Creatures of Peach Blossom and Snow

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Creatures of Peach Blossom and Snow

Three stories and a poem

A Senior Honors Project
In Partial Fulfillment of
Bachelor of Arts with University Honors in English
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Randi Shaé Caldwell
May 2005

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Lisi Schoenbach
English Department
To my grandmother
  who remains, in my mind,
  the perfection of Southern womanhood

And to the tattoo artist in Memphis
  who immortalized her on my brother’s chest

  *I thank my God upon every remembrance of you...*
  *Philippians 1:3*
Abstract

This project is a creative attempt to rectify problems and deficiencies perceived in contemporary Southern literature. The critical introduction offers a brief overview of the history of Southern literature, emphasizing the problems arising with postmodernism. Most importantly, postmodern Southern literature has lost the deep sense of place and time that has characterized the genre historically. The introduction denies the claim proposed be some critics that a distinct Southern culture and identity no longer exist, arguing instead that the region below the Mason-Dixon Line is still very vibrant and very unique and continues to wield an incredible influence on its inhabitants, especially those inhabitants who are also writers. Finally, three short stories and a poem are presented in order to prove that argument. The goal is to present contemporary creative narratives that reveal the influence of a postmodern consumer culture, but also the deep and powerful traditions of the South. In general, the works tell the stories of three generations of Southern women within a family. An appendix is attached to explain more fully the family relationships and the chronology of events.
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Introduction

It may seem peculiar or even inappropriate to open an academic thesis with a dedication, but I always swore that my first piece of creative fiction would be inscribed to my grandmother. Of course, I usually hoped that inscription would appear in a published work, but at some point during the course of this project, I surrendered any such delusions. This, then, constitutes not only my first attempt at fiction, but also my last, and therefore, I dedicate it to the woman who inspired it, simply by living, and facilitated it, by making me believe in the viability of my fantasy. Thankfully, she abandoned this corporeal realm several years ago and is thus spared the disappointment of realizing that her confidence in my abilities was misplaced.

But there is something else; I am also proud of this collection, not because I believe the stories or poem to be particularly good, but because I poured myself into them. I begun this incredible endeavor with the naive assumption that because I could read, assess, and criticize, I could write. I thought that if I could simply correct the failures I had identified in previous narratives, if I could compensate for the deficiencies I had perceived in others’ writing, I could produce a timeless, original masterpiece. Not only were my illusions of literary grandeur swiftly obliterated, but I soon discovered that my chances of creating anything even deserving the title of “literature” were minimal. In my opinion, only one of the four pieces included here, the second in the sequence, comes close to deserving that title, and even it falls short. Yet, I am proud of them all. Of all my accomplishments, in fact, I am most proud of this project, not the finished work, which is mediocre at best, but the process that produced it, the sweat and tears and determination that made me finish it. Once, in explaining why he liked The Sound and the Fury better than any of his other novels, Faulkner said, “Since none of my work has met my own
standards, I must judge it on the basis of that one which caused me the most grief and anguish, as
the mother loves the child who became the thief or murderer more than the one who became the
priest” (Meriwether and Millgate 244). Similarly, this thesis is the cruel, iniquitous spawn of my
imagination, and I love it, not because it turned out well, but because it has wrenched my poor
parental heart relentlessly, without mercy or remorse.

The inspiration behind this project festered in my mind for sometime before I committed
to it, prompting me to focus my undergraduate studies largely on twentieth century American
literature. Over the last four years, I have found that the richest, most enduring works of
American fiction often stem from the literary traditions of the old Confederate states.
Southerners are incessantly ridiculed for their ignorance and cultural isolation, both of which are
undeniably products of an underdeveloped economy; yet, the greatest texts in the American
literary canon have sprung from the imaginations of Southern writers. It has been claimed that
the poet possesses a degree of sensitivity unrivaled by the novelist. I would argue, however, that
the venerated writers of Southern fiction may share the poet’s unusual sensitivity, by which is
meant an uncommon capacity for emotion, a level of feeling that ordinary authors of prose
cannot achieve. But why? What is it about the American South that heightens the artist’s
senses, that allows him to feel things so acutely, and often so painfully?

The early modernists, the writers of the Southern Renaissance, believed that the land
itself possessed some intrinsic, indefinable quality, very much like guilt or pride, with which its
inhabitants become infected. For Faulkner, that quality is an invisible and eternal force, usually
associated with evil, that seems to seethe from the very ground, as if the rich, black, Delta soil
had become saturated with the guilt, sin, and hatred of a civilization, the blood of the undefended
innocents. Although defeatism is a common theme in Renaissance literature, not all Southern
modernists were as thoroughly fatalistic as Faulkner. Nevertheless, they all agreed that life below the Mason-Dixon Line was a peculiar and unique experience, the effects of which were not easily escapable. The Southerner, and especially the Southern writer, could flee from Dixie, but he could never eradicate its memory, the stain it left on his mind, the scar it left on his heart. Theirs was an intimately reflective genre, an astoundingly progressive art form characterized by a perpetual backward glance.

In the second half of the twentieth century, a new movement emerged in response to modernism’s perceived failures. The movement, rather uncreatively dubbed postmodernism, denounced the idea that language could be used to reveal truth or even to convey meaning. The modernists had attempted to forge a new identity, especially in the post-Reconstruction South, using the epistemological tools available to them. For the postmodernists, this attempt reduced truth to a linguistic formula, and they began to doubt not only the ability of words to convey meaning, but also the reality or comprehensibility of abstractions signified by words, such as any sort of cohesive unity among groups of individuals. For the Southern writer, these doubts translated into a loss of identity. Authors like Barry Hannah and Bobbie Ann Mason claim that popular culture has usurped tradition, and a distinctly Southern society no longer exists, resulting in an abrupt and deliberate severing from the past. For the postmodernists, history exists in chunks, discreet blocks of time, unrelated to and unaffected by one another. While I think the Southern writers of the late twentieth century have been immensely successful in depicting the general human condition in an increasingly globalized world marked by homogeneity, multinational corporations, and suburban sprawl, they neglect the unique position of the American South as a vibrant, if somewhat impoverished and vulnerable, subculture. My goal then, in the following pages, is to present a contemporary southern artistic vision that is doubly
afflicted by the concerns of decay, stagnation, and depersonalization that plague the postmodern condition in general and by the more peculiarly southern fear of perpetual cultural disintegration, thus retaining the modernists' obsession with place and time. Somewhere between Faulkner and Barry Hannah, a crucial element of Southern identity has been lost, and I have attempted to recapture it, hopefully proving that the history and traditions of the American South are still profoundly influential in the development of the region's inhabitants and especially its writers and that a distinct, uniquely Southern identity still exists in a fragmented, self-conscious, postmodern world.

The absence of the South, literally and symbolically, constitutes the fundamental deficiency in the fiction of contemporary Southern writers. In the "cultural helplessness" of a "fluid, plural, uncentered, and ineradicably untidy" postmodern mass-consumer society (Banks, Billings, and Tice 291), regional distinctions and attachments seem to have become obsolete. Postmodern sensibility Rejects generalized "truth claims" or metanarratives that interpret the South as a "coherent region" with a distinct culture because such universalistic assertions might "repress multiplicity and diversity" (ibid 292-3); in the process of doing so, postmodernism obliterates the collective voice and denies the possibility of community. By deconstructing "falsely unified conceptions" of regional, communal, or familial identities based on tradition and personal relationships, postmodernism isolates the individual mentally, emotionally, and temporally. The postmodern worldview debunks the "illusions" of continuity and meaningful interconnectedness among individuals. But rather than exposing the multiplicity and diversity of humankind, the brilliant dazzling "kaleidoscopic view of culture and history" it promised (ibid 291), postmodernism actually homogenizes cultures and societies by raping individuals of the means to develop personal identities in relation to one another. As "privileged discourses,"
metanarratives undoubtedly impose an arbitrary power structure that favors the dominant perspective and marginalizes minorities (ibid 292), but the deconstructed postmodern condition is equally bleak because it alienates and marginalizes everyone and precludes meaningful social relations of any kind; it is solitary, peripheral, and often hopelessly nihilistic. If postmodernism frees the individual from the oppressive "unitary notions" of collectivism, it does so at the expense of personal identity. By eradicating the "old 'self' of humanism," which had naively celebrated individual autonomy, epistemological certainty, and "imperial self-presence," the postmodern condition deconstructs the myth of personal identity, severing "all ties to a convenient and secure anchorage of 'selfhood' and an unproblematized 'experience'" (Town 118). The society that remains after the corrosive effects of postmodern fragmentation, dispersion, and deconstruction, is characterized by neither diversity nor plurality; it is a stale, skeptical, monolithic consumer culture acutely aware of its own redundancy, irrelevance, and vanity.

Although the depravity, isolation, and technological advances of the postmodern era have produced countless works of art that are innovative, poignant, and often fiercely humorous, the historical and cultural discontinuity that accompanies postmodernism has been particularly problematic for Southern writers. Southern writers, whether they acknowledge it or not, stem from a long literary tradition of remembering and venerating the past. In a deconstructed postmodern world, however, they are taught that the past no longer matters. Its institutions and "falsely unified conceptions" have been razed, annihilated because they were antiquated and oppressive; its ancient traditions and values have expired, disintegrated as industrialization and modern progress made them obsolete. Contemporary writers in the Deep South, ever wary of "romanticizing the quaint old days" (Hill 72), have come to terms with the death of their
ancestral civilization, it seems, and espoused the tenets of postmodern rootlessness, burying
Faulkner's South with appropriate pomp under a colossal magnolia tree. The transition is more
difficult, however, for the Appalachian writer because he was never heir to an established literary
heritage; he has no tangible relic of a forgotten age to bury in some symbolical ritual. In fact,
postmodern anthropologists tell him that the conception of a historical mountain culture that he
believes himself to be the descendent of is all lie, a falsely unified "mythic system" that never
really existed (Banks, Billings, and Tice 293). In one of the earliest postmodern studies of
Appalachian societies, Henry Shapiro deconstructs the mythic "idea of Appalachia," concluding
that the misconception and misrepresentation of Appalachia as a "coherent region" populated by
"a distinct people with distinct and describable characteristics owes much to the stereotyped
tradition of writing about life in the southern mountains that originated in late nineteenth-century
local color fiction" as well as in the accounts of Northern missionaries (ibid). Thus, the vibrant
spirit of the mountains is reduced to "local color," and fiction is blamed for the proliferation of a
fabricated, imaginary cultural identity, which, because it never existed, the contemporary writer
cannot appropriate, relinquish, or move past.

The threat of cultural extinction is certainly not new to Southern writers. When John
Pendleton Kennedy published his first novel, *Swallow Barn*, in 1832, which mourned the passing
of an idealized and symbolic Southern Plantation, the apocalyptic fear of imminent destruction
was already a well-established theme in Dixieland literature. Even at the height of the
antebellum period, Southern writers like Kennedy were consumed by the fear that their beloved
and peculiar way of life was beginning to erode. This fear intensified alongside the abolitionist
cause and the threat of Northern aggression and finally culminated in the South's secession from
the Union. For four long years, this fear served as the driving force behind the Confederacy's
resistance, not only rallying troops and bolstering military morale, but also sustaining the women and children and elderly men who stood in arched doorways and on columned porches and courageously greeted Sherman and his band of arsonists with a curtsy or a bow. During Reconstruction, when it seemed the long anticipated nightmare had finally materialized, the fear subsided and was replaced by a proud resignation and the burden of defeat. Interestingly, Southerners did not write during this period, at least not anything worth remembering, according to H.L. Mencken (Jones 276) and even many contemporary critics (Manning 38). Their subject matter, their symbolic Eden, was gone.

