

Bone White

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the graduation requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford, Mississippi
May 3, 2017

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*For Ricky Tyson,
who taught me how to find joy amongst dysfunction,
who instilled in me a love of storytelling,
and from whose life I take endless inspiration.*

*For Lucy Tyson,
who listened to horrible poems and bought me more notebooks and pens anyway,
who always encouraged my reading and learning,
and who is the female embodiment of strength.*

*For Gail Murphy,
whose encouragement at such a critical time
shall always remain dear to my heart
and whose work has made a difference in my life.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Tom Franklin and Kiese Laymon, thank you. Thank you both for continuing to work with me over the course of these past few years, and thank you for offering feedback and guidance with my writing. Since you both so graciously opened your offices and lent me your time, I was able to write this novella. It would not exist if not for the two of you.

To Dr. Debra Young, my third reader, your patience throughout the latter portion of this semester literally brought me to tears several times. Thank you for being so understanding and supportive.

To my parents, Lucy and Ricky, thank you for your support of everything that has led to this thesis. From buying books for me as a child to reading my short stories to sharing your experiences with me, both of you have encouraged my growth as a writer, even if you weren't aware of it. Beyond writing, both of you have helped guide me to being the person I am today, and I'll never be able to express to either of you how much you've both shaped my life by making me a consistent priority in yours. I love you so very much and am so proud that you're my parents.

To my brother, Patrick, thank you for allowing me to see the young man you're becoming. Being your sister is one of the greatest gifts I've ever been given, and this work's exploration of sisterhood and sibling bonds is no coincidence. I love you, kid.

To Dr. Hilary Becker, your ever-present stream of encouragement and support of all of my endeavors has been almost as astounding as your exemplary work ethic I've seen in just the few short years I've known you. Thank you for being the perfect example of a mentor.

To Melanie Munns, many, many thanks to you for providing me a forum to improve my technical writing, gain internship experience, and test out whether or not a museum career was the right path for me. Also, thank you for your generous nature, whether that be of your time, your advice, or a friendly ear. I hope that I am always as magnanimous as you have been to me.

To my closest friends, Zac Creel and Alicia Dixon, you two have been the best throughout this entire process. Whether enduring my mood swings or listening to my complaining, the two of you have been anchors for me during the many trying times of writing this thesis. Thank you. I would not have completed this without you, and my life would be on a very different path now if I had not met you both two years ago. I'm continually humbled to call you both friends.

To Olivia Griffis, thank God we both did our laundry on Sunday evenings freshman year! I never knew that my practicing Latin while my clothes dried would lead to my gaining a sister. Thank you for your laughter and your appreciation of my quirks, delightful and otherwise, throughout these past three years. For this thesis specifically, thank you for enduring my mess-making in the name of creativity, your willingness to lend me your dry

erase markers to use during brainstorming, and your readiness to tease out plot holes and characters' motives with me into the early morning hours despite still having to finish your own work. I know I will have other apartment mates in the future, but I couldn't love them as much as I love you. You're family now.

ABSTRACT

LIBBY CATHERINE TYSON: *Bone White*
(Under the direction of Tom Franklin)

This thesis is a novella that follows a 1952 white Mississippi family through a pair of concurrent stories which eventually merge. Written in a Southern Gothic style, this novella utilizes several perspectives, violent scenes, and depictions of familial tension to explore the themes of overt and covert racism, femininity, motherhood, ableism, Southern identity, and myth within mid-twentieth century Southern culture.

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INTRODUCTION

Everything goes back to Copiah County is a running joke between my friend and me because I always mention that tiny patch of land and tell of its mysteries and mundanities whenever I get the chance. Having left Copiah to attend college three hours away in Oxford, I came to realize the adoration I have for it as a young adult. More recently, the realization that I soon will not have a Mississippi address or visit Mississippi without luggage has made me weep as if I've lost a parent. Copiah County is the setting for all my early memories; the place where I first reckoned with my own identity and that of my slaveholding ancestors; and the community that continues to be a creative cradle. Copiah, and Hazlehurst more specifically, is my first home. At its very core, this thesis is an ode to that specific place, all of its beauty, all of its ugliness, and all of the important people who also currently call or have called Copiah County home.

When I approached the thesis two years ago as a sophomore, my main goal was to grow and push myself as a writer. Throughout this journey, that desire to push myself thankfully remained a driving force. Until this point, I had dabbled in poetry and written short fiction pieces, no more than fifteen pages at most, which had no real plot and attempted third person or stream of consciousness narration at the cost of clarity and entertainment. I would often create only one character, usually a white middle-aged male, who would then have some sort of mental instability. There was never any physical violence or vocalized arguments in my stories either. Instead, all conflict was internal. These cookie-cutter, internal narrators were a pattern that I realized only in Tom Franklin's Introductory Fiction Creative Writing Workshop. Once I made this connection, I decided early on that my thesis would focus on a community with different

racism; that my main characters would be female; and that I would make myself write violent, action-driven scenes. I would eventually allow myself to create one of my “old” characters in the form of Lee Ellis, but Lee is surrounded by many characters whom I learned to write as I came to know them throughout the course of the thesis.

Sitting on this resolution, I then enrolled in Kiese Laymon’s Advanced Fiction Creative Writing Workshop that spring at the recommendation of Tom, who had committed to being my thesis adviser by this point. Enrolling in Kiese’s course was the best decision for me as a fiction writer, and it came at just the right time. Always heavily interested in Mississippi racial relations, especially after finding atrocities in my own genealogy, I wanted to write different races but was afraid of it. I’m a white female, and until this point I had no idea how to write outside of the lens of whiteness. Only after Kiese spoke with me in his office did I realize the underlying racism and cowardice in this fear, which was the singularly most revelatory experience I had during this entire journey. However well-intentioned, I had spent most of my life being afraid of writing as a black person because I didn’t want to face backlash or unfairly write a character’s worldview. I had forgotten, as Kiese put it, that “black people are people” and that I needed no permission to write from any person’s point of view as long as the writing was legitimate.

In Kiese’s class, we were asked to write a few short pieces and one longer piece of fiction. Having gone home to Hazlehurst over Easter break, I was shocked that one of Hazlehurst’s historic houses, the Isaac Newton Ellis House, was burning. An 1890 Queen Anne style home, this house had been a staple of my childhood, as I had to drive past it every time I went to school, the post office, or the grocery store. Seeing just a blank slab

where the house used to stand was jarring, especially considering that a handful of other post-Reconstruction era homes still stood in the vicinity. However, as much as I hated that the house had burned, the image of this magnificent white house burning was too great not to use in a story. I decided that the longer story I would draft for Kiese's class would focus on this image of a crumbling house and the mural of musician Robert Johnson that had stared at me from the side of the Hazlehurst Post Office since I was old enough to remember. Johnson, a Hazlehurst native, allegedly walked to Clarksdale, Mississippi, and traded his soul with the Devil for the ability to play the blues. Now, there are current debates about whether or not Clarksdale was the actual location of this event, as the town of Rosedale argues that it is the actual location. Either way, I was raised on the myth taking place in Clarksdale, and so this mythology made me want to work with even more local mythology and folklore within the story I was drafting. Combining all of these ideas, I wrote the first draft of *Bone White* and submitted it for workshop in Kiese's course. Never thinking that this story could one day become my thesis, the first draft was short, choppy, completely disjointed in parts; but it was something. Meeting with Kiese after the workshop to discuss improvements to the story made me realize that this draft chronicling a Hazlehurst family's decline should become my thesis.

