of memory and the world of now.

I couldn't be in the apartment right then. I walked outside into the night. There were only a few stars floating above me. The rest were obscured by the lights of nearby gas stations and parking lots, grocery stores and bars. All spitting out trash, I thought. The stupid people in their little lives, out there

purchasing whatever it was they could get and then throwing away the refuse when they were done. And here this happens to me.

"Damnit," I said softly as I leaned against a leafless tree in the darkness. A car engine started up behind me, across the parking lot. It was the powder-blue car. Even over my shoulder I could see the pile of trash in the back seat. The car backed-up a little; the white taillights winked out and it drove off. From where I was, I couldn't see the thin man at the wheel. I looked at my watch. Just after eleven-thirty. Where the hell was he going?

I sat down heavily into a pile of self-doubt and waited. Fifteen minutes. Thirty. Almost an hour. I wondered where thin collectors of garbage go near midnight. Maybe to work. Hmm, maybe a bar. I got up and walked back towards the building. I thought about how Nell hadn't said we were through, or anything like that. I shook my head quickly, hoping that the flakes of worry could be thrown away. Then I was standing in front of the thin-man's door.

I leaned in and pressed the side of my face up against the thick wood. I could hear the mechanical hum of air-conditioners in the building but nothing specific inside the apartment spoke up. My right hand was pressed up against the door. I slid it down in a semi-circular motion but I paused just above the knob. Slowly, I looked down at the tarnished gold of the doorknob. Rocking my hand away from the door, I touched the knob with the back of my hand. It was rough and old, worn out by the touches of millions of other hands. I flipped my hand over and gripped the knob, softly at first, then squeezing it tightly. I did

not try to turn it. I listened again through the heavy wood of the door. I could smell only old paint and the moisture of the night air. I twisted my hand slightly and felt the knob give. Opening the door quickly, I was inside the apartment. The door shut behind me.

There is a distance between the clutter of everyday use and the mounds of history left behind in disasters and warfare. I stood in the thin-man's living room and thought to myself that what I saw now must be almost precisely between the two.

There was a slightly tattered couch to my left. It was a shade of dark yellow but its surface was as pockmarked as the moon's. The remains of spilled and dropped substances mixed with the yellow to create a cloudy pattern of bygone meals. To my right, in a little dining room corner was an old table with no chairs around it. On top of the table was a small mound of trash. As though this table was the thin-man's studio and the car was his gallery, the trash seemed unfinished, young. I thought about how the pile couldn't be very big because the table wasn't very big.

Between couch and table was a teeming river of trash. Much of it was like that of the car: wadded paper, food trash, and some clothing. However, the clothing on the floor in front of me was different than what I saw in the car. Much of it was the clothing of a woman, a large one at that. There was an old, worn muumuu with faded flowers on it. Just under that was another large bra, very much like the one in the car. Mixed in with some paper trash a few feet

away was a single sock with light-blue fringe around the ankle. The fringe had torn away from part of the sock and it was spattered with a deep reddish-brown dried substance, perhaps once previously liquid.

Hovering above all this trash, like a shadow above a grave, was the smell. The consistency was uncanny; the smell of things neglected and gone bad filled the rooms.

I looked down the little pseudo-hall and could see the bedroom with a small pile of trash just outside the doorway. I realized that I was sweating profusely and that my right eye was twitching slightly. For an instant, I thought about leaving. I could be out the door and back upstairs with nobody the wiser. I could call Nell. I could talk to her but I would have to leave this place.

I took a few steps towards the bedroom. I heard the jingle of keys outside the door. I remembered that his door wasn't locked. The mailboxes, I thought. He's back and he's getting his damn mail. If I had been sweating before, it was now as if the water of my body was afraid of getting trapped inside or being caught with me. Panic threatened to consume me. I looked around for a place to hide. The thin, hanging blinds were no good. The creak of his mailbox opening. He might go straight to his living-room closet. The slam as his mailbox shut. I jumped around the side of the partial wall separating the two first rooms.

The door opened softly only a few feet from me and shut with a hiss and a thud. I listened for his footsteps. As soon as he was past me I could bolt out of the door and be gone into the night. But he made no sound. I heard the little

click of a switch and the living room light went out. The impenetrable darkness that immediately follows light surrounded me. Holding my breath, I listened for any sound. Two seconds went by. Then four. Ten seconds went by. The amount of time it takes ten seconds of fearful darkness to pass is so much longer than ten actual seconds. It felt like an hour of bondage. Still I counted and listened. Fifteen seconds and no sound. I thought that maybe he could hear my heart. I was sure I could. Without moving my feet, I leaned towards the edge of the wall, towards the only light I could remember.

Then I saw him. As though the darkness had simply added to itself, there he was. He was standing in front of the sliding glass doors with their thin, skewed blinds. He was looking through the glass, out into the parking lot. I can still see him. After a few minutes, he turned slowly towards his bedroom and, wafting through the darkness, disappeared from my sight. I heard a door close but still I listened. I stepped around the edge of the wall and looked deeper into the apartment. I thought about this being my chance to get out. Go, now, I thought. Instead, I squatted down to the floor and tried to see the shapes there. I made out the little sock with the torn blue fringe. My hand wrapped around the sock with its reddish-brown spattered stain. I opened the door but only enough for me to slide out sideways. I closed it softly, only untwisting the handle after the door was tightly in the frame. But just before the closing of the door and the tiny click of the bolt, I heard something. I still don't know whether it occurred within the thin-man's apartment or if maybe it came from some neighbor's TV. I

heard a tiny noise from a human throat. A cough or grunt. It could have been a soft, single laugh.

Two days later, bright sunlight burning down onto the asphalt of the parking lot, I threw out my trash. Mixed in with the fruit peels, bits of plastic, wadded paper and burnt rice was a thin, ladies sock with torn blue fringe. It had been cleaned of its dark reddish-brown stains. I threw a sealed trash-bag into my apartment's large dumpster, walked to my car and went to work.

Rumbling William

William Heck and his brother Dickey walked together down two rows of a cotton field, their large feet leaving deep imprints in the soft earth. Looking back towards the woods behind them, William could see the tracks of he and his brother going in. He couldn't help thinking that they had been walking forever, that the lines of the field converged to an invisible point thousands of miles away, back past the woods, and that they had been walking all the way from that point to where they were now. Looking ahead, he reasoned that they had about two or three hundred more yards to go to the gas station where their motorcycles were parked. In fact they had only gone about a mile or so but William would have sworn that the distance they had traveled was immeasurable.

"Goddamn, Dickey. You gonna have to get me a beer when we get back," William said huskily, his mud-caked boots slogging along underneath him. He wanted to forget where they had just been. Dickey looked at his brother, his large, bright eyes offset by thick eyebrows. He was several inches shorter than William but he was still a large man.