Despite an acute and sometimes exaggerated awareness of its own transience, however, the South is and has always been resilient, or at least stubborn. Although the Civil War had decisively crushed the myth of the Plantation Paradise, the South soon developed a new identity for itself, built on several more “peculiar institutions,” including racial segregation, sexual discrimination, and the Jeffersonian ideal of a white, Christian, patriarchal, and agrarian society. In the new South, the image of the old Plantation became a symbol of traditional Southern values. The genteel character that had been confined to the aristocracy in the antebellum period was now extended to any white citizen of Dixie, including poor whites. Although the war had been fought to defend a way of life enjoyed by only a few, all Southerners shared in its devastation, an experience that united them with each other by distinguishing and separating them from the rest of the country (Millichap and Sullivan 40). The Southern Plantation, it seems, was much more powerful as a symbolic image than it had ever been as a reality. The resulting “cult of the Lost Cause” inculcated all Southerners with the belief that they belonged to a distinct and even morally superior society that had been victimized and ravished by a malicious and debauched enemy, Northern industrial capitalism (Potter 469). This new, expanded
generation of Southern cavaliers was as proud and impervious as their fathers and grandfathers had been, and soon the old lurking fear of destruction resurfaced. Two new threats emerged in the early twentieth century, increased industrial modernization and the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement, and both incited and revived the Sons and Daughters of the Confederacy, sparking a wave of literary and artistic activity in the South commonly referred to as the Southern Renaissance.

Although many critics have argued quite persuasively that this revival actually began much earlier, with the works of Ellen Glasgow and Kate Chopin, for instance (Manning 39), the Southern Renaissance is usually defined as an “upsurge of literary and artistic activity” bracketed by the two World Wars (Simpson 231), with the Nashville “Fugitives and Agrarians at its head and William Faulkner at its center” (Manning 38). Allen Tate, one of the fathers, perhaps not of the Renaissance, but at least of a “modern literature by Southern white men” (ibid 39), famously described the movement as the South’s reemergence into the world. According to Tate, after World War I, “the South re-entered the world – but gave a backward glance as it stepped over the border: that backward glance gave us the Southern renascence, a literature conscious of the past in the present” (262). That consciousness of the past that Tate perceived in the work of his contemporaries could also be called an intense nostalgia for “the quaint old days” (Hill 72). As the Renaissance writers glanced backward, they were reminded of what seemed to be the inherent transience of the Southern dream, and they feared losing what remained of their shattered heritage. Tate and his Vanderbilt colleagues articulated this fear in their now famous Agrarian Manifesto, *I’l1 Take My Stand*, “which appeared in 1930 under the anonymous authorship of ‘Twelve Southerners’” (Millichap and Sullivan 39). The South had been attacked, ravished, and defeated; its institutions had been demolished, its way of life overturned, but it was
still the South. It still had its own distinctly unique character, which the Agrarians were determined to protect.

For the “Twelve Southerners,” the unique, and in their minds superior, character of the South was the direct result of the region’s agrarian tradition, which was itself the direct result of the land’s natural fertility, perhaps explaining Faulkner’s obsession with the power of the soil as an almost supernatural force. As they described in their introduction, “the culture of the soil is the best and most sensitive of vocations, and therefore it should have the economic preference and enlist the maximum number of workers” (ibid 41). *I’ll Take My Stand* was not an operative proposal, however, but a philosophical defense, which opposed New South proponents like Henry Grady on ideological rather than economic grounds (ibid 43-44). The Agrarians defended the ideal of Jeffersonian egalitarianism against the twentieth century “onslaught of commercialism, consumerism, and industrial capitalism” (ibid 41) because they believed that only a society built on and sustained by agriculture could “engender naturally (rather than by artificial stimulation) order, leisure, character, and stability, and...also be aesthetically enjoyable” (Davidson 309). They were taking their stand against modern industrialism not because they opposed progress, but because they feared the disintegration of their culture.

Industrialization of the South, they argued, would destroy its distinctive character by devastating its landscape and dehumanizing its people. The industrialized New South would be as bleak and unsatisfying as Eliot’s “Wasteland.” Robert Penn Warren identified the Agrarian’s “intense disgust with the spiritual disorder of modern life” as their primary motivation for publishing *I’ll Take My Stand* in a poetic, if somewhat depressing, description of modernity: “You have no individual sense of responsibility [in an industrialized modern world] and no awareness that the individual has a past and a place...for me it was a protest...against certain things: against a kind
of dehumanizing and disintegrative effect on your notion of what an individual person could be in the sense of a loss of your role in society” (quoted in Millichap and Sullivan 44). The South had changed drastically since John Pendleton Kennedy defended it in *Swallow Barn*, but the perception of its continuity and the fear of losing it still inspired its writers.

Of course, the nostalgia that consumed the writers of the antebellum and Renaissance periods was not exactly healthy, wholesome, or shared by all Southerners; the society they mourned the passing of was certainly one of inequality, discrimination, and oppression. But there is more to the Southern character than racism and patriarchal hierarchy. Even those “lost or forgotten authors,” mostly women and blacks, who are excluded from the traditionally constricted Renaissance canon (Davis 15), share with their Agrarian brothers a deep sense of place and an intense connection to their Southern heritage. Throughout the South’s rich literary history, black and female writers have courageously attacked the arbitrary and oppressive institutional ideologies of their societies (Manning 41), but they never intended or hoped to destroy Southern culture; rather, their goal was to modify it, to enlarge and broaden it and make it more complete and inclusive. In fact, many such writers were just as troubled by industrialism and modernity as the Agrarians were.

The fundamental change that has occurred in Southern literature with the emergence of postmodernism is that writers no longer fear cultural disintegration. Authors like Barry Hannah, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Kaye Gibbons essentially claim that there is no longer a distinct Southern culture to lose because it has become “homogenized into a more generic American culture” (Town 130). Interestingly, they are not bothered by this loss; in fact, they rarely even mention it. At some point, it seems, while Allen Tate and Donald Davidson were busy worrying about the demise of an agriculture centered economy and Barry Hannah was growing up in a
Mississippi town teeming with fast-food chains and discount mega-stores, the South died and no one noticed. There is a gulf, a huge chasm, in Southern literature between the Renaissance and postmodernism, as if a significant chunk of history was simply skipped over. Postmodernists do not mourn the end of the South or even take time to describe it; they simply assume that it happened and move on. Barry Hannah, often hailed as a modern day Faulkner, writes stories about Las Vegas lounge singers and cowboy midgets in the Old West. His most recent novel, *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*, is set in Mississippi, but, despite its promising title, could just as easily be set in New York or California. Bobbie Ann Mason, whose fiction has been called K-Mart Chic, Grit Lit, and Mall Fiction, but who most resents being labeled a “Southern writer” (Flora 553), writes about schoolteachers who are addicted to MTV and women who feel emotionally closer to Donahue than their husbands or children. The only contemporary Southern writer who seems to be proud of her cultural inheritance and who consistently writes about the South is Lee Smith, and even she seems to believe the South is dead.

Lee Smith is noted for her distinctly Southern voice, extensive historical research, and the strong sense of place and tradition, including the importance of orally transmitted culture, in her novels (Parrish 578). Sadly, however, Smith’s most enduring characters are those from past and forgotten generations. Many of her stories, including *Oral History, Fair and Tender Ladies*, and *Saving Grace*, span several generations, usually beginning with an adolescent female character growing up in the underdeveloped mountains of turn of the century Appalachia and ending with her grandchildren or great-grandchildren in a present-day South that has been homogenized by popular culture. In each of these novels, Smith paints a vivid picture of the strength and richness of Appalachian culture and its influence on the matriarchal protagonist, but inevitably, that culture is relinquished by her descendants as they move away, go to college, or become movie
stars. In the end, however, only the reader is left mourning the cultural loss; Smith’s characters are not surprised or troubled by it. The novels generally conclude with almost startled swiftness, as if the narrator has run out of story to tell and must simply stop, spirally to a premature end. The final chapters are saturated with references to television and popular culture and generally adopt a more generic and grammatically correct tone. In a few concluding scenes and thoughts, Smith completely dismantles the culture that she has spent three hundred pages building up.

As stated above, I believe that the absence of the South and Southern values and traditions is the fundamental deficiency in contemporary Southern literature. Many critics have argued that Southern postmodern fiction cannot be faulted for neglecting its heritage because it merely mirrors reality. Such critics claim that Tate’s prophecy has been fulfilled; the South has been homogenized; it has become “a provincial society cut off from tradition whose denizens live in a continuous present and grapple less with problems of right and wrong than with matters of technological progress and utility” (Brinkmeyer 22). As William Styron regretfully admitted more than two decades ago, postmodern writers may “capture a flavor of the South, but I don’t know if it makes much difference anymore” (quoted in Hill 69). Others, however, have argued that a “separate Southern character” still exists if for no other reason than it believes it does (Millichap and Sullivan 40). While it would be foolish to assert that the South has not been affected and altered by twentieth century commercialism, industrialization, and an increasingly pervasive and Hollywood-generated Americana culture, I do not believe that it has been completely eroded. I think a distinct Southern culture and identity is still very much alive, and it continues to influence and direct the lives of those born into it. My goal in these stories and the concluding poem was to prove that the South still exists and is still worth writing about.
Before turning to the creative works, a few general statements of apology and explanation are necessary. First, there is a tension between two worlds, both Southern, in these stories. This was an authorial error stemming from my personal experience as a Mississippi-born East Tennessean. I had hoped this tension would highlight not only the differences, but also the similarities between the Deep South and the Appalachian South, but I think it only convoluted the issue. As Lee Smith explains in the Reader’s Guide suffixed to her 2003 edition of *Fair and Tender Ladies*, “Faulkner’s South was not my South. I grew up in the mountains…where there were no magnolias or plantations or black people or aristocracy or even money…The only white columns in the county were on the Presbyterian Church, up the road from my house.” I claim East Tennessee as home because I have spent the majority of my life and all of my most formative years here, but I also have close family members who still live in Mississippi and Alabama. I have always been struck by how similar the two cultures are, in that both stress the importance of family, religion, tradition, and a strong sense of place, although they appear so different. I did not intend to favor one over the other, but that seems to be the result.

Secondly, while I think these stories present a distinctly Southern voice, they fail to impart a sense of Southern culture as a whole. The characters are sympathetic, if not fully rounded, but I fear that their dialogue might open them up to ridicule without adding substantially to their development. The most obvious failure in each of the stories, and the element that makes them most difficult to read, is a conspicuous lack of action. In fact, they are almost descriptive sketches rather than short stories. Finally, I had hoped to prove that the South is still vital and influential, and I am not sure I have done that, at least not in the full, complete sense that I had hoped. The forces operating in these characters’ lives are direct results of an antiquated patriarchal hierarchy that still exists in the South, though of course not only in the
South, and the vicious self-perpetuating cycle of poverty, which exists everywhere but is particularly rampant in the South, but the stories do not clearly demonstrate how the characters develop their individual and collective identities because of these forces. Also, the stories seem to suggest that the Southern inheritance, the peculiar influence the South has on the minds and hearts of its inhabitants, is primarily negative. I did not intend to propound this notion at all. For me, and most Southerners, I think, the legacy with which we are bequeathed as Southerners is overwhelmingly positive. It is strange, probably too proud, slightly belligerent, obstinately stubborn, and usually a little indolent, but it is also generous, passionate, comforting, and honest, and, at least I believe, it is a legacy to be envied.