Over this past summer, I began thinking of plots, some more ridiculous than others, to use with what was originally going to be a collection of related short stories. That summer and into this past fall, I spent many late nights on campus brainstorming ideas in front of a dry erase board with an Expo marker in my right hand and a fistful of Act II low butter, highly salted popcorn in my left. This past fall, I focused mainly on

reading to research the methods in which I should write this story. I read Toni Morrison, Yvonne Vera, and several nonfiction accounts of life within the southeastern United States or of life outside of whiteness or of a combination of the two. I began writing short stories in January, but I felt a structural tension between them and realized that these short stories needed to be connected even more so than they already were. I decided that they would take the form of a novella with alternating points of view and location. Once I made that decision, the formatting finally felt *right*.

This resulting novella is the embodiment of many firsts for me. It is the first piece I have written that has actual length, the first alternating yet intertwined points of view in different chapters, the first times I've written violence in differing forms. The piece hinges on transformation, as the Ellis house transforms to dust and characters like Shirley and Johnny Ellis come of age. Motherhood, the transformation of one body housing two, plays a role toward the end of the piece, with the life of an actual person transforming into a mythical folk presence greeting the reading in the first scene. Most important to me, the female characters in this novella are strong, and their less than perfect moments fight to keep them off pedestals. When writing, I tried my hardest to construct characters who could and would retain their humanity at all times, rather than falling victim to idolization or stereotyping. My intent when I was writing and my hope now is that the reader sees characters who are deeply human and who, like Copiah County itself, can simultaneously be guiltless and depraved, mundane and mystical.

I

“Shirley, bring Cassie and come along now. We don’t want to miss the show’s starting,” Helen Ellis said as she looped a thin rope through the loops on her nautical dress and tied both ends around her waist in an overhead knot.

“I know! I know! We’re comin’. It’s just that gettin’ Cass down the stairs is hard is all.”

“Yes, well, imagine teachin’ her to walk,” Helen muttered.

She had put both her shoes on and was standing by the door when Shirley emerged from the hallway, dragging Cassie into the foyer. Before both girls could catch their breath, Helen opened the door and ushered the girls outside, Cassie’s hand pulling Shirley’s shoulder into the sticky Mississippi summer evening.

“Now, y’all’s father is bein’ real nice by lettin’ you skip your lessons, Shirley.” Helen meant Shirley’s summer homework assignments, which her father, Lee, had assigned “to keep her brain from turning to mush.” Helen continued, “and lettin’ all of us go to this show. You better thank him when we get there. Hurry up with Cassie. People don’t need to be thinkin’ she’s deaf, blind, *and* crippled.”

Shirley stopped suddenly, making Cassie run into her backside, and Shirley’s brow crinkled just enough so that the droplets of sweat sticking to her forehead began to roll down the crevices and onto her cheeks. “You want Cass to get there faster, then why don’t you pull her along then?” Helen pivoted, her left kitten heel making a deep pocket in the grass, and came and knelt before Shirley, eye to eye. “I *did* pull her along. For nine months, I pulled her along. And then, I pulled her along for three full years before you got here, all the while knowing that she wouldn’t amount to much. And then when I got

done pulling *her* along, I pulled *you* along for another nine months.” Helen continued but never once blinked, “I’ve pulled. Now it’s your turn to share the yoke.” Helen spoke so closely to Shirley’s face that Shirley could taste the wafts of leftover cigarette smoke on her mother’s breath. The two of them walked the rest of the short way straight across the two blocks in front of their house in silence, Shirley dragging her sister Cassie by the hand, Cassie making the unintelligible mutterings she sometimes made, and Helen readying the smile she was going to display that night.

When Shirley saw the red banner with *Faustus the Coon* written in gold letters, she knew they had made it to the minstrel show. The walk hadn’t been too bad. After their little incident, Helen and Shirley had seemingly separated, with Helen walking just far enough ahead of Shirley and Cassie to look almost as if she were being stalked by an eight-year-old and her handicapped friend. And Shirley had preferred the walk that way. She could steal glances at the dusk sky between watching the ground for her sister without the presence of her mother’s palpable judgment.

Shirley pulled Cassie behind her as the two tried to cut through the crowd and follow their mother. Since Hazlehurst hardly ever had traveling entertainment come through, the minstrel show had been the talk of the town for the past month or so, and Shirley caught herself wishing that her father had picked any other night than the opening to come see the entertainers. To cut through the crowd, she elbowed a couple of thighs and pulled Cassie through the gaps. Finally, Shirley saw her mother’s navy hat in front of the makeshift stage next to a blond man, who must have been Lee, her father. Shirley and Cassie edged closer until Shirley saw that the blond man was wearing a suit coat, and then Shirley screamed.

“Shirley! Hush, it’s me!” her father had come up behind them and grabbed both her and Cassie’s upper arms, steering them away from the crowd.

“But Mom is that way,” Shirley pointed to the navy hat.

“I know,” he said. “She’ll find us when she’s done.”

As instrumental music started, Lee, Shirley, and Cassie found themselves to the right of the stage. Standing in front of her father, Shirley could feel Lee’s thick nuclear power plant jumpsuit against the back of her sweater and Cassie’s soft hands clutching her left wrist. She examined the stage and its construction: Brown wooden boards served as the floorboards, and two poles with a wire strung between them held up a red velvet curtain. The stage was about three feet off the ground, just big enough for the show’s banner to hang from the edge of the stage and barely touch the grass underneath it. There was a big piece of plywood set up on the stage with a face painted on it. *The face of a nigger*, her father would’ve said, and had said hundreds of times throughout Shirley’s life during mundane activities in which Lee thought of *the blacks*, as Helen would say. Some of Shirley’s fondest memories involved Christmas puddings or woodland paths or her father’s stories. Even though only metaphorically, a *nigger* or two always found itself in the family den or at their supper table, wherever the Ellises gathered together, because Lee would invariably twist the conversation so that he could tell the story most recent on his mind.

Shirley noted that shorter posts held lanterns around the edges of the stage despite the town’s available electricity. Nevertheless, Shirley thought that the flames reflected on the stage better than bulbs would anyway. Light bulbs always put out this constant beam of light, but there was a sense of danger flirting with the lanterns’ flickerings, a sense of

unpredictability that added to the ambiance. There was also a door within its own frame standing on the stage. Suddenly the music softened, and a white hand pulled back the stage's red velvet curtain to reveal a man in black and white pinstriped pants, with large painted lips and blue eyes glowing in the middle of his darkened face.