"You big girl," he said. "It wasn't that far. Besides, we'd still be on the way there if we had ridden. The road don't go through them woods."

For a short time their grunting and the sloppy noises of their boots were the only sounds William was aware of. When they were almost to their bikes William asked, "You really needed it that bad?"

"You got one," his brother said without stopping. "Sides, it's safer if we both got one. Shut-up now," he finished, nodding towards an old man who was pumping gas into a truck with curved edges and large yellowed headlights like two rheumy eyes. William looked up at the old man and stopped dead, sending a miniature mud-slide cascading down from his boots. He thought about what he and his brother must look like: their old, almost worn-out jeans, two sets of large black engineer's boots. William weighed an easy thirty pounds more than his younger brother but together they looked like almost five-hundred pounds of meanness.

The old man coughed once and looked back up at the revolving numbers of the pump. William shifted his weight onto his right leg and turned his head down towards his boots. He suddenly became aware of the slightly cumbersome weight hanging just under his left armpit. The pistol had been his for years and he had never thought of it as heavy until now. The pistol made him remember his brother then and he looked up towards their bikes.

"C'mon, William. Hell, c'mon," Dickey said around a lit cigarette. William immediately picked up his right foot and stomped it on the ground, knocking off most of its mud. His next step was towards his bike and the remaining mud from his left boot fell off, leaving a small series of cakes in the parking lot.

William threw his leg over the saddle of his bike and started its huge engine. His brother smiled a very small, crooked grin. Still grinning, he reached up to his rear-view mirror, adjusted it and pushed a small button below it which sparked his bike into life. The two large men rumbled out of the parking lot and quickly sped away down a stretch of Rapides Parish highway which converged off into infinity.

* * *

William and Dickey had been riding for a little over an hour, putting them about seventy miles away from the gas station. They hadn't spoken much, sticking to their limited pattern of hand signals, but the lack of conversation didn't bother William in the least. Whenever they rode, he was very happy to just listen to the noise which surrounded him. The bike beneath him made a very pure, solid rumble. Its noise started down below the engine, between the wheels and the ever-changing spot where they touched the road. The rumbling continued up into the frame of the bike and threatened to shake the large chrome fittings loose and send them cascading off into the brush. The rumbling continued up into the rider, William, into his feet and up his large, round legs and into his hips and out his arms into his thick hands with their stubby fingers. The rumbling continued into his head and here it took on its full magnitude because the rumbling then drowned out everything around both bike and rider

until it became a sort of silence unto itself, one that dared to deny all other sound besides itself and then finally itself as well. Always the rumbling continued.

Within the rumbling, William could hear the staccato pattern of his bike's pistons, and this small clicking made him think of the fast, loud noise of his brother's new pistol. Recently William had heard the fast pattern of the gun. Suddenly the frequency of the rumbling changed so much that William was snapped out of his contemplation. He noticed movement on his left side and looked over to see his brother frantically signing to speed up. Dickey then gunned his throttle and sped down the road. William sped his bike up a little but before trying to catch up to his brother he tried to hear the staccato tapping again. He couldn't hear anything but the rumbling. He reasoned that he and his brother must have left that sound far behind them, about seventy miles, and he decided that it was best that they had. Hearing that sound made him sick. He twisted his right wrist, sped down the road, and became aware of the rumbling which began again beneath him.

They rode on until the sun began to fall bank behind the road-side trees. William and Dickey stopped at a small motel called the Sea Breeze and decided to stay there for the night. Dickey had remarked that they weren't near any Goddamn sea and that it was a stupid name for a flea-bag joint like this. It was, however, attached to a bar called the Gin Mill, which made it a very attractive to Dickey. The two Hecks stood in the doorway of their room and gave it a once

over from there. Then Dickey turned around and began to walk away but his brother's large hand on his shoulder made him stop.

"Wait-up, Dickey," he said. "I wanna take a shower. Just wait a few and then we'll go." His brother looked at William's hand and then stared up into William's bright eyes. His brow had a deep line in the middle of it and his thick eyebrows threatened to fall over his similarly bright eyes. He pulled his shoulder backwards quickly and William lost his grip.

"I'm going," he said. "I'm going and I'll see you there." His last sentence sounded to William like that of a parent or a teacher; it was a statement of fact, something that Dickey would definitely do. Dickey stood there for a few seconds with his small smirk wrinkling up his face. William knew that he was being tested. Would he use his strength and size to convince his brother? Come on, shithead. *Come on, I dare you to.* He heard in his head. He blinked several times and his brother's smile was gone. "I'll see you there," Dickey said as he turned and walked away.

After Dickey was gone, William took his shower and sat on the bed. His brown hair was slicked back on top of his head and he had a small white towel wrapped around his waist. The hotel was just off the small highway and he could hear vehicles as they drove by, each one on its separate course. He thought briefly about getting on his bike and going on that night. His brother could catch up with him tomorrow; he knew how to get to Biloxi as well as William did. Then he thought about how angry his brother would be when he

caught up. He could see Dickey storming up to him after a full day of riding. He might not say anything; he might just come up swinging, knowing that William probably wouldn't swing back. William couldn't swing back. William knew early on in life that he and his brother were two of God's toughest creatures but he had grown a little taller and a little wider than Dickey . He could beat Dickey in a square fight but what would be the point? Their lives together would be over; their riding days would be through. No, William had decided many years ago. He would not fight his brother. Dickey caught on quickly though and soon became aware of his brother's decision. Since then William was more than happy to ride with his brother and keep them both out of too much trouble but Dickey was forever testing William's tolerance.

As he was thinking, William had been getting dressed. He now walked out off his room and into the parking lot. The entire Parish sky was on fire in the setting sun. He locked the door and walked heavily towards the Gin Mill.

There were a string of large pick-ups parked in the dirt parking-lot; each one contained either a Rebel flag, a gun of some sort, or both. A sign above the front door read "Gin Mill. No niggers or neckties served." William shook his head at the sign and went into the bar. He felt the weight beneath his jacket, took a deep breath and looked around. The bartender was an incredibly round man with short hair, a long beard and no more than five teeth. His hair wrapped around the side of his head and left a shiny patch of skin on top. When William

asked what this bar sold, the round man explained to William that he didn't actually sell gin or any other hard liquor. He only sold beer.

"You get a bunch a rabble rousers in here, get all liquored up and break my damn bar. Beer's pretty harmless to folks round here so that's what I sell." His voice was hoarse and high-pitched. He sold beer in bottles stored in large, round styrofoam cylinders filled with ice. The bottles were buried in the ice with only their caps showing. William paid for a round, which consisted of six beers, and walked over to a small table where his brother sat.

