

**All Seals and
Symbols of
Redeemed Sin**

John Gallagher

Because no battle is ever won he said. They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools.

Before

“She’s a whore and a nigger,” Father said, his skin glistening in the heat. Charles called him Father rather than Dad. And Father raised them in the house of the Bonners. Father beat Charles’ sister when she wore the wrong stockings to Church. The Bonner’s house in Tedra County was the same as the one in Arthur. “But she’s a pick of the litter nigger.”

“Yes sir,” Charles replied.

They walked down the street, the hot July air stifling the birds. The woman walked past them, her brown skin glistening with sweat. Saturday nights were a time for her business. Charles noticed wrinkles in her face, around her eyes, as if she were constantly squinting. “You gonna do it, just like I done it in Arthur. And they enjoy it. Give em a few dollas and they’ll be happy.”

“Yes sir,” Charles said. He didn’t like it when his father got excited. Charles looked at his father and noted how the old man’s smile wasn’t quite straight and it curved downwards on the right side of his cheek. It became more obvious and his father’s words became less pronounced whenever he discussed Arthur.

“Will you go along with me tonight?” Charles asked. *Will you go along with me?* It was from a family nursery rhyme. Charles wasn’t sure if it was right to use now but he felt it was.

“I shall not,” Father said, his voice returning to the processed and edited sound of age. He stood straighter, too. Charles pulled out his white handkerchief and patted his brow.

He breathed deeply, relieved. The hot air grew a bit cooler even though the sun rose higher.

Charles followed Father to the store where they bought several casks of grapes and several pounds of flour. Father almost always paid in cash. “Father, would you like me to get the buggy and take them home?” Charles asked. Father shook his head and Charles followed him next door.

The new model T had come out and Daniel Bonner had every intention of buying one. Charles hadn’t expected to see much of anything. Tedra County had been wealthy. Arthur on the other hand. Charles went outside while his father haggled. He sat on the bench. Main Street, despite the town’s obsession with whiskey, was devoid of any liquor stores. Most of its wealth came from the coal mines. *If one could call it wealth. I’d call it nonwealth*, Charles thought. He lit a cigarette. *Just like those niggers speak nonlangauge. They speak nothing*. Then he silently corrected the voice that was not his. *They do not speak correctly*.

“Are you ready?” Father asked when he came out. He dangled keys in his hands.

“Cash, sir?”

They walked to the back of the shop. The car was waiting. The car salesman, Peter Lloyd, smiled with shining teeth though he was the oldest man in all of Kentucky and limped. “Even President Harding would enjoy this kind of ride,” he scoffed. “Mr. Bonner, you gotcha youself a great car in that.” Charles scowled.

The men shook hands and Charles got in the passenger seat. They started back home. Charles fidgeted,

eager to get home. Father seemed less enthusiastic, wanting to show off the car. He undid his shirt, revealing a soaked white undershirt and thick wafts of grayed chest hair. The chest was muscular, forged of iron, sweat, fire. Nearly three decades of the largest plantation in Tedra County would do that. Of course, ten years of trying to be mayor gave the lower portion a slightly puffed look. They had only come to Arthur because a friend of Father's had wanted a Bonner in office. A friend who happened to be governor. His campaign in Arthur for mayor had already started. There were no competitors, not even the decrepit mayor who was running against Bonner.

So they drove around, Father seeking reputable men with whom he could associate. Charles sat silently, his shirt remaining buttoned. He needed a respectable woman. One with decorum. One who wasn't a romantic blind fool but still beautiful.

"What about that Kearns woman?" Father asked.

"Fucking Irish," Charles said. Father nodded.

"That family who lives by those gnarled trees. They seem to have plenty of money. Nice house. Their women still seem like ladies."

"Kikes," Charles stated.

Father turned, aghast. "Really?"

Charles nodded.

"No one told me," Father said. "Why wouldn't anyone tell me. I've been trying to win their votes."

"People don't seem to care about the kikes."

“The kikes and the niggers are from the same place. Jerusalem and Africa are the goddam places of forsaken waste.” Charles looked towards him.

“I’ve been thinking of Ellen Forrester.” Father stopped the car on their way to the liquor store. The sun was past its peak, turning the Kentucky sky dark red, dark blue, and, in some places, black. The willows smelled strong and the sun beat down on the black car. Even with the windows open, Charles could barely stand it. With the car stopped, the wind died. Charles looked at his father, neither man smiling.

Both were handsome. Both around six foot, although Charles was more muscular, which was only natural in that his father was nearing sixty whereas he had just come of age. Father, though, was more powerful. Powerful but not stronger. His eyes were set deeply in his face and his skin was taught, pulled back and wrinkled around the edges of his mouth. His hands were worn, calloused and red.

The liquor store was the place to get votes as well as booze. Men often hung outside, smoking, bulling, talking, bulling some more, mentioning the niggers just like Father and Charles did except they cared more about them being black than not being white and everyone new in town had to introduce themselves for some time.

“Forrester?” Father said. He got out of the car and took out a handkerchief. He wiped a small speck of dirt off the hood and got back in the car. He shook his head, content, and waited for his son to answer.

“She’s a lady. She’s all I really need,” Charles said. “Just don’t tell her anything.”

“Keep your discretions in check. You’re still new here.” Charles was new. His sister and his father were not.

“Father, the Forresters are a good people. Ellen is the daughter of a minister. The mother is chaste.”

They arrived at the liquor store. “If you’re going to go after her, good. I support it. But go after her and win her.” Father combed his hair. With that, he got out of the car and starting shaking hands.

* * *

The words oiled their egos. The conversations always went well. Even during the summers, when no one wanted to talk. During the winter, everyone listened. They had to. But in the heat. The flowers. No one ever wanted the vote—or to listen to talk about voting.

It was then that Sheila stopped by (or he stopped by her but that wasn’t the way), her voice crisp, her lips pink like peppermint toothpaste, so thick it made Charles want to vomit, even in the summer heat with the sun setting and the longest day of the year a month ago but the days still seemed longer somehow, the sun was always in the sky if still low. Charles stared at Sheila, her legs shining through the see through skirt. He sat in the parlor, the humidity forcing sweat down his brow and down her legs. He felt his stomach tilt and then took a sip of whiskey.

“First time?” He shook his head.

“First time at a place like this.”

“It’s okay, everyone does it.”

The town tire was what they said. Everyone always uses it and no one says anything and everyone does it but no

one says anything and everyone frowns on it but not so long as the words remain sliced, silent, everyone unconvinced but convinced the same. The moon was rising over the back of the house and the sun was out front. Charles couldn't see the front because he was in the back. The moon looked small, orangish, pale, dead, but still living hollow and full. Sheila sat next to Charles on the couch.

"It's okay," she said, putting her hand on his knee.

"Yes ma'am," Charles replied. Her dark skin glistened with the drip of water she dabbled on her neck and arms. "How much?"

"Not from you darling," Sheila said. "Your father paid it all up, plus a little extra."

"Why?" asked Charles.

She didn't say anything but his father's words echoed in his head. Charles swallowed his pride. Negro woman was a tradition and Charles needed to be part of the tradition. Father needed a river in which he could actually swim. He needed his lineage to swim in the same river in order to make the river swell, engorged on whiskey, wine, fine beef, and cigars. The whole family would join in the festivities except for Charles' mother, the deceased matriarch who would abhor them all, even Charles' sister who had her own traditions.

Charles stood up. Sheila stood up. He sat down. She didn't. He stood. "Can we go outside?" he asked. She nodded, her eyes understanding. A large scar sat under her chin. Charles has been told, warned. But he couldn't help himself. They stood outside and he asked.

“Where is it from?” she replied. “I wouldn’t be doing this, with a young buck, so young he need coaxing, unless it would drive the demon from here. He’s going to drive the demon and the demon can’t tell the difference yet.”

She took Charles’ hand and led him back inside. He said nothing. The sun was down. She led him upstairs a little while later.

After

Charles sat at the table, reading the paper. He walked outside hoping to catch the milkman before he left but he didn’t get there in time. The new car was not in the driveway, so Charles left the bill on the counter while he went to the club. His father’s late night excursions often took him to places Charles would not venture. Charles thus went to the club in the morning alone.

“Sir, are you sure you want to take part in today’s golf?” asked Jeffrey, the valet for Charles’ carriage.

“Of course!” cried Charles. The club was set back a ways from the road, on a dirt road itself, an old mahogany sign, worn from dust and winters. The small sign was the only indication that there was a club far back from the road.

“It’s your choice,” Jeffrey answered. “If you need anything, just let me know.” Jeffrey only had one eye and played poker with the other employees at the club. Charles often played with them, but he only played misgris—poker with the joker added. That was the only card game Charles played. The only one that father allowed his son to play. Sammy was forbidden.

Charles was supposed to meet Sammy for brunch before he took in the game of golf. As he approached their standard table, he noticed she was conspicuously composed, not standing up, not in her normal white blouse and light pink dress, the one that curled up at the end, the one she wore to the county fair and town meetings when they were young.

“Sammy?” he said, sitting at the table. He glanced around, seeing no one else in the entire place. He gave a small thanks. He did not want anyone to see her unhappy.

“Charlie, why’d we come here?” she asked.

“What?”

“Charles.”

“Where?”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’ll tell you then,” she said, without waiting for a pause. “To adore a man that only a few years ago was sitting in New York, grinning from all the people he had finally convinced to loan him money in a tight suit that didn’t fit him right because it was stolen, you helped steal it I know and can’t say much other than I’m ashamed, a suit that smelled of sin even before it became such. We’re starting at each other with Father stuck in our eyes, his money in our pockets, and his negro woman taking my brother’s purity.”

“My purity is none of your business. Your purity on the other hand, Sammy.” Charles stared at her and she crossed her legs gently. “Yes?” He waited for an answer and the hatred and spite for her blood reminded him that Sammy controlled the family’s name but didn’t have any authority.

She burst into tears. "Father's dead."

Charles stood up and held out his arm for Sammy. She glided over to him. He grabbed her thin pale arm in a swift motion and her mouth opened in pain but she said nothing all while he grimaced for hurting her and smiling because he was hurting her. Sheila's face entered in his mind opening several doors that hadn't been unlocked in years and there was Coney Island and that Jewish family that had no money yet still willing to give away food to a man and a son who had none and no money and even offered the pair a place to stay in the rat-infested shack that was supposed to be a home. The pair declined knowing they wouldn't stay long and just had to get the attention of big men in the city. There the pair got their money but not before the family had lost the old man's only suit, the one he'd brought from Germany, a family heirloom and the family had nothing for their newborn son other than irony and the newly opened baseball stadium that the Jews never actually cared about in the first place.

Father was dead.

It was then that only a few years ago Father and Charles Bonner got themselves on the wrong side of the Irish who weren't jumping for joy over the end of the war but the money they got for what they promised was far more than the money Peter Lloyd wanted for the car that Father bought (but Lloyd didn't want to sell) but money is money and *no one can ever change that* said Father who had smiled that crooked smile like he did around the McInnis and Slattery and Sullivan families and they of course returned the favor liking what they saw in him, not liking Charles, but trusting the father over the

son despite the son being the one who had a better reputation for honesty, truth, and building lines that could go from Georgia to New York to Kentucky. The only seeing thing was to see potential but the blind go on instinct and so the trio took the father instead of the son which didn't make the son hate them but it made him weary of them, a trio of Irish clansmen who had a bit of money, and wanted something in return. They wanted nothing to do with anything unless it was money and even the new ballpark didn't concern them until they realized they could scalp tickets to see the greatest ball player. The money mattered. Father knew that and used it so he could shake hands in Arthur, making sure everyone in Arthur knew his name, only his name.

Amor patris, thought Charles. The first time the Irishmen let go of the chains, hearing their minions that followed them around after a night of drunken boxing, with the fists of Slattery against McInnis' square head, the saliva dripping from the dogs' mouths fell the peach groves when Charles and Sammy held Raven's leash, the Georgia air so humid you could wave your arms and feel rain hovering. Charles' shirt clung to his back and Sammy's breasts, as yet only partially developed, were outlined by her yellow sundress, the pair of them watching Father walk downtown, leaving Mother in bed with a cool washcloth on her forehead, in order to get more votes from people who only wanted Father because of Mother's family, Father's having never truly made any appearances in Tedra.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" asked Charles. He let go of her arm and she tossed him an incendiary look that

appeared, like Mother's had when the peaches were ripe, to melt some part of Charles. He went numb and she wrapped her arms around her brother and he wrapped his arms around her like Father could do to both of them when he wasn't shaking hands. She rubbed her arm and held her brother's muscular arms as though they were made of glass. He was taller than her and as he rested his weight on her body, she remembered the moon over the sky the night Mother passed away and the way they climbed into bed with Jimmy, their father's cousin, a pale skinned man who kept out of sight of Tedra citizens because he hated the way they looked at him.

Jimmy had moved back to Arthur with his cousin but had been arrested. Some people thought Daniel should have been arrested. Jimmy confessed to moving the whiskey over state boundaries and was sentenced to fourteen months on Vineyard's chain gang.

"Whiskey," Charles said to the waiter, who immediately followed the harshly barked order.

"I'm sorry that I didn't say anything sooner," she replied.

"What happened to him?"

"He was murdered."

"How?" Charles' hands were beginning to shake with angry effluvium.

"Shot to death last night around midnight, outside of town, past Reverend Maggloire's church, where Hank Yvrend lives."

"They think Hank did it?"

“Not sure yet,” Sammy replied her voice never wavering as she told the story.

He drank the whiskey the waiter brought in one quick gulp, breathing a bit to get the burn out of his throat, but making sure he still could feel it go down. Two decades in Georgia couldn't erase a few years in New York and Kentucky. The bourbon with peaches would have been better, but Charles couldn't get the desire for Saturday night whiskey from his mouth. Either was sufficient in Tedra, only now Arthur seemed devoid of any good whiskey. And Charles was not going to pay for peaches, not after spending his entire life around the orchards.

“Where are we going?” she asked when he stood up.

“We're going to pay Hank a visit. He better not be living with that nigger woman of his. Lord knows he treats those negros like family.”

“Charles?” Sammy asked. Her voice quivered, a small voice now when it was a big one just moments before.

“No,” he answered.

* * *

As they were getting into Charles' carriage, Jeffrey came up to them with a large piece cloth in his hands. He gave it to Sammy. She wasn't sure what it was until she opened it. It was a large flag. Jeffrey hadn't folded it properly, and the gigantic faded cloth looked little like a flag. It was, Charles thought, an emblem. She handed it to Charles, somewhat disgusted by it, somewhat confused by it.

Charles stood, smarmy flag in his hands, somewhat disgusted. He got into the carriage and Sammy got in with

him. Jeffrey turned around but not before Charles asked him to set a place for their family that night. Jeffrey was one of the few negroes that Charles respected. He stood like an African king. Regal.