The title of the collection as a whole is taken from Thomas Nelson Page’s 1887 description of the adolescent Southern woman, which I quote at length because I believe it is important and profoundly fascinating:

So generally did the life shape itself about the young girl that it was almost as if a bit of the age of chivalry had been blown down the centuries and lodged in the old State. She instinctively adapted herself to it. In fact, she was made for it. She was gently bred: her people for generations...were gentlefolk. They were so well satisfied that they had been the same in the mother country that they had never taken the trouble to investigate it. She was the incontestable proof of their gentility. In right of her blood (the beautiful Saxon, tempered by the influences of the genial Southern clime), she was exquisite, fine, beautiful; a creature of peach-blossom and snow; languid, delicate, saucy; now imperious, now melting, always bewitching. She was not versed in the ways of the world, but she had no need to be; she was better than that; she was well bred. She had not to learn to be a lady, because she was born one... Her beauty was a title which gave
her a graciousness that well befitted her. She never "came out," because she had never been "in;" and the line between girlhood and youngladyhood was never known. She began to have beaux certainly before she reached the line; but it did her no harm: she would herself long walk "fancy free." A protracted devotion was required of her lovers, and they began early. They were willing to serve long, for she was a prize worth the service. Her beauty, though it was often dazzling, was not her chief attraction. That was herself: that indefinable charm; the result of many attractions, in combination and perfect harmony, which made her herself. She was delicate, she was dainty, she was sweet. She lived in an atmosphere created for her – the pure, clean, sweet atmosphere of her country home...She was indeed a strange creature, that delicate, dainty, mischievous, tender, God-fearing, inexplicable Southern girl.... To appreciate her one must have seen her, have known her, have loved her. (53-8) [emphasis added]

Obviously, the title is meant primarily to be ironic. The women in these stories are not delicate, dainty “creatures of peach-blossom and snow,” and their environments are certainly not “pure, clean, and sweet.” But they are “strange” and “inexplicable” women; they posses an “indefinable charm,” and one must know them and love them in order to appreciate them. Also, the myth of the Southern Belle that Page perpetuates, and which has been substantially written about for at least a hundred years, has had a tremendous impact on the way Southern women, even Appalachian women, have been viewed historically and the way they continue to view themselves. Perhaps the only theme in these stories that is perfectly clear is that, despite Page’s claim, this myth does in fact do them harm.

In general, these four pieces tell the stories of three generations of Southern women. Many of the literary techniques and even some words and phrases are blatantly and deliberately
stolen. For example, the use of italics to indicate shifts in time in “A Good Man Ain’t so Hard to Find” is a technique that has been employed by countless writers. I was thinking specifically of Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury when I wrote that story and also when I attached the appendix explaining the family relationships. The phrases “immodest dawn” and “unruly sun” are stolen from one of my favorite poets, John Donne, and the image of an “ancestral grove” was suggested, though not exactly taken, from Walcott’s Omeros, in which the narrator watches a line of women carrying baskets of coal up a hill, walking “like ants” in time to that “ancestral beat” from which his own rhymes originate. I was struck by the idea of a line of female ancestors stretching as far as the eye could see, but my ancestors would not be climbing; they would be rooted, immobile, eternal, so in my mind they became oak trees. Maybe one day I will mature as a writer and “find my voice,” but for now, I can only borrow from those who said it first, and probably better.

This collection originally ended with a story that depicted Abby Mae’s daughter studying in Paris and explaining her Southern heritage to a French classmate. I envisioned her character as the last in the line. I thought she had broken some sort of cycle and thereby freed herself and defied destiny. Worse, I imagined that her liberation was a positive thing. Destiny has since notified me of my error. It turns out my fictional daughter is not the last at all. There are some things stronger than progress or education or willpower, and apparently one of those things is fate. In light of recent events, I felt the last story was disingenuous, so I replaced it with a poem that I believe is more consistent with the truth, meaning of course, the fictional truth. I hope it provides some closure to the collection and leaves the reader feeling optimistic about whatever the future may hold.


It was an unseasonably warm afternoon, for October, and we were sitting on the back porch, which had never been stained and was now beginning to rot, staring out over the vast expanse of tumbling blue mountains, which sort of faded at the top into the vast expanse of cloudless blue sky, not talking and barely even thinking, at least on my part. It was one of those almost hot, almost endless afternoons when the sun seems to linger longer than it should, unnaturally suspended in the sky like it’s trying to tell you to pay attention because this is an important day, and it’s giving you a little extra time so you will realize it, but you never do because you’re lost in the oblivion of being ignorantly human and you can only recognize what is really important long after it’s gone. Yes, it was one of those days, exactly one of those days.

When she finally broke the silence, her voice was rough and scratchy from disuse and cracked like dried mud. “My daddy always tole me,” she said, not necessarily to me, “you can cut the ears off a mule, but hit don’t make ‘im a horse.” If she had meant to address me she would have said “your great-granddaddy Martin” because she always referred to kinfolks in terms of their relationship to me, like a schoolteacher explaining long division, as if family relations were a very complicated matter and I might get confused if she used names and titles interchangeably.

But somehow I knew what she meant. Or rather, I knew to whom she was referring. I never quite knew what she meant, even though she had been talking about him a lot lately, because she always did it with one of those small frozen painted-on smiles that aren’t really smiles at all, but a sardonic kind of stretching of the lips that sort of startles you when it reveals the bottom half of the top row of small white rounded teeth, like she had just told a very funny
and very adult joke that I didn’t get and couldn’t unless she explained it to me, and she couldn’t explain it because it was too dirty and I was too young. It probably would have been sad, in the way that porcelain dolls look sad, had it not been so grotesque.

I didn’t answer immediately. I thought she might keep going without my having to; or maybe I was more fascinated by how my recently painted toenails glistened in the never dying sunlight, because I was still young enough and vain enough then to find such things fascinating, and she didn’t prod me for a response because she was old enough to understand. “You mean he didn’t like Pawpaw, neither?” I finally asked; he meaning her father, my great-granddaddy Martin who I never met, and Pawpaw being my granddaddy, her husband, who I remembered, but in such a foggy sort of way I might have just dreamed about him once.

“Naw. That would a took too much effort. He just knewed the kind a man he was, and he didn’t like ‘im or not like ‘im for hit. He said I had picked my own burden ‘cause I was the one that murried ‘im and went down there to Miss’ sippy with ‘im, where I didn’t even know nobody, an’ me naught but sixteen. But he tole me then that it was the only choice I had, and so I thought he wanted me to go. ‘Well, I reckon you got yerself in a predic’ment this time,’ that’s what he said. And when I asked him what he thought I oughter do, he just sighed, ‘Well, I don’t see as how they’s a whole lot ya can do. You’ll hafta go an’ murry ‘im, I reckon,’ as if he was sayin’, ‘We all got our cross to bear,’ with that same worn and weathered sense of resignation people wear when they talk about human sufferin’ and how life ain’t meant to be easy. He who had never before spoke positively on anything at all, never voiced a opinion that couldn’t be taken eight differnt ways, and now he was telling me to do somethin’ particular for the first time in my life. I was jist sixteen, and so I thought hit was right, ‘cause he said hit was right.”
I could picture my great-granddaddy Martin that I had never met standing there in the kitchen shaking his head, just as proud and impervious as he looked in that one picture they had of him; in his faded overalls and white short-sleeve collared shirt, far from new, but clean and freshly ironed, the symmetry of his head thrown askew by the big chaw of tobacco ('backer, he would have called it, just like she did) stuck in one side of it, making a perfect rounded lump in his right cheek, like a giant cancerous tumor (of course, he would not have had the cancer yet then, and when he got it, it was not in his cheek), telling her to go and marry a man she didn’t love and barely even knew.

Everybody says she was real pretty then, with that long dark hair that was just barely curly and those restless blue eyes that always looked sadder than they were. Everybody says she was the prettiest girl in town, even if her legs were always bare and her dresses, already thin from washing, were always stretched a little too tight over her not quite Christian curves; she could have had any man she wanted, they say. And she was still pretty, even though her hair was now brittle and streaked with gray, and the cataracts had clouded up her eyes years ago, obscuring the natural definition that eyes are supposed to have and making it difficult to ascertain her meaning when she spoke sometimes, like someone had smeared Vaseline in her eyes and you couldn’t quite make out their expressions. Years later I read that cataracts don’t actually cover the eyes at all; that they cloud up the internal lens, and you can’t even see them, but I never believed it. Because I watched her eyes get foggier every year, and even though they say that happens with old age, even without cataracts, she wasn’t old yet then. She never got old.

"But hit was his brother I loved, you see. Frank was his name, but we all called ‘im Frankie. They tried to call John Johnny, but he wouldn’t have hit, said he weren’t a child and he didn’t mean to be talked at like one.”
I had heard this story before, but I liked it and there wasn’t anything else to do except
watch my red toenails sparkle in the sun, so I let her go on, in that same sort of moronic torpidity
that we usually let the most profound and meaningful moments go by, without noticing them, or
even particularly wanting them.

“They had come up here when the plant opened, all the way from Tunica. A’course,
there weren’t any casinos or gamblin’ places down there yet, and they were jist the sons of a
poor sharecropper, which wouldn’t be so bad, but Miss’sippy is a peculiar place, and bein’ a
sharecropper there is the most disgraceful thing in the world a body can do. ‘Course, there ain’t
nothing you can do about it neither, ‘cause luck don’t really circulate around there like it does
ever’where else, and people jist kinda stay put where’er the Lord sees fit to make ‘em be born.
The way they talked ‘bout hit, I thought hit must be real terr’ble bein’ poor down there, but hit
ain’t really no differnt than anywheres else. The poor folks there ain’t any poorer than they is
here; there’s jist a bigger gap ‘tween rich an’ poor, which makes ‘em thank they’re worse off’n
they really are. I always said hit ain’t right fer people to be so unequal, ‘specially in a place
where they’s all doin’ the same thing, all diggin’ an’ scratchin’ at that rich delta soil, jist tryin’ to
 eke out a livelihood. But that dirt’s too black to be as good as they say hit is, and it’s jist as
discriminatin’ as the people. The rich folks down there grow money trees by the acre, an’ all the
while, the poor ‘uns cain’t even raise a decent ‘mater patch to feed their younguns.

“So Frankie and John knew there weren’t nothing they could do fer theyselves down
there, ‘cept break their backs jist tryin’ to farm enough fer them to eat on like their daddy did,
and they decided to come up here and go to work in the plant, where they knowed there was
money. The people was pourin’ in like molasses then, all comin’ to work in that plant.

Gener’ly, us mountain folks are ‘spicious of strangers, y’know, but we didn’t mind so much then
‘cause they’d started pavin’ our roads and even brought the ‘lectricity all the way back to our house in Possum Creek Holler. They built a water treatment plant, and we let the well dry up and started payin’ for our water. ‘Course, they didn’t tell us then that the only reason they had to treat the water in the first place was ‘cause it had got polluted with chemicals from the plant and weren’t fit to drink. But we had lights and water and nice smooth roads, and so we let ‘em come, jist like now we’re lettin’ ‘em build that durned interstate through here, which won’t do nothin’ but turn this town into a nasty ole truck stop, with all sorts a hoodlums an’ God-knows-what kind a crimin’als passin’ through here anytime a day or night they please.

“But anyways, Frankie an’ John come here an’ settled in, an’ ever’body liked ‘em immediately. All they’d talk about ‘round town an’ in the post office was how cute them Cochran boys from Miss’sippy was, even if they did talk a little queer and couldn’t quite seem to recollect which side had won the Civil War. They all thought John was the better lookin’, an’ he was probably better liked too, jist ‘cause he was louder and real bois-trus. But there was a gentleness in Frankie, somethin’ in his eyes that was almost womanish, like he might cry any minute, an’ I found hit near ‘bout impossible not to love ‘im.