* * *

William was still young when he realized that Dickey's main concern in life was Dickey. The two boys had been on their own for a better part of their lives but cooperation had almost never been an option to Dickey. When the boys were fifteen, they had made their first road trip. They stopped outside of Lafayette to get something to drink one sunny afternoon. William was nearly his present size even then and Dickey, while still a bit shorter than he would finally stand, had already developed a lot. So there the two young men were at a Texaco about thirty miles from anywhere. As William pumped gas into their bikes, Dickey went inside. William finished with the gas, walked over to the front of the store, just behind the front door, and lit a cigarette. In a few moments, Dickey came running out of the store and hopped onto his bike.

"Hey, you sombitch," the clerk yelled as he came out of the store. "You ain't paid fer that shit!" The clerk stopped a few feet from the door, from William, but with his back to the large man. Dickey looked over the clerk's shoulder at his brother. Realizing the situation, the clerk turned slowly to face William, the man behind him. The clerk's right hand flew behind his belt, reaching for something, but William moved more quickly. His heavy fist caught the little clerk to the left of the man's chin and sent him sprawling into an ice-machine. He lay on the ground, inert. William's eyes opened wide. He stared at his victim in disbelief. He remembered thinking about that word: victim.

"Damnit! C'mon William," Dickey yelled. "We gotta get out of here."

"Yeah," William said after a short pause. Dickey had never even said thanks. It was this Dickey that William had decided he could never fight.

Now, over ten years later, the two men sat and drank in the Gin Mill. They had first one round then another, William because he didn't want to hear the rumbling within himself, and Dickey, William reasoned, because he was Dickey. The juke-box began to play a Merle Haggard song about a place in Oklahoma. The bass line started to measure a series of thumps. These thumps began to tap out a solid rhythm within William's mind. A quick, dull pain in his arm snapped him out of the rhythm. He looked at his brother, who had punched him.

"I said, I know that guy," Dickey said, looking towards the bar. William turned around and saw a short, thin man standing alone at the bar with a single

beer bottle in his hand. He was standing confidently, his legs wide apart, his hands together in front of him. He wasn't used to trouble, or at least he wasn't expecting any.

"How do you know him?" William asked without turning around.

"What?" Dickey yelled over the thumping of the juke-box.

"How do you know him?" he repeated more loudly. He turned to face his brother. He knew the determination in his brother's face then. The eyes were opened wide and the brows raised slightly and of course William noticed the set in his jaw. Dickey not only knew this man but had some business with him.

"Name's Alfred, Albert, something. He used to run with Jamis out of New Orleans," Dickey explained. "Did a lot of business for a small timer; always had a lot of money for a small time business." William looked back at Alfred or Albert, looking for danger signs. He looked like a small time guy, like Dickey said he was. This guy obviously wasn't watching for trouble. That kind of small timer could be dangerous; they could take care of themselves and weren't afraid of much since they had nowhere to go but up. William had come across this sort of guy before but he worried about this one. He worried because he knew that Dickey was going to talk to him in his special, convincing language and that this Albert guy might not take any shit.

"Dickey," William suddenly said, turning to his brother, "don't mess with that dude. Let's just finish these beers and go back to the room. We got a long

ride tomorrow." He reached up and held onto Dickey's arm, squeezing it a little to reassure himself of his own strength. Dickey didn't look at William's hand.

"He used to run out of New Orleans," Dickey said slowly. "He ran from New Orleans to Natchez and to Biloxi," he continued, adding emphasis to the last words. "I'm gonna find out some people to hook up with in Biloxi so we can make some money when we get there."

William held onto his brother's arm. He swallowed hard, tasting beer, and said "No."

"Get off me, William," Dickey said. He pulled but his brother's grip was firm. Standing up, Dickey twisted his way out of William's hand but William was on his feet quickly.

"Hey," a voice near the bar said. "You sonabitches knock that off or get out." It was the bartender. William looked from the round man to the lanky Albert at the bar. Dickey coughed once and began to walk forward.

Let your damn fool brother go talk, William thought. Let him go because he'll be all right. He ain't gonna do anything stupid to a friend of Jamis. William watched his brother go up to the man and shake hands. Again the music laid out its thumping pattern. Again William let his brother go off ahead of him. He saw his brother talking to a thin friend of Jamis, who William had never actually met before. William sat back down and watched. He didn't do anything but watch. He listened to the thumping and let it become a part of him and he watched. William could identify the subtle body-language of his brother which suggested

that he was trying to convince the man of something. The shift of weight. The laughing mixed with dead-pan seriousness. The fake pensiveness which seemed to manifest itself out of nothing. An older woman walked by and addressed William.

"What?" he asked. William noticed that she was far older than he and his brother. Old but not older than someone he had seen just a ways back on the road. An old man who lived on the other side of a cotton field. That was also where he had last seen Dickey's acting display.

"Another round," the old woman said as though it were a declaration.

"Yeah," William answered. "Yeah, another." He thought back to that cotton field he and his brother had walked so far across. They trudged heavily across newly tilled soil but Dickey wouldn't tell his brother what they were walking for. The two had made two sets of footprints in the otherwise pure field. They had walked across the field and into the woods where they came upon a very old shack. The wood was dry and grey and the walls had many cracks and holes in them. Dickey had urged his brother up to the house and onto the front porch.

"C'mon, man. We gotta get another piece if we're gonna do some riding," Dickey had said.

"How much you gonna pay?" William had asked him. He always tried to be sensible in the face of his brother's assertiveness without bullying.

"Shit, I don't know, William," he had answered. "Whatever he wants. He just an old guy who lives out here alone. He ain't got a dime. I'll give him a twenty or something and we'll be gone in half an hour. Sides, he's got a great Ruger. It's a great gun."

William wanted to turn around and walk back to his bike then. He could meet his brother in half an hour and never have to deal with one of Dickey's eccentric friends. He could just assume that Dickey had done the right thing and they could get back on the road. When he looked up, Dickey had already knocked at the door.

"Dickey," William began but it was too late. A flimsy wooden door opened behind an only slightly less sturdy screen door. A small old man stood behind it, his long thin frame accentuated by the door's frame.

"What the hell ya'll want?" the old man said. He looked from Dickey to William and back, his right hand fidgeting underneath the left side of his jacket. Dickey had responded in his special charismatic tone, his body changing position, large shoulders slouching forward a little, head bowing.

"Name's Dickey. Dickey Heck. I knew your boy Tom 'fore he went in. I met you back when Tom and I used to go hunting."

"Tom don't live here no more," the man said. His entire head was involved in a wrinkled scowl.

"Yes, sir. We ain't here to see Tom. We want to talk to you," Dickey said slowly. The sudden verbal association with his brother made William very

nervous. They were on this porch as "We." Tom's father hesitated for a second and William knew that his brother would capitalize on this. William noticed the raise in the eyebrows, the tilt of the head, the new melodic rhythm of his voice.