“Sir?”

“Three places for dinner, nothing more. Keep Father’s place set.” Jeffrey rarely asked questions and said nothing more.

But you see rang a vision in his head. The words never quite make a tale and the words are more valuable than the person who speaks them unless the person has no decency or decorum, something that remains to be seen among these Irish. Words have little value in themselves. They make no promises and never win or lose. They create gray areas, where rhetoric can partition itself from guile or pair itself with guile, either way making the speaker more powerful than the truth, which never has its way, until someone decides that the truth and their words come together in agreement.

The words that speak themselves aren’t truth, because the words are then speaking, because the truth has left, because the truth never was, like time never was, time only is, truth only is, it never was, because if it was then it is not truth but a moniker of its doppelganger or perhaps the ghost of some long dead nigger come to claim us, like they tried to do during the war, not this war but the old war, when men could be men and defended each other, not some flag that tried to kill its seamstresses and workers, and even some of the negroes tried to help us keep the flag from being buried with the dead soldiers because they knew like we knew that the

world was getting too big, like it is now, like the Irish recognize.

The listeners of the words grow uneasy or they grow to love the speaker. If the words betray, you can blame it on the words, if they convince, then they are your words. The disadvantages are little, the opposite great, for you never have to claim ownership, but others think you can in exactly the same way the Indians took back their land, or tried to take it back, that way, that same way, you never have to claim the words. They claim you.

“So what happened?” Charles asked, not quite speaking, more of thinking aloud. Sammy sat with her legs crossed tightly and her corset even tighter, waiting for the Son to take the place of the Father. Charles did not look ready. Sammy relaxed and put her head on her brother’s shoulder.

“They told me I had to tell you,” she said, her voice growing in strength again. Charles’ shoulders slumped, growing weak and suddenly narrow. Sammy sat straighter and her white sun bonnet remained unmoved.

“Who told you?”

“The police,” Sammy replied. “They said father was shot to death past the reverend’s house, along the side of the road.” And the grass roads were overgrown in Georgia. Father says: Roads don’t have to lead anywhere. Charles says: All railroads lead somewhere. They go some place. They were built with goals in mind, with a reason, a purpose, a some thing. Father says: roads though have nothing. Roads bear no fruit. Never will.

“Stop by the station,” Charles said, to himself more than to Sammy. He knew it wouldn’t be open, although Sammy did not realize it.

“Why?”

“Because I want to know,” he replied. The hot July day burned down quickly, as if it were trying to keep people from going about their Sunday activities. The death and the air weren’t particularly noticeable in the heat. The humidity drowned out the rotting.

“He never talked much to me,” Sammy replied.

“You were his daughter.”

“And you were his son.”

“I was the son,” Charles repeated.

“Father?” said Sammy. Charles nodded at Sammy as he drove. She continued. “Father was a man who rose out from ashes.”

“Yes he was,” Charles said, driving the carriage slowly across the town. The last week of July was giving way to the humidity of August, the time of year when Indian summers had their way, the last gods of heat and thunderstorms that crashed through savannahs were trying to hold on to a semblance of a time that would be forgotten and then rediscovered only a year later. The last week of July was a portal to these times and the Indian summers helped that portal grow.

“Father arrived in Tedra tanned from his excursion in the Caribbean, his skin scarred from the salt water slicing his body. He went to church every Sunday, donated as much as he could from a job that wilted his hands and broke his back. The

people in Tedra hated him because they never met someone so honest, someone who didn't want anything when he donated money, a man who actually donated to the church because it was the Christian thing to do." Sammy paused and covered the back of her neck. The two sat on top of the carriage. Even the horses were starting to grow thirsty. It wasn't the first day of summer but it was. The summer only officially began when the horses' tongues lashed about, the dogs unable to stand during the height of the afternoon.

"He went every Sunday, without recourse, met Mother and they eventually, after Father saved enough money from building other people's homes, was able to build ours. After Mother died of the wretched disease and Father joined people darker than the negroes who worked for Mother's family, not darker but darker, you understand Charles, they helped Father rise out of carpentry, construction, and labor to a place where he could talk with people in order to earn his keep, that was his dream, to support his family with oration, something that he said none of his family had ever done, Mother's had, but Father's family was different, we know that, poor and without solace, but Father arrived in Tedra County in 1881 with little more than his clothes, his hands, and that fiery will."

"But that's all he needed," Charles replied.

"That's all the Bonners ever needed," Sammy said. "He had nothing and stayed in a shack outside of town until he could afford a decent suit, which he then wore to church, he never went to church before he could look proper, an after the suit, he built a small house with the help of no one, not even

the negroes who offered to help him for free. All the while working on the entire town's houses, halls, and offices. Everyone hired Father because he was a good man, a diligent worker, and his work was reliable. He charged an accurate rate, make no fuss about it and finally built the small two room house in the spare hours before he would fall asleep and after he woke up."

"Father then finally died, after God knows what took him to another way, after those Irish and those niggers betrayed him, someone shot him in this town, and I don't know who. But Charles, I want to know why and I want you to find out who killed the only good man to arrive from nothing and come out with nearly everything."

"Do they have any ideas on who might have done it?"

"A few. They think that Johnny Telemaz did."

"The drunken guitar player?" Telemaz was a man known for two things: he could play the best songs and drink more whiskey than any two men put together. Often, he did both in the same night. No one much paid attention to him, his Mexican blood not welcome in Arthur. Just over the border in Tennessee, a large population of Mexicans, Comanche, and Negroes lived, most of them staying out of the way of those in Arthur. Charles did not understand how Telemaz, the most welcoming and enthusiastic man for his Father's election, would kill him.

Telemaz wanted Bonner to win the election. Bonner promised to make sure everyone was paid fairly for their work, an important aspect for a man who worked drunk and

was usually thrown from the building without a check. Charles patted his brow and the sweaty image of a whirling Johnny Telemaz entered and squatted in his mind.

They arrived at the police station. It was closed.

“What do you want to do now?” Sammy asked.

“Take you home.”

“I can walk home.”

“It’s a distance.”

“I’d rather have you go and crucify someone. The carriage is faster and will take you to town. Damn sure.”

Charles told her ladies do not swear.

* * *

The mid-afternoon of Sundays filled the saloon up to its brim. Everyone always paid their respects to the lord and then Bobby Teague, the saloon owner, would let them drink. Charles walked into the saloon, over to the dingy card table where four men sat, a fifth just watching, their drinks sweating from the summer disgust. They played a few hands of draw with Charles watching. Finally, the fattest one looked at him.

“Mr. Bonner, I’m sorry for your loss.” His hands were fat and his eyes were set in deep recesses, as if they were made to hide away in his squarish head. He wore kakis and a buttoned shirt. His skin reflected the lights that were dimmed in the afternoon sunshine, so that his arms looked like twin earthworms without any color. They bet no money, for it was Sunday, and Sundays were the day of the Sabbath, and the Sabbath was a day of atonement, atonement meant little to them but to everyone else in Arthur it meant all, not nothing.

“I’m here to see my father,” Charles said simply. He wanted to see the body.

“Not until tomorrow son,” the man said, his voice unwavering.

“I have every right.”

“You do, Charles, you do. But wait a day, wait until we can figure something out, figure out maybe who did it. Sit down, play a hand.”

“I don’t play stud,” Charles replied. *Only niggers and fools play stud. It involves too little risk, too little of chance. And we Bonners live on this side of Chance. Before I came to Tedra, I lived with those men in New York, traveled with the Irish and making people pay for their crimes, some of them committed no crimes at all, but we collected the money nonetheless. Chance kept me alive, it rewrote my scripts, offering me chances for things I could never dream of, or want, or do. Bonners play the game it was meant to be: with the odds stacked against them—which means the odds are actually in our favor. No side ever wins, but the Bonners come out on top.*

We roamed the streets, looking for those who owed us money. I helped them and they gave me money in return. And victory. They gave me victory. I did what was right. I did and I would do it again. My only hope and desire was to see you and Samantha rise up, rise up and take what they would deny you. The dream is for you two to live a better life than me. At any cost. That is why I give you my permission to go on ahead and stake a claim. Go ahead and herald my coming.

They have no idea who we are. That lies in our favor. We are mysteries and no one knows any different. The power is us. The people will help me and I will follow you and the Bonners will become all that we were destined to be—and more.

“Son ever since you and your father arrived in this town,” the man started, “have I given you a reason not to trust me? Your father is gone. You have my sympathy, but we are going to lead an investigation. Stay out of it.”

Charles paused a moment, looked at their beer mugs and ashy cigars in disgust, and crossed his arms. Jim Vineyard stared at Charles, appearing almost frightened for an instant. He then summarily dismissed the four other men. The one who wasn't playing poker protested, but the leader made himself clear with a quick flick of his wrist.

The men who keep order will always betray men like us. They claim to be white and on our side, but they always side with those with the most money and those with whom they smile the most or buy them the most drinks. Take this money and go to Arthur without me. I will follow and you shall lead us to a new era, one where we will receive that house, keep our courage and our confidence in what we hope for.

“Sit down, Mr. Bonner.”

Charles put himself on one of the chairs closest to Vineyard, whose wide shoulders gave him the appearance of a man weighed down by heavy things, most of which was the previous night's gossip discussed by the townspeople.

“Do you have any idea who might have wanted my father dead?” Charles asked.

“No idea.”

“What?” Mother says in a whisper: Hatred will fill you but it can never sustain you. But don’t ever let them tell you that hatred is evil or a false idol. Our hatred gives us strength. You need a family, a reason, and hatred. When you arrive at the end of the day, staring at yourself in the mirror, face dirty, unshaven, and the sun scorching at your back, you will understand.

“You’re not familiar with your father, are you Charles?”

No else in Arthur knew how long Vineyard family had lived in town. But for generations, the men in Vineyard’s family had occupied the police force. Six generations before Jim Vineyard and he hoped his son would be his successor. There was no curse on the Vineyards for they rose to power long before the wars arrived, before time ever truly began, during the time when fields of grain covered Arthur and not even orchards breathe life. The Vineyards existed outside of chance, where everything would be all right, the woman Vineyards would bake pies and on Easter would slaughter their pigs for a magnanimous feast. The men would return at night, eat, get up, go to work, return, rarely seeing a variance in the routine.

Charles stood and Vineyard followed. “Come outside.”

As they exited the bar, a bee flew by Charles’ face. He recoiled, jumping a bit. Vineyard chuckled and Charles said, “They only sting idiots so I’m not afraid of them stinging me. It just surprised me.” He went on to say that bees were the

only creatures without regards for their masters. A man could own a beehive yet they never paid him much attention. “In fact,” Charles said, “one might say that the bees own the beekeeper. For if a beehive dies, then the beekeeper can starve or is without his honey. If the beekeeper dies, the bees continue, uninterrupted, unfettered.

Vineyard motioned for them to sit on the bench that looked over the gravel street. Once next to each other, Vineyard pointed to his left and then to his right, his gestures encompassing the entire town. “Not much in Arthur. My father told there never really was. Just a farming community with a few businesses set up for the farms.” He pointed to the firehouse across the street. A brand new gas-powered fire engine sat in front. “It’s brand new. It was the only one in Arthur.”

“My father bought one.”

“And Peter Lloyd sold the third to the police.”

Charles remembered how reluctant Lloyd was to sell the car to his father. Charles began talking about his schooling, which was a lie because he never attended college, but he told everyone he did, as part of the deal with his father. He mentioned how he played football with a man shaped like a teardrop who had no hair, even though he was barely twenty. Charles was glad to be out of the bar, away from the other officers. Vineyard sighed. He was irritated.

“What.”

“Don’t know much but maybe you should,” Vineyard said. Both men were glad to be in the shade of the overhang but Charles dried sweat off his forehead. In the distance, a

dark storm cloud gathered. The sweat poured off Charles' brow although his attention was on Vineyard.

“What are you implying Vineyard?”

“When your sister arrived in Arthur, where were you?” Charles told him that he was with his father in New York. “When your sister arrived, she stayed in the hotel right down the road. She drank bourbon and ate peaches the first time I saw her.” And Mother says: I don't want any help. Only a touch. That's all I need. And Father says: always. And Sammy says: always. And Charles says: what can I do.

“I went to the hotel for a dispute and there she was,” Vineyard said, “the young girl sitting in the lobby, eating a peach, reeking of bourbon.” Susan Bonner always smelled of bourbon and peaches. Her daughter would smell no different and it did not surprise Charles. Tedra was a different place than Arthur. People kept their business to themselves. Peaches and bourbon. It was traditional combination, though no one in Arthur understood it.

“I know.”

“Listen,” Vineyard snapped. He spoke with such authority that Charles sat at attention. “When Sammy first arrived, she was only fifteen but already a lady, though perhaps not. She didn't know what to do. No one told her and so for those first few weeks, there was a woman who should have been a girl staying in the hotel, not a soul watching her. The manager, I think his name was Fredrick, called me every Tuesday for two months. I watched over Samantha.”

“She never went to school. I wasn't even sure if she could read, considering she never went out to eat and rarely

made any sort of real appearances in the streets. A few men would visit her room and Mrs. Yvrend would bring her food twice a week, always fresh fruit. Your family has an obsession with fruit.”

“Her money came in, lord only knows, and soon she starting knitting for the local tailor, Buddy. He was a drunk, just like his sons, but he did good work so I never bothered him much even though I probably should have. Passes out from time to time in the river. He paid her well, I know, my wife and her sisters used to always shave Samantha do their tailoring.”

“She lived in that hotel for four years, without ever once asking you for a penny or your father.” Charles replied that she never asked him for any money but he couldn’t verify any monetary exchanges between her and his father. “She lived extravagantly, more than her sewing could ever afford her.”

“Parties, late nights, dresses from Asia, and fine cuisine from the hotel restaurant. Samantha had it all, Charles. Do you understand?” Charles sat staring at the dark clouds that refused to move closer, as though they were sitting on the horizon like a darkened Buddha.

“Answer the god damn question. Who do you think killed him?”

“Everyone,” Vineyard replied. *Bury me in the old churchyard, Father says. I want to be buried in Arthur.* But Charles had no idea. There was no family, no plot. He remembered the family nursery rhyme. “Will you go along

with me? Will you make sure my coffin ain't black? Will you make sure there are six angels at my back?"

"What does that mean?" Vineyard said.

"Something about Father's family."

"She afforded it, yes she did," Vineyard continued telling his story, for he was answering Charles's question. "Those blouses, with their light blue fading into a dull hue of pink. Her smell of roses, lilac, and oranges. She would go to the market every day for fresh fruit. One time she arrived a bit late, actually very late, eyes dark, dark circles. Most of the market had gone home for the day. You know it, Charles, that market down by the Milleage River. It's still around, though the general store has grown in those seven years and taken the market down a notch."