“So as you can imagine, when he went off to the war (he weren’t but nineteen), I thought I’d probably jist shrivel up an’ die. But I was happy fer ‘im too, ‘cause I knew it’d make ‘im feel brave and manly and ‘cause finally he could do somethin’ his brother couldn’t (John, ya see, was borned with a weak heart, a murmur, I think, an’ they wouldn’t take him). Now this was before the hippies and politicians had started tellin’ us ‘bout how bad the war was, an’ so we still thought it was somethin’ noble an’ grand, and we was all real proud of the boys that were goin’. An’ John, he was so upset ‘bout not being good enough fer the army an’ bein’ left outta all the hoopla that he quietened down a little an’ we didn’t see ‘im fer a long while, not even at the
parade they had the day the boys left. Hit’s funny how we always had parades before wars, like we was leadin’ our brothers and sons and husbands off to a sacrifice, it was that religious; fifteen or twenty boys all lookin’ alike, bald and unsmilin’ in their green pola-ester suits, like a bunch a tragic Christ figures marchin’ up to Calvary, Vietnam to give their blood fer people who didn’t even want ‘em there in the first place. Years later, after they tole us that the whole thing was a ‘political debacle,’ John would stand up, ‘specially when he’d been drinkin’, and shout like a preacher ‘bout how thankful he was that God Almighty had seen it fit to give him that faulty heart, which had kept him from dyin’ half way ‘cross the world in some dirty Asian swamp with the sin of unjustified war on his head, like his poor brother had done and was probably burnin’ in hell fer now ‘cause the U.S. gov’ment had a-made him go over there and rape and kill little children. ‘Poor thing,’ he would say. ‘Course, even John had to know that if any soul’d ever gone to heaven, hit was Frankie Cochran’s.

“So Frankie went off to the war, and John stayed on at the plant, and two weeks after the parade I started getting the sickness, and I knowed your mama was comin’. By the time we got word that Frankie was kilt, I had done started to show. And that’s when John turned back up. We hadn’t seen or heard nary a word from him all the time Frankie’d been gone (‘fact, if we hadn’t knowed people who worked with ‘im at the plant who’d tole us he was still there, we would a thought he’d gone on back to Miss’sippy to be with his mama an’ daddy), and then one night he jist showed up outta nowheres, soakin’ wet from head to toe ‘cause it’d been a-rainin’ hard for three weeks or more, like it’ll do in the summer after a long draught. He just appeared outta thin air, vaporized almost, right onto our front porch, like the ghost a John Wayne or Roy Rogers, ridin’ in on a big white horse to save the day. And there I was, Dallas the dancehall girl, friendless an’ fallen an’ in need a savin’.
“Him an’ daddy talked fer a long time out on the porch with the rain still comin’ down hard, and then daddy called me out there, but he didn’t say nothin’; he just looked over at that hero of a cowboy, the brother a the man I loved that was now dead, kinda directin’ my eyes that way, towards ole John Wayne standin’ there with his big clunky boots in a puddle a rainwater, as if he, daddy, wanted to say, ‘This gentleman here has a proposition fer ya,’ but he couldn’t ‘cause he knew it weren’t nothin’ so proper as that. An’ I knew then, ‘fore he even opened his mouth, an’ I knew I’d hafta do hit, ‘cause there weren’t nothin’ else a girl could do in those days.

“Ah figure you can come on back home to Tunica with me, if you wont to, and raise that baby of yawrs respectably. Won’t nobody hafta know, ‘bout you an’ Frankie, Ah mean, an’ how y’all sinned ‘gainst God. He’ll look ‘nough like me Ah’m shore, ta make hit believable.’ He said that ‘cause he still thought I was havin’ a boy then, even though I tole ‘im I knew it’d be a girl. He said female intuition ain’t all hit’s cracked up to be, that I’d hafta have a boy ‘cause there hadn’t been no Cochran girls in three generations. I broke the tradition, I guess, ‘cause I ended up havin’ five younguns an’ not a one of ‘em a boy.

“But that’s how he said hit, jist like that; like hit was already decided an’ I jist had to nod my head an’ pack up my clothes, which there weren’t much of anyhow; like a loveless marriage to a man I didn’t even like, a man so unlike his sweet dead brother, was ever’thing I’d ever dreamt of. He never proposed; he jist sort a condescended to murry me, as if I’d been a-beggin’ him to fer years. An’ so it was settled, an’ me an’ ole John Wayne rode off into the sunset, ‘cept you couldn’t see no sun ‘cause hit was still rainin’ when we left, headin’ out west to a flat an’ barren land, not a thing to share ‘tween the two of us ‘cept the mem’ry of a man I had loved an’ he had happened to be kin to.”
She stopped. She didn’t have to tell me the rest; about how he had helped his daddy bring in the harvest that first year and then never touched a plow again, or how he had beaten her for the first time that winter when she gave birth to a beautiful little girl, his niece and daughter. She didn’t have to tell me about how he had defied all the natural and social laws of poor white Mississippi culture by buying an airplane and making a small fortune for himself cropdusting; or about how he had joined the country club and started drinking scotch and bought that big house with the white columns. She didn’t have to tell me how strange she felt living in that great big house or how absurd she thought the columns, having never seen a building with columns in her life, except the courthouse, until she went down there; or how she had begged him for the bus fare to go home for a week’s visit every year until he died and how he had refused every year until then even though he had the money. She didn’t have to tell me about the nights that she had tucked my mother into bed, telling her in a hushed, secretive, almost fearfully shaking voice about how her real daddy was up in heaven watching over her and protecting her. She didn’t have to tell me about how he would gamble and drink away all his cropdusting money and then come home to her and beg forgiveness and promise never to hurt her again; or how he would buy a modest new suit and go to church the next Sunday and pray at the altar like a regular apostle, crying and trembling and thanking God for His mercy, only to start the cycle all over again after a few awkward months of sobriety and frugality. I guess that’s what she meant about the mule’s ears, but it could have been something else altogether.

“An’ then one day, hit was all over. All of a sudden, ‘cause don’t nothin’ last forever, not even him.”

And that’s the part I knew about, because I was there, even if I was real little. We were down there visiting when it happened. I remember how she stood there holding the phone in the
kitchen of that obscenely large (and as she later found out, heavily mortgaged) house, not crying or even saying much except, “Yes...Yes...thank you.” She had been cooking breakfast, and she was wearing an apron, which I thought must have made her very old because I didn’t know any other women who still wore aprons. But she wasn’t old yet then, and even though those fleshy bulges that used to be curves now hung about her body like several evenly distributed sacks filled with mushy oatmeal, the face that she turned to my mother when she said, “Your daddy has crashed, and they thank he’s dead,” was almost wrinkleless. I remember the funeral, and the surrounding activities that seemed to drag out for months, but I don’t remember her ever crying. The whole time she just stood there, with that inscrutable, wrinkleless face, completely blank, like she wasn’t thinking of anything at all, even when they told her they suspected foul play because it appeared that someone had purposely emptied the plane’s gas tank and that’s why he had crashed. She never said anything at all, except the almost mechanical “Yes...thank you...yes,” until after he was buried, and we packed up the things she wanted and sold or threw away the rest, and she rode back home with us for good. And then when the old van started to have trouble climbing the Cumberland Plateau, and people started to honk their horns because we couldn’t have been going more than thirty miles an hour, she smiled, soft and sincere-like, and neither he nor his death were ever mentioned again.

I woke up the next morning when she whispered my name in that same soft, scratchy, cracked mud sounding voice, and I rolled over in the bed we shared to find her staring up at the ceiling like she had been awake for hours pondering those thousands of tiny white bumps.
“I ain’t sorry, y’know. ‘Cause I’d do hit again if I had to.”

I laid my head on her shoulder, too sleepy to wonder what she meant. I don’t know how much time passed before she spoke again; it might have been a few minutes or just a few seconds, but I had already fallen back to sleep.

“An’ when I see him in Hell, I ain’t gonna ‘pologize.”

We laid there a long time like that, my head on her shoulder, but I didn’t fall asleep again. We laid there until her hand grew cold and purple in mine, her eyes still looking up at the ceiling even though they couldn’t see anything anymore, and then finally, I got up and told the rest of them.

They wanted to know what had happened, if she had said anything or cried for help, and I was unprepared. Instinctively, without knowing why, but maybe thinking that they wouldn’t understand or that it would make them feel worse or maybe just wanting to keep it all to myself because it was a secret that only she and I shared, I lied.

“She said that she was ready, and real at peace.”

They seemed unsatisfied.

“And, um, that she could see Jesus’s face.”
“Now when the Pharisee which had bidden him saw it, he spake within himself, saying, This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a SINNER!”

He let the last word ring out loud and long, as he always did with words of grave import, pleased and smiling through slobbery lips at the profundity of the moment that he, with God’s help, had created. Mrs. Abby Mae, sitting, like always, prim and erect in the third pew from the front wearing a new, neat, modest but not exactly motherly cotton print dress, was startled back into attention not so much by the volume and passion with which he bellowed “SINNER!” but rather by the inordinately long pause that followed. She could not recall with any certainty what she had been thinking about before, but she was surprised to realize that she had heard little of the pastor’s sermon.

Mrs. Abby Mae had been a constant fixture in the Church for several years now, and she always sat in the third row; she did not wish to make a spectacle of herself like some of the other, more flamboyant ladies who strutted down the aisle every Sunday in elaborate procession before finally and dramatically planting themselves in the very front pew, but at the same time, she wanted to be conspicuous enough to be seen by everyone in the congregation, especially if she happened to be wearing a new dress, as she was today, so that they could see her unwavering piety and have no occasion to doubt the strict and steadfast tenacity with which she performed her sacramental duties. She had some half a dozen children and nearly as many ex-husbands, but she was still very young, and she carried herself with an air more sensual than maternal.

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1 The preacher’s sermon is taken from Luke 7:39-48, which relates the famous story of the woman who washed Jesus’ feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.
Though Mrs. Abby Mae often worshipped alone, she was joined today by three children of indeterminate ages who sat next to her in clean Sunday suits and mimicked her perfect posture, with their backs straight and flat against the hard pew and their polished, motionless shoes suspended in time and space inches above the floor, like three little dolls posed on a shelf. A few rows back, another child, her oldest, was lost in a homogenous giggling clump of preadolescent girls who looked much older than they were, primarily as the result of heavily and meticulously applied eyeliner. The others, the youngest members of her copious progeny, were off in some distant children’s enclave within the small church, sequestered away in rooms more appropriate for baby Christians. Mrs. Abby Mae did not know where exactly these rooms were, but neither did it occur to her that she did not know. She was a good mother, even a doting mother, but she could rarely locate all of her children at the same time; not that she was negligent or inattentive, just rarely informed. People were always taking them out of her arms for no particular reason, without offering, or being asked to offer, an explanation; they were always carrying them away to some more appropriate, more removed place. The children, for their part, had grown so accustomed to it that they rarely resisted. For some reason, seeing her holding a baby was immediately discomfiting for other people, especially other women. Perhaps because she was so young and so pretty, it seemed, not unnatural, but rather too perfectly natural, too picturesque, so they were always taking them away.

_I remember when she was born, my first one, they wouldn’t let me hold her. They just said “Miss Cochran, it’s a girl,” and they took her away. They didn’t even let me get a good look at her. It all happened so fast, I didn’t have time to think about it at first. I just remember feeling very tired all of a sudden, and then there was one short, violent shriek and the doctor telling me “It’s a girl” and a swirl of red blood and white coats, and then my belly was flat, and_
she was gone. Everybody was gone, except Mama. And then I must have fallen asleep because when I opened my eyes Mama was gone too, and Daddy was standing over the bed staring at me.

I must have sensed his presence because I woke up all of a sudden, for no reason, and I could see him in the darkness, standing over my bed, staring at me. The beam from the streetlamp outside my bedroom window caught his eyes, and they looked yellow and full of water under his thick black eyebrows.

“Hi, Daddy,” I said without wondering why he was there or how long he had been watching me, like it was all completely natural and normal.

“Hush now, Baby doll. You’re sick.”

His face was alternately colorless and green, and his large clumsy hand felt cold and sticky on mine. I thought maybe he was sick too.

“I am?”

“Yes, baby. Yes you are,” and he bent down and kissed me on the mouth. His lips were dry and cracked, and his breath smelled sour.