"Like I said, we're real sorry about what happened to Tom and besides that we got some business if you're interested. We'd like to help you out if we could," he said

"What the hell kinda business you boys got? I ain't got nothin' for ya'll," the old man retorted, but Dickey always knew how to talk to people. Leveling his eyebrows and standing up a little straighter he continued.

"We want to buy somethin' from you. We'll pay good for it," Dickey said. Whether the old man had sincerely wanted the transaction to take place or whether Dickey's fluid speech had simply convinced him, William did not know. Regardless, he and his brother were suddenly inside the old man's house. It was decorated sparsely with the most noticeable adornment being a poorly stuffed raccoon on the mantle below an old muzzleloader.

"I ain't got much to sell. I figure you got something specific in mind, though," The old man said putting a small chair between he and Dickey's large frame.

"Yessir," Dickey responded. "I 'member you had a pistol that Tom and I both liked. A big Ruger with a custom handle. I'd like to take it off your hands, if I could."

"I know which gun you want," the old man said, his head cocking to one side. "I could sell it if you gimme enough for it. Hang on," he said. He walked into the back of the house and William remembered being surprised that the small house had more than one complete room. When the old man reentered, he carried a revolver-style pistol with a black rubber grip. Handing it to Dickey for inspection, he said, "Now how much you boys talking about?" Dickey looked down the long barrel out the window near the front door.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "What you want for it?" As he asked this, he swung the barrel around to point at Tom's father.

"Watchit now, boy! That thing's loaded," he said. He put his hands up in front of him and leaned back. William thought about what a small gesture that would be if his brother was serious. Then he looked at his brother and noticed the squint in his eye, the set in his jaw.

"Cut it out, Dickey," William whispered. His brother lifted the end of the gun up towards the ceiling and laughed aloud.

"HAHAHAHA! Hows about twenty bucks, old man. It's more than you make in a month," Dickey said. William watched him without blinking now, trying to guess what he was doing.

"That's a Ruger Security-Six. It's worth more than two hundred dollars," the old man said. William noticed that he had begun pacing a bit as he spoke and that his old thin frame seemed to creak as it moved.

"I ain't paying no damn two-hundred dollars to no old man. I'll pay you twenty or maybe I'll just take it," Dickey responded. William tried not to see what happened as the old man reached into his thin jacket. He tried not to be in that small house as his brother aimed at the old man. He tried not to hear the thumping as the gun went off three quick times in front of him. He tried to be far away, if only in his mind, but he found himself riveted to the floor. Then he was riveted to a parking lot with mud on his boots. Then he was moving quickly until he was at the Gin Mill with the juke-box rumbling out another country song. He watched his brother continue to talk to his new acquaintance in that special way and tried not to let the rumbling in. He just observed. He just watched and listened. It's what he always did. He watched as his brother shot that gun three times. He watched his brother lead him down the long highway into trouble. He watched as his brother took him into bars and across states and into trouble that William had to take care of. He just watched as his brother talked almost everybody into doing his will.

Tonight he watched as the man at the bar didn't like what Dickey was saying. He watched as Dickey noticed the same thing but didn't walk away. The rumbling in William's head began to grow as he watched his brother's failed venture. Heavy subsonics started in his gut and resonated up into his trunk He watched as Dickey raised his voice and swore at the man. The rumbling began to vibrate William's entire frame He watched as the man pushed Dickey and as the bartender began to reach under the bar.

No, William thought. He walked quickly to where Dickey stood and grabbed his brother's shoulder, spinning him around. The bartender paused with his hands under the counter, knowing that these two men had entered together. The rumbling was so loud now that it shook tears out of William's head and made his hold on Dickey even tighter. He watched Dickey's cocky, crooked smile jump to life on his face. Here was William to bail him out again. William raised a large fist up behind his own head, and then shot it towards Dickey. The blow landed just below Dickey's nose and knocked him clean out of William's grip. The rumbling continued to move William as he picked up his brother and walked towards the front door.

"You best get your friend out of here, man," the round bartender roared. "You better get him out of here fore somebody gets shot."

"Mister," William said as he threw Dickey's limp body onto the dirt outside, "I don't even know that man." Then the rumbling stopped.

The Weight of Heat

Nobody was ever able to explain, while the events of Horatio's life unfolded in their time, how Albert's son, Horatio, could have come to wear a cloud above his head. The cloud was not that intangible melancholy which covers the lives of people for whom the shadow of regret is ever present. Rather, the boy Horatio had a small, very real cloud floating above his head. At times it was thin and wispy, white in meteorological repose. At other times, the cloud swelled up in a fury, its dark cumulus form threatening to release a miniature torrent onto the boy's head.

Albert, pronounced in the old French way, had once been very wealthy, before his son was born. His thick mop of wavy black hair hung down past his ears. The brown eyes that he stared through were shiny, as though he was ever on the verge of tears. He was born in New Mexico, but his parents had moved him to eastern Texas while he was very young. They were neither harsh nor especially affectionate to him while he was a child. Still, at thirteen he had run away without much real thought about where he might go or what he could do. He had simply gone away. Soon after he left, he found that he could barely even remember them. Traveling east, he ended up in southern Louisiana where he began work on a sugar-cane plantation. Albert liked the fact that the work did not call for much thought. He had always enjoyed heat but working in the cane

fields, the humid summers of Louisiana and without any shade under which to hide, seemed right to Albert. When other workers, some of whom had been working on plantations such as this one for years, were beaten down by exhaustion, young Albert found that he could keep on working as though nothing in his life made as much sense.

When he turned seventeen, he traveled south again and, lying about his age, got a job off shore. He signed on with a crewman who said that work on an oil-rig was good but hot. Albert did not know exactly what an oil-rig was but he went with the crew anyway. On the boat, he felt the sun marking his skin, the warm spray of the ocean leaving its salt in his hair. He listened to the stories the men told and he learned when to laugh or complain. The trip was short, but he learned quickly.

Many of the men on the rig told Albert that he was crazy. He loved how the heat wrapped him up as he worked. The rig provided even less respite than the cane fields. The steel towers and platforms gave Albert places to sit and look and not speak to anyone, but they rarely came between he and the sun. After a few weeks of work, Albert was told that he should go back to the mainland and see his family. He said calmly that he had no family, then he added that his parents had died when he was very young.

"What about a woman?" his foreman had asked.

"Now, what do I need with a woman," Albert asked, remembering things he had heard the other men say. The foreman had laughed and agreed that Albert could work one more shift, but then he had to go back.