“Ladies and Gentlemen!” His robust voice quieted the audience. “What you are about to witness is the tale of a man who thought he was better than God!” The man’s voice rumbled on among the surrounding gasps, “A man, born here, in this very town,” he pointed at the wooden floorboards, “forty-one years ago on a breezy May day...” Shirley was so enraptured by the man’s gesticulating that she couldn’t take her eyes off him. “... And died just fo’teen years ago in the Mississippi Delta!” Shirley liked the way he stressed every syllable of each word. “A man who walked his way from Hazlehurst, Mississippi, all the way to Greenwood! Ladies and Gentlemen, what you are about to hear is the story of Robert Leroy Johnson,” he pointed behind his head at the painted face behind him, “... the man who sold his very soul to the Devil himself,” the man paused, and the crowd hushed, “... so he could play the guitar!” Amid the crowd’s applause, the man took off his top hat to reveal straight, gray hairs cut short to his scalp and touched the hat’s brim to his chest. Then, like a true showman, he extended his arm, facing up, as he backed off the stage and said, “Ladies and Gentlemen, Faustus the Coon!”

Shirley watched the announcer duck behind the board with the painted face as several other performers, each with white hands, blue eyes, and big painted lips, came onto the stage. One of the performers was wearing large potato sacks sewn together into a baggy dress, and when he squatted early on in the play, another performer popped out from the dress. The audience laughed as this newly discovered performer crawled around

on the wooden boards and sucked his thumb like an infant. Shirley assumed that he was Robert Johnson, or Faustus the Coon, since he never left the stage like the other actors did. Infant Robert Johnson tried to crawl into another performer's lap, only to be too big and fall onto the floor, legs splayed and fake tears leaving white trails in his dark face paint. He then rolled and stomped his feet on the boards, throwing a toddler temper tantrum.

Eventually, Robert Johnson got up and started walking back and forth from each end of the stage to the other, which Shirley assumed symbolized his walking to Greenwood. Every now and then he'd stumble and fall, just for audience laughs, and then get back up and continue walking. At some point, another performer handed him an empty turtle shell. Robert Johnson then unbuckled his belt and tied it around his shoulder and through a hole in the shell. Then, while he was still walking, he started taking off each shoe, unlacing them and throwing them at a specific member in the audience. Shirley laughed each time one of the shoes hit somebody's head. The first one hit Joe Cockrell, whom Shirley knew because he was a deacon in the Baptist church, and the second hit the blond man that her mother was still standing beside. Shirley didn't know which instance she enjoyed more. With his white soles slapping onto the wooden boards, barefoot Robert Johnson then began to string his shoelaces tightly across the turtle shell, so that he was holding a makeshift instrument when he finished. He then plucked at the strings, but no sound happened; and one of the strings popped off the shell. When Robert Johnson bent over to pick up the string, another performer came and hit him across his backside with a switch, laughing just as the audience was. Between her own giggles, Shirley noticed that the women on her right were crying with laughter, and Shirley could

feel her father's chuckles with each ripple of his work jumpsuit against her back. Finally, Robert Johnson quit walking, and a performer brought out a sign that said, "Clarksdale." With his turtle shell still hanging on his shoulder, Robert Johnson walked up to the door on the stage and stopped.

Silence enveloped the stage and the surrounding audience. The doorknob twisted slowly, and the door widened to allow another performer to step out, although this performer was different. Shirley noticed that his lips were just as dark as his face and so were his hands. He was dressed in a red velvet floor-length dress with orange chiffon flames sewn onto the sides -- the Devil, no doubt, wearing a dress made from the leftover curtain fabric. Shirley watched as the chiffon flames hugged the Devil's waist and flowed down his arms, up his back, and over his shoulder to touch the top of the dress. The whole ensemble was made so that his feet couldn't be seen. Excess red velvet bunched on the wooden stage and left a trail whenever the Devil chose to take a step. The Devil was large, barely fitting through the individual door frame, and Shirley noticed that his beads of sweat didn't leave white trails down his face. She looked at his chest and saw hills where there should have been none, saw small hands and an even tinier waist, and realized that the Devil was a woman the same time that Robert Johnson did.

"The Devil! Ha!" Robert Johnson cackled, "You said you want my soul?" The Devil nodded her head, silent. "What I want is you on your back!" Robert Johnson doubled over, and the audience did with him, all clearly in on the joke. The Devil stood there, silent but resolute.

Cassie's mutterings brought Shirley's attention back to the three of them. She checked Cassie and made sure that she wasn't too close to anyone. Their father was still

behind the girls in the crowd, but the faint smile playing across his lips and his eyes had that look that Shirley had learned meant not to disturb him. Shirley turned her eyes back toward the stage to see the Devil hold out her hand to give Robert Johnson an acoustic guitar. The instrument was too big for the scrawny man, but Robert Johnson took the guitar, unhooked his turtle shell, and flung the haphazard instrument at the Devil, hitting his face to the audience's delight. Robert Johnson secured the guitar to his belt by tying the end of his belt around the fretboard and attaching his buckle to a clasp on the end of the guitar's body. He plucked at the individual strings at first, making tiny picks of unintelligible sounds float from the instrument.

Then, almost immediately, the fingers of his left hand distorted themselves on the guitar's frets, and his right hand began to strum. The sound was hideous, with his belt still tightly wrapped around the fretboard, but it was a start. Robert Johnson fiddled with the guitar, making it squawk haphazard tunes while he skipped around the stage's rim. He got so close to the edge that Shirley could see the flames reflected in the whites of his eyes, his white lips, and his teeth, so much so that he looked as if his internal organs were nothing but fire. He was the type of danger that Shirley enjoyed, the kind that she could see but barely touch. And the Devil still stood in front of the open door in the background. Since she was so far from the stage's edge, the flames cast just a faint glow on her, enough to illuminate her face but not its individual components, enough to remind the audience that the Devil was always present in the story even if not the focal point. Robert Johnson's song and dance stopped, and he approached the Devil. He looked straight into the Devil's eyes and nodded. The Devil smiled and stepped aside. Then Robert Johnson walked past the Devil, through the Devil's door. The Devil followed and

closed the door behind the two of them, and then they both disappeared behind the curtain.

II

Amidst the audience's applause, all the actors came back to the stage to take their final bows. From their positioning in the side of the crowd, Shirley could see the performers scrambling into a single file line behind the stage's curtain and then, miraculously, composing themselves as they crossed the curtain onto the most visible portion of the platform. It was not a long line, only twelve actors, yet each performer took his time making his final bows, each smiling and dancing a made-up jig. When Robert Johnson came out, Shirley pried Cassie's fingers off her wrist to clap with the rest of the crowd, and wolf whistles rang out loud and shrill for the performer. An audience member threw his turtle shell back on stage, and Robert Johnson picked it up and pretended to play it and his guitar simultaneously. As he did so, a black hand tugged at the curtain, and the Devil walked onto the stage. The flames on her costume moved like the tails of a hovering kite hung at the end of its rope but still turbulently poised in midair. The Devil took a deep bow at center stage, and then the pin-striped announcer hurried her off. "Ladies and Gentlemen, we hope you enjoyed our rendition of Faustus the Coon, and we thank you for supporting our festivities this evening! Come back and see us! We'll be here two whole weeks!" With that, the announcer ducked behind the curtain, and the audience turned to leave.