“You got a bad fever; we best take off that hot shirt a yours,” he said. And then he pulled the covers back and took off my shirt, but he didn’t hurt me, not that first night.

He put his hand under my head and stroked my face hard with a giant calloused thumb.

“You got tuh get well so you can start school tomorrow. Ain’t you excited about startin’ school?”

I tried to say, “Yes, Daddy, I am,” but my voice cracked; I was suddenly and unexplainably terrified.

“Alright then, you just go on back tuh sleep now,” and he slid his hand down my neck and ran his fingers over my chest and belly. His touch was lighter, but his fingers were still
rough, and I trembled in spite of myself. I felt tingly all over, like there were a million tiny bugs craw
ing around underneath my skin. I fought back tears without knowing why and pretended to sleep. And after a few minutes, he left.

With one small white hand nervously aloft, Mrs. Abby lent her sweet, full-bodied voice to the chorus of amens and preach it brothers that his long pause had solicited.

"Hear me now, he that hath ears to hear²; the Lawd's a-speakin'.

"Who and what manner of woman was this? She wasn't just a sinner, oh no; she was the worst a sinners. She was a fornicator and a adulteress, a blasphemer and a harlot, deservin' a nothin' but hellfire and damnation...But she came to Jesus. Oh hallelujah! Brothers an' sisters, I'm a-tellin' ya, they's pleasure in sin fer a season,³ but like the Good Book says, the triumphing a the wicked is short, and the joy a the hypocrite but fer a moment."⁴

A lone, small voice rose from one of the middle rows, "Bless him, Jesus."

"Thank you, sister. An' some a you here today used to be like this woman. I know it, an' God knows it. You used to be wicked an' abominable in the eyes a the Lawd. But like the harlot, you came to Jesus. And now, Praise God!, ye are warshed, ye are sanc-tuh-fied, Oh Glory! Ye are jus-tuh-fied in the name a the Lawd Jesus, and by the Spirit a God Almighty!⁵ Now, by the Grace a God, you're a-free from the bonds a sin an' the desires a the flesh, an' you don't hafta go out a-whorin' yourself for the devil no more!⁶ 'Cause, Praise Jesus!, you are redeemed!"

"Did you see her, Daddy? Is she pretty?"

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² A common phrase Jesus used while teaching. See Matthew 11:15 for one of many examples
³ Hebrews 11:25
⁴ Job 20:5
⁵ I Corinthians 6:11
⁶ The Bible, especially the Old Testament, repeatedly equates spiritual disobedience with prostitution. The book of Hosea, for instance, is a striking example.
He didn’t answer, and I felt like crying, but I didn’t know why. “I’d really like to see her,” I said. “I haven’t even seen her yet.”

He still didn’t answer, but his eyes blazed with anger, disappointment, and disgust. I knew that look, and I knew the deprivation that always came with it. I thought he must know why they were keeping my baby from me; I thought he might have told them to do it, and I began to beg.

“Daddy, please, you have to let me see her. I’m her mother!”

“You ain’t nobody’s mother. You ain’t nothin’ but a common whore, just like your mama.”

_I could hear them in the kitchen, him shouting slurred obscenities and mama whispering “Shh. Shh, John, you’s a-gonna wake the babies.” Then he would grumble something too low and unintelligible for me to make out, and I would hear his heavy boots pounding through the living room, and I would think it’s finally over. But really, he had just gone to the bedroom to get some of mama’s makeup or perfume or a picture or a dress or anything else that he could break or rip, and he would go back into the kitchen, and I could hear mama cry and say, “No, John, please don’t. Please, you’ll wake the children.”_

Then I heard the smack of his hand hitting flesh, and a whimper, and “You ain’t nothin’ but a dirty, filthy whore. Is this what you’re a-teachin’ them girls a yours, tuh paint up their faces an’ parade around like whores for ever’body an’ their brother tuh gawk at?”

“No, John, no. I jist wanted to look nice, that’s all, fer Abby’s ceremony.”

“What’s that, Jezebel? Still flappin’ them jaws, spewin’ your lies an’ deceits?”

“No, down at the school, remember? They had ‘em a ceremony tonight fer all the fifth graders. You missed the—”
“After all Ah’ve done for you, takin’ you in when you couldn’t pay a decent man tuh marry you, passin’ you an’ that bastard child off as respect’ble. An’ all the time you’s out a-runnin’ around makin’ a fool a me. Ah should a known better. Now look what Ah got, a whole damn house full a little hillbilly sluts.”

*His fiery, Man of God eyes met hers across the two almost empty front pews, and she imagined with a brief sensation of hysteria that his dumb half-grin emanated from some profound revelation to which only he was privy, as if her whole being had suddenly become transparent before him, and he could see into her very soul with the omniscient eyes of God Himself.*

“Now, hear what the Lawd Jesus has to say about sanctified sinners:

> And Jesus answering said unto him, Simon, I have somewhat to say unto thee. And he saith, Master, say on.”

“I don’t thank I can keep counselin’ you in private like this, Abby. People are startin’ to talk. It’s not right, it, it just don’t look good fer a Man a God to be spendin’ so much time alone with a woman of his flock. ‘Specially a woman like you.”

He seemed nervous, and his voice was heavy like when he preached a sad sermon, so I smiled as kindly as I could and said, “But you’re my pastor; you’re just doin’ what the Lord called you to do, helpin’ a lost sheep find her way home. Everybody knows I’m comin’ through a divorce.”

“I thank that’s why they’s a-talkin’. People, they sees that you’re in a vulner’ble an’ precar’ous situation...An’ after all, Abby, I’m only a man.”
Now, I didn’t see my situation as either vulnerable or precarious, and I felt obliged to tell him so. “Preacher, you forget that I’ve been in this same situation twice before. I promise you, God as my witness, I’m not any more vulnerable than usual. After all, I’m the one that left.”

He smiled, a contorted nervous schoolboy smile, and pulled me to his chest with such abrupt force that I let out a tiny, startled gasp. He burrowed his head underneath my hair, and I could feel his hot fast breath against my neck as he held me. He smelled like dust, mothballs, and masculinity all at the same time, and I wondered if he could feel my heart throbbing. I felt a bitter lump rising in my throat. He held me like that for a full half minute; then he sighed, deep and slow and long, and said again, “I’m only a man, Abby.”

Only momentarily shaken, she shifted her body on the unpadded pew, breaking free from his gaze and thereby relieving her anxiety; Mrs. Abby Mae was blessed with a remarkable propensity for dismissing unpleasant thoughts almost as soon as they were conceived. She blushed becomingly as she recrossed her stockinged legs, sincerely hoping that the soft, explicit sound of nylon against nylon had not distracted any of her spiritual brothers from God’s message. Many men had confessed to her their own weakness for the tantalizing, sibilant noise, and she knew what a grave sin it was to cause, even inadvertently, a fellow believer to stumble. A discreet glance over the congregation, which met no distracted eye, whether male or female, promptly satisfied, but also surprised her. Insensible to injury, however, Mrs. Abby Mae returned her attention to the pastor’s sermon, suddenly and intensely interested in his message.

“Master, say on.”

“There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most?”

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7 See Romans 14:13, 21 and Mark 9:42
“Tell me, Abby Mae, who do you love the most?”

“Darlin’, you know I love you with all my heart, but it just ain’t that simple.”

“Yes, it is. Or at least it can be, if you’d just let it. It’s you that’s makin’ it complicated ‘cause you can’t make up your mind. I don’t think you even know what you want anymore.”

“Oh no, Baby, I know what I want. I want you. It’s just gonna take a little time. Come on now, can’t you wait just a little, teeny bit longer?”

“I’ve been waitin’. An’ I don’t know if I can take it no more. I don’t want nobody’s leftovers. Fer Christ’s sake, Abby, you’re a married woman. An’ here you are runnin’ around with me, tellin’ ever’body you’re my girl, and we’re gonna get married and all. An’ then you tell me your husband’ll be back real soon, any minute now, an’ you better go on home an’ get his supper ready! Abby Mae, you’re gonna hafta make up that mind a your’n. Who’s girl are you?”

“Yours, Daddy,” I answered.

“That’s right, Baby. And who loves you more’n anybody else in the world?”

“Mama,” I thought, but I said, “You, Daddy.”

“An’ that’s why you can’t trust nobody but Daddy, ‘cause nobody else loves you like Ah do. An’ sometimes when two people love each other as much as you an’ me, other folks, they get jealous, you see, ‘cause they don’t have that kind a love, and they might wanna hurt us so we can’t be together no more. An’ you don’t want that tuh happen, now do you? You don’t wanna be without your Daddy?”

“No, Daddy, I don’t.”

“Then we gotta keep all a this a secret, ok? Just between you and me, you understand, Baby doll? You can’t be tellin’ nobody else, not even Mama.”
“Which of them will love him most? Simon answered and said, I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most. And he said unto him, Thou hast rightly judged. And he turned to the woman, and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman?”

“Ma’am, I’m sorry to get you outta bed at this hour, but we found this woman over yonder a couple a streets. Claims she was a-headed here. You ever seen her before?”

*It was the middle of the night and frigid cold, but she was wearing a thin cotton tank top. He was holding her up on one side, and she was clutching the porch rail with her free hand. She never looked at me, or him.*

“Yes ’sir, Officer. That’s my little sister.”

“Well, I tole her we could a took her in fer public drunk’ness, but I’ll leave her with you, if’n you’ll take her.”

“Yes ’sir. Thank you, sir. Come on now, Maggie, let’s get you in the bed. Now, be real quiet. God knows we don’t wanna wake Ray up.”

Mrs. Abby Mae felt a familiar tingling sensation, like a thousand tiny ants were crawling all over her. His words seemed peculiarly potent, more powerful and authoritative than they ever had before, and she wondered if this was what people called conviction.

“I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head.”

*He came in about the time we were eating the cake Mama had made for me, strawberry with chocolate icing because that was my favorite, smelling like a mixture of cheap perfume and well whisky. He tried to wish me a happy birthday, but his lips got in the way and his words came out garbled, and suddenly Mama realized how very late it was and sent us all to bed.*
As we changed into our pajamas, Maggie said, “How come we gotta go to sleep? It ain’t our bedtime yet.” I opened my mouth to tell her, but I remembered that she was only seven so I stopped.

“You’ll understand when you’re twelve,” I said.

“Bullfrog, Abby. You ain’t even been twelve fer a whole day yet. You don’t know nothin’ more’n I do.”

“I dunno why you keep a-bailin’ her outta trouble,” he said over breakfast with a mouth full of eggs. I hated how he did that, kept shoveling food in his mouth while he was talking. It took me a minute to figure out what it was he’d said because all I could think about was how vulgar he looked sitting there with his bacon-greased lips flapping open and revealing all those mushy yellow eggs. I guess I knew even then that it wouldn’t be long, but I never would have admitted it. Just like with my first two husbands, I denied the obvious and inevitable as long as I possibly could.

“She’s my sister, Ray. What am I supposed to do?”

“I dunno, but she oughta have to ‘cept the consequences of her own doin’s. Maybe ‘least she’d learn from ‘em then.”

I hated that too, how he was always talking about learning from things, like everything in life was supposed to teach you something. Because sometimes something happens to you, and there’s nothing to be learned from it; it just happens, and you’re supposed to get through it and go on and that’s it.

“Everybody deals with things differently, Baby. She’s just going through some growing pains is all, just trying to deal with things.”
"Jaysus, Abby, she's near 'bout twunny-five year old; she oughta be done growin' by now. 'Sides, I dunno what she's got to deal with; ain't nobody ever made her take no responsibility, not fer nothin' in her whole life."

*Without meaning to, Mrs. Abby Mae had become enthralled. The tingling sensation continued, but she decided it was not conviction because it seemed to have originated between her legs, and everybody knows that sensations in that region come from the Devil, not God. She did not feel guilty, however, because she attributed it to the sensuality of the story.*

"Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet."