Albert worked through the next shift and the next one. Nearly a year passed before anyone cared how long Albert worked. Albert did not give the matter a moment's thought until a man in a suit came to the rig. Over the course of a few days, the man examined the entire rig. He went up all three towers. He looked in the workers' rooms and he rode around in a boat underneath the rig, peering up into the girders. He spoke with foremen and boat-drivers and workers with black smudges all over their bodies, and he wrote things down on a pad of paper while he talked. Albert watched him sweat in his suit, watched his tie turn deeper red as it soaked up perspiration. On the man's fourth day he had come to talk to Albert. Of course the man discovered that Albert hadn't been away from the rig in many months. He had become very upset and had shouted all sorts of questions at Albert. He started rattling off what he called "company policies" and mentioned a thing called the Jones Act that protected workers like Albert. Albert let the man in the suit talk for a time and then, in silence, he turned to walk away. The man in the suit called after him.

"Excuse me!" he said. "Hey! Mr. uh . . . ," he said, running up behind Albert. They were out on a deck of the rig. The sun reflected off Albert's uncovered, dark shoulders. It pressed down on him and on the man in the hot suit. The man was still yelling; little veins raised up on his sweaty forehead and

neck. Albert looked up at the sun and then, turning slowly, he grabbed the man by his black lapels. Three other workers began screaming and ran towards Albert, grabbing him just before he could fling the other man over the side of the rig. Albert never made a sound. He didn't complain when they locked him up on the rig or when the man came down to yell again and to threaten Albert. He didn't call out into the cool darkness of the rig at night. He didn't offer thanks when his foreman came to put him on a boat bound for the mainland. The sun was many hours away as the foreman talked to him in a low voice.

"You've always been a good man, a good worker here, Albert. You get on this boat and go away from here. They'll think you got out and jumped over, in which case you'd be dead. Anyway, you gotta get out of here and you can't come back." Even in the pitch blackness of night out on water, Albert could see the foreman's hand extended in front of him. Reflexively, he shook it.

"Now go on," the foreman said. Albert was smart enough not to stay in Louisiana for very long upon returning. He found a boat that needed workers and was chartered to go south. Without giving the matter too much thought, he signed on to work, rode out across the Gulf of Mexico, and when the boat landed, he disappeared in the flux of people that always surrounds a harbor.

* * *

He found that he very much enjoyed South America. The climate there was not especially different than that of southern Louisiana, to which he was accustomed. He picked up the language quickly, or that is, he picked up as much of it as he needed to speak. Tan, strong, and not especially tall, he fit in quickly with the local working class.

Travelling south again, he first made money on a beef-cattle ranch in Argentina. His boss there, a pudgy rancher named Luis, never called Albert "gringo" and claimed that the young man could work there as long as he wanted.

"My estancia does good to have a man like you on it, Alberto," he would say. "You work hard without too many questions." Luis claimed that his family had been raising cattle in Argentina since the late 1700's, after Spain moved the capital to Buenos Aires.

"Over two-hundred years, Alberto," he would say. "Over two-hundred years of cattle, and now it is all Luis'. Not bad, eh?" He was uncertain whether it was the sedimentary nature of cattle farming in general, or that of Luis' ranch specifically, but Albert had worked there for only three harvests before moving.

Taking the money he made, he moved to Venezuela and started harvesting lumber. After trying unsuccessfully at no small expense to form his own lumber company, he signed on with the lumber team of another man. His pay was good and he was happy to see that the thickness of the air seemed to discourage conversation. He liked the movement of the team and the heat of the

place. The humidity and the heat. In that muggy climate, he had met and fallen in love with a woman named Carolina de Miranda. Their courtship, such as it was, had not been a long one, as is sometimes the case with young people. He was a popular foreigner with money, and to a girl like Carolina that had been appealing. He had several girlfriends in nearby towns, but Carolina's lure was, for him, uncanny. Her eyes shone like those of a jaguar he had seen one night in the jungle. The cat had been hunting some small animal, but he was never sure what Carolina was hunting. He sometimes heard her voice call out to him through the vaporous ghosts of the forests in which he worked, although she would deny doing anything of the sort when he returned to her. She was wiry and elegant, and he could follow her across a smoky room by scent alone, the warmth of her body and sweet perfume wafting behind her as she walked. He thought of her constantly, even when it was inopportune for him to do so. He knew plainly that he loved her but that the sentiment was probably not reciprocal.

Carolina denied that she was descended from de Miranda, the revolutionary, but the townspeople had their rumors.

"Her family lived first in Coro," an old man had once told Albert after seven beers. "They fled Mexico and landed in the north of Venezuela, in Coro. My cousin was a mistress to Carolina's grandfather, you know." Albert had held the top of his shaggy head in one hand and looked deeply into the old man's rheumy eyes. A few small beads of sweat ran down his nose.

For the next three nights Albert had slept in the jungle while on a logging job. Among the din of the forest animals and lumberers who have only alcohol for comfort, Albert had stared into the night sky and remembered Carolina. During the day, the vines and moss on felled trees reminded him of her black hair, often a little matted in the heat. Walking through the ethereal traps laid by camouflaged spiders, he thought of the fine brown hair on her arms. He found that he was unable to smell her or hear her voice on that trip. After a few days, rain had come and Albert had gone back searching for Carolina. He found her daring a tourist in a thick, heavy shirt to chew coca leaves shipped east from Columbia. Albert convinced Carolina to leave the bar with him, and they stayed in an embrace for two days, parting only for food and fitful sleep, while fierce rains pushed down on the roof of Carolina's house. When the rain stopped, Albert had gotten up for his return to the jungle. Turning, he had watched Carolina breathe softly. Her wild eyes were closed. He thought about her voice in the jungle.

"We should marry," he said, and then swallowing, "Would you marry me?"

Her eyes remained closed. After a few seconds she said, "Yes."

Albert put his clothes on and went out of her house with a two-handed saw and his machete. The team cut trees for nearly a week, and when he returned nobody knew where she was. Going to Carolina's house, he found that it was just as he had left it: used pots in the sink, stray dog on the front porch,

sheets askew on the bed. Albert searched the village but could not find her. The old man who had told him of her family's arrival had no information that day.

"She's gone?" he asked. "Well, she'll return. It is her nature to come and go. Come have a beer with me." Albert thanked him and went away. He wandered for several days, to several different villages, always asking about Carolina. Still no one had anything to tell him. He returned to her home and waited until her scent was no longer present there. Awaking one day, he felt the heat of the place all around him, but he was aware of it in a different way. He thought about it suffocating him under its thickness. It seemed visible in the house, and Albert could find no relief from it. He was sweating profusely as he stepped out onto Carolina's porch. The stray dog made gurgling sounds in its sleep. A man from the logging crew came walking by and called to Albert.

"Hey, we got a contract for a big forest up in the hills. Lots of work, good money. You should come." Albert thought of how much the jungle usually calmed him. About the dense, misty air and the silence before a massive tree fell to the ground, dead. Now, he felt nothing for that place.