"Girls," Lee said as he clutched both of their shoulders, "We should go. It's late. We need to find your mot..." Lee's voice trailed off in Shirley's mind. All she could think of was the brilliance she had just witnessed, with all the costumes and the makeup and the charades. She loved the ways the flickering lanterns bounced off the velvet curtains, casting a red shadow over each wooden floor plank, and she loved the

communal merriment. Most of all, though, she found herself wanting to touch just some of it with her own fingertips, to feel included with these traveling performers.

With her father's grip attempting to steer her away from the stage, Shirley broke away and ran toward it, eventually diving under the raised platform and crawling to the other side. She knew that her father would be furious when they got home; he already was with her mother, but that fury was a slow burn. His anger towards her would be more immediate. Nevertheless, Shirley knew that his guiding Callie would slow him down, and she found herself, curled in the gravelly mud under that stage, staring at the performers' ankles and wishing that they would never stop performing, if even just for one continuous evening. She didn't want them to remove the face paint and take off the top hats; they all were so much more intriguing with just glowing eye whites and teeth. She had seen Mr. Stowers and Uncle Reford and all the other white men she could imagine all dressed up at church every Sunday morning, but with a little paint, these men weren't truly white at all. They were mixed, and Shirley loved to watch the light hinge on the enamel of their teeth, how the light attempted to reach into their nostrils but either refused or was too scared to delve into such darkness and yet wasn't concerned about the crevices in their unpainted ears.

III

The thick Yazoo mud caked on Johnny Ellis's face like midnight fog clings to the earth during a Mississippi June. Fuller, the six foot tall black teen saw hand walking next to Rett, broke his stride and turned to look at Rett Ambrose's pale, grimy, towheaded grandson who, from the amount of falls he had already taken, had clearly never been in Yazoo hill country. Fuller had been told about the kid before his coming: *He just started running track for Hazlehurst High, real muscular, kinda tall, sturdy feller.* He had been told that the boy was rugged, that he could climb any tree he wanted, but Fuller knew there was a difference between climbing a tree for fun and climbing a tree for work. The kid in front of him, wiping the mud off his face, was tall, yes, but he was thin for his frame — not thin enough to be considered scrawny in general but thin enough to be scrawny in comparison to Fuller. And he was muscular, true, but the muscles he had were sculpted by organized exercises at timed intervals. When the sun hit that boy's legs, the indentations of his calf muscles cast shadows across the rest of his leg and made him look as though he were composed of many different muscle groups, attached to one bone yet individual in function. The specific bulges and depressions in Johnny's legs told Fuller that this boy in front of him had never seen true work. If he had, he would've been one solid muscle. The woods had a way of doing that to people. One running joke was that Rett Ambrose's arms were so tight he could bounce pennies off them, and if anyone had asked Fuller to place his money on it, he would've bet on that being true. In the logging camp on the outskirts of town, Rett Ambrose with his axe was a fearsome sight for any tree that attempted to defy him. Meanwhile, Rett's grandson, sent to live with Rett to toughen up, kept tripping over tree roots.

“Fuller, I trust you. Watch out for him now. And tell him whatever you can to keep him safe.”

“So tell him, if he sees a white turkey, to go try and ride the damn thing like a horse?” Both Fuller and Rett chuckled at the joke at Rett’s expense, as Rett had claimed he’d seen an all white turkey wandering the woods a couple times and was offering a small reward for anyone who could shoot the thing.

“Naw, y’all kill the thing together if y’all see it.”

“If it’s real.”

“Oh, it is.” Rett’s certainty filled every crevice of his face. “Real as thunder and lightnin’.” Rett paused for a moment and looked Fuller straight in his eyes.

“I’d be so proud if the two of you were the ones who did the thing in. Ain’t nobody else I’d rather give my money to than y’all two.”

Fuller shook his head, even though he knew it wouldn’t be possible. The city boy had never seen a real turkey, much less an all-white one, but Fuller knew that white turkeys did exist. People back in town — good, trusted people, like Lilliana Robinson and Miss Mae Evelyn, and the not so trusted but no less good people, like Porkchop Stevens — had heard of a glowing one in that part of the woods before.

“It was all white, Fuller! All white, white as my apron here, I’m tellin’ ya. It was big and ugly with its pink gray beard and scaly legs. Ugly thing, I’ll tell ya.”

“It was so white the light surrounded it and floated ‘cross its back.”

“Yeah, I seen it, too. It came up near the house one night ‘til it saw me watchin’ it. It knows when it’s been seen or not.”

If the thing did exist, Fuller wanted to be the one to find it, to kill it, to pull the trigger of his gun and watch the bullet hit between its silver white feathers. Fuller wanted to be the local hero. He knew the turkey was the only white thing he'd ever be praised for shooting. The prize money was just a bonus.

IV

The mud was hot, almost burning, when it found Johnny's tongue. He had fallen with his mouth open, and his tongue was an easy target. Johnny freed his left hand from the undergrowth and tried to scrape the mud onto the ground, off his tongue. He managed to smear it across his face and swallow some of it, but at that moment he wasn't focused on the mud or the heat, the half-crazed men barely dodging his body as they ran around it, the shoddy sawmill town only ten minutes away, or the new pair of overalls he was wearing. He was thinking about the white turkey he had just seen and how much he wanted to kill it.

"I swear ta fuckin' God, you slow. Git up! Gone git stomped if ya stay down like that!" Johnny's maternal grandfather, Rett Ambrose, screamed at the fourteen-year-old. While bits of clay stuck to his tongue, Johnny focused on a leaf just ahead of him. His eyes traced its oval outline, its jagged edges. He counted its eight veins, each flowing into its own quadrant of the leaf. It had fallen, crumpled, into the mud just as he had, but this leaf was dead and brown. Johnny could count the creases and chips in its waxy coating, and he could see the leaf's flesh pucker as his grandfather's boot smashed pine needles through its skin. A strong, burly man in his sixties, Rett grabbed the portion of Johnny's overalls where the back straps converged and hoisted the muddy boy off the ground. "Why're ya on the ground anyhow?"

"I tripped and fell over the branches and landed in the --"

"Mud. I know. But from here on out, listen, boy: No more fallin'. No more excuses. Ya hear me?" Rett's throaty voice managed to put multiple syllables in the word

“hear,” which prolonged the deep stare into Johnny’s gray-blue eyes, making his words sound more like a threat than a pep talk.

“You can’t be stumblin’ everywhere.” The *a* in Rett’s *can’t* was as hard and crisp as the part in his hair. Rett turned and headed south, entrusting his grandson to Fuller.

“Johnny, we ain’t gone get anywhere if you keep fallin’ like that.”

“I know.” Johnny Ellis stood and wiped the mud from his face. He hadn’t seen mud like this before: It was thick and cakey, and it left stains wherever it touched. He had noticed that only a little water had seeped into the few crevices the mud would allow, and the rest of the water had resorted to resting in red, shallow puddles on top of the cakey mud. *Fuckin’ famous Yazoo clay*, Fuller had said that morning.