*She pictured the scene in her head. It unfolded like a movie shot in Panavision with dramatic close-ups interspersed at appropriate intervals; the woman in her imagination bore a striking resemblance to herself. She thought briefly that it must be gloriously enjoyable to kiss Jesus, and she wondered if he would taste salty like normal men. Then, with a blush because it had occurred to her that it might be wrong or even sinful to want to kiss the Son of God, she added in her mind, “I mean, His feet, of course.”*

I laid awake long after Mama had sent us to bed. I knew he would come tonight because his breath smelled sour when he gave me my birthday kiss, and he always came when his breath smelled sour. The streetlamp by our house had gone out a few years back, and Mama had called the electric company once a week for nearly two months because I got so scared laying there with my eyes open and not being able to see anything. They never did fix it, but when the new baby came and Maggie moved into my room, we got a nightlight, so I didn’t mind it so much now, laying there, waiting.
“But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; they shall walk, and not faint.”  

Mama had been whispering the whole time, like she was telling me a very confidential secret instead of reading a verse that I had heard a hundred times, but when she closed the old family Bible, which, even though she did it real gingerly, emitted a tiny puff of dust, her voice dropped so low it was almost inaudible.

“You see, Abby, the Lawd don’t give us nothin’ we can’t handle, an’ if you’re jist patient with Him an’ let Him work ever’thing out accordin’ to His own time, He’ll get ya through. He’ll give ya wings like a eagle, an’ He’ll exalt ya up o’er your en’ mies. Ya jist hafta be patient and have faith in Him, jist the faith of a mustard seed, He says. ‘Cause all things work together fer good fer them that love God.”

“Yes’sum, Mama.” I was really rather taken aback by the whole conversation because Mama wasn’t in the habit of reading the Scriptures at home. She always took us to Church and Sunday School and prayer meetings, but I thought that big family Bible on the coffee table was just for decoration.

“Abby, I got something to tell ya, now, ‘cause I thank you’re old enough to hear hit.”

She paused to take a long deep breath, which she let out in a long unsteady sigh.

“Yes’sum, Mama?” I prodded her, half because her hesitation made me nervous and half because I wanted to go play outside with the rest of them before it got too dark.

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8 Isaiah 40:31
9 I Corinthians 10:13 claims that God does not allow humans to be tempted by Satan beyond their capacity to resist, but Christians often apply the promise to life’s undeserved hardships as well.
10 The Psalms are particularly fond of praising God’s tendency to bless believers by exalting them over their enemies, either symbolically or militaristically.
11 Matthew 17:20
12 Romans 8:28
“Do you know where your name come from?” she asked, and I thought she was trying to change the subject.

“Yes’sum, Mama. It come from the Bible; it was King David’s wife’s name.”

“Yes, honey, hit was. But do you know what hit means?”

“No, ma’am. I don’t reckon it means anything.”

“All the names in the Bible mean somethin’, an’ Abigail means ‘a father’s joy.’” She paused again, as if I was supposed to derive some great insight from this newly divulged knowledge. Then, in an even softer, shakier whisper, “You see, honey, a long time ago, afore you was born, your daddy had a brother. An’ me an’ your daddy’s brother, we fell in love together, an’ we wanted to get murried, but he had to go off to the war. So he went, but he never come back, you understand?”

“Yes’sum.”

“And so then, I murried your daddy ‘cause I knowed you was on the way, an’ I didn’t want you to hafta grow up without a daddy, an’ he said he’d raise you up like his own blood, ’cause that’s what you was, bein’ his brother’s baby an’ all.”

“Yes’sum.”

“And the reason I’m tellin’ you this, Abby, is ‘cause I want you to know that you got a daddy up in heaven who’s a-lookin’ down on you an’ protectin’ you, an’ that he loves you, no matter what, an’ you’re the joy a his heart.”

I laid there waiting because I knew he would come. I heard them in the kitchen, him cursing and stomping around, and her hushing him in her gentle, scared voice, and then I didn’t hear her anymore, and I knew she had gone to bed and he would come soon. So I waited.
He stood in the doorway still holding the knob, as if he was pondering what to do next. It seemed later than usual, and I was real tired, and I wished he'd hurry up and do it so I could go to sleep. Finally, he closed the door and walked in, stepping as lightly as he could in his heavy boots, lighter than usual, I thought. But he didn't come to me; he stumbled over to Maggie's bed and crouched down next to her and looked like he was staring at her real hard, like he was studying something he'd never seen before. I watched him as he sat down on the edge of her bed, which made the whole thing slump sideways, and put one of his big, clumsy hands over top of hers.

"It's because today's my birthday," I thought. "It's because today I'm twelve."

He sat there a long time like that, just staring at her, and I watched until I saw her eyes open and heard her sleepy little voice say, "Hi, Daddy."

"My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment."

The tingling intensified to the point of discomfort, and she feared she might look flushed. Even her childish attendants had noticed her restless squirming and, perceiving her to be unusually lax, begun to slouch and fidget themselves.

"Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven."

She released a long, passionate, unexpected wail, and as she felt it rising in her gut and leaving her body, she could not help but think the sensation powerfully orgasmic.

"That's right, sister, give Him the glory."

The pastor continued, "For she hath loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little."
She began to tremble, as she often had before, especially during revivals because
everyone trembled and cried during revivals, but this time it was completely involuntary and
very frightening. She thought she felt another wail lodged deep in her stomach.

“And he said unto her, Oh Praise God!, he said, Thy sins are forgiven!”

The wail released itself, and someone behind her whispered, “Bless her, Lawd.” She
watched as her feet stepped into the aisle. The piano began.

“That’s it, sister, don’t fight the Lawd, now.”

“I don’t know why you’re holdin’ out on me fer. You know you want to just as bad as
me.”

“Whaddya mean you ain’t gonna give in? You done done it, Abby Mae; you done gave
in oncest.”

“Shh. Don’t fight it. You know Daddy loves you. Don’t fight.”

“Give in to Jesus, sister. Give in to Him.”

“Abby Mae, why are you pushin’ me away?”

“Why’s it so hard fer you to just love? Just to let it happen?”

“Why’re you always fightin’ it so hard?”

“Don’t let the devil hold you back, now.”

“You want ever’body in the world to love you, but you’re too damn scared to love
anybody fer yourself.”

“It’s gonna happen, y’know. You can’t hold out forever.”

“Shh. Don’t fight it.”
She watched as her feet moved forward, and with hands raised, she cried out, “Oh Sweet Jesus, into thy precious hands I commend my spirit.” Several members of the congregation offered words of praise and encouragement as the choir began to sing.

“I surrender all…”

“Come on now, give it all to Jesus. He’s waitin’ fer ya today; he’s a-waitin’ with open arms.”

Oh God, I’m coming.

“All to Jesus I surrender…”

“Lay down your burdens, lay ‘em down on the altar a God.”

Take it away, God. Take it all.

“Humbly at His feet I bow…”

My whole life I’ve been searching for something,

“Worldly pleasures all forsaken…”

…someone to fill the emptiness and I finally found Him.

“Take me, Jesus, take me now…”

“Hallelujah! I think I found Him!”

“I surrender all…”

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13 Luke 23:46
14 “I Surrender All,” written by Judson W. Van DeVenter, 1896
Her small room, which bore the same, chipping, factory white paint that defaced every wall in their shabby doublewide trailer, was completely bare, except for three stacked plastic crates where she kept her clothes and the metal frame daybed that a lady from the Church had given her three winters ago and which her mama had spray-painted hot pink, but it was completely and exclusively hers, and now, its harsh barrenness deceivingly softened by the pale blue obscurity of twilight, she took great solace in her meager proprietorship. She waited until the clouds and colors and splendor of the brilliant, immodest dawn had faded, leaving behind a dull, diminutive, yellow sphere, a pathetic remnant of the unruly morning sun, stuck high and immovable in the stale summer air, and then finally, reluctantly, she got out of bed. As she slipped into a pair of three day old jeans, she heard the coarse, unmistakable sound of her mother’s voice, quieter than normal she thought, because it barely penetrated the thin prefabricated walls, but still shrill and obnoxious.

“Go on, now; get movin’. I got me two kids in yonder ‘bout to wake up, an’ the last thang they needs to see is your scraggly drunk ass, first thang in the mornin’.”

Pulling her dirty hair into a lumpy knot at the back of her head, she heard a stranger’s muffled incoherent reply, and then the noisy frantic confusion of a hungover man fumbling for his clothes, and finally the clacking latch of the aluminum screen door. Almost immediately, the coarse familiar shriek resounded, “Sissy! Siii-ssssss-yyyyy!” Her bedroom door flew open with an unnecessary and impertinent thud, revealing first her mama’s leathery sunken face and then the wiry body that trailed behind it.
“Oh, you’re done awake,” she said with a look of awkward surprise as a clump of ashes from the long Marlboro Medium 100 perched between her two thin yellow lips fell to the floor. “Well, put yourself a dress on; we’re goin’ to Church.”

“We are?” the girl asked, timid and mildly perplexed.

“Yes,” her mother answered, smearing the ashes into the already well-stained beige carpet with one bare, disproportionately large foot, “It’s Decoration Day.” And before she had even turned to leave, with her hollow blue eyes still fixed on her daughter, she began to screech, “John Heeeenn-rryyyy! Waaaake uh-up!”

Her tiny malnourished frame, which only moments before had sagged and sighed under the cruel heavy weight of impoverished childhood, was suddenly, almost instantly animated with the full and desperate hope that only a child who has known nothing but the perpetual, tedious sameness of want and despair can feel; the full and desperate hope that can only be inspired by the childish anticipation of imminent relief, however temporary, from a stale and monotonous life. With this incipient hope, and the restless energy of youth, she quickly changed into the one decent dress she owned, a bibbed lilac-colored hand-me-down, which some distant cousin had given her and which she had outgrown at least a year ago, and after an unsuccessful attempt to smooth her lumpy, knotted hair, she hurried into the kitchen where her brother was already waiting for her to pour his cereal. John Henry, Jr., who was named after a grandfather neither of them had known, was only two years younger than Sissy, whose real name was Laura Lee, which she hated even more than Sissy because it sounded like laurel leaf, but he expected her to care for him like a mother because she always had. When he was little, she had changed his diapers and sang him lullabies; now, she woke him up for school and made sure he brushed his teeth. Sometimes, whenever he came home with an angry note from one of his teachers, she
would insist that he finish his homework before playing any video games, and he usually obeyed. She knew the importance of a strictly enforced bedtime, and given a box of macaroni and cheese and a can of potted meat, she could prepare a well-balanced meal. But she was still only ten, and there were many things she did not yet understand, like the necessity of a nightly bath, for instance, or a daily change of clothes.

She kissed his small, freckled forehead, which he immediately wiped with his shirtsleeve, and poured two bowls of artificially flavored corn puffs, which they swallowed in silence, without tasting, as they watched cartoons, excited to have electricity again, which they had been without until yesterday for nearly two weeks. At least we got cartoons, she thought, at least we got that, remembering the astonishment she had felt the first time she met someone too poor to own a television. It had happened just after their mother’s last “run-in,” as she called them, during the ninety days that they had lived with their aunt and her husband. Aunt Abby, who believed gratitude and humility could be instilled in children by exposing them to terrible and depressing scenes, had taken her to visit a woman that the Church delivered food to every week. The woman was old and crippled and lived in a two room shack with her eight or nine children, most of which were retarded or lame, and no husband. She, the old woman, and Aunt Abby, whose red fingernails and matching red heels seemed maliciously garish because of their incongruence to the environment, had disappeared almost as soon as they arrived, leaving Sissy standing in one of the shack’s tiny rooms, surrounded by a dozen gawking and suspicious eyes. Finally, one of the older boys spoke, slowly and without kindness, “Well, whaddaya wanna do?”