"She arrived in the middle of the afternoon. She stood tall, just like all you Bonners. Stood straight, but she was tired. I wasn't there until later, so what I'm saying is just what people told me. There were no more peaches. Her dress was stained with white wine and even hours after this happened I could smell it. Only the dregs of the market remained selling their products cheaply. Mostly negroes. She walked around, circling the few carts that were cleaning up. No peaches. Then she couldn't get any sort of decent fruit."

"Suddenly, as I was told so I can't be sure, Samantha starting ranting about the fools of Arthur and how we let our negroes run free."

"You do," interrupted Charles.

"They're free here," Vineyard stated.

"Propaganda."

“No more lynchings, no more of your sister crashing around the market, determined to destroy whatever she can.”

“They don’t even have real names,” said Charles. “We gave them names and we gave them a meaningful life and sometimes God. Sammy was probably doing right: she was telling animals to work.”

“And what was she doing? She wasn’t working, was she?” Vineyard gave Charles an odd look. “Samantha was weak. She let her womanly side get in the way of being a professional. I can’t believe we gave them the right to vote. Men vote and women help the men vote.” Vineyard paused and watched a single lightning strike far in the distance. It danced for a few moments and vanished.

“Samantha can vote just fine. She knows more about politics than you,” said Charles. He felt satisfied by his answer. A passerby walked past them, glanced over them and nodded at Vineyard. He avoided Charles’ gaze. The streets were fairly empty. The church crowd had gone home, finished their shopping and the lunch crowd was only beginning to start.

“Truly?” questioned Vineyard. “Better than the niggers?”

“Some don’t even have names.”

“What is your name?” Vineyard asked, sweat starting to drip from his nose. Two boys ran across the street and into the hotel. They were roughhousing and the second one caught his hand against the hotel’s doors. His cry echoed in the street. And then the three schoolboys grabbed Charles’ head and put it against the schoolroom door. The leader let go and punched

Charles twice in the back of the head. A large welt appeared in a few moments. His name was Tom. He was Catholic. Or he was Protestant. Charles was the opposite. Or his mother was the opposite.

Tom punched Charles a third time and whispered that he should never again kiss any girls in Tedra. The two other boys started saying something but Tom hushed them. Billy and Robert, both their families farming for generations. Tom repeated his order. Charles was never to touch another woman again. He was to stay away from Tom's sister or else the trio would kill him with rocks and pocketknives. Charles cried like a baby. He agreed. He agreed never to touch a woman, to hold them up like crystal.

“What is your name?” Vineyard said again.

“Charles Bonner.”

“No, what is your father?” Vineyard said. Charles said nothing.

“Exactly.” Charles stood up. He took his jacket off and rolled up his cuffs.

Vineyard stood up and nodded across the street to the hotel. “Why don't you check with them before you go around challenging men to duels?” Then he nodded back towards the Bonner household. “Or maybe just go back home and ask her yourself.”

He starting to walk away but Charles grabbed Vineyard's arm. In an instant, Charles was against the brick wall, the red stone slightly cool against his warm skin. Vineyard gritted his teeth and let go of Charles. They

exchanged a look. Vineyard took out a handkerchief. He dried off his scalp and then walked away. He didn't look back.

Charles sat on the bench again. He took out a cigarette. As the smoke curled in his lungs, he stood as the sun rose and the hotel was a new sight in his eyes. It was so different from Tedra. Less majestic. Not much on Main Street. Father says: this is Arthur. Charles says: where is Sammy? Father says: she's been staying in the hotel. Charles says: isn't that expensive? Father says: she has a job. Charles says: women better start working if they get to vote for you. Father says: I need to make sure they vote. I'll make sure they know I'll support their children. Then I'll get that signature. Charles says: I missed her. Father says: I do too. Charles says: why doesn't she live with you? Father says: it's inappropriate for a father to house his daughter. She needs a husband.

Charles sat in the bar and in walked Sammy. Seven Christmases without seeing each other. Three years after the war ended and after Father arrived in Arthur, Charles was able to hug his sister in the presence of his father. The men clapped for Sammy when she ran to her brother. They all congratulated Charles and said how much they'd heard about him.

Thaddeus Fairbanks walked over to Daniel Bonner and whispered in his ear. The bar was dirty, with soot on the ground from the steel mills by the Hudson River. Daniel's head curled back, listening intently to Fairbanks. Charles walked out of the bar and glanced towards Sullivan, who was sipping whiskey. He put the bottle away and started carving a piece of wood. He always carved. "Fairbanks is in there with him," Charles said.

“Yes he is,” Sullivan said. The small piece of wood was taking the shape of a pair of glasses, small enough for a doll. Sullivan collected dolls and frequently made his own accoutrements. “They’re making your pops an offer. Miracle, mystery, and authority.” Charles declined his offer of whiskey. He pulled out a large wad of bills and gave them to Sullivan. “Long time coming,” Charles said.

“It’s payment. We all do it.” Sullivan cut his thumb. He sucked on it and then said, “They’ll give us things we never thought possible, convince other people that we are their friends, and allow us to collect our own money.”

“Miracle, mystery, and authority,” said Charles. Daniel Bonner walked from the bar and sat on the bench.

“Want to come home?” asked Sheila.

Charles blinked and he was back in Arthur.

* * *

Sheila and Charles walked past the hotel and the general store and the lawyer’s office. There was only one lawyer in Arthur. He helped the Bonner’s frequently, managing the money that was wired from New York while also helping to run the finances of Daniel Bonner’s mayoral campaign. During the weekends, his office was closed. *There is a lawyer in Arthur, says Mother, who can help make sure you all stay on your feet. He will help Samantha.*

“Sammy is a wreck,” Charles said. “She trembles and her figure isn’t as straight. Father meant much to her. The past three years, before I arrived, they spent much time together.”

“Sweetheart,” Sheila said, about to contradict Charles. Then she decided to say, “would you like to spend the night with me?”

“Is it free?” Charles said.

“Not anymore.”

“How did you find out he was dead?” Charles asked.

“This is Arthur, Charlie.” Charles hated it when people called him Charlie. Tabitha Stevens called him Charlie. Her husband was an octroon and she was a Bohemian. The Bohemians hated her for the marriage and the blacks hated him for the marriage. Then Sullivan hated him because he loved her. She called him Charlie when they arrived to collect money. He paid. She paid. Slattery and McInnis asked for payment again. The Stevens refused. And then she says: Charlie why do they keep asking us for money? Charles doesn’t respond. She says again: Charlie, I can see you’re a decent God-fearing man. They’re Irish but you’re.... She pauses for a moment and then asks: can you get them to leave us alone?

“The day you get to vote, make sure you protect your nigger better,” Charles had said and taken one of Sullivan’s carvings and driven it through her husband’s side. He fell to the ground. Her cries: Charlie! Charlie! Charlie!

He glanced at Sheila and said, “Please call me Charles.”

“Let’s walk to the river?” she suggested.

They walked and Charles felt his legs grow weak. Walking had a way of etching out the wrinkles in one’s soul. One could saunter and one could walk. Walking had no

purpose. Sauntering did, just like those who marched to the holy-land. But walking maintained its goals despite having none. Having no goals was the point of walking. One can walk to the forest, away from civilization, outside of sound and force and clattering. One could walk into the city, the new desert, its sands asphalt, stone, brick, and mortar. Either version was still the same. A walk could not be changed or struck down unless the walker was struck down.

When they arrived at the river, Sheila stood with her arms crossed and asked Charles how he was holding up. He said nothing, looking over the small bank. The grass was short and oddly manicured. He sat in the shade. Sheila sat directly in the sunlight. "Charles, you can visit me."

"I plan to marry Ellen Forrester," was all he said. A moment later he added, "Father made me."

"He didn't pay me," Sheila said. Charles watched the river rush by. It was down several feet, though he had heard that the Milleage River never went dry.

It stretched over thirty yard wide, and was nearly as deep as a house in the middle. A few squirrels ran behind Charles. Silence crashed all around him. The dark green pine trees grew up in droves, trunks so thick no one could reach around them. A hot sticky wind lashed at his back. Sheila stood next to him, not saying a word, making the silence unbearable.

He took out his belt and the knees fell to the marble floor with shadows coasting around the edges of the room. He stood above her with both watching, the oak doors so thick that a special carriage had to be called in from Virginia to pull

them to Tedra. The stairwell stood before him and her on knees, as though she were worshipping the black, white, and gold stairs. It started out as a single staircase and then split in two, one going left, the other going right. The ivy growing outside of the house curled against the windows. There were no vines or flowers inside.

“We don’t wear that to church,” he said. Her whimpers gave no indication of words received. He raised his voice in suspicion. “Say that you understand.” No words from her. The four figures watched each other. The man and girl in front of the steep stairs that lead to a view of cornfields. The woman and boy with their hands at their sides, trying to avoid any gaze from the other pair. The girl tried to give an answer but the only commensurate one was her cry.

And the crickets shattered the silence.

Sheila sat down against an overgrown willow. Charles stood in the sunlight. Sheila remained in the willow’s shadow. She took a mirror from her purse and inspected herself. Her brown skin looked a bit lighter from the night before. Charles could barely see her curves beneath the bonnet and dress. As she added powder to her nose, her hand seemed to gain a life on its own. Her index finger was long as it guided the mirror. The other three fingers curled, as though crushed, unable to straighten themselves out. The thumb stood out like an obsidian statue built on a porcelain base.

“How well do you know your father?”

“As well as a son can know his father. His blood is in the masonry of our house. Sweat poured off our backs in Tedra and I’m sure sweat poured off his back in Arthur. I can

see him in Arthur, arriving with that overcoat and a hammer in hand. He would have ignored Sammy. Ignored you. Even Vineyard and his cronies. Particularly no one. No one in particular. The entire town was irrelevant to him.”

Charles stared at the bridge in the distance. It was narrow and the only way into Arthur across the river. The other side of town was nothing more than farm land, with overgrown roads leading west. Across the river, a train horn blew. He couldn't see it, but Charles knew the two o'clock steam train passed behind the trees. An iron curtain made of oak and willows, harder than iron softer than oak. A dense cavernous set of trees grew in Arthur and made its home surrounding the town. The trees grew thicker than steel pipes carved from a medieval wall—that is what separated the train rail from Arthur. The river too. The river and the tree line that slithered along Milleage.

“Well,” said Sheila. Charles continued starting.

“Well,” she started, “I can imagine him arriving with no shirt tanned to the point where he looks like a negro, arriving from shipping those packages down the river, just like you did, with those Irish and those niggers back in New York. He arrives with boots and pants but no shirt. In his arms he's got a pickaxe and a shotgun hung around his shoulders. He goes to the hotel and lays down enough money to buy a hotel room and then gets busy building his house after he buys the land from whoever owned it.”

“Or,” Sheila continued, “he arrived in a suit coat with his hair slicked back with oil. He checked on Sammy. After he finds out what she's been up to he goes to the police and asks

them where he can buy land. He goes and buys it, of course taking a carriage there. He pays for it not in cash or collateral but in gold or promises, probably both. He buys the land you now live on and builds that mansion with the guest house. I see him hiring anyone who will work for him.”

“Maybe he built the house himself,” Charles said slowly. Sheila spoke with a feigned veracity but Charles couldn’t gauge her. A cardinal chirped in the trees above them. The river went by them steadily, with concern, a wave of isolated unfeeling power, a force without regard.

Charles stood up and waved his hand around, without direction. He walked to the shallows of the river, dipped his hands in and ran them through his hair. Sheila walked up beside him and said, “You might think I’ve done it.” He turned to her and then looked away. A few bushes rustled.

“Done it?”

“Could have done it.”

“Okay.”

“Then why say could?”

“Because I’m a suspect.”

“But you just said you didn’t do it.”

“I’m telling you now that they’ll suspect me. That way you won’t feel belittled or short. When they come to your door and say I might have done it, I don’t want you to be surprised.”

“Because your father didn’t pay me.”

“Pay you?”

“Never.”

“How much?”

“Nothing now. He’s dead.”

“Why didn’t he pay?” Charles asked. A strong breeze moved through the trees but it actually made the bank hotter, moving the air towards the river rather than away.

“He threatened to go to Vineyard. That self-righteous prick has been wanting to throw me out of town for years now.”

“Vineyard knows about you.”

“But no one has ever said anything to him. He needs a complaint.” She turned to go. Her work always started later in the day.

“Boy,” he said to himself, “people got a ways of getting at each other.” He didn’t bother to correct himself. He knew how to say it right but he didn’t particularly care. “Not sure what I plan on doing.”

The river water was cold even in the dead of the summer. The dogs in town sat under the porches and men drank their whiskey and bourbon in the shade. Few of either bothered to meander to the river. The walk was so hot only people with nothing to lose would walk to it. Charles took off his shirt and shoes and waded into the water. He dunked his head in and raised his hands to the sky.

The Milleage River moved swiftly. It was named over Colonel Milleage, a lieutenant who fought for the South in the beginning of the Civil War. He had come to Arthur, according to Charles’ father, in search of reinforcements. But Arthur was an even smaller town then and only eight men signed up. Two of them were twins who were barely old enough to shave and were forced to join Milleage under

duress. The twins shot Milleage in the back and dumped his body in the river. They were crossing the river when the other six Confederate soldiers discovered them trying to return to Arthur. The twins were shot and dumped in the river, just like the Colonel.

But the town only reluctantly named the river after the Colonel. The Colonel refused to take advantage of the town's farms. Arthur was thus ostracized after that. Charles crossed his arms and wondered whether or not the town's tolerance of the Negro derived from that divide from the rest of the south. Even in Tedra, Georgia he'd sung nursery rhymes about the treacherous soldiers in Arthur.

Charles walked back to the bank and was dry in a few minutes. He put his clothes back on and thought about the rivers in New York where he'd floated supplies to his father all the way in Kentucky. The rivers connected everything in the county. People were oblivious to their predicament. People move along in life without ever realizing the subtle world that lies beneath their feet, behind their backs. It is a world below them, unmarked, unrehearsed, unseen, and often unwanted. The dregs of the world, the riverboats that carry food, the people that run the hotels, the folks that run a grocery store—these people pass into the earth often times with no better remembrance than that of a gnat. Gloom settles over this world below, one where there is never enough to go around and shadows only lengthen.

Water trickled. Charles watched the water flow but he saw it differently. He saw it flow backwards. His eyes went south but the water traveled north. From the Milleage river

and then to the Mississippi and then to the Ohio and then to the Allegheny and then to Great Valley in New York. Charles, McInnis, and Thaddeus Fairbanks' servant piled the whiskey, rum, and guns on the colossal boat. Negro: too much drink go on. McInnis: only you dries would see it like that. Charles: I don't give a shit. Both of you men getting paid, ain't that right? The pair nodded to Charles. He could tell McInnis wasn't thrilled with Fairbanks' choice of helper but the man worked fast and he could handle himself if the police ever showed up.