Johnny liked the clay. It wasn’t like the dirt back home in Hazlehurst that was dry and gritty and always flying into an eye with even the tiniest breeze. This mud stuck to skin. When he tried to wipe it off, it smeared, and when he did finally get it off, it stained. All in all, Johnny liked the resiliency of the mud. He liked the idea of hardiness and determination that manifested in this cakey substance, and he liked the fact that it tasted like leather boots, metals, and cinnamon. While they had stopped for a moment, Johnny held the dripping soil in his angled palm while the water flowed down his palm and off the side of his wrist, leaving red trails as it went. The dirty water crossed his veins and arteries, filled the crevices of his palm lines, settled underneath his fingernails. And when he pressed his thumb into the ball of clayey soil until the particles had shaped themselves into the form of his fingerprint, he felt, inexplicably, that the blood in his very bones was nothing more than liquid clay.

“Fuller, you gotta help me get this turkey.”

Fuller turned around to see Johnny still contemplating the mud on his palms. “Sweet Jesus. Git it off your hands. We don’t have time for you to be starin’ at mud or talkin’ turkeys. Ain’t nobody else seen this thing. Your grandfather’s blind is all.”

“But, Fuller, there’s somethin’ ‘bout this — it’s so thick, and the water sits on top of it, like it’s a bowl or somethin’.”

“That’s ‘cause the clay.”

“The clay’s what makes it hold the water like this?”

“Yeah, it’s the clay. It got real tight pores, and it open up only when it want to. If it don’t want to, no matter how much water you put on it, the water jus’ gon’ sit there — like Porkchop Stevens sits on Miss Mable’s porch steps every weekday, always there waitin’ for just a little room to slide on inside.”

Johnny chuckled at the joke and let his eyes rest on the clay still smeared across his palms as his thoughts settled back on the turkey. “Fuller, we gotta get this turkey. Keep on the lookout for it. You just saw it, didn’t you?”

Johnny decided to pretend not to notice Fuller’s eye roll.

“Yeah, I saw it just ‘bout a week ago. Big white tail all fanned out and struttin’. Don’t git your hopes up, though. Many a man’s had his eyes play nasty tricks on ‘im when he wawnts somethin’ bad enough.”

Through the slats, Shirley watched different ankles pass by — thin ankles, hairy ankles, scarred ankles, all white and all moving to help clean up the area surrounding the stage. Then Shirley saw two black ankles pass. A set, no doubt, and they were the only set that Shirley could see. In fact, they were the only set that Shirley had seen in several years, because those ankles must've belonged to what her father had always called a *nigger* and because niggers and people who loved niggers stopped coming around the main part of town after Print Matthis got shot at the voting booth just ten years before in 1942 for casting his vote for Roosevelt. Robby Pritchard had told Shirley once that nigger skin looked smooth but felt slimy. *No, not slimy like a lizard*, he'd said, *but slimy 'cause they're so dirty. Ya know, like they got mud on 'em forever, like God Himself done smeared 'em with mud.* The ankles stopped in front of a broken board, and they must've been talking with another set of ankles because a white pair stopped about a foot and a half away, facing the black pair. Without thinking and overcome by curiosity, Shirley shot her hand out and grabbed the black ankle closest to her, and she was shocked and even disappointed that her hand never once felt slimy. Sweaty, yes, but not slimy. In the moment, her shock stemmed more because the ankle she had grabbed belonged to the Devil himself. Even more shocking to Shirley was the fact that the Devil was a woman.

“Youngin’, what’re doing under there?” the Devil lady asked as the white man next to her pulled a muddy, scraped Shirley from under the stage.

“I, I...” Shirley stammered, nearly speechless at the fact that she had not only touched Satan but had also done so in front of witnesses. Because of the excitement of the moment, Shirley was quivering. *I’ll leave the kid with you. Y’all’s kind is used to*

having kids hangin' all over ya anyways, and the white ankles took their brunette owner away from Shirley and the Devil.

“Yo--, you’re the --,” Shirley stuttered.

“I’m the what, kid? The Devil?”

Shirley nodded her head.

“No,” the Devil said, “I *was* the Devil. Now I’m an actress.”

“What’s your name?”

“Mary.” Shirley noticed that Mary’s voice hit the first syllable of her name like a drumstick hits a drum and that the second syllable of her name was thrown in there like an afterthought.

Shirley stared, enraptured. Cottony, the simple horizontal striped dress Mary wore reminded Shirley of the even, plump cracks between each linoleum floor tile in the Ellis kitchen and in the washboard that her mother still used for the dirtiest clothes, despite the new washing machine Lee bought just eight years prior when he returned home from the Ardennes one leg less from the knee down and took a job at the nuclear power plant in nearby Crystal Springs. The leather pylons that held Mary’s spacious frame were brown, no-nonsense loafers, with irregular, tiny hand stitches scrapping together wily bits of seams here and there and mingling among the exact suturing that only a factory-line machine could produce. Mary’s columnar legs stood straight beneath her a-line skirt, disguised by only a thin film of polyester stocking the same color of muddy water. When she shifted her weight from one leg to the other, her shoes squeaked like the third floorboard of the Ellises’ upstairs guestroom.

Mary looked at the silent, unblinking girl in front of her. “You like the show, huh?” Mary continued, “Lots of kids do. It’s the dancing.” Mary paused and arched a single eyebrow, “Why ya here?”

Now it was Shirley’s turn, and she almost missed her cue. “Oh, I — I just came for the show with my mom and my pop and m—.”

“Well, you better run ‘long then. Wouldn’t want to keep your pop waiting.”

Shirley didn’t move.

“Go on! We’ve got cleaning to do.” Mary leaned over to Shirley’s ear and whispered, “Since you like us so much, you should come back. We’ll be here a couple weeks.” Shirley nodded in silent, excited agreement and then promptly ran off to find Lee and Cassie.

For the next two weeks, Shirley dreamt about the show. Yes, her father was angry once she got home that first night. But she had gotten to hold the Devil’s ankle, to touch her! That alone was worth the leftover welts from her father’s beating. Mrs. Cindy at church had always said that Jesus would touch you when He saw fit. Since people had to wait for Jesus to reach out and touch them, Shirley felt that she had grabbed the next best thing. In Shirley’s mind, the experience was similar to the time about five years before when she had tried to play with a baby milk snake. She had found the snakelet slithering against the wall at the Ellis house, back when Johnny was too young to be working full time and when Shirley was too young to have Cassie almost permanently entrusted to her. She stuck her hand, palm up, against the red brick and pressed the back of her hand into the moist dirt, so that the snakelet would wriggle itself onto her palm. It obliged and then shed bits of its skin as it crawled. She had held the harmless thing eye-level for a

good while until Johnny had told her to put it down. *They bite, ya know*, he said. *They bite, and it hurts real bad. Might even send ya to Hardy Wilson!* Shirley knew that she'd need no hospital. *Red and yella, kill a fella*, their grandfather told both Johnny and Shirley once when they visited him in Yazoo. Black partitions separated both colors on this snakelet. *Safe.*

VI

Toula Ambrose woke up that Tuesday morning smoothing her pillowcase, at first caressing the cotton, as if every single cotton fiber were in desperate need of affection, but eventually trying to smear away the residue of leftover makeup. She had left her husband, Rett, in the Yazoo logging camp a month prior to help care for her daughter Helen. Never one to ask for favors, Helen called her mother one day and asked that Toula travel the two hours south to stay with their family for a few weeks or so. *There's a problem.* That's all Helen would say on the phone, and Toula figured it must have been serious, as Helen offered to send her son Johnny up to Yazoo to keep watch on Rett so that Toula could come stay in Hazlehurst without worrying about her husband. The few weeks had turned into a month, and each day made it more and more likely that all of Johnny's summer vacation would be spent away in Yazoo.