“Do?” she asked stupidly, realizing even then how dumb her voice sounded.

“Yeah, do,” and with a backward jerk of his head he added, “They’s gonna be a spell.”
“Oh, um, I dunno. Do you have any movies?” Stupid! she thought, Stupid! even before they started laughing.

“Wouldn’t matter if we did,” the boy had smirked, “ain’t got nothin’ to watch ‘em on.”

After the third cartoon, they began to grow restless, and she, in her seemingly innate, but probably cultivated out of necessity, motherliness, went to check on their mama.

“Mama?” she called as she walked slowly and deliberately through the hallway so as not to startle her mother, who ranked barging in on her as the worst of her children’s transgressions.

“Mama, are you ok?” but still no answer.

She approached slowly, and through the half-open bathroom door, she saw her mother’s cracked reflection, pasty, sunken, and yellow, in the medicine cabinet mirror. Haggard and emaciated, her bony spine bowed over the sink in a disturbingly feline arch; her white bloodless hands clutched the countertop as if they might rip the plastic laminate completely off in one fell swoop. Horrified, she watched as her mother’s wet swollen eyes rolled back in her head, and her ruddy elfish nose began to bleed, releasing one long dark gelatinous strand into the sink. She felt nauseous and thought she might faint; instead she let out a tiny startled gasp, which her mother heard and responded to by sucking back the viscous string with one powerful, disgusting snort, inspiring another startled gasp.

“It’s ok, baby,” she assured her daughter, wiping away the thick bloody clumps with the back of her hand, “I’s just got the sniffles is all. Mama’s alright.”

Her eyes darted around the small bathroom, unwilling to rest in one spot for fear they might notice the neat powdery line on the counter, the scattered medicine bottles, her mother’s gaunt veiny figure, the dark bruises covering her arms. It’s just the sniffles, she told herself,
regurgitating her mother’s words, even as a thousand terrible images, memories, flashed in her head. You can believe her, especially now, especially today. Just believe her.

“Come on now, close that big ole gapin’ mouth; you look like a durned fool. I’m alright, baby, I promise. Now where’s that no-good brother a yourn? We gotta get goin’ or we’re a-gonna be late. John Heeeenn-rryyyyy!”

The Church was small and dank and smelled like baby powder and cottage cheese, but in her ten-year-old mind, it was the holiest, most intimidating place on earth, largely because it was white and unfamiliar. They walked in half-way through the offertory hymn and followed their mother to the front, thankful that she would not have an opportunity to touch the collection plate, because they had seen her succumb to temptation before and feared the embarrassment if she were ever caught. They rarely attended church, but when they did, they were always late and their mama, instead of slipping discretely into one of the back pews as they wished she would, always sauntered straight down the aisle, with that gangly slouching stride of hers, all the way to the fourth row so she could sit right behind her sister. Their mama never seemed to notice or care that she was creating a spectacle, but they were keenly aware of the disgusted, pitying eyes that followed them. Feels like they’re prickin’ me all over, she thought, like I’m a big ole giant pincushion. Walking with their heads lowered, their chins burrowing into their collarbones, they were overcome with shame and then guilt, because they knew they should not be ashamed. Y’all don’t have no right to stare! she thought, but she could not bring herself to raise her head.

Finally, they slumped into the fourth pew and the congregation returned their gawking eyes to the preacher, who in turn, resumed his sermon.

Aunt Abby craned her neck backward and whispered over a bare, golden shoulder, “Well, hello there, Maggie. It sure is nice of y’all to join us.” Aunt Abby, who, despite being five years
older than their mama, looked much younger, was clean and pretty, but there was something restless, frantic, and almost hysterical in her eyes. She was the only person who ever called Sissy by her real name, which made the child unexplainably nervous.

The preacher was ranting about hellfire and brimstone and gnashing of teeth, and she trembled, feeling suddenly sick, imagining the smell of dead burning flesh. Churches, in her mind, were always associated with death, not only because most of her experience with them involved funerals, but also because so many old people attended them and she was unaccustomed to old people and their smells. Her grandmother was the oldest person she had ever known, and she had always smelled like strawberries and never got old. The preacher suddenly raved, shouting and flapping and spitting, working himself into a profound anticlimactic frenzy. *I guess he caught the spirit,* she thought solemnly, without sarcasm, but she could not concentrate. Staring at the altar, she could not help but remember her grandmother; she could not look at it without picturing the white coffin that had rested on it four years ago. She was only six when it happened, but she was old enough to understand, to comprehend as far as any human can, the finality of death. She remembered standing before the casket, tip-toed, peering in at the cold lifeless face. She remembered the overwhelming smell of flowers, the children running, hiding under the pews, the sobbing women hugging her mama and aunts and cousins and her. And then bitterly, reluctantly, she remembered her mother. She remembered watching as she reached into the coffin and slipped a thin gold band off the dead woman’s finger, with a hundred people that could have seen but didn’t. She remembered how she had held out her hand and said, “Here Sissy, put this in your pocket. Go on, it’s a present, a keepsake.” Later, when she asked for it, her daughter told her it was gone, that she had lost it.
But I didn’t lose it she thought now, suppressing a brief sensation of guilt. *I kept it and hid it, ’cause I knowed she’d hock it, just like she hocked that gold watch her daddy give her and John Henry’s radio that he got fer Christmas from Aunt Abby. I didn’t want Mamaw’s ring sittin’ in some dirty ole pawn shop, where anybody in the world could go in and buy it and wear it around like it was their mamaw’s and not mine’s.* Even now, she could picture the ring on her grandmother’s finger, the five bright stones glittering in the sunlight, especially after the strokes, when her hands started to tremble regularly. It was the only piece of jewelry she had ever owned, and now it was safely hidden in a gash in her granddaughter’s mattress, carefully wrapped in newspaper and secured with masking tape. She had not dared to unwrap it in four years, but she remembered it perfectly, a thin flat band with five tiny stones; there was a red one, which she knew was for her mama, and a green, white, purple, and blue one for each of her aunts. *I wonder if I got a birthstone too,* she thought, but when she turned to ask her mother, she realized that she was gone. She didn’t know how long she had been gone, but it was not unusual for her to leave in the middle of a sermon. Church was even more uncomfortable for her mama than it was for her, and she usually found some reason to excuse herself.

Like always, she reappeared just as the choir began the Invitation, still swaggering down the aisle with her long gangly legs and belting out the words before she even got back to the pew. Her shrill, scratchy voice was predictably off-key, and her tempo was absurdly fast, as if she were trying to hurry the choir and pianist along, rushing them to the end of the service. Aunt Abby, however, was blissfully ignorant of the plan, which she foiled by running to the altar in frantic haste as they sang the last line of the last verse of “Just as I Am,” thus prolonging the event indefinitely. Naturally, after several minutes of crying and praying, God laid it on her heart to give her testimony, right then and there, which she did, allowing Him enough time to lay
it on six or seven other people’s hearts to testify or confess or sing a song, which they dutifully
did, and before long the preacher felt compelled to give another sermon.

Another hour passed before they finally stepped out into the bright harsh sunlight and
another half hour after that, because Aunt Abby couldn’t leave without mingling a little and
shaking hands and hugging everybody’s neck, before they finally piled into Uncle Mark’s truck.
Aunt Abby, her oldest daughter, Uncle Mark, and their mama managed to stuff themselves into
the small cab, while a dozen or so children all climbed in the back. And with more aunts and
cousins, and their husbands and fathers, following in their own cars or trucks or tractors, the
shabby burlesque caravan finally set forth.

The road to the family cemetery curved deep into the valley alongside Possum Creek and
was shaded by a thick canopy of birch and blackgum trees, making it dark and cool, even in
June. When they reached the end of the blacktop, the motorcade was forced to slow to a barely
sputtering speed. She heard the rushing of the creek, no longer obliterated by the roar of engines,
and she felt completely happy. Someday I’ll get me a truck, she thought, and every Sunday I’ll
ride up in the mountains with the windows down. The graveyard itself lay on a small gently
sloping hill at the foot of Bearcat Mountain. A week ago, Uncle Mark had hauled his John Deere
through the winding valley road and mowed the plots, as he had done twice a year ever since he
married Aunt Abby and as her previous husbands had done twice a year before him. Six or
seven generations ago, her ancestors had drudgingly cleared the hillside for cow pasture using
homemade axes and scythes, but she did not know that. If she thought about it all, she simply
assumed nature did not intend for trees to grow there.

When they reached the cemetery, the women immediately employed themselves in
unloading and uncovering dozens of baskets and Tupperware containers while the few men
hovered next to the line of parked cars, chewing tobacco and spitting on the ground and telling each other what a good message that was this morning until they were called to eat. As they gorged themselves on fried chicken and gravy and biscuits and cornbread and several green vegetable purees topped with French-fried onions, Sissy felt more secure than she had in a long time. Lost in the anonymity of a vast extended family, she felt comfortable, unforgotten, and unashamed. Occasionally, one of the women would carry on about how delicious a particular casserole or pie or cake was and wonder who had made it, but no one noticed or cared that her mama had not contributed to the feast. She was not a charity case anymore; she was simply part of a community in which everything was held in common and no one had more than anyone else. She even experienced a brief surge of pride when someone complimented her Aunt Geneva’s pasta salad and the woman confessed, “Oh, well, it’s Maggie’s recipe.”

After everyone had had seconds and thirds and they were sure that no one was still hungry, the women packed up the food and unloaded the flowers. The men recongregated next to the cars, accompanied by their youngest sons, while the older boys scattered over the hillside or into the adjacent woods. Solemnly and dutifully, the women commenced their morbid ritual. The girls followed their mothers to the first few graves, starting at the top of the knoll with the oldest ones, many of which were marked only by a small wooden cross, and moving downhill to the most recent. In a giant pastel female mass, they floated from one grave to the next, reciting the names and critical dates and ancestral lineage of each dead relation, alternately laughing and crying, sharing memories and decorating each headstone with a profusion of plastic flowers and wreaths.

“Real uns wouldn’t last two days in this sun,” an aunt had explained one year as she drove a neon green polyethylene stem into the dirt. They couldn’t bear the thought of their dead
kinfolk lying beneath withered foliage that might stick to their tombstones as it decayed, leaving a dark organic stain, so they opted for the most durable plastic available, avoiding the popular silk polyester flowers as much as possible because, although they looked more natural, they were easily soiled or blown away by the wind.

The young girls quickly lost interest in the ritual, and after two or three graves, they began to slip away in small clusters to pick the wild blackberries that grew along the fence on one side of the cemetery. John Henry had disappeared behind a hill with their Aunt Leola’s boy Eric, who at only twelve was known to smoke dope and sneak into his daddy’s whiskey. A year ago, he had gotten in trouble with the law for stealing hubcaps and pawning them. Laura Lee knew Eric had gotten her brother high before, and she began to worry.

“We orter go an’ look fer ‘em,” a gawky, bucktoothed girl with straw-colored hair, some second or third cousin, offered. The girl was nine and was known to have had a crush on Eric at least since she was four. Innocent crushes among siblings and cousins were not abnormal in their family; in fact, they were often encouraged by the adults because they provided entertainment at family gatherings and because everybody knew they would never materialize. Except that one time behind the barn, she thought, when Eric’s older brother had pulled down his pants to show her what boys looked like and she said she knew what boys looked like because she had a little brother and she had changed his diaper and given him his bath ever since he was a baby. “I bet you ain’t never touched one though,” he had said, and she said “Naw, I ain’t,” and then he grabbed her hand and made her touch it and it felt hot and sticky and she thought she was going to be sick. Except that time, she thought, suddenly more worried about John Henry.