"Yeah, wait and I'll walk with you," he said.

As they walked, the man talked interminably about a woman he was sleeping with in the village. She was plump and a good cook. Her coarse hair scratched his face as they slept. Albert watched strange feet beneath him kick up dust in the road He heard none of the man's words.

The job was a good one. There were many acres of old trees to be felled. He worked without thinking about the motion of the saw. It moved back and forth, back and forth, the tree spewing out shards of live wood. After a time, the tree would lurch towards the wound in its trunk. Its back would snap under its own weight and, like a disjointed pillar of Heaven, it would fall. It would claw at nearby trees, oblivious bystanders, as if trying to stay upright, but none of its fellows lifted a branch to help. As it crashed to the ground a cheer would erupt from the men and the nearby jungle animals. Albert would see this ritual without once feeling anything for it. Then he would move on to another tree.

At night, the men on the crew drank heavily and some of them tried to contend with Albert's melancholia. "Alberto, my cousin she is very beautiful and I could. . . " they said. Or "Alberto, she is one woman among the millions surrounding us. You should just. . ." but Albert would have none of it. As the trees breathed out into the night air, the jungle was filled with thick, damp mist. Looking up, Albert discovered that he could not even see the stars.

The job was, as Albert had first been told, a very big one: two weeks. The team worked constantly as long as they could see. They cut when it rained and when the sun burned their skin. If all of the trees in one area were gone, they hiked quickly to another and immediately began working. Albert's work flowed with the smooth constancy of habit. He cut and moved, and then again and again. After the two weeks, he received a very large sum of money, the largest

among the crew. Without speaking to the foreman or any of his fellow workers, he left the jungle.

As he walked back into Carolina's village, his hand was a tight fist around the money. He knew the crumpled bills were leading him directly to a bar. He tried to smother the notion that he should go north to Caracas and sail away from this place, perhaps to a cooler climate. He did not want to think about how much sense that made. No, instead he would take this money and see if it could kill him with decadence. Perhaps that meant as much to him now as anything else he could do. He wasn't sure.

Pushing open the decaying door of a bar, he saw Carolina sitting at a table near the door. Her hands were flattened out, palms down, on the table. She was not surrounded by people. There was no auspicious glow around her. She just sat. Albert looked at her and she at him. He tried to breathe without moving, turned and walked toward the bar.

"Albert," she called. He froze for a second and then continued walking.

"One minute," he said over his shoulder, not knowing if he meant it. He ordered one beer, finished it quickly, and ordered another. He turned and saw Carolina sitting exactly as she had been when he came in. He walked over to her table and stood above her. She raised her eyes to see him and he sat down quickly.

"Albert, let me tell you something before you speak," she began with an uncharacteristically soft voice. Albert felt his throat constrict but he swallowed

hard. He looked at the bottle in his hands as if only now remembering its use. Beads of sweat rolled down its smooth side. As she spoke again, he held the beer to his lips but did not drink.

"Albert, I had to go to my family's home for a time," she said. He realized that he did not know her family still lived. "They are my only link to sanity right now and I needed to speak with them even though I knew that they might never forgive me."

Albert felt a little dizzy and wondered if he could ever be Carolina's link to anything.

"Forgive you? What would they need to forgive you for?"

"For the marriage, Albert. They do not know you, and you are a foreigner. All of this has come about so quickly." His hand tightened around the wet glass bottle.

At that point, Albert heard exactly what she said. The woman he was convinced he loved sat across from him, her wavy black hair down behind her shoulders, the scent of her floating towards him. He did not feel the need to stammer out questions or challenge her words. Instead, breathing in slowly and then exhaling, he asked, "And what did they say?"

* * *

The ceremony was a small one with some of Carolina's family in the front pews of a large Catholic church. Many of her family (two of three brothers and all of her mother's relatives) would not attend any marriage of Carolina to an American, but the young couple had little concern for that at the time. They recited the appropriate vows and kissed in the name of God when given the opportunity. Then they went back to Carolina's house for their honeymoon.

At first, life after the marriage flowed quickly and without incident, bad or good. Albert worked as he always had and made money quickly. When he was home, the pair made love quickly. Occasionally, he would come home and Carolina would be gone. A few times, he made a point of being gone, back to the jungle or fishing or anywhere, before she had a chance to see him. After all, he reasoned, he was still a man who could come and go as he pleased. His love of the heat had come back to him and he made a point of remembering the times in his life when that love had been the only one he needed.

Sometimes when they were together, they spoke. At other times they did not. Carolina's eyes sometimes glinted like those of a predator in a zoo, as though any violence had been abated but the propensity might always be near the surface of awareness. She would cook, or not, as the mood struck her. Her house was small and Albert was often gone, so she did not really clean. Albert rarely mentioned these things to her. Best, he thought, to simply be happy with her nearness. He never asked her where she had been.

Nearly a year passed in this fashion when Carolina told Albert that she was pregnant. Albert was elated. He bragged to all of the people he knew and to many that he did not know.

"My beautiful wife is going to have our baby," he would tell people in the bar. "Lovely Carolina is getting bigger every day," he might say on his way to the jungle. "Have you seen Carolina? She is very pregnant now," he could be heard asking someone in town. On occasion he might just say, "Have you seen Carolina?"

Towards the end of her seventh month, she was too large to be very mobile at all and Albert stayed home more often than he went to cut trees. While her pregnancy was relatively easy, as easy as one can be in sub-equatorial heat, Albert wanted to be around even if she was too proud to ask him for help.

The boy was born a little prematurely, but despite that he was strong and healthy. Even as an infant his dark eyes glittered from within, as though he was forever on the verge of revealing a secret. Very quickly, Horatio seemed highly intelligent to his parents. He would wander around naked in the warm humidity near their small house and call out the names of things he saw. Albert said that his boy had a natural affinity for language and would point out that he was speaking in broken sentences at less than a year. He learned both Spanish and English quickly but never got the two confused. At two years old his high, lyrical voice could be heard singing or talking to no one around the house. His black hair, like that of his father, tended to attract dirt and damp but he never

seemed to mind. His mother would come out onto the front porch to advise or admonish. "Horatio, do not pull the dog's tail," or perhaps ,"Horatio come back from the edge of the jungle." Albert loved the fact she almost never let the boy out of her sight.

Then, one day, Horatio was playing outside while his mother sat inside. She dozed in the languid afternoon and upon waking, she called out for her son.

"Horatio," she said softly to the house. There was an urgency in her then, a need to find Horatio although she did not know why. She rose and walked out onto the front porch. "Horatio," she called again, this time more loudly. Horatio did not answer her call then or in the hours afterwards as she ran through the village looking for him. Albert returned that evening and Carolina told him that Horatio was gone.

"How do you mean 'gone'?" he asked. He was calm but aware of how dangerous their world could be to a young child.