Throughout the month in the guest bed, Toula began reveling in sleeping alone. Having left her father's house in which she had to share a bed with her sister and run into her first marriage and then finding herself in a second marriage, Toula had never lived or slept alone. When she first came down to Hazlehurst, every night she would roll onto her doughy stomach and lie there, awake, feeling her pillow mold itself around her breasts, her neck, the left side of her face until she could almost hear a heartbeat under the cloth. She would wake up the next morning still cuddling the pillow and caress it for a few minutes before she began her day. Once she wondered if her husband's absence were the root of her latest tradition, and one night she placed a shirt of his over her pillow to see if she could fall asleep faster, only she never heard even the faintest traces of a heartbeat.

After that moment, Toula still felt the need to personify her pillow some mornings but relished her individual sleeping arrangement more often than not.

The guest room's hardwood floors, warmed by the June humidity, met Toula's feet with a thud as she walked to the slight indentation that she called a closet. Containing only the clothes she brought with her, the closet held a handful of dresses on one half of the rack, and just two worn tan and gray plaid flannel button down shirts of Rett's occupied the rack's other half. Below the hanging clothes were Toula's shoes and across the rack's middle section hung a pair of panty hose, which Toula reached for and began pulling carefully up each leg so as not to rip or cause a run in the nylon. Flesh-toned, the hosiery made Toula's pale, aged skin seem sun-kissed, as if she had spent a day lounging on the bank of the local creek, and she liked that the color it added distracted the eye from her many varicose veins. Toula pulled a blue cotton dress on over her undergarments, slipped on her flat shoes, and headed downstairs to find her daughter Helen in a frenzy.

"Helen, what is it?" Toula, midway down the stairs, called out to her daughter who was scurrying about the house so much that she was sweating through her dress and a small sweat outline had formed on her back around the tied edges of the apron she wore.

"Helen," Toula called again to no response. Finally, Helen looked up from her tidying and saw her mother still standing on the steps.

"Don't just stand there! Get down and come help me. Lee should be gettin' here with Cassie any minute, and it won't matter to her what the house looks like; but he'll want it spotless. C'mon, here's a broom." Helen tossed a wooden handled broom at her

mother, only for the broom to fall on the floor because of the too slight toss. Toula didn't move.

"Ya know, a "good morning" would be nice. D'you do the same thing to Shirley this mornin'?"

"No. I woke *her* up early." Toula inhaled slightly and turned to climb back up the stairs, the broom still lying on the floor.

Helen exhaled and then spouted off a half-hearted apology. Toula stopped and turned to look at the one wavy baby hair encased in the beads of sweat on her daughter's forehead.

"I'm ... stressed right now. This heat is just *in* the house. I can't get away from it. And Lee's comin' home from work early today since he's picking Cass up from her lessons," Helen said.

Toula nodded, as she remembered that *lessons* equated the weekly two-hour summer sessions with Dr. Walter James, the local community college's speech therapist who was allegedly teaching Cassie to form symbols in people's palms to communicate. Normally, Cassie would be given things like zippers or shirts with excessive buttons to play with and keep her mind occupied. Touch was one of the few senses that functioned fully for her, and things as mundane as different fabrics could leave her amused for hours, especially if fur or a mechanism were involved. This specialist had recently been hired in the area, and he offered one-on-one meetings with people who couldn't communicate traditionally. From what Toula understood, Cassie had been going to him for about five weeks now and hadn't shown any signs of progress with anyone other than Shirley.

Helen continued, “And I want just one day where we’re fine, you know? One day where everyone gets along. Lee hasn’t had days like that in a while, you know.”

Toula did know. She had heard the late night and early morning arguments through the floor of the guest room. She had seen the marks in the walls the size of Lee’s fist that Helen would cover the next day with some painting or other knickknack Helen found in town. Two storied and plantation style, the Ellis house was boxy in nature, with four rooms extending from a large central hallway, which held the house’s only staircase, and Toula watched as every room in the house began to look like a local museum on account of all the eye-level wall hangings. Beyond the visible signs, Toula had noticed a change in her daughter. Helen had become short tempered, easily irritable. She looked pale and nauseated most mornings and had put on some weight, making her round face appear just slightly fuller and giving her average-sized yet still slender frame a paunch of about an inch. Helen’s hair, always curled like Nancy Olson’s, now hung in loose natural waves on the days that it wasn’t pulled into a bun. Today it hung about Helen’s round face the same way scum clings to an empty fishing hook pulled through the surface of pond water.

“Cassie won’t know if he screams, but Shirley will. She always gets real quiet after the fights. I want today to be a perfect day.” Helen’s voice took on a pleading tone, “Would you please come help me?”

Toula’s face softened as she descended the stairs and leaned over to pick up the broom. All that morning, Toula swept as Helen tidied, both of them moving from the living room to the dining room to the kitchen and then through the house’s hallways and

the bedrooms upstairs. They had almost finished when Shirley came running through the front door of the house toward the sound of an idling motor.

Toula gathered the brooms and put them away when she heard the motor's idle cease. She walked outside on the porch to see Shirley holding her sister's left palm against the underside of her right hand with her left hand and staring enraptured at the tracings Cassie was making on her palm after this lesson.

"She drew a leaf!" Shirley said, yet Cassie drew nothing whenever Lee opened his palm to her.

"Hi, Honey," Helen said as she reached to embrace Lee, but he turned away before she could wrap her arms around him. He was a tall man, coming in at just under six feet, and the individual pieces of gravel in the driveway seemed to part themselves to avoid the pressure of his size fourteen shoe. Toula had seen a change in him, too. She remembered that the eighteen-year-old boy who stopped her and her seventeen-year-old daughter in Alford & Miller's general store one day to give her daughter a flower had been good looking, despite his dirty factory jumpsuit. Toula thought he still was an attractive man, yet now his eyes seemed flurried with a mixture of sadness, pain, and anger — no longer bright and hopeful as they were that day in the general store.

VII

In Hazlehurst, one week of the show passed, and the summer only got hotter, leaving a humid footprint on the door handles and window panes. Tiny water droplets clung onto each pane, a sweaty film. Helen awoke one morning nauseated and vomiting. Coupled with her recent inability to wear a portion of her dresses and her constant temperature swings, Helen realized she was pregnant between bouts of puking. When she realized that the baby could not have been Lee's, she vomited even more. Cleaning herself up, she took a shower and headed downstairs to the kitchen. She found Lee in his usual spot, the only place in the house where he spent a consistent amount of his time, the head chair of their dining room table. Helen grabbed the broom and began sweeping because the subtle rocking motion was easing her nausea.