When the trio had first met, McInnis threatened to tell Charles' father. "No blacks," were his words. Then they ran the train rails and Jabba saved McInnis from getting his legs run over after he'd fallen on the opposite track. After that, McInnis always said there were different breeds of niggers.

The trees rustled again but this time there was no wind. Charles' reverie was broken and he turned around to find an adolescent black boy staring at him.

"Danube, what the hell are you doing?"

"Nothing," the boy replied. Danube was around eighteen or so. He was tall, muscular, skin darker than midnight. He had no shoes. His feet look coarse and harder than granite, ashy and dry. A large piece of white cloth sufficed for a shirt, stained here and there from random occurrences of river water, soot, dirt, and refuse.

"How much did you hear?"

"All of it." Charles squinted one eye at his counterpart. He'd never known Danube to lie. He distorted the truth on occasion but rarely was it untrue. Danube moved

some brush aside, revealing a small raft tied, gently rocking in the river. It was four logs twined together with moss and algae surrounding the pieces of wood. A large box sat, lashed down, flopping side to side.

Danube unpacked it, handed it to Charles. He opened it, took out a bottle of whiskey, then returned it to the box, where it clanked with other bottles. Danube pulled aside a flattened tree to reveal a hole supported with stones about three feet deep. He put the box inside and covered it up. Danube worked with such skill that Charles could barely distinguish where the whiskey was hidden. Charles nodded, pulled out a rolled cigarette, glanced at Danube and lit it. He handed the lighter and tobacco pouch to the tall black.

“Don’t trust Miss. Sheila,” he said. Charles watched Danube pull the homemade boat out of the river and stash it away under some brush. He then walked down a little ways, disappearing from sight. He returned with a small canoe, big enough for just two people. Charles got it and Danube tossed him a paddle.

Pieces of lilies rose from the water. The water was clear. A bottle lay at the bottom of the river. Numerous tadpoles used it as protection. A large tree across the way was shattered, struck by lightning or some long forgotten and infuriated god. Charles paid it little attention. Danube paddled more efficiently than Charles. The lilies and fish tried to avoid his paddle but were frequently victims.

“Where we going?” Danube’s broken English batted away the silent buzzing of flies.

“Telemaz’s place,” Charles told him.

Danube sat straightbacked, regal, as though derived from some long dead nigger prince. He said little. Charles appreciated his quiet loyalty but knew Danube appreciated the payments he received more than anything the Bonner family had done for him. They paddled in silence, passing Arthur from the other side.

“She plays games.” Danube spoke with accent. He had big hands, big lips and a white teeth. Charles often wondered how Danube managed to stay clean shaven, nearly bald, with pearly white teeth. Crickets chirped, water pushed against the sides of the canoe. They stayed close to the shore, sometimes hitting large stones that they couldn’t see or avoid.

“I know she’s playing a game,” said Charles.

“She trying to flip you round.”

“Flip me?”

“Tell you lies.”

“That’s her job. I know.”

“She tell you so you think she don’t.”

“I know.”

“Just saying.”

“Thanks.”

They continued canoing in the shallows, passing a few boaters who paid them little attention. Danube waved to a large group of blacks. A little while later, Charles said for them to stop after he heard a steady clinking emanating near the shoreline. It was steady, unending, unremitting. Charles’ ears picked up on the metal and the stones cracking against the other.

Danube braked with his paddle and they pulled ashore. Charles hopped out. Sycamores waved in the sticky air so thick that Charles could taste honey on his tongue. A cardinal perched on a branch and cawed in a high off tune voice.

“Not Telemaz,” said Danube, still sitting in the boat cross legged.

Charles held up his hand and said, “Hear that?” Danube cocked his head, then got out of the canoe. He stood in the water. It lapped around his ankles. His feet were already sunk in the mud.

“What?”

“I don’t know but we’re close to Telemaz’s.”

“You walk?” Danube asked. “What?”

“That noise. You know what it is.”

“No.”

“Sounds familiar.”

“What you want with the whiskey?”

“Keep it there for a few days and then we’ll sell it to Lloyd.”

“Could have shot Father too. And he would have been justified.” He turned around with a dismissive shoulder. Danube got back in the boat. He shook his head. He waded to the shore, took a large stick, broke it into a pike, then climbed into the boat. He pushed the archaic, homemade canoe away from the shoal with the pike. A loud sucking floated from the stick. Then Danube paddled away.

Charles watched him go. Long weeds of dandelions, wild raspberries, and thorns tore at his ankles. Several piles of

white stones lay piled about. They were sign markers. Cicadas hollered in the trees, shrieking with some hollowed version of robins. Dead trees dotted the embankment, but gained new life as they got further from the river. Climbing over a massive stone, muddied with time and rain so that it became unremarkable without any confirmation of its origins, Charles listened to the clinking that was going on in front of him, through the impenetrable woods.

Determined and salivating rage, Charles tromped agnostically, a workman with zealot's fury.

Inspect

He forced through woods and heat and humidity that make dogs refuse to bark at intruders. After a little while, he arrived at the same road that ran through Arthur, though it wasn't paved with gravel anymore, only pale, dusty beaten tracks that were impossible in the rain. The path kept growing wider and wider with every heavy winter, the carriage continually leaving the trail to blaze their own, violating the town ordinance. Charles looked up in the town's direction and then started the other way.

The road smelled like roadkill, woodchips, and shit. A few wheat farms made their homes in nearby fields. Nothing grew from the road. Not even weeds. The ground felt matted and like concrete under Charles' feet. Garish tin cans lined the bushes here and there, like alien berries. The dry clay made no sound. An occasional hot blast of wind blew the sandy dust into Charles' mouth. He spit and watched the sun overhead burn the same way it did in Georgia. The voice began again.

People are never willing to take what is supposed to be theirs. They try to avoid taking things so they can't be accused of stealing. Except those who are willing aren't willing to take responsibility or walk with against the wind and keep their heads high. For those people think their actions are wrong. They think breaking a law is evil. But laws are just words and words can be wrong. The people who march onwards, hand still, unquirming, unwavering by his sides, are the ones with the moral high ground. The individual who can take the load of bread because he needs it or the distiller who sells his product from the side of the road—those people can look at themselves in the mirror and never have to worry about right or wrong.

Around the closest bend he came upon a chain gang, one of Vineyard's proudest possessions. A dozen lost souls picked with a pair of guards armed with shotguns about their shoulders and a bear-sized Doberman on their leash. A large carriage filled with slices of stone was parked thirty yards from the side of the road. A line of six prisoners, all chained together, passed rocks to each other and the last placed it on the road. The other six picked and flattened the rocks, shattering the smaller pieces, lining the larger ones neatly along the side of the road.

Most of the men were black, with only a trio of white men. They all talked freely, the guards without a role other than duress and simple observation. Charles continued walking closer. They paid him little attention, focusing on the road. Charles heard one of the white men speak. "Better than

prison,” he said to a thick black man but most of the crowd agreed that it was hotter than hell.

The road repairs were obvious. At this particular section of road was a slow, tilted left hand turn with a small creek running past it. The dead vegetation and mud gathered around the edges, ending up in large divots where water and refuse would collect. The stones would hopefully prevent that.

The man closest the carriage noticed Charles first. And then the rest of them found him in their sites. “Well looky here,” said one. Another white man scoffed about him, saying he’d gone too far from Arthur.

“You looking for the Reverend’s place?” asked the only white man who hadn’t spoke. He had had teeth and a scar running from his ear to chin, a clownish grin permanently inked on. The pale scar was neat and deep, as though the man were a professional knife fighter. Realizing who the man was, Charles replied diligently.

“Only if the man don’t steal my money.” He emphasized the word don’t. The man smiled, put down his pick, and walked to Charles. They shook hands.

“How you doing, boy?”

“Good, Jimmy. You almost out of here?” Jimmy Bonner was a burly man with pale skin, so white Charles was surprised he wasn’t burned. The scar on his face had its origins in myth. Jimmy never talked about it. Neither did Daniel Bonner. Only pieces of its legend appeared. Once, when Daniel and Jimmy got drunk with Sullivan and McInnis, they started arguing. Daniel shouted that Jimmy got what he deserved from the police. Jimmy, with whiskey on his breath,

returned the fire, claiming he would have never been a crook without his cousin.

“You bet. Be out soon.”

“How much longer?”

“A month or so.” He paused, looked around, his eyes beady. In a lowered voice, he said, “Do you know?”

“Know what?”

“Father’s dead.”

“Danny?” Jimmy asked, in a faint whisper. His face made a slight twitch but nothing else. His hands refused to shake and he stood straighter than a moment before.

“Yes,” Charles said.

“How?”

“Shot to death.”

“Who did it?”

“Don’t know.” Jimmy cocked his head towards the sunlight. He was burly, knotted in the face and neck, without tar or glue or anything to give him shape in the midsection. Not only was he thick, he also stood like a small tree. The pick looked like a child’s toy in his hand. The clothes were far too small, starched, stiff, without recourse. Jimmy almost looked like an adolescent who’d been playing outside too long and needed to rest, shower, and a shave.

“Don’t know?” Jimmy echoed. He swung the pick awkwardly. “Hey guys?” he called to the other prisoners. They looked at him. “How much longer do I have?” They shook their heads.

One of the black men looked at him. He was bald with a large tattoo on the side of his head. “Forty-one days.”

“Forty-one days until I’m free?” Jimmy whispered.

“I know.”

“Uncle Jim, you ain’t leaving.” Charles choked on the words, as though they were vile. Jim lifted his pick and placed it on his shoulder. “I’m going to pay a visit to Yvrend and Maggloire.”

“You need to stop by the reverend’s house.”

“Why?”

“He owes my brother some favors.”

“What do you mean?”

“Talk to him.”

“Okay,” replied Charles. He started walking away. Jim took a step towards. A guard called. Jim stopped. The guard pointed a rifle in Charles direction.

“Leave.” The man was far away but Charles could see his hollowed, blackened teeth. The guards started towards Charles but the other held him back. He whispered something to the foul-toothed man. He stood straight, kept his rifle pointed towards Charles until he was out of range of the prisoners. The road began to stink of shit and rotten wood and sweat of men without liberty. The sun was falling and the light was all wrong, striking the trees and river, making it ripe with the specter of obesity, making Charles squint, spit and rub his forehead. Once he was out of earshot, Charles said, “Coward.”

* * *

He plotted forward, the waste of the fields overflowing into the streets, the streets barely streets this far away from the town, Arthur little more than a town. The sun scorched down, the air shimmered, the gnats flew across his

face and into his eyes. He arrived at the old shack, but it wasn't a shack but a hole in the ground but it wasn't that either. It wasn't far from the road, nor was it close. Just a short walk that seemed a bit too long but then suddenly ended. Not a single tree stood within a hundred yards. Behind the house was a line of trees and behind them was the farm that belonged to the denizens of the shack. A little ways up the road was a negro church but it was around a long bend, out of sight.

The place had four walls, all thick pine trunks, lashed together in some sort of sap-infested tapestry. He approached the front of the moss covered house, his nose wrinkling. The rank scent of rotting wood surrounded the open plain, which seemed cut from the very forest that surrounded Arthur. A large fire pit sat in front of the house, smoldering.

“They say a man come around here in a fancy suit with feet stronger than pillars of fire.” Charles crossed his arms and waited for the voice to emerge. “A man arrived last night, just like I thought he would. Except he ain't who I thought would show. It was just another man, not the Lord.”

The voice did not emerge then either. Charles waited and the sun sank lower and the air was darkened, by the dying sun and the smoke of the enormous pit. The voice kept quiet.

“Was he here last night?” Charles asked, after a few moments. A buzz and a cricket.

“Yes,” the voice said.

“Where was he?”

Charles walked over to the smoldering fire and picked up a white log. The middle was still ablaze. He handled

it awkwardly and threw it onto the top of the shack. The log landed, making the roof bow.

“Christ Almighty!” the voice shouted.

“I’ll burn you down, Yvrend.” Charles picked up another log, dropped it because it was so hot, and then picked up the cooled end. He pitched it through the glass-less window. The voice appeared.

Yvrend was a short, bald man, a wide middle, thin arms and legs, an appearance that made him both fat and skinny, obese and starved. Oversized denim overalls hung on his bare arms, his black hair covering nearly his entire body. A small hump gave him a stooped look. Mud covered his boots.

“I came to you first Hank Yvrend. They said he died past the Reverend’s house. He had to of passed through here. What do you know, Yvrend?”

“Get away from me and this town,” Yvrend shouted. “And take your whore sister with you.” Charles picked up a egg-shaped stone and threw it at Yvrend. Dodging it, Yvrend ran head first at Charles. They collided and suddenly they were dogs again, just like in New York.

A fist in Charles’ stomach. Another in his neck. Charles picks up a rock, bashes it against Yvrend’s hand. Yvrend howls. Blood dripping. Yvrend bites Charles’ shoulder. They roll on the ground. A woman watches them but ventures no closer. Charles picks up another stone, slamming it against Yvrend’s head. He crumples to the ground. Charles walks over. Yvrend moves, punches him in the testicles. Charles falls. Yvrend kicks him in the chest. Charles’ vision dims, his lungs vanish, the air gone.

“Stay down,” Yvrend says, barely able to form the words with all the blood in his mouth. Charles tries to stand but Yvrend kicks him, just like Charles had done to Sullivan after he’d beaten Tabitha Stevens. Charles nodded, not able to muster any words. And they were no longer dogs or in the city but back again in Arthur.

It took Charles a bit to breathe again. Once he did, he sat up. A tree-trunk propped near the fire had seats cut into its side. Yvrend sat there and Charles followed suit. The woman had reentered the earthy house. Yvrend spit blood and covered it with dirt. Charles tongued one of his molars and felt it jiggle.

“My wife and I were visiting her sister last night.”

“That’s pretty far.”

“Three hour buggy ride. You can ask people around there. We had a small party. It was my nephew’s birthday.”

“Should have said so.”

“You’re a fucking nigger. Trying to burn my goddamn house down and that was all I had to say. I’ll knock your teeth out.”

“Don’t call me a nigger. I know all about Tabitha Stevens and her nigger husband.” Yvrend had come to Arthur on the advice of Charles’ father. But Charles never trusted the Bohemian.

“Leave my cousin out of this,” Yvrend said. “Your father was always kind to me and my wife.” Charles thought about Mrs. Yvrend bringing fruit to their house. He grimaced a bit. He opened his mouth and spit out the molar. “Looks like I knocked your teeth out anyways.”