“I just don’t want him getting’ my brother into no trouble,” she explained in that anxious, maternal tone she had, ignoring the bucktoothed girl’s suggestion. She would never have
admitted it, but even she knew John Henry didn’t need Eric to get into trouble; he had learned to do that all by himself. Just like most trailer park mothers expect their boys to smoke and drink and steal, she knew her little brother would inevitably fall prey to his environment. Poor white trash boys were raised to be criminals, and poor white trash girls were raised to have babies, which they would raise to be criminals. She could not articulate it because she was only ten, but she knew.

Angry that her proposal had been ignored and further incited by the implied insult to the object of her heart’s affection, the bucktoothed cousin retaliated, “Maybe if your brother’d hang around Eric a little more, he wouldn’t be such a durned sissy.” John Henry was exceptionally small for his age and perpetually sick, and the other children often teased him for it. But what he lacked in health and stature, he compensated for with courage. He was a foot shorter than his classmates, but he had a fierce, reckless temper that made him as strong as five full-grown men.

Sissy immediately sprang to his defense, “Don’t you say that ‘bout my brother, you hear? He might be little, but he ain’t no sissy.”

“Uh huh, is so. My mama says it’s ‘cause Aunt Maggie’s a big ole drunk. Says she’s surprised he was even borned at all with all the pills an’ liquor your mama drunk ‘fore she had him. My mama was there when he was borned an’ she says he was so teeny, he could a fit in the palm a your hand.”

“He was premature,” she regurgitated her mother’s habitual excuse, without understanding or even believing it. But it was too late; the other girls’ laughter had already galvanized her enemy.

“My mama says Aunt Maggie was such a drunkard that when little John Henry come out, first thang he said was he wanted a sup a ‘shine.”
She heard the laughter surrounding her, suffocating her, but she could not see their faces because her eyes were clouded with rage and tears. She knew she was outnumbered, and she knew resistance was futile, but she felt obligated, bound by blood, to fight back. Without warning, her tiny body hurled itself forward, toppling the scrawny bucktoothed girl in a whirl of fists and legs and teeth. Tumbling into the blackberry briars, they scratched and squealed and bit and had generally ruined their Sunday dresses before a fat frantic aunt appeared, waddling shrieking and obese, and pulled them apart by the hair. They were swiftly transported down the hill to where their mothers and the massive pastel cloud of grave-tenders had progressed to the final stretch of markers, a trail of stiff neon flowers clapping their plastic leaves in the breeze behind them. Her mama greeted her with a violent blow to the ear and a thorough scolding, which, like everything she did, was vulgar, unnecessarily loud, and meant to attract attention. *It's your fault,* she thought to herself with gritted teeth. *If it wasn't for you,* but she felt a sour lump rising in her throat and didn’t dare finish the thought.

As her mother jerked her to the final grave, she realized her jaw ached and felt a warm heavy trickle of fluid running from her ear into her collar. She knew the women were talking, but the sound of blood throbbing in her temples drowned their voices in pulsating thunder. Growing dizzy, she stared at her grandmother’s simple tombstone, which they always saved for last, unable to comprehend the words:

Barbara Ann Cochran

Loving wife, mother, and grandmother.


Her aunts stood motionless above the grave for several minutes and she wondered if time had stopped. A small marker next to the headstone read “In memory of her husband, John Henry
Cochran,” but she knew no corpse rested beneath it. The grandfather she had never known was buried somewhere far away, but she couldn’t remember where just now. Her peripheral sight grew dark, gradually narrowing her focus until she saw nothing but the glistening stone, the incomprehensible words, a bright luminous spot in the blackness. Her Aunt Abby kneeled into her constricted circle of vision and began to arrange several plastic chrysanthemums, weeping stripes of blue-black mascara. She remembered her grandmother, the birthstones glittering on her hand, her milky blue eyes, how she turned sick and old all at once and died without warning, too early. A train whistled somewhere. She knew the gravestone, her kneeling aunt, the neon flowers all had something to do with the bright gem-studded band wrapped in newspaper and stuffed in her mattress; they were all somehow related to her grandmother, to her death, but she couldn’t remember how. The ground began to spin.

Suddenly, everyone was roused; she followed their collective gaze. She could hear a train rumbling, whistling, thundering along invisible tracks. Her cousin Eric was running down the neon-speckled hill, his face ashy white and streaked blue and purple with veins and tears. She pitied him, but did not recognize him. She heard the blood throbbing and the train rumbling, the two sounds colliding and amplifying, hurting her ears.

“Oh God! Oh God! Somebody! Help somebody!” The boy sounded far away. She watched him running down the hill, his shape growing larger as he approached, his giant white face oscillating with each bound, glowing like a full moon. The motion made her nauseous and she thought she might presently be sick.

“We was... we was. Oh God!... the tracks... we was playin’ on the tracks... an’ then the train... God!... the train came... an’ it got him... he fell an’ it got him!”

Far away, she heard the shrill, unmistakable sound of her mother’s voice, wailing screaming crying. She saw the others run up the hill. She saw the boy that she still could not recognize fall trembling to the ground, his face still white, streaked with purple. And then everything went black and quiet and she saw nothing and heard nothing. Her tiny limbs collapsed like a folding chair, falling in a lilac-colored heap above her grandmother’s corpse.

. . . .

The doctor said she had suffered a severe concussion and would probably have some permanent hearing loss in her left ear. She was still dizzy when she woke up on the third day with a dull throbbing ache in her head. She stared vacantly at the new black velvet dress that her Aunt Abby had bought for her and which she knew she was supposed to wear to the funeral, spread neatly and unwrinkled at her feet. Plum ridiculous, she thought, velvet in the middle of June. She waited for the dizziness and throbbing to subside, and then finally, reluctantly, she got out of bed.
Here between the blunted tops
of two misty blue mountains
we have watched the sun rise over a thousand days
and set over a thousand more
red and strong and insensible.

We have tasted wild blackberries in June
and breathed the thin cold air of autumn.
We have dug our hands into the wet spring dirt
and planted our tomatoes and loved ones there.

A thousand hillside graves
plastic nosegays dancing in the wind
remind us
and root us until we stand as strong as trees.
Beautiful womanly oaks
rising from the hard red clay
stretching green arms into the tired morning sun
towering proud and solid
unshattered in the storm.

Their ancestral grove extends before my eyes
raw impervious unyielding.
I, who thought I could break free,
deny, disavow, defy
the grief and pull of river and mountain and blood,
I, who thought I could keep running forever
running fast away in the cold and the dark,
until I found someplace kinder
someplace flatter
someplace where the soil is richer
and the summers milder
with people who use fewer pronouns
and women whose eyes are not so strong
so pregnant,

I am returned.
And I long to wrap myself in their fragrant green arms
sheltered by warmth and love
and tell them I’m sorry.
I want to cry to them
because soon I will add another to their number
and I don’t want her to run away
like I did.

I beg them,
teach me to stand again
tall and proud and indestructible
between earth and sky.

But her soft rustic voice stops me
and says
“Here we are not in the habit of apologizing,”
and she laughs.

Here
I’ll never say I’m sorry.
Appendix

The Ladies of *Peach Blossom and Snow*

BARBARA ANN COCHRAN: The matriarch; born Barbara Ann Martin in 1950 at her family’s home in Possum Creek Hollow, a small nondescript mountain town identical to every other small nondescript mountain town throughout Southern Appalachia; who, in 1965, met and fell in love with a young man from Mississippi named Frankie Cochran, whose child she conceived before he left for war with his army regiment that summer, shortly after which he died, in a Vietnamese hospital, having never seen combat, from malaria; that same year, after hearing of her lover’s death, she married his brother and moved to Mississippi, where she gave birth to a daughter just before Christmas; a strong, resilient woman who endured an abusive, loveless marriage for many years, during which time her sole occupation was raising and comforting her children, a task partially accomplished by filling their heads with nighttime stories of a simpler, purer life in the mountains, a life that she herself had enjoyed in youth, and would return to in 1987, after her husband’s death and ten years before her own; the mother of five children, all female, and grandmother of countless more, she was loved and respected by everyone whose path she crossed; a woman, not old, but possessing a deep, ageless wisdom that gave the impression of a life far longer than hers; who, bold and unafraid, died at the age of forty seven after a brief, but debilitating illness caused by complications from untreated diabetes, a disease that she did not know she had until it was too late because her entire
life had been devoted to the care of others, often and ultimately at the cost of her own health.

ABIGAIL MAE COCHRAN: Later Abby Mae Cochran Stevens Hicks Jones Trent; the daughter of Barbara Ann and her husband’s deceased brother Frankie Cochran, whose birth in December of 1965 occasioned the first beating her mother received from her husband; unaware for most of her childhood that her father was also her uncle, the knowledge of which, when revealed, only served to further complicate her childish and distorted perceptions of familial love, she suffered physical, emotional, and sexual abuse from him for many years, as did her sisters, though neither she nor they ever acknowledged it openly; a stunningly beautiful woman caught gracefully in perpetual, radiant youth who struggled for most of her adult life to fill the void left by her father’s sick, unsatisfying love; a woman, not promiscuous, but unguarded, because she had never had anything to guard or protect, except that which she had been raped of at so early an age, which she could neither remember nor imagine possessing, it having been so long since she had; a loving, puritanical mother who, despite her completely unmotherly appearance, loved her children with a fierce, all-consuming, intensely obsessive, and utterly unhealthy, not because it was demented or perverse like her father’s but because it was too extreme, passion; the mother of more than half of a dozen children and surrogate caregiver for many more, including her nieces and nephews; who, after a lifetime of frantically searching for her masculine counterpart, someone whose love would make her whole again, someone to fill the void he left, she, like many others, found solace in religion, deriving peace and joy from the symbol of divinity, the didactic picture of a man as God.
MARY MAGDALENE COCHRAN: Maggie; one of four daughters born to John Henry and Barbara Ann Cochran; born in 1971; the mother of two children, a daughter that she named Laura Lee because she heard it on a soap opera and a son that she named John Henry, Jr. after her father, a man that she loved as fiercely as she hated; a woman broken and defeated by the cruel sickness of her father's affection, years of alcohol and drug abuse, and life; who, if she had ever learned to love and care for herself, could have been an excellent mother.

LAURA LEE WATTS: Called Sissy by everyone in her family, not so much out of affection, but for simplicity, because Laura Lee takes too long to say and often gets stuck on Southern tongues when they try to pronounce it correctly; the daughter of Maggie Cochran and a truck driver named Luther Watts, with whom Maggie shared a single drunken evening in November of 1990 and who remains as oblivious to his daughter's existence as she has always been to his; a plain, freckled girl accustomed to grief, hunger, and filth, so much so that she is more startled by their alleviation or absence than by their appearance; a girl who has seen more death than life; who lost her maternal grandmother at the age of six and her younger brother, one of her few male relations and the only one she loved, four years later; a daughter ever-willing to make excuses and a sister ready to fight in her brother's defense; one of the infinite numbers of poor, neglected, forgotten children who pass their youthful years in the shacks and trailers of Appalachia and who, if they miraculously reach adulthood, are almost destined to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and ignorance that spawned them; a child deserving of pity; but also, a survivor who possesses formidable strength and an incredible capacity to endure.
A DAUGHTER: A young woman on the brink of adulthood and self-awareness; the daughter of Abby Mae Cochran and an unidentified teenage lover; born in 1983 when her mother was seventeen years old; modestly educated and well-traveled; the sole guardian of her grandmother’s incriminating secret, a secret that in her mind represents an eternal, unique bond between her and the woman she loved so dearly; a girl acutely and painfully sensitive to the “old pull and grief of blood” who, like Faulkner’s immortal son, finds herself shouting into the iron dark, in grief and despair and maybe even denial,

I don’t hate it! I don’t! I don’t! I don’t hate it!
Dear Michelle Blackwell,

As the first reader for Shae Caldwell's senior honors thesis, I wanted to let you know that I've read and approved her thesis. Please let me know if you need any further information from me.

All best,

Lisi Schoenbach