“Robert Johnson's been starin' at us for too damn long,” Lee Ellis spat from his window sill as he glared into the dark brown eyes of the minstrel show's mural backdrop. When the show first came to town, the crew members put up a makeshift stage in the main part of town, which was across Extension Street and two blocks directly in front of the Ellis house. Peering through the handful of pine trees edging the downtown area, Robert Johnson's face stared directly into the Ellis house, directly into Lee's face when he sat down for his daily morning coffee. When he didn't use his cane and stood up straight, Lee came in just under six feet tall. His hair had grown gray, especially in the last couple years, and his slacks, like his beliefs, had been stiffened to a point so many times before that they creased naturally now. “Why they gotta put the nigger's face lookin' right at us, day and night?”

Helen stopped her sweeping long enough to look up at her husband's stance: strong, broad-shouldered, resentful -- the same way he stood back in his high school boxing days, as if he were ready to fight the painting. "Well, Lee, he was born here, ya know." She put her head down facing the floor and started sweeping again before Lee could respond.

"I don't care if he was born here or Hell itself. He ain't got a right to be starin' in our house like that. This house has been here since 1878. You know when Robert Johnson was born? 1911. That's thirty-three years o' difference. Thirty-three years that our house was here first. 33 years that Robert Johnson ain't got permission to situate himself lookin' in our house, especially not right in the girls' window. Prob'ly why Cassie's so messed up anyhow. Robert Johnson and his no goo--"

"Yes, Lee, we have an eleven-year-old deaf, blind, almost mute child because a temporary painting of a black has been staring into her window for going on eight days now."

"I don't need your sass."

"Fine." Helen swept at the floor's edges, having already covered most of the floor's main area.

"Back when I was a boy, wand'rin' eyes could get a nigger in trouble."

"Wand'rin' eyes still could get anyone in trouble."

"Yeah, you'd know, wouldn't you?" Lee shot Helen an angry look. Unblinking, he had squinted his eyes just enough that his waterlines caught the light and looked puffier than they actually were. Helen pursed her lips and stared straight back into Lee's

eyes, returning his intensity with her own unwavering version, and Lee sat down at the table with a thud.

“How’d ya want your eggs?” she finally asked.

“Scrambled. Like usual.”

Helen made quick clicking noises with a silver spoon against the four soft white shells until hairline fractures decorated their rounded edges. She pulled each one apart at the fractures so that each yellow orb oozed onto her skillet and watched as the clear liquid around the yolks turned opaque white with the heat, all the while Lee, seated, had moved his chair to where he could lock eyes with Robert Johnson through the window again.

After a few minutes, Helen removed the eggs from the skillet and placed them in front of her husband. She watched Lee skewer a clump of the eggs with his three-pronged fork. Waiting until Lee had placed the clump in his mouth, she said, “I need money for a new dress for Sunday.” As quickly as the sandpaper of a cat’s tongue can prickle human skin, Lee hurled questions at her. *Why do you need a new dress? You tryin’ to impress somebody? So the life I’ve given you isn’t good enough, is it?*

Helen answered each question, occasionally adding that she had *gained a few pounds* or *just wanted something new* or *just didn’t feel pretty anymore*. She didn’t dare tell Lee her discovery. Although, he would know soon enough if he didn’t already. She was gaining weight, more than she had in years, and their marriage had died the day Lee came back from the war with a limp and a broken psyche. After that, her marriage had become a union of convenience more so than of attraction or lust or even love. Helen tried, but Lee disregarded her advances to the point that Helen had stopped trying with Lee. She now focused her energies on her new beau, and the fact that she was holding his

baby instead of Lee's inside of her filled her with a tenacity she had never felt before, a tenacity that encouraged her to fight for everything to make this pregnancy the best of her four. In Helen's mind, fighting Lee for a new dress and being able to reveal her news the way *she* wanted at the time *she* wanted was the first step toward building what she felt should've been her family all along.

As the voices kept escalating, Shirley broke up the argument.

"I know somebody who's a seamstress, and she can sew up a new dress real quick!"

Lee squinted and looked at his daughter, "Who is she?"

"Her name's Mary, and she sews for the show downtown." Lee began shaking his head no.

Shirley continued, "No! I'm telling you, ya know all the costumes in the show? The announcer's fancy suit, all the rest of the cast's outfits, the Devil's fire dress? Mary sewed all of those, and she did it in less than a week. She told me herself after the show. She's a *professional*."

Thinking that she could get Lee to agree at least on a fiscal and religious stance, Helen said, "It'd probably be much cheaper to pay her to fix one of my old dresses than buying a new one. I just know I'm gonna need one for Sunday, or I can't go to church. The Lord deserves the best from all of us."

Lee thought for a moment and pondered while he looked from the face of his daughter to the face of his wife.

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll pay this Mary for one night’s worth of work. If she can sew a whole cast’s outfits in a week, then she can fix a dress in a night.” He then looked at Shirley. “You bring her one night before Sunday, and I’ll pay her when she gets here.”

“I will,” Shirley did her best to hide the upturning corners of her mouth and vowed to invite Mary over that night.

VIII

Homesick one evening, Johnny picked up his grandparents' seafoam green telephone and dialed the number to his house back in Hazlehurst. He wanted to speak to someone who didn't curse the way the loggers did. For Johnny, the cursing was different and interesting, but it wasn't something done at his home. Thus, his lack of familiarity with it still alienated him from his grandfather's crowd.

A wave of gratitude washed over him when his grandmother's voice answered.

"Hello?"

"Maw, it's me. I'm callin' from your place."

"Johnny, baby, how ya doin'?" Johnny could hear the smile forming on his grandmother's face.

"Maw, I think I might actually be getting used to the way things are up here."

After several weeks, Johnny felt as if he knew the logging process a bit better now. In branching out to a new tract of timber, the men would take the crawler tractor — a big, blocky machine — and clear a path in front of the desired logs. Two men would scale the trees, delimb them — which Johnny had learned was one of the most dangerous parts for anyone not scaling the trees — and fell them into the path. Cables would be attached to the trees. Once the steam donkey hauled the cabled trees up to camp, they'd be pushed over a circle saw and cut into logs, then boards. With no covering on the rotating blade, the circle saw spelled instant death for anyone who might lose his footing near it.

Sometimes, when the weather was rough, the loggers would manually haul these heavy steel cables around the bases of the trees, so that the steam donkey would pull the tree and cut it for them. It was more work on the engine but less work on the loggers, and

rainy days already made for extra work on the loggers. They looked for any cuts they could get, especially when felling the trees, on days when they had to wade through mud on top of everything else expected of them.

“Good!” Toula continued, “You going hunting with your paw in the morning?”

“Naw. He mentioned huntin’ a couple times, but we’re workin’ tomorrow. He’s got me paired up.”

“If he put you with that colored boy Fuller, you do whatever Fuller says. He got a short fuse.”

“Yes, ma’am. He already put me and Fuller together two mornin’s ago.”

“Did Paw mention that turkey of his yet?”

“Yes, ma’am, he did.” Johnny chuckled as he realized how infamous this mythical turkey had become for his grandfather’s community. “Fuller says the turkey might not even be real.”

“Lord, don’t tell your paw that. He’d stroke.”

“At what?”

“At the idea that this turkey might not be real. You’re right about that one, Johnny, but don’t point it out to your Paw. He knows but don’t wanna admit it.”