“Do you know what happened?”

“Charles, I don’t know. For all I know you did. I’m one of the few people who actually like your father. He gave us the money to buy this property and helped me escape.”

There is a no place for villains in our world. They lie to us and they turn pale to make you think they aren’t lying but that paleness is too natural, too much like the real thing, too much like the doomed lies that emerge from their lips. The men who turn pale and crack jokes are liars. The ones who look you in the eye, outright deny your accusations, outright have a reason for their denial, those men are the ones you want on your side. They are the ones who will guard your tomb as you waste away in a catacomb, food for the worms.

The sun was falling fast. A grotesque dust storm was rising, blowing the dirt and soot in the air. It hit Charles in the face. He put his head down, trying to swallow the blood but could no longer stomach it. Yvrend followed suit. He answered with a negative grunt. “Why did I come out there then?” he wondered aloud.

Yvrend took a flask from his jacket and let the whiskey flow into his mouth. He handed the flask to Charles. Charles drank it. “You came here to ask for my help.”

“Maybe I did.”

“But Charles Bonner, you are on your own.” Yvrend stood up. “This town wanted your father dead or it wanted him to stand like a preacher, throwing down God’s words like lightning bolts. It refused any middle ground.”

“Well, they said he died past Reverend Maggloire’s place. Go there. Just leave me out of this. I have a farm to run.”

The wind grew stronger, lashing against their faces. Yvrend went inside. The sun went down. Charles spit blood. He looked towards the direction of Arthur and then in the direction of the church. He rose, his body shaking, and headed away from Arthur. Charles could barely make out Yvrend’s eyes watching him from within the shack.

* * *

“If you don’t believe then you shouldn’t preach.” Charles stood in front of the church, which was actually a one room schoolhouse that had been renovated. With what money, no one could discern. The niggers worship their god here, they wait and they kneel and they cheer. “This is the shadow that covers the earth,” Charles said to himself.

The church was new yet old, its renovations halfway, unprepared for the weather of the summers and the winters, without enough money or time to continue into the present. An old fireplace rose up in the middle of the roof, etching itself out in now darkened Kentucky sky. The last wisps of the sun speckled the horizon, turning it a faint shade of purple. The spire stood against the dirt road, a testament to the blacks who lived in the woods and in squalor, away from Arthur but who still worked in Arthur. It horrified the woods, a bastard piece of human achievement stuck within nature’s heart.

Light flickered within its windows, it only had two real windows and the rest were simply holes cut in the sides. During the winter, the glass-less windows were filled with oak

barriers. He saw the figure and a smallish box in his hands. Reverend Maggloire walked slowly, carefully, with dexterity. Whenever Charles's father saw the reverend, he would say that Maggloire was victoryless but capable of defeat. Only now, with sweat finally dried on his brow, in the middle of Arthur's woods, away from the whiskey and away from the sunlight, could Charles finally understand what his father meant.

Father says: He preaches to the niggers and the wretched of the earth. Samantha says: He preaches to those who listen. Father says: Not everyone should listen to preachers. Samantha says: I beg of you, give him money. Father says: For what? So he can make sure the loins of Africa sprout in America? Samantha says: No. For the people who will live here in the future and for your grandchildren. Father says: Do you have a man? Samantha says: I will take one if it will suit you. Father says: As long as he's of the right blood. Samantha says: Yessir. Father says: I'll give the money when you get married.

"Who's out there?" Maggloire called into the darkness. He opened the front door with a candle, creating shadows. Charles stood between the rays of light.

"It's Charles Bonner."

"Step into the light, son." Charles stepped forward. "Charles Bonner," Maggloire said. Charles said nothing. "I've been waiting for you."

Courage

They did not go inside the church. Charles refused, despite the reverend's wishes. His rhetoric could never

convince Charles, as it could never convince his father. The reverend's words made little possible and his suggestions in his sermons possessed a distinct fortitude for failure and despair.

This fool preaches to niggers, just like Slattery hung out with those Jews. Pick your people. Pick them or someone else will pick you and put you where they want. They'll put you there and leave you and forget and suddenly you'll be something other people want you to be. You won't be you anymore.

They sat on the odd porch, which wrapped around the front of the church. It appeared as most houses in Kentucky, with bombast and a faded blue paint that no matter how new, looked like it needed a new coat. The reverend drank tea. Charles did not. He stood while the reverend sat on a bench carved with some deceased patron's initials.

"You know why I'm here," Charles said.

"I can't answer why he's dead."

"Someone shot him. That's the why."

"Don't know that either." Charles crossed his arms.

"Charles Bonner, why'd you really come here, on the day of the Sabbath, the day after your father's death. Why?"

"I know you forced him to give you money."

"Blackmail?"

"You bet. And I know it, you nigger-loving, gold-digging Jew."

"Jesus has my soul."

"And I have your body." With that, Charles grabbed the reverend and dragged him onto the dirt in front of the

church. He pulled the reverend by the neck and smashed his face against the ground. He picked him up again, grabbed his waist, and threw him against one of the church's walls. The reverend collapsed moaning. The clouds of the dark sky rolled past the moon, a dark spot appeared on the wall.

“Reverend,” Charles began, “where is all that money my father gave you?” He picked up the reverend's head by the hair, the greasy locks feeling thick and unwashed. “I know he gave you all that money.”

“Inside.” Charles let him fall and walked into the church

And. Again. And again he was a dog but only smell, sweat, and stains of tears were in his nose. The money was there. The pews reeked of it. The odor. The stench of the niggers. Charles could hardly stand it. He walked through the sparsely decorated church and into the reverend's small office. It doubled as his home.

“Will you go along with me?” Charles asked aloud. “And I can imagine him here, giving Maggloire money for keeping his mouth shut about all that whiskey and keeping all those blacks outside.”

“I can see him there, with no shirt on. The sweat dripping down his chest, onto this floor and waiting for more money.” A desk and a cot. A picture of Mary on the wall. That was it. The room, the oak and the pine walls had nothing else in or on them.

Charles looked at the bible on the bed and turned to the desk. He pulled out a ledger, as thick as his forearm. “And I saw him here, in a suit, hair greased, offering me money to

hire out these blacks to build that farm you live on. To build that mansion, to build your entire estate.”

Magloire stood in the doorway, blood dripping from his mouth. He did not make a move. He stood, arms by his shoulders, unbent, straight. Charles held the ledger in his hands. He leafed through it quickly, not processing it.

“That is church business,” Magloire said. He made no move to take it away, though. Charles sat on the floor, facing the reverend.

“I’m going to figure out how much money you owe me. Father paid you for what? To make sure you preached that he would make a good mayor? You’re mine now.”

The preacher sighed. And with that, he left, walking out of the church swiftly, almost regally.

There were payments from all the black folks from the outskirts of town. Daniel Bonner was the only one who had donated money in all of Arthur. Hundreds of donations every Sunday. Even Sheila gave the reverend money. Charles sat on the floor, crossed legged, indifferent to the words until he noticed that his father did not donate the money correctly. The records went back years

Years. Decades. The Bonner’s name was there, then it disappeared before 1915, the year when Samantha arrived. Daniel Bonner had donated every week, eight years. His name was always first on the ledgers. No one else donated like Daniel Bonner. Some names appeared every few months, but only the name BONNER appeared on the ledgers in dark ink, inscribed first.

We keep to our patterns. We make sure that people know we're there. We take them along with us, show them, engage their ways so they with ours. The sweet river runs softly, just like our blood. It continues. It continues, never leaving, never departing like the angels or god who abandon without a reckoning. The Bonners stand and shall stand forever, no matter the sin, whether it will all be redeemed or not, we will stand by those who support us, even niggers, even the fucking kikes, we honor those who stand with that vague notion of commitment, who do not tremble at death's twilight kingdom, who roar and swap stories before they are hung for thievery. For those people I give money, always, constantly, forever.

Charles stood up. Sweat dripped down his forehead and nose, touching his upper lip. He looked at the ledgers, going back further, before Maggloire had kept the register. The previous keeper of the church was just as meticulous. "Maggloire," Charles screamed. When no one responded, Charles went outside. The darkness had finally arrived. "Maggloire!"

A rustling in the graveyard. Charles walked over. Maggloire sat at its entrance, though one could barely call it that. All that heralded it was a small stone bench. "You blackmailed my father into these," Charles hissed. Maggloire held up a lantern, awash in its light.

"No, boy, you never really knew your..."

"I knew him plenty. I knew he would only ever give you negroes money if you gave him something in return."

“We gave him the opposite of what we are,”
Maggloire said. He motioned to the graveyard.

The graveyard sat a ways back, small, crowded, noisy with the broken stones. Some were opened, crack in half. It was no more than twenty rows in either direction. A small picket fence, three feet high, surrounded the stones. None of the markers were wood. Charles remembered his father mentioning the graveyard had been improved. *God serves everyone. Or everyone serves God. Either way. Don't matter.*

“What?”

“Your father grew up in Arthur,” Maggloire said.

“He grew up in...” Charles paused. Maggloire seemed satisfied. “He grew up in...”

“Where? Georgia? You know he didn't. Your mother, Susan, grew up there. But he didn't.” The air shimmered in the light from the lantern. Behind the graveyard, a large empty space, a field, a new field, designed for more families to rest forever, dust to dust.

Charles pulled out the ledgers, and read the names. He continued with the first entries and continued backwards. *I can't stand them. Their voices. Their voices wake me, drowning me in those sounds.* He read the ledgers with conviction, incendiary, singular. The words exited his mouth. Bonner. Cottle. Dorward. Adams. Bonner. The blacks were poor. The house of the Bonner's was not. Anderson. Adamski. Bonner. Kaiser. Kelly. Kemp. Bonner. Bonner was the tribunal. Every three and Bonner appeared again.

Harris. Taylor. Thomas. Bonner. He skips down. Decker. Lee. Reed. Bonner. He has gone back farther, further,

beyond, years. Reynolds. West. Westbrook. Bonner. Further, before they ever arrived in Arthur. Andre. Arthur. Ellis. Bonner. The father continues to donate. The money trail has no beginning. Hobbes. Jenkins. Mason. Bonner. More, it continues. Arthur. Garcia. Mitchell. Williams. And then. Murphy. Murray. Myers. Williams. And then. Adams. Thomas. Stecker. Williams. And then. The father's name no more but the Williams. It continues. Repeating, three names and it appears again. And again. Again. Again. Again. Again. Charles paged through the book.

“How far back do these records go?” he asked.

“As far back as you're willing. They were here before me.” Maggloire eyed Charles the way he would a parishioner. Charles sat next to him.

“He donated regularly and—someone else donated the same way.” Maggloire nodded.

“Again, I ask you: how well did you know your father?”

They say and the exchange took place. Neither looked the other. It was silent, unspoken, wretched. “Why did Father donate so often then?” Maggloire did not answer. Charles repeated his question. No answer. Charles stood up.

“Your father was killed just down that road, by the tree that leans into the road.” Maggloire paused.

“Daniel Williams. That was his name when he was born. His father was Williams, a blacksmith. Made the best rifles you've ever seen. Legend has it that Lee bought seven for himself. They were a respected family. The money was

part of their life. They were well off and they let the rest of their community enjoy it.”

When I arrived in Tedra, I had nothing. Boy! Listen! I arrived here with nothing. My parents were killed in the last year of the war. They were killed when I was just an infant. Our family will have no business protecting niggers. Tedra was a torn where a boy becomes a man. I built our name, I built a marriage, and Susan bore me two children. You and Samantha. And you two will continue our blood. But she tries to sully our name, pulling it down, down, down into hellfire.

“They cared for him. But he hated, hated us, hated that they didn’t hate.” Maggloire’s shaved head and mahogany skin glistened in the pale light of the lantern. Mysticism seemed a part of his lie more than the bible. He talked like a wizard, making the listener feel smaller, dull, and honored that he could listen.

I came from nothing and we will build a new home, in Arthur. Tedra is dead to us. Susan was our only link. Why Arthur? I’m not sure, but there is a lawyer there who knows me. I’ve known him for a long time. A friend of his wants me to run for mayor. The town needs a leader. New York? No—too dangerous for us. McInnis wants me dead. I’m sure he wouldn’t hesitate with you either. It’s the way things go. We knew what we were getting into. But we’ve got enough money. Just nod your head. Good. Let’s go

“Charles?”

“I might go see that tree.”

“If you want.”

“Want has nothing to do with it.”

* * *

The tree was planted sixty years before. In a spot where blood has poured on the ground, a soaking rain. It grew upon a smallish hill that looked over the forest but never had a view. It was planted with desire and purpose. Commemorate the dead. Remember the living. Condemn those who refused to fight. Or fought for the north. A small rope, broken, hung far above. Charles lifted his arm up to reach it but fell short a good four feet. The rope remained, permanent, solid, frayed.

He put the ledgers in front of the tree, noticing the blood stain. "Shot to death," Maggloire said. He stood behind Charles, not venturing near the tree. It invaded Negro country like a plague, a monument to a plague, a monument to greatness, to dignified people, to dignity. Maggloire refused to acknowledge its presence, indicating only that Charles' father had died on the gnarled roots of the massive pine.

Rain fell lightly, but the air was so thick, the drops seemed only to hang in the air, unmoving. A few coyotes howled. An owl hooted. Charles did not move. Maggloire took a few steps away and began trudging back to the church. Charles remained. Beads of rain and sweat fell from his brow. Charles knelt down in front of the tree.

The blood stain had already soaked into the trunk of the massive pine. The bed of needles at its base looked a dirty brown, dead needles, sap, and blood. He ran his fingers over the trunk, stained with a darker hue than the ground. Pieces of bark lay on the ground, the base of the trunk seemed torn, almost bitten apart. "Choice. He chose this life. Which means he's a better man for choosing his destruction."

“I don’t know you, do I?” Charles sat in a crook of the roots and stared at the branches. The noose remained unmoving, its two foot entrails dripping with dew. Charles took off his shirt. “Sometimes the man who smiles the biggest, laughs hardest carries the most guilt.”

“O’man, fly,” said a voice from the darkness. The accent was unmistakable. “Lynching. They lynched these niggers and the spics and painted portraits, took pictures, selling them like the Jews eat those cakes.”

“Fly away from here Charlie Bonner. Take your sister with you.” Charles stood up.

“Johnny Telemaz,” he said.

“Charles Bonner.”

“All you’ve ever done is talk. Go talk your way away from here,” Charles said.

Johnny Telemaz played the guitar, which hung from his right shoulder. He sung a slant jazz, his voice wavering from perpetual alcohol-induced stupor. But his fingers moved with unrequited dexterity, never demanding applause. Whenever he played, they listened until they drank too much and then they listened to him drink and everyone went home after he’d used all his money to buy more drink. He couldn’t sing, but he could play. Some say he was the only Mexican who could play for whites without ever being called a spic. Charles thought the same.