"Albert, I can't find him anywhere. I have been through the village a dozen times; I have looked in every house and yelled at every face I saw. I have prayed and cursed and pulled my hair and I can't find him."

Night had come and Albert convinced Carolina to stay home that night while he went into the only place that hadn't been searched: the jungle. He wandered in the place that so often provided him with intervals of repose. Now though, he shook as he walked. Sweat poured down his face even as the night air continued to cool. He searched for what felt like miles and called out as he

went. He yelled Horatio's name in front of him and turned his head up into the trees and yelled it again. He heard distant monkeys howl and cackle in protest, but he did not hear his son's voice. Still he searched.

Exhausted, he returned to the house just after dawn. The heat of the day had already begun to expand around him, but his body had no more sweat to give. His face and arms were scratched and dirty from running through the dark jungle. He walked through the front door and saw Carolina slumped over a chair. He knelt down beside her and she stirred quickly with a gasp of air.

"Albert, where is my son?" she asked. Her shape blurred in Albert's vision as though he were looking at her through distance and heat. All of his energy gone, he collapsed on the floor next to Carolina and the chair.

* * *

Albert awoke without a sound. Darkness was a warm, liquid presence in the room with him. Its hungry heat seeped in around him and pressed down on him. He sat up quickly, sputtering out half sentences in a mixture of his language and Carolina's. A slender human silhouette stood in the doorway but was just another facet of the darkness already in the room.

"Carolina?"

"He is gone, Albert." Her voice was filled with a soft menace, raspy and resigned to loss. "You have been asleep all day. One of your fellow workers

came by to ask about Horatio and helped me get you into your bed." He saw her shadowy outline turn around in the doorway. "He is gone," she said.

Albert rubbed his eyes and tried to suppress the vertigo of confusion. In his half-waking he said, "I dreamt of a huge tree in the jungle that was covered in moss. Deep green moss, as thick as two fingers. If the jungle has a heart, surely that is where it is kept."

"Albert," Carolina began, emphasizing the last syllable in frustration.

He continued. "A man came up out of the ground, just rose up out of the moss head first, and started chasing me away from the tree. I wouldn't stand and fight him. Instead I ran as fast as I could away from him. I couldn't see his face." He heard Carolina suck in a soft breath. "As I ran, branches from other trees reached in and down towards me. They were trying to stop me, I think. They tore at my clothes and face and arms but I kept running. I got near an opening in the jungle but just before I reached it, I fell over something. At first, I knew it was a body but when I looked back, it was a stone. A little stone, smaller than my hand. I could hear the man running quickly through the jungle. I picked up the stone and waited. 'Stop,' I yelled at him. 'Get away from me,' but still he came. He was almost on top of me so I threw the rock. It was little, but it hit him right in the head and he collapsed. I turned around to look at the clearing I had been running towards and when I turned back,"

"When you turned back he was gone," Carolina interrupted. She stressed every other word and flailed her hands around, mocking Albert.

"No," he continued in a soft voice. "When I turned back, the old man was the body I had tripped over. He was lying underneath my feet and he wasn't breathing. There was a wound on his head where the stone hit him."

Carolina breathed in and out, turned and left the doorway.

The next two days were the longest Albert could remember. He hardly ate. He slept in fitful bursts that were dreamless. There was no joy in his work so he did not return to the jungle, the place that he knew had swallowed up his son. Carolina was despondent but seemed resigned to the loss. She spoke to no one, including Albert. Her face was swollen and red from tears, and she breathed in haggard gasps. A few times, Albert tried to comfort her but she would have nothing to do with him. If he placed his hands on her shoulders, she turned quickly and let his touch fall away from her. When he said her name, she looked at him as though he spoke a strange language that it was not her business to know. The was a panic beginning to well up in his chest that he had never felt. Yes, Horatio was gone, and now Carolina was leaving him without going anywhere.

On the second day, as Carolina stood out on the porch facing the jungle, Albert decided that it was time to leave. To leave the jungle, all of Venezuela, the heat. While watching her through a window, he had become certain of the decision. He would go and put the memory of this place away, in a place inside his heart where he need never touch it. Where it could decay from disuse and fade away. The time he had spent here had given him some happiness but, he

could admit, also a great deal of pain. Did Carolina even love him now? Had she ever?

No matter, he thought. I will go and start somewhere new, somewhere north of here where the heat does not press down so heavily.

There was a silence then in the room with him. A stillness that seeped up from the ground and in through the walls. That surrounded him and his new decision but blocked all outside sounds from him. He took a single step towards the front door. That is when Carolina began to scream. Then Albert was running through the house towards her.

* * *

Horatio had simply wandered back up to the house as though he had never been gone. Albert stood beside Carolina, who continued to scream and watched the boy walk towards them. Horatio looked right and left, picked at one of his ears, kicked a small stone. Perhaps nothing had ever been wrong, nothing would ever be demanded of the boy. Albert felt tears welling up and thought at first that the soft gray blur above his son's head was some trick of his watery eyes. Then Carolina stopped screaming and she saw it too. Floating above Horatio was a fuzzy, gray-white, translucent mass. It was only slightly larger than Horatio's head, but from a distance it seemed to have no definite edges or boundaries, but as Horatio got closer, Albert saw that it rolled slowly

above the boy's head from one rounded shape into another. As though driven by tiny winds, the shape floated and boiled over itself but was always centered above Horatio. At first, Albert felt stupid for thinking it, but it looked to him like a tiny cloud. He had seen fragile clouds rise up from sections of the dampest jungle and from his own breath in the winters of his past life in America. But here was his son, his only son who had been missing for two days, with a very real cloud sequestered above his head.

Albert stepped off the porch and walked over towards his son. Carolina, as though only now realizing that Horatio actually stood before her, leapt towards the boy and snatched him into her arms before Albert could get to him. She kissed his face and said his name but glared fearfully at the cloud, her eyes wide and watchful. Albert reached over and touched his son's head. Then, reaching up, he passed his hand through the cloud. It was cool to the touch and left tiny beads of water on Albert's skin. Horatio, for his part, was oblivious to the tragedy that had been averted. He looked around a bit, then at his parents. He smiled at Carolina and the cloud nearly dissipated. Its rolling form spread out into thin wispy strands of vapor. The white strands continued to flow and replenish themselves while they cast a minor shadow on Horatio's face. Albert looked at Carolina and moved as though he might speak.

"Hush," she said. "Do not speak to me right now." She watched the cloud roll above her son's face and, as it did, it shifted back into a thick cumulus ball and darkened.

"What am I to do with our son now, Albert?" Carolina said.