“That what they do around here,” said Telemaz.
“They talk. They regard the art of conversation very highly.”

“Leave me alone,” Charles said. He continued sitting. Telemaz sat on the edge of the road. Charles adjusted his lantern. Telemaz did not have one.

They stared at one another, the dampness beginning to soak through Charles’ pants. The feeling was the same as when he was with his father, in New York, delivering the bottles. “Don’t really know.”

But Telemaz knew precisely what he was there for. He continued talking, reminding Charles that he could help, just like the lawyer helped the Bonners and how Telemaz worked for the lawyer. Except Charles wasn’t listening.

And they begin. They are the best at conversation. They don’t make sense. But they talk. The words they use. They rarely make sense. Or engage in any real thought. They talk though. Mixing love and desire, rhythm words become ribbon candy, devoured by those listening. And that tree shows them who’s in charge. It reminds them who is the master and who kneels. But most of all, that tree talks louder than they ever could—and it never needs to speak a single word.

“You hear me Bonner?” Telemaz asked. His voice curled in the air.

“What?”

“White men don’t understand the land.”

“Who decides who’s white and who black?”

“I ain’t neither.”

“Does any of this matter? I’m sitting here where my father died. Daniel Bonner. The biggest man outside of New York City.”

“Your father was dead when he arrived at this tree.”

“He was shot. Not hung, if that’s what you mean.”

“Of course. No one gets lynched without the mayor’s permission.”

“How long have you been out here?”

“Since I brought your father’s body to this tree.”

Charles stood up and threw a punch. Telemaz blocked it easily, moving right. Even in his drunken stupor, Telemaz was still a formidable boxer. In the process of dodging Charles, though, he dropped his guitar. He pushed Charles to the ground. As the young man landed on the ground, Telemaz landed on him, pushing his head towards the gravel road. Charles looked at the dirt, so close he could see the individual pieces of stone. A small stone, end sharp, sat a fraction of an inch from Charles’ eye. He blinked. The end scraped his eyelid.

“I’ll tell you a story that will make you believe in God.”

“Die,” Charles said. With a quick motioned, he threw his head backwards, smashing it into Telemaz’s head. Telemaz reeled back. Charles felt warmth on his neck and back. He jumped up, turned around, finding Telemaz with blood streaming from his nose.

It doesn’t make sense. They don’t feel pain. They keep fighting even when confronted with defeat. Charles lunged towards Telemaz, took him to the ground. But his head was low and Telemaz was able to wrap his arms around Charles’ neck. He squeezed.

“I did not kill your father,” Telemaz stated, eerily calm, lacking in any sort of emotion. Charles went limp,

confused. Telemaz threw him on the ground, stood up, and walked towards the tree. The guitar sat on the ground, away from them both, unharmed. The massive guitar player stared at it. Then he turned his attention to Charles.

Charles tongued his gum, feeling a tooth missing. “So you say.” Telemaz shook his head.

“I’ll tell you a story that will make you believe miracles,” Telemaz stated.

They stared at one another. The rain had become fog, sitting on them, with the moon lighting it like All Hallow’s Eve. “Tell me,” Charles said.

“A man arrived in this country a few years ago, just as the Great War ended. But he didn’t come here by accident, nor was he aimless in his machinations. He knew exactly what he was doing. He arrived with nothing but the clothes on his back, fancy clothes that were worn. The remnants of a suit.

“He arrived with a herald who destroyed his name, the one he’d tried so hard to protect. He built it, like a sculptor chisels granite. Years, slowly cutting and trimming, each detail more important than the previous one, so that each moment arrives at its zenith in the present. All of that gone in a moment, like when God cast down Lucifer, faster than the Fall.

“And so the more he stayed in this area, the more he began to remember when only a few of us remember, remember that name was just a false idol, like men who preach on street corners. His herald lived in debauchery and so he had to consult a lawyer, a man who lived in fear of people finding out that he helped a woman—from the family that he

lived for, worked for, and would perhaps die for—marry a man who had nigger blood in him but then changed his name and no one would ever know the difference because the man look so oily and refined and pale that he was just another cowboy who could have arrived from the great plains of Oklahoma.

“And so the lawyer built him and when the woman died and the two children were left, the man came back because the lawyer would always help the offspring of the family for which his blood boiled. And so the man got himself north, built an empire underneath several empires, all awash in whiskey and gin.

“When that became too dangerous he returned to the lawyer for more advice and decided to leave the distillery and go into office. But when he remembered or other found out about that past someone took it into their hands to end the story and begin a legend.”

Johnny Telemaz is the only man who can keep a tune and an intelligible conversation. He's unique and for that he's better than those niggers. He's got class and that's why he drinks. But he can play. Damn can he play. He'll make you believe an angel was strumming the guitar.

“And that'll make me believe in miracles?”

“No it doesn't make me believe,” replied Telemaz. “It should make you believe in God.” With that, he left, leaving Charles to walk home, alone, in the dark, in a corner.

He did not go home that night. Samantha was at home. Charles did not want to see her. Nor did he want to see Arthur. He went to the hotel and checked himself into a room.

Small, dirty, worn carpeting reminded him of their apartment in New York. He slept and dreamed of Acheron.

Under

“She left town,” Rufus Williams said. His suit matched his voice: professional, well-read, exactly as a lawyer’s should be. They walked around the house. Charles went into her room, clothes gone, shelves stripped, a note with the words *Won’t you go along with me*. It was addressed to Charles.

“And Father?” asked Charles, his voice singularly focused.

“Take your pick,” Rufus said. “Any of these people could have done it.” *He is the only man who can save us. He will reward us, protect us, keep us from perdition.* Charles stared out, the hot Kentucky air smoldering down on the manicured lawn. The house engulfed nearly two acres, with its bastard tendrils reaching triple that. Rufus had bought the house. Susan Hersh Bonner’s state supplied the money.

“He was shot to death, according to Vineyard. Not hung.”

“I know.”

“How?” asked Rufus.

“Telemaz told me. He said he brought my father to that tree.” Rufus grunted, dried the sweat from his brow. They sat in the kitchen, which had been crafted with nearly a dozen windows. He lit a cigar. “He said you and my father knew each other. Quite well.” Rufus nodded, saying nothing more. He chewed on the cigar and walked to the door.

“I don’t know why he would do that, even if he did. But remember, Mr. Bonner, you are now in charge of this family. And the Bonners avenge.” *They rise, a phoenix.*

“And Telemaz?”

“Him, Lloyd, Sheila, Maggloire, Yvrend.”

With that, he left, making his way to the carriage. Charles pointed downwards, blinked, walked outside. Small gardens dotted the landscape. *We shall build this, big, grow it into large segments of our marks.* Charles made his way to the river that flowed in the backyard.

He looked at the river, no wider than twenty feet. It was shallow during the summer and so Charles waded across. A small shed sat back in a small grove of trees. A large lock sat on the frame. He produced a key and went in, moved several barrels, and pulled out a small tackle box. Aluminum, rough, the hinges falling off. Charles ran his hand over the sharp edges. If one wasn’t careful, the box could cut flesh.

“Did I?” Charles asked himself.

Of course you did. The exact image that was designed. Knowing another is about presentation. Stills of what you think you know, sharper carvings of hope, sin, greed—I presented you with those and you created as you wished, as you desired. It is not a question of whether you knew. It is a question of what you wanted to know. What you turned your back on. Those arms you held, hands you chose to interlock.

These niggers are nothing like us and that’s why we need to surround ourselves with them. Those Irish are worse than them. And us. We shall rise up, unknown, and reclaim

what no one takes. Let's return and let Rufus take care of us. Susan would help us and therefore so would he.

“Sweetheart, everyone in town is looking for you,”
said a voice from behind Charles.

He whipped around to find Sheila standing in the doorway. *Everything we do is eventual. It arrives one way or another.* “I’m not your...”

“Be quiet. Come into town with me. Vineyard asked to see you.”

Charles looked at the box, closed it, locked it, and turned to Sheila. He followed her into the dusty air. The rain or mist or whatever the demons in the moonlight thought it was had vanished and the ground was already dry. By mid-afternoon the entire county would have bleached out, carrion bones whitened by the roads.

They left the shack, which had a view of the estate. The house itself was larger than a courthouse. It loomed, a gnarled patchwork of reclusive rooms, all built at various moments in Arthur’s history, each representative of that moment’s specific taste in architecture. The third floor had only one room, which had only one window that faced the front. The octagonal window gaped, a single never-blinking eye.

“You think you know who did it?”

“Who pulled the trigger?”

“Is there a difference?”

“Yes,” Charles replied, without emotion. “For all I know it could be you.”

Sheila stopped and slapped Charles across the face. He pushed into the riverbed that no longer contained any water but remained muddy. Sheila tried to get up but he put a boot on her chest and again pushed her down.

“It doesn’t matter what you do for me,” Charles began, “but the thunder and galloping horses will soon arrive.” He paused at that moment and pulled a rock from the riverbed. It was messy, covered in stale mud and mosquito eggs. But its pointed oval shape could still be distinguished. With his other hand, he took a clump of extremely wet mud. He went back to the shed and stuffed the mud into the lock. Then he carved the word WAIT into the door with a switchblade. And then he turned, throwing the rock at Sheila.

It missed and she ran.

* * *

He did not go back to town. Sheila left and he entered the gardens. The servants were out doing the errands. “There only two of them now,” thought Charles. They no longer had a group of them. Just a pair, an old negro couple, Milly and Tommie. Jeffrey, the chauffeur, was probably gone too, along with the carriage. Charles knew they hadn’t killed his father. They were in Alabama, with permission of course, partaking in a revival. *It’s better that they get the belligerence out there than here.*

It was then that Vineyard arrived, without any backup or guards. Charles greeted him alone, as he was now abandoned, without Samantha and certainly without a father and probably without servants for they only responded to

Daniel Bonner and never the offspring of the man who raised himself from the muck of the black swamp.

Vineyard sat down on the carved bench, next to Charles, among the gardens. Exhausted, Charles Bonner, the last of the Bonners in all of Arthur, could make no reply.

“He didn’t arrive in Arthur, son. Bonner, your father I mean, sprung into being, *ex nihilo*. No real parents, so to speak.” Vineyard continued, refusing to wait for Charles to respond. The sun rose higher until both men were sweating though neither moved. “Bonner, your father, never left, I mean he left but he didn’t arrive here in the fall of 1919, just four years ago, no he was here years ago, a different name, a name that I think you’ve figured out and if you haven’t, then you are a fool with abortive hopes or meaningless dreams. No he was in Arthur around the war, when most of the men were away or dead.

“Bonner wasn’t Bonner then he was Williams, I think. I can’t remember first seeing but I can imagine it. He arrived from those woods, with a shirt pressed. No one knew how he kept it that way. But he entered town, with a few measly dollars, and checked into the hotel. I can picture him getting a room and going to the bar, drinking and blowing the rest of his money buying men who would never sit with him if they knew where he came from but they didn’t so they drank his whiskey and bourbon with a smile. And after that, all he had to do was find one of them who needed a farm hand or a clerk.

“And so he became a clerk because his ambitions drove him more than the Devil trying to collect new souls on Halloween. He started working suddenly, that’s all I know.

“He was a strong worker. Started out in Lloyd’s shop.” A harsh, hot wind blew in their faces. Charles could feel the salt collecting on his skin, almost like he was covered in sand. He however did not move or flinch. His eyes never left the gardens or the house that should have been a mansion, a mansion that looked over the gardens with an unblinking eye.

“He started there and no one knows where he came from. Or knew. Now we’ll never really know, I suppose. I think he came out of that nigger town, arrived with mud from the woods still on his boots, but no one could or would prove that, particularly because his skin was so pale and his hair was straight and well groomed, but he really arrived here because he could live here without a shadow or a curse.

“And so he lived in that hotel for nearly a year, from fall of 1864 to the winter of 1866, until he finally moved into a small cabin behind Lloyd’s house, after he built it of course, lived there until he could buy a plot of land for himself. And he lived in that tiny cabin until he vanished. I think he wasn’t more than twelve when he first arrived, though his body was well ahead of his age. More than six feet tall then and a body like a bronzed demigod.

“And so, like I said, he didn’t do much physical labor which confused my father and his father though I certainly don’t remember that, even though Bonner was the talk of the town for years, even after he left and went to Tedra, that place

where he married your mother with that last name of Hersh and I knew Bonner wanted her because she had the power to change his fortune and fate or at least the children of Bonner would or could have a different fortune if no one could remember his name, so he changed his name from Williams and the swamp to Bonner and the clerk's office but his name was Williams until he left Arthur in the year of 1881. Lloyd knows when Bonner changed his name, I don't, but I can imagine it changed the instant he left this town and continued to change more than his name, his looks, his hair, his mannerisms, his face, his smile, all of it changed in 1881, though my grandfather told me that boy who was in that time only a newly minted man was changing before that and educating himself in Lloyd's shop, ingratiating himself with the women and the men.

“Oh,” Vineyard continued seeing the incredulous look on Charles' face, “not many people recognized Bonner when he returned here, a man with cash and a suit. I didn't at first but Lloyd did. No, I didn't tell anyone because for no one would believe me and that Bonner when he was Williams could never had been established to be a nigger he just came from where the niggers lived, in that town near the Reverend and Telemaz and that tree.

“Is he a nigger? Bonner was a man with plenty of enemies, particularly in wanting to become mayor. And I think someone is or did dig into his past, finding if not a black then a country-bred white man with no past which means no credentials.

“So yes, Charles Bonner, I’m looking for someone who killed your father, who was shot in the head but not hung like it looked when we first pulled him off that tree. And no, Telemaz didn’t kill Bonner, we know that because Telemaz found your father already dead and was paid by someone to hang him from that tree. He isn’t saying and he ran away this morning when we confronted him. One of my deputies shot him in the back, but we all know Mexicans, Telemaz even more so, can sustain bullets and ride for miles.”

And so they sat in the hot sun, neither man moving, waiting for the other to begin some sort of courtship to which the other would respond. Neither man began the dance.

He’s waiting for you to spill your soul and give him the information he needs. He wants to know the source of our income. The source of what propels us beyond other families, what enables us of all people to rise above the squalor and human suffering and filth and maintain our dignity. But you’ll never tell him. You can’t. Because it’s not about the income. That is the result not the cause. Pride is the cause. The money will arrive after you’ve established the inherent and sometimes miscast praise of our staunch humility and determination.

Don’t tell him about New York or the rivers and our method of transportation. That’s what he really wants to know and knowledge for Vineyard, for all the Vineyards, is merely and ghostly hearsay. They will try to trick you, flip your words so they bite you back like a cornered serpent.

Stolen merchandise is what he’s after. He won’t find it because we don’t steal. We sell what we buy from others.

That's our profession. Buying product and selling it for a profit. Float it down the river. The water belongs to no one and that's how we made ourselves, with no one.

We rise above men like Vineyard and his family and his cohorts.

“My family has a saying, Mr. Vineyard.”

“Will it help us find your father's killer?”

“Wait and hope.”

“And once your father left, I never actually saw him leave but I was told that he left the cabin and when he returned here four decades later, someone, I think it was Bobby Teague, he had money and not just money but charisma and that smile which owned everyone, even me. Today I in the morgue he still managed to make me stand up straighter and I might have voted for him, though I'll never admit that to anyone but you.”

With that, Vineyard stood up and asked Charles to visit the police station. The son of Daniel Bonner was supposed to collect his father's possessions. Charles promised he would.

He wasn't going to wait and hope. There was until this point a bridge he had not crossed. He wasn't sure if he was going to cross it now, but he was certainly going under it.

Return

Dead air, like rotting flesh stuffed in a closet. The store felt small, as it always had and yet somehow it now seemed foreign, without any residual familiarity. Charles walked around, wondering why the store was no longer the store that he had been in just a few days ago.

“Sorry for your loss.” Lloyd said. Charles thanked him. “They find that car, Bonner?” Lloyd asked when he saw Charles.

“No but I sent Jeffrey looking for it yesterday and he hasn’t returned.”

“Hope they find it.”

He walked toward Lloyd, who stood with that same face that had smiled at his father but it no longer had a grin but a straight line. A pencil was tucked behind his ear. Lloyd, noticing Charles’ stooped shoulder and clenched fists, nodded and motioned for him to follow into the back part of the store.

They went behind the store, which butted against a small open field. Arthur was no more than a street lined with old dead burnt farms, burnt not from fire but from overharvesting and unending bleaching summers. Large empty crates, meshes of wire and wood, lay strewn about and trash of all kinds littered the back lot. The field, on the other hand, immaculate, was ready to be tilled again despite the weather and the soil that looked healthy. But the town knew nothing would grow for several more years, the decades of tobacco and cotton having raped it.

They spoke, Charles did not listen. He thumbed the iron piece tucked in his vest. He fingered it, every finger that touched it quivered, trembled, a witness to real action, meaningful but without conviction for the actual action would be far too easy. Lloyd spoke, only the voice rang in Charles’ head.

We shall never claim to be people we are not. But we shall not volunteer any information and realize that it is who

we are now rather than who we were then. The Greeks went through large periods of reflection. We overcome and succeed, even if it means through blood, even if it means that revenge becomes justice and power becomes law.

“Charles?”

“Yes?”

“Ever notice that the streams in Kentucky are dying, that this heat is deleterious?”

“Just wait a few hours. Maybe the weather will change,” Charles replied.

“But look out at those fields, dead because of us, though there wouldn’t be any fields without us, so I’m not sure what that means but I can imagine that somehow, somehow, we’re inconsequential. We are free to do whatever we wish because Kentucky doesn’t care, the land is so indifferent that it simply doesn’t matter.

“And that, Charles, is why I’m talking to you.” A sharp gust blew over the empty, flattened acres but only moved the stifling wind. Lloyd cough, his engorged belly wriggling as if to be set free. “People wonder who killed your father. And I’m sure you wonder about me.”

Charles looked up but remained silent.

“I raised your father, as I’m sure Vineyard has told you but he doesn’t really know. All he knows is what he was told by his father, who was told by his father. Those Vineyards breed like niggers, the son sometimes part of the same generation as the father. But not you. No—you are not your father and will never be.

“Your father was a free man who shouldn’t have been one. You’re a shackled man who should be free. After going with your father to New York, when the family should have never left Tedra, I know that the two of you rose above the damn Irish and became respectable, at least in letters and in rumor.” Charles was now listening intently but not for the reason Lloyd thought. The mention of letters and of New York caught him by surprise.

“Oh yes,” Lloyd said, reading Charles’ expression, “I know about your father’s dealings. Or I know about the dealings through your father’s letters.”

The sun overhead blazed down upon them, drying out the air. Charles could remember the men in town hoping for the normal rainfalls to return. They hoped for promise of normalcy. That was why Daniel Bonner could run for mayor. He made bold promises.

Sui caedere. And I who regard you, the son who loved and disliked his father and who liked but hated his mother, loved his sister but didn’t respect her, I who behold you in the highest because you have the will the continue, even in the face of or perhaps in spite of—I will look at you and remain proud.

His fingers continued to fondle the piece of metal that had more power and authority than Charon crossing the Styx. But in the same manner, both were doomed to repeat the same task, always defeated.

Lloyd sat on one of the crates and rolled a cigarette. He lit it and inhaled deeply. He blew the smoke towards the

western horizon, storm clouds beginning to form on the edges of sight. "I wish you knew your father like I did."

In that moment, Charles realized how old Lloyd must have been. A man who survived the war, the war that made the south the south and created the north and left fields of ash, with rivers of corrupted and bitter rivals. He was a man without hope and with success, or perhaps it was the other way around but Charles did not care. The real man was dead, only a shadow of former soldiers could have identified Lloyd, who smiled and still had teeth though he could barely walk.

"Tell me," Charles began, "what would you have done if my father had been elected?"

"I suppose I would have..."

He would have sabotaged me, just like he will do to you. The entire town was his and now it will forever be his, because he can, well he can do anything.

"Your father wasn't a good man but he was decent. A true sinner but not blackhearted. People say we should do what's in our hearts. But we shouldn't. For the heart is a dark, deeply mistrustful thing. It's not an organ nor is it human. It is a thing that dwells inside of us but no matter how hard we try, we can't expel it or kill it, it may change and morph and meld but it will never die. Its will prevents it."

The clouds gathering on the horizon were moving closer, quickly, as all Kentucky weather does, always moving never stopping or beginning but in perpetual motion as though that was what it had always been. The hills seemed to part, Charles couldn't quite see it correctly, so he imagined a bit of it too, but either way, the hills flattened, opening a plain that

went on for miles, ending with the sun overhead. Lloyd seemed to be staring at the same horizon alive in Charles' mind. They were staring at the same one, each different for difference made it the same, as imagination would.

“When your father came to me,” Lloyd began, “he emerged, a clairvoyant figure without mercy or emotion or history.” They stood next to one another, side by side, with the sun in front of them, a sun so strong it made Charles' eyes water.

“People think he started out in my shop and while that's true, in the beginning he didn't spend much time actually in it. Rather, he would go out looking for good land and was a prospector. During those few years, with him living in that hotel, I have never seen someone so indomitable, so invincible, so driven and yet he was weak.

“He never wanted help—to this day I'm surprised that you all kept servants, but they're gone now, from what I've heard, yes I can see it in your eyes that they're gone, I would suppose they left because he died but they really left because his will has not died, not with you still living, and in the few days it takes for you to reclaim your blood, they know these are the only days they could escape and be as free as negroes can be.

“No, he never wanted help and so he would leave for days at a time. Sometimes people would accuse me of locking him away and making him work for me but that wasn't it at all. He left and I can remember him telling me about searching for land to buy and sell and find people for me to do business with. Land was big to him and so was my general store. He

wanted to sell people whatever he could but all he ever wanted to buy was land.

“That’s really how he met Yvrend and Maggloire. When he came back here, after your expeditions in New York, he continued going around trying to buy and sell, but I think he was selling himself and buying votes. That’s just a guess but I know that’s probably the truth.

“Back then he was selling my wares, mostly farm supplies, actually only farm supplies and only ones that could fit on the back of a horse. Sometimes he didn’t even put a saddle on the horse so it could carry more products.

“Fame used to run before him as a morning-star, sometimes he was so good and so clever that after people bought from him, typically axes and seed, they would herald him as a guardian, as if he had consecrated their homes not with his tools but with his presence. That was Daniel Bonner. An almighty force that went into the woods and rural farms and left with some semblance of civility and propriety.

“He didn’t have any friends and I know personally that his room was simple, so simple in fact, you would have thought he were a priest of sorts. I was the only person, I believe, to have visited his hotel room. The owners weren’t even allowed in. He kept the place clean, paid his rent ahead of time, and rarely made a sound. So naturally they didn’t complain.

“I would venture to say that this town hated him then and that might be why when you all returned, he only bought from me. He looked different, sounded different, but I could still tell it was him, his origins were never a concern to me and

I supported his changing of the stars, so I assume he liked me though I don't think he was capable of that.

“Not capable of liking others. Oh, he was capable of love. Not love in a human way, love in a way that is primordial, of desire and will meshed. He loved you and he loved his daughter and he loved his wife because she bore the two of you. He would have never cheated on his wife, as long as she was alive, because of you and Samantha.

“I could tell he wasn't capable of love like you and me, though, when he finally moved into my backyard. All my wife and I had was my land and my house. It was really just a shack...”

A man should always have a second home, even if it is no more than a shack, in case his first home is destroyed. In case a fire or a strike of lightning or a curse from God himself. That's why I built it, for you and I and Samantha. It is insurance. It is in case.

“I suppose a lot of people in town thought he was dull. And he was. All he did was work and when he finally moved out behind me in that shack, that's all it really was at the time, all he did was work and fix up that shack. The way he moved, I could tell he was scared of people finding out where he came from—from that nigger town.

“It was like that for the first year. Selling farm equipment, building a house. Yes, I was surprised as you are now. He worked on that house. I could hear him late at night when I could barely piss and thought I was old then, now I don't care. I suppose losing my wife made me realize that age has nothing to do with being old.

“Chopping wood, sanding, hammering, adding a few rooms, a wall, a kitchen, he even built an outhouse that he envisioned having plumbing, I know because I rent out that house now to make sure my children have money to attend university. And then he was finished.

“My wife and I were the only ones he confided in. He stood taller and talked crisper once he finished building that house with his hands. I tell you, Charles Bonner, your father was the hardest working bull I’ve ever encountered.

“Like I said, though, he finished after a year and I swear he didn’t know what to do. So he took to going to the bars, looking for a few women, and of course, lynching niggers.” Lloyd, for the first time, gave a long pause and looked away from the sun and to Charles. Charles did not blink and continued staring at the horizon, despite the pain of the July sun. “Son, he loved to catch them after church. They’d be walking home from Maggloire’s church and he dragged them to the courthouse. Most of the time, they wouldn’t—and couldn’t—be found guilty of anything. There was one time that Billy Jean Allen was, found guilty of stealing and hitting an officer, but he tried running out of the courtroom. Got as far at the courthouse lawn before Vineyard’s grandfather shot him twice in the back. Dropped dead right there. And your father dragged his body back to Maggloire’s church.

“I think he even strung up Bill Jean Allen’s dead body. Let it hang there almost a week until someone who couldn’t stand the smell cut it down. Why’d he do it? Don’t know. Boredom? Lynching people isn’t too terrible hard and

it's a meaningful activity. I mean, the war had just ended and people didn't know what to do with themselves. In fact, that's something that I never got answered—your father never told me what he did during the war. I don't think he fought, but it would have been pretty hard for him not to have been involved. He was very young then but he would have at least been a drummer boy. All I know, all he ever said, was the war made his hate more. Niggers and Whites and Jews and Italians. He intimated somehow the war made them all irrelevant and because we all think they are relevant, he took to hatred.”

The hand emerged with the metallic extension and rose in Lloyd's direction. “I didn't kill your father,” Lloyd stammered.

“I know.”

“Someone hung him up there, on that tree.”

“I know.”

“But someone shot...”

“...him before that. I know.” Charles stopped talking and lowered his pointed hand, with the metallic extension and tucked it behind his pants. The sun suddenly went behind a cloud, dropping the temperature slightly. Charles knew the weather would soon grow cold. Not cold like winter but enough to make people sick and bother the livestock. The field suddenly became hilly again, folding upon the horizon, blurring its edges.

“Billy Jean Allen?” Charles said, after several moments of silence. “I've heard that name before.”

“Of course you have,” Lloyd said. “He’s Sheila’s great-grandfather.”

Charles began walking away, without saying a word. Lloyd called, “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Charles stopped, turned around, and walked towards the oldest man in the county. He got so close, their noses almost touched. “If you weren’t already dead, old man, I’d kill you.”

Stayed

She sat in a dress barely there, without any affection towards him. It had vanished and in its place sat inhospitable business-like savvy. “You look at me as though I partook in the direst cruelty. Maybe I have. I have endured the smoke of hell and the ash of heaven, but I’m still here Charles Bonner. Or Charlie Williams. Whatever you want—no. I’ll call you what I desire.”

Her face, still beautiful, looked etched, carved from ebony. Charles stirred at her name-calling but said nothing. They sat outside her home, in the front yard, her without caution, Charles with eyes westward, towards Maggloire’s church. He had not gone home, nor had he relinquished the heavy hunk of metal that sat tucked in his pants.

“Say something, you coward,” cried Sheila, her voice still smooth and eerily quiet, though it had grown harsher—her voice was obsidian, heated so that it was shiny and polished but inevitably smooth.

“You’re a whore.”

“And?”

“You’re the town tire,” he said. And then the rock melted. She stood up, slapped him across the face, and walked inside. He followed her inside. She said nothing. She went upstairs and he followed her.

“You think you’re out on some righteous request? Your father wanted to be mayor. And he did things you never knew about. There was something never quite right about Arthur, it was inhabited by a demon. Made me that name which you have no right to call me. Made Maggloire the jester he’s become. I thought your father would do away with all that, that’s why I helped him. I thought he would drive the demon away but he was the demon.”

She walked from the hall into her room, the only room in the second floor. It wasn’t her house. Or it was hers but she hadn’t paid for it. The demon had paid. Charles could imagine mounds of gold.

Sheila wandered to her bureau. Fingers slid over the makeup, bottles and containers lined the back. She sat, staring at the mirror. Charles sat on the edge of the bed.

“Did you know your father ran for mayor in Tedra, back in George?” He nodded. She continued staring into the mirror: she was no longer present in the room now, her voice faded, tears streaming down her cheeks. Her ebony skin glistened in the heat but not as it during daylight. The night brought a different tone, a kinship of inscrutable calculation, deposed by a monument now being prepared to enter the earth.

For that’s what we all become—we become monuments, even when we’re still alive. No one can ever be a

martyr, for to become a martyr, you must first be a victim, and no one is ever only a victim.

“I’ve found meaning in futility.”

“You don’t know the first thing about futility,” Sheila replied. They did not look at one another. “When your father was not your father, he was something else. Not a who but a thing. My father told me that he lived with whites and killed niggers because that’s the kind of man he was: a man so bent on destroying his past that he took to killing those who shared his blood.