After pausing for a second Albert felt anger well up. "How the hell should I know?" he yelled. He was surprised to hear his own voice so loudly. "I have never seen anything like this. I don't know what it is or what to do." As he spoke, the cloud raised up into a shape slightly like an anvil and further darkened. It was now almost a greenish-black. Horatio seemed unaware of his parents' words or of the atmospheric calamity above him.

Carolina bombarded Albert with loud questions regarding his inability to find a little boy who had obviously been nearby. Albert retorted in a calm voice but with spiteful words about how a more attentive mother would not have let a youngster wander off into the jungle. Only when the rain started did their argument end. The cloud above Horatio gave a small rustle like static and began to pelt his entire head with diminutive rain-drops. Carolina gently set the boy down on the ground and backed away from him. She frantically tried to wipe the water off her shirt. Horatio held out his arms and ran towards her, and for the first time Albert could remember, she seemed genuinely conflicted. She held out an open palm to Horatio gesturing him to stop.

"Wait, baby. Don't now. Stay there for a second. It's ok," she said but the pain in her face was obvious. She wiped her nose and turned away quickly when Albert took a step towards her. "It's ok," she said again with her back turned. Her voice shook as she said the words.

For the next few days, the three barely spoke. That is, Albert and Carolina did not speak. Horatio seemed to his parents to have all but lost the ability. He would stare at anyone who addressed him (mother, father any one of a slew of befuddled doctors) as though he simply could not speak their language. His face displayed no emotion of any sort. Conversely, the cloud in its rolling way was relatively communicative. As Horatio sat in the main room of his parents' house that first night of his return, his parents had a great argument. Carolina screamed at Albert in a rapid barrage of Spanish and English, while Albert rubbed his head and glared at her. He spoke back to her in terse but hateful words. This lasted for some time, and Horatio sat watching without revealing any sentiment. But above his head, the cloud turned a deep green-grey and rained. Later, after mopping up water, Albert stood on the porch watching the night.. He walked through the house and into Horatio's room. The boy was asleep and, as he dreamed, the cloud thinned or expanded, lightening and darkening. The next day began with more harsh words between Albert and Carolina, followed by more diminutive storms above the boy's head. Albert thought he smelled burning hair at one point and wondered if tiny lightning might have struck Horatio. Still the couple fought.

Albert did not go to work the next day or the one following that. He sat in the bar that he knew and drank and thought about what to do. Who was he bound to? Why did he owe Carolina in this way? Horatio's condition could be a curse from God or from the jungle. Certainly it was not Albert's fault. He went

home and tried not to speak to anyone. The next day he returned to the bar and then came home. He ate very little and vomitted liquid.

The next morning Carolina told Albert that she was going to her parents, that maybe they had been right about this marriage. He said that they had been right but not for the reasons she thought.

"What does that even mean?" she asked.

He paused. "Nothing. It means nothing." Albert suddenly felt far away from her. Not in some esoteric, romantic way. He felt as though the two were physically hundreds of miles apart. That they had never met. A slow, smoldering malice began to burn in his stomach. Had they wronged him? Yes, perhaps they had.

Horatio looked up at Albert and walked in his direction. Albert looked at the boy and then at Carolina. He suddenly felt that this place was not his, that he did not belong. Who was this strange little boy with a crown of clouds? Who was this woman who could not let him see her cry? He watched them for a few seconds more and then, turning slowly, walked into the house. Picking up his logging tools, he walked back out of the house. Horatio was being rained on but less significantly than he had in the last few days. Carolina had turned towards the boy but Albert could see that she was wiping her eyes. He watched the ground do nothing beneath his feet. Albert began to speak but realized that he did not know what to say to this woman or this boy.

Then he walked into the jungle.

Albert did not mention anything about Horatio's cloud to the men he worked with. He did not say anything about the boy returning or the fact that he felt nothing about it. He said nothing about what he thought was a growing apathy towards Carolina, that this woman who had once called out to him over great distances through the jungle now was another face in his life but one for whom he registered little if any feeling. After he had been cutting trees for some amount of time, he was not sure how long, he looked up at the sun, but he looked back down quickly. He felt the heat of the day push his shoulders and head forward. It thrust down his back and in on his knees. Sweat poured from his brow and his armpits. His felt the warm claminess of his arms, his crotch, his feet in their thick leather boots. The trees of the jungle seemed to spread farther apart, allowing even more of the heavy brilliance to pour down onto him. He found himself wondering how the jungle, its wood and brush and animals, could resist bursting into flames under the pressure of this sun. He marveled at the fact that his own skin did not burn off the bone from this exposure. People around him said his name and reached out to touch him but he did not feel them. He heard them; he knew they were near but he felt nothing but the heat as it pressed down on him with its immense weight. His breath became ragged, and he found that he was unable to speak. Albert fell against a great tree next to him, slid down its warm bark and onto the ground. Looking up, he realized that the men were now miles away. He couldn't hear their voices. He thought, just for a

second, about how grateful he was that the hot sun had stopped shining down on him.

* * *

Carolina found out about Albert's death the day after it happened. When the men came to tell her, they found her sitting on the floor of her room. They looked at Horatio, a wispy cloud floating above him, and crossed themselves. Carolina said nothing when they mentioned Albert's name. Her arms hung limply by her side. She felt as though someone had chained her to this floor, this house, this place surrounded by green, leafy nothingness.

The next day she took Horatio back to a local doctor. Of course he could not explain the strange little cloud above the boy's head. He brought in several of his fellow doctors and made phone calls and stroked his dark beard. It seemed benign enough, but better safe than sorry so he still wanted to keep Horatio for a day or two and run some tests. He reminded Carolina that he had asked her to bring him in when she and her husband first discovered Horatio's predicament. Carolina said nothing to him. She did not *try* to speak. For her, there were no words to give to this doctor or to anyone. She *was* trapped here. There was not now nor would there ever be any escape for her. She turned and walked out of the doctor's office, oblivious to what the said to her, to his pleas, to

her own name as the doctor said it. She walked out into the street, past men and women who held her in this place. She spoke to none of them.

Afterwards, people would say that her eyes went dead right there on the street. That they took on an grayish hue and stared out into nothingness, like a sad toy's eyes. There would never be any more words from her for anyone. Much later, the men in the village talked about how she had once been beautiful before her son came back from the jungle and about how perhaps her spirit had simply left her body, maybe squeezed out by pressure from the sun and the air around their hot city.

VITA

John Michael Hart, Jr. was born in 1974 in Monroe, Louisiana. He attended Neville High School in Monroe, but graduated from The Louisiana School for Math, Science, and the Arts in Natchitoches, Louisiana in 1992. Then he moved to Memphis, Tennessee to receive his Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Rhodes College After graduating in 1996, he moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana for just over a year. In 1997, he moved to Knoxville, Tennessee and began pursuing his Master of Arts degree in 1998. He graduated from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in August of 2000 with his Master of Arts in English.