“He walked around Arthur as though he owned this place. When he came back, he was the same, hadn’t changed a bit. I could search the whole earth, between Heaven and Hell, and I know that Daniel Bonner denied his heritage and sought to ensure that no one would ever know it. But I did. And so did Vineyard. And Peter Lloyd. Strung up everyone as a child and he would have done the same but he knew that he would have to do it in another manner, a quieter one, under the guise of law, where no one would question his motives.

“He’s a demon, Charles. No two ways about it. I can remember when he lynched Ray Yvrend—yes Hank Yvrend’s father. And the Yvrend’s ain’t even niggers. He strung up Yvrend because he tried to help the negro church. He wanted to do the same to Maggloire’s father, but since those priests seem to have children, I think Daniel Bonner assumed they had their own punishment ahead. Daniel Bonner made people suffer for sins that weren’t theirs, even if they deserved to suffer.”

Charles finally turned his attention away from her window and to Sheila herself. It was the first time he'd directly looked at her since the night his father was killed. And it was the first time that he began to listen, not just hear, but listen and respond. The voice no longer could quash his or spoke for him.

He could no longer pass in silence. He pulled out the gun and held it in front of Sheila, pulling back the hammer. She did not stammer or pull back.

"He's a demon," Charles said, to himself more than to Sheila. "Niggers are niggers. Ain't no way around that."

"I didn't kill him."

"Did you? Did I?" The words inked themselves somewhere without his knowledge, horrified at the grotesque revelation. He became wakeful, his conscience becoming some unredeemable grace, crying for Grace but knowing or perhaps hoping it would not come. The weigh dropped in the back of his mind and down inside his chest—it wasn't lifted, it just dropped, and his stomach churned, upset and nauseas.

"I didn't pull the trigger!" Sheila cried. "I know who shot him but I didn't pull the trigger!"

"Who!"

"Teague."

"Teague."

"Teague." Charles cackled a bit.

"That lousy, no good, fucking bartender?"

The level words had vanished, leaving the dead trio of Irishmen hollering but Charles Bonner no longer listened. McInnis and Slattery and Sullivan had no words and after

Daniel had left them in New York, taken all their money and all his money and the Bonner son and father gone to Arthur to escape and build a dynasty, it didn't matter then and it certainly didn't matter now, except Charles always prided himself on the difference between him and the Irishmen, the vernacular and the dialect of education—that distinction had evaporated.

He almost pulled the trigger. But Charles didn't and instead grabbed Sheila by the hair and threw her onto the bed.

She didn't scream.

There

They walked to town and entered the saloon, which on a Monday wasn't crowded. Charles pulled out his gun and a drunken pair of men ran out, leaving only Teague and Sheila. Teague said nothing, stoic, bartender, watcher. He was fat, hairless, polished looking for a man who spent his days asleep and nights wide-eyed.

Charles rarely stepped inside the saloon, partly because he had no reason, partly because his father had told him that Teague was a man who always wanted something and never expected to give anything in return. He and his father had built the saloon together and didn't expect anyone to give them so much as a cent. Teague, though, had managed to branch out, developing ventures throughout not just Arthur but all of Kentucky. Charles had heard Teague was running Everclear up and down the Mississippi. Daniel Bonner had told his son this and then reminded to be leery of men who would kill for alcohol.

"I told him I helped," Sheila cried.

“What?” Teague cried, breaking his image. “Help me with what? I didn’t do anything. Shit, that fucking nigger? You trust her over me, Bonner?”

Charles pointed the gun at Sheila and told her to run. She did. He returned the gun to Teague and said nothing, waiting for a reply, glancing at the bar which his father had visited and Teague’s father had run, the next generation of father and son reclaiming tradition, even if it was detrimental, both men seemingly hell-bent on reclamation.

In the production, Teague had mimicked Charles, producing his own weapon of hope and waiting, the two pointing at each other. “So what now, Bonner? You think,” Teague said, eerily calm, “that this is the first time I’ve dealt with a Bonner? Your father came in here before you arrived and he came in here when my father ran this place.”

“When I’m through, your family will never set foot again in Arthur.”

“You have no family. You’ve got nigger blood in you and your sister’s a whore. Your father’s corrupt.” Charles lowered his gun. So did Teague. They stared at one another until finally, Charles said, “Tell me how he died.”

“I don’t know exactly. I’m not sure who killed him. Even all the people who hated him. He wasn’t worth killing. Maybe he wasn’t a good man but he wasn’t a scoundrel.” Charles sat on the edge of the closest table. Teague continued standing.

“He went out to Maggloire’s church and after that I don’t know. You were with Sheila then and after you left her she came here, asking for him. It all happened so fast, like

when your father and my father became acquaintances and a little while after that until my father found out what your father was.

“No one ever is until they was,” Teague continued, ignoring Charles’ scoff. “That’s your father’s saying, so don’t laugh you Protestant fool. Your family tries to pretend it’s something that it could never hope to be. I’ve heard things about you, about what you’ve done.”

“Is that right?”

“In New York? The whiskey and floating it all down the river, you know but not the things that your father told me here, like the end of that Irish trio—or who killed them and why.

“You don’t do you? He knew they were going to turn him into the police, that he could take their shares and create the Bonner legacy, or more precisely cement the Bonner legacy into a statue made from kings and riches that even kings would have trouble imagining. That? Oh yes, Charles, or should I call you Mr. Bonner because you’re the only one left of the family, or the only one left who will carry the name. I can see the same determination I saw in Daniel Bonner.”

“That the most I’ve heard you speak,” Charles replied.

“No—you’ve never heard me speak. I don’t have anything to say to your kind.”

Charles raised his gun faster than Teague. He pulled the trigger. It hit Teague in the shoulder, forcing him to drop the shotgun. With one fluid motion, Charles landed on top of Teague, his knee in the bartender’s throat. He pulled a

whiskey glass from the bar, held it in front of Teague's face as if to showcase the irony, and then smashed it into his forehead.

A small shard of glass imbedded itself into Charles' palm.

Teague moaned but managed to bring his knee up, into Charles' groin. The pair let go of one another. Charles grabbed the shotgun and Teague grabbed the pistol. A frozen moment before both simultaneously fired. Charles felt the viper's teeth in his shoulder but Teague fell to the ground. He clutched his right arm, which had been stripped of most of its flesh. Grabbing a barstool, Charles thrust it into Teague's chest. A thick shattering sound emanated into the room. Teague coughed blood.

Charles knelt beside him and whispered, "You see, Mr. Teague, I own this town. We own it and always will."

Teague nodded and tried to speak but only dark blood, so dark it appeared black, emerged. "It's futile," Charles said, his voice quivering but never rising above a whisper.

Teague rolled on his side, spitting blood and coughing so he could speak. "If you move, I'll make sure Bonner is the last name you hear." Teague shook his head in acknowledgement. Charles stood up and made to walk out. He stopped halfway, turned and picked up the pistol and the shotgun. "If you live," he said flatly, "then I'll be expecting you."

* * *

He tromped outside the town and waited for Maggloire to emerge in the morning. He hadn't heard the

voice, it had disappeared, replaced with muttering, shouts, phrases, murmurs. “I am driven by faith, guided by my lack of it. Those who have faith have doubt.”

The sun rose and the cloud hovered and the cold wind arrived. July, no longer hot but chilly, chilled not by the occurrences of the Kentucky town but by winds finally arriving from the north. Bonner stood, arms clenched, pistol tucked in his pants, shotgun thrown over the shoulder. Maggloire’s small, plain cabin, built originally as a fur outpost in the early 1800s, stood with its door closed. He stood no more than an arm’s length from the door.

Streaks of crimson set against the sky, the door spoke of very little, save for a distant thumping near the river, a thumping Charles couldn’t identify. Maggloire opened the door and Charles leveled the pistol at his forehead.

“I knew you’d show up,” he said.

“I know.”

Charles pulled the trigger.

Church

Charles gathered large chunks of wood, cedar and maple and large pieces of ash. The sun blasted the churchyard. Charles piled the wood higher and higher, until it was almost as tall as he was, and was almost ten feet around.

“Why’d you shoot him?”

Without turning, Charles said, “He was stealing from the church. He wasn’t a negro.”

Sheila looked at him and started helping him move the wood. “You knew.”

“Yes.”

“For how long?”

“Always.”

The sun boiled. Charles took off his shirt. His skin was not white or black. It was closer to the color of ham hocks. Sheila rolled up her sleeves and they worked until late afternoon. In that light, Charles realized that Sheila wasn't afraid. Her passion outweighed her fear.

She was dressed in a dirty white skirt, with muscular legs and a long silk hat that had worn from the sun and age and Charles wondered every so often, throughout the afternoon, where she had gotten it from and from who and why she continued to wear it, even though it fell off from time to time. But whenever he began to wonder, he shook his head.

At one point, he walked into Maggloire's house, having to duck to enter. He thought about taking some of the reverend's bedding but he threw it into the pile of wood instead. Finally, around five, he went into the reverend's room once more. He took the kerosene lamp and poured the oil on the wood. Then he lit the match. It burned.

Sheila and Charles watched. The sun, still strong, made the fire seem less grand and more significant. “I'm sick of curses and dead priests.”

Charles sat down on the front of the church porch. “I'm glad it's not Sunday.”

Sheila stood near the bonfire and said, “We're dead. I think we should burn the church.”

They did. Charles found a large branch and set it ablaze. And then he walked into the church, the old nigger church that Maggloire should have never entered and the

Bonner should have never left. He torched the curtains and went outside, again sitting in the entranceway. Sheila sat next to him. She knew Charles was rash, too rash to associate with on occasion, sometimes it made him bold, incendiary, clever—and other times, he made her cry.

“Do you think we’ll live forever?” she asked.

“Why would you want that?”

“We’ve done something awful here, Charles.”

“I know.”

“I am going to kill you,” she said. “The only reason I haven’t is because I think you finally understand.” She paused as she said the last word, almost pawing over it, mouthing it more than saying it.

“I know. I always assumed some nigger would slit my throat, though a nigger woman....But you and I are cut from the same cloth.”

The church was smoking now, dark clouds emerging from every orifice and eave. The pair didn’t move until Sheila starting coughing. Smoke curled around them, dressing them, licking them, from the church and from the bonfire.

“Everyone is going to see this.”

“Who killed my father,” said Charles.

They stared at one another. Sheila watched him earnestly, as he fondled the shotgun. The pistol hung from his belt as well. She didn’t know whether it was loaded, but she didn’t care. Charles knew that, solved the puzzle of what she stood for: venom. The road that ran near the church was so dry that the small weeds caught fire. The church was fully on fire

now and Charles reminded himself that the fire couldn't spread well because of the river and the roads.

But he was wrong. The air and the trees were so dry that by sundown, the blaze was so bright, one could barely notice the darkened sky. They moved away, to the tree where Charles' father was hung from the tree. Charles wiped his forehead. His hand came away with thick swaths of ash. He smelled of oak. Sheila white dress hadn't managed to remain untouched but it was still remarkably clean.

"Vineyard should be here soon," Charles said. He expected Sheila to kill him then, but instead she stood up and stared at the fire.

"Charles Bonner, they are coming for you. You knew they would. Teague. Lloyd. These men don't trust you. The only reason you've lasted in this town was your father. Your sister is a whore. Your father had nigger blood in him, which means you do too. But unlike your father, you endured. That's why I'm going to kill you. Because you'll continue the bloodline, a bloodline drowning in its hypocrisy and hatred that it can't look itself in the mirror.

"Then man who killed your father? He killed himself because he couldn't deal with it anymore." *I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire. I do this so that you don't. I take your sin so that you may again live unblemished.* "He learned, I was there in his last moments, that years of bootlegging and trying to be Irish when he was just the son of a son who was the son of a slave.

"He asked me to hear the last of his words. He spoke gloriously, always bigger than he actually was, more boastful

than he should have been, more intense than necessary, never knowing the people who surrounded him cared less about his rhetoric and more about his passion. Those last words were regret. He said that he will always regret and so should you, Charles, so should I Sheila.

“I can still see him sitting on the ground, a few hundred feet from that tree. He is still there now. Sitting, polishing his revolver, like you are polishing that shotgun. He can’t stand the crackling of the wood. All he can hear is the bell tolling, clanging for someone to shout, denounce the reverend. He raises his hand up towards the sky, crying and full of regret and self-hatred, hatred in general. He stands up, blind and deaf to me and to you. Can’t you see him?”

“He’s still there, Charles. The fire roars, he doesn’t like it. So he says goodbye and he’s not sorry but he does regret what he’s done, but he won’t give a damn and won’t quarrel with God or the Devil, he’ll continue and won’t change but he does regret it a little. His hands shake a little and his head lowers, as though he’s trying to hear something from the church, something he hasn’t heard in a long time. He certainly can’t understand the tune, even if it was real. But he never understood it.”

The brimstone rained down. The already dead sky. They pair had to move away from the church and near the tree, the only tree which seemed now to exist to Charles. Sheila sat under the tree. Charles stood. He touched the tree. “He’s still there, Charles. He’s still here.”

“I know.”

“Doesn’t matter.” In the distance, men had begun to arrive. Whites, not the blacks. They arrived but did not see Charles or Sheila.

They couldn’t have stopped the blaze, even if they’d tried. But they didn’t try. “None of this matters,” Charles said, running his fingers over the bark. It felt rough. Dried, brittle, dead. The men watched the church burn, their backs to the arsonists. None of them said a thing, only watching the black church fizzle in the nighttime, with smoke so thick, the stars couldn’t be seen. Charles heard the voice once more, the rasp coming back.

We are shamed and condemned. The end has arrived. Charles walked towards the men. The fire cried, groaned, hissed.

“I killed Maggloire,” Charles said. The men did not care. No one cared, not even Maggloire.

“I killed Maggloire.” The men walked away, not able to hear Charles over the sound of the hissing wood and thick dense smoke. That was it—Charles could hear the smoke.

The sound was satire. Detached, uncaring, unfeeling—they, the men, ridiculed him, wandered away. It curled in his ears, without variety or voice, regularly thumping on Charles’ ear. “Can you hear it?” he asked. Sheila shook her head. The smoke ambushed Charles’s ears, like prayer. It was prayer.

The cadence of the smoke sounded obedient and passionate, weak but grandiose. Charles couldn’t embrace it, despite its appeal. Charles shook his head, trying to disown the tune, which sounded wise despite its quiet. Celestial wisdom

whispered in his ear and he couldn't hear it. He rubbed his ears and his hands came away with soot. Sweat dripped off his forehead, blackened, as though burnt. The soot that covered his body, suffocating it, could not do away with the smoke or its voice.

Sheila dropped the shotgun and said, "You'll see him soon enough." She left the gun on the ground and walked away.

"I know," Charles replied.