“Why does he want the turkey so bad anyhow?”

“Well, it started out as him just seein’ the thing walkin’ through the woods here and there. At first it didn’t mean anything, but now he says it he wants to eat it so he can know what special food tastes like.”

“That’s it?”

Toula laughed at her grandson's confused tone. "Yep, that's it. The whole thing is dumb really. He's already told me he wants the thing baked with sauteed onions all around it and mashed potatoes and white gravy." Johnny stayed silent for a moment.

"Why're you quiet, baby?"

"I just can't believe that that's all it is. I thought this turkey was plumb magical or somethin'."

"Nope, not magical. It'd just make your Paw happy is all. See, Johnny, your Paw ain't never had something cooked directly for him. All his life, he ate whatever his maw made for his twelve brothers and sisters, so she never made anything special since it was such a big family and all. She just cooked what could feed the whole fam'ly. Then he grew up and moved in the logging camp, where the food is cheap and hardly filling if there's even any. He wants to eat something especially for him, and the white things are always most expensive, he says."

"What happens if nobody ever gets the turkey?"

Johnny heard Toula's laughter on the other end of the line. "For your Paw's sake, let's not talk about that."

Johnny paused for a minute and let that response settle in his head for a minute. Then he changed the subject. "How's everybody else back home? Everything good?"

"Oh, yeah, baby. No news is good news, you know. It was just a regular day here. Cassie came home from her lesson, and we all got up early to help your mother clean. The whole is spotless."

"Really?" said Johnny, feigning interest.

"Really. It looks nice. Y'all all right?"

“We’re makin’ it, Maw.”

“Good. Well, I would offer to let you talk to somebody else, but they’re all asleep since we all woke up early and everything.”

“If they’re all asleep, then what are you still doing up?”

“Oh. you know, just couldn’t sleep. Anyways, it’s gettin’ late, and you’ve got an early start with your Paw in the morning.”

“You’re right. I need to hop in bed. Nice to hear from ya, Maw. Love you.”

“Nice to hear from you, too, baby. Love you.”

As he hung up, thoughts of this turkey swirled in Johnny’s mind, and he formulated a plan. The phone’s clicks reminded Johnny of an axe head hitting against the metal wedges he sometimes used to split firewood.

IX

Later that afternoon Shirley left the Ellis house and headed toward the minstrel show stage in the middle of town. Since it wasn't dark yet, she was hoping to find Mary instead of a production. She wanted to know Mary, to ask her what being a real actress was like and what her favorite cities were. She wanted to try on Mary's clothes and tell her what dresses would look best. Shirley wanted Mary's acknowledgement and time.

The benefit and curse of living in a small town is that doing so makes one fodder for social gossip. This public interest in others' daily minutia only amplified for people from outside the town, and so Shirley had heard that the minstrel actors and actresses were boarding at Millsaps Bed and Breakfast just behind the show's stage. Once she reached the bed and breakfast, Shirley either was short enough or the hostess was too inattentive enough not to notice her from across the counter, and she slipped through the foyer like a fairy dancing across pillows.

Shirley caught herself looking for Mary yet realized she had no clue what Mary looked like outside her Devil getup. This place was not large by any means, but it was large enough that young Shirley was intimidated by it. Nevertheless, Shirley walked past each room, carefully listening through the doors to try and hear an unfamiliar voice, but she heard nothing. On the few off chances she passed a room while its tenant was opening the door, she'd steal a peek inside. Twice she had seen minstrel show jackets hanging on coat racks in the back of the rooms. She was in the right place.

Shirley mentally kept tally of all the performers walking by her: *One Skinny. Two big-bosomed. Five manicured hands. Seven Blondes. Six blondes with blue eyes. Six blondes with blue eyes and pale skin. Six white blonds. One white. One white. One white.*

Three white. One black. Shirley realized that finding Mary would be easier than she had thought.

Shirley quickened her pace and followed Mary down the hall past the kitchen and foyer area where Shirley had come in the building. She followed Mary down a narrow flight of carpeted steps.

When Mary reached her door she asked Shirley, “So, are you staying for something other than an autograph?” without turning around, indicating that she had sensed Shirley’s following her to her room the entire time.

Stunned, Shirley stammered at her that she did want more than an autograph; she wanted a friend. Shirley was more than slightly shocked by her own honesty, and Mary’s quizzical expression at the girl indicated that she was taken aback by it, too.

Mary let Shirley into her room. Shirley was most surprised that her first reaction to the room was the thought that the spring green linens looked like they smelled nice. It was an odd thought, but something about them looked so fresh — like they had just been pulled from the dryer. Taking the room in, Shirley could see flowered wallpaper with a yellowish tint adorning the walls. A Denicotea cigarette filter holder rested in the nightstand by a pack of Marlboros. A full length mirror stood in the corner of the room beside a chest of drawers, and a large trunk was shoved against the far wall. Partially open, Shirley thought she saw the reflections of red sequins beaming from the sliver of exposed trunk.

Shirley also felt Mary’s eyes on her the entire time, yet she wasn’t afraid of them watching her. Shirley had been around older people whose gaze made her uncomfortable

before, yet Mary's gaze snuggled around her like a fleece blanket. It was soft and comforting, light enough to breathe yet thick enough to protect against harsh weather.

"Okay. You've come here. What do you want?" Mary's tone was reserved, quiet, discerning.

Suddenly self-conscious, Shirley's voice shrank from its normal tone. "I told you I wanted a friend."

"Honey, we all want friends. What do you really want?"

Stunned and her mouth suddenly dry, Shirley felt herself wishing she hadn't come. She didn't *know* Mary, and the meeting felt silly and cheap whenever Mary began questioning her. Having decided that she would leave the room, Mary looked in the direction of the trunk one more time.

"My costumes? That's what you want?" Mary let out a dry chuckle. "Hell, you can have all of 'em that fits you."

Shirley felt her face open up with questioning delight.

"Yeah, go on," Mary motioned toward the trunk. "Try on whatever you like. Just don't tear it."

"Really?"

"Ask me again, and you won't be able to."

"Oh, okay! Yes," Shirley pried open the trunk to see the colorful costumes suddenly at her reach. A can-can skirt, the Devil's red outfit, a man's tuxedo, and an antebellum dress with collapsible hoop skirt were in the chest. When Shirley was fingering the hoop skirt, she looked at Mary, who offered only one solution for her

confusion: “Creoles.” Shirley didn’t know what that word meant, but she assumed it was the name of the bone-looking material that would’ve held up the big skirt.

Even though none of the costumes fit Shirley, she still tried them on, with Mary giving her impromptu acting tips as she practiced delivering dialogue and hand gestures suited to each costume. Somewhere around the second costume, Shirley asked Mary, “How can you just let these sit here and not wear them everyday? I wouldn’t be able to just leave them alone if I could help it.”

Mary said, “I act enough each day. Sometimes the costume would just be extravagant.”

“Do you make them yourself?”

Mary let out one of her dry chuckles. “Of course, I do. I’m a seamstress.”

“Do you ever throw them away, Mary?”

“Sometimes. Or I give them away other times.”

Shirley turned and looked her in the eyes. “Really?” she asked.

“Yeah, really.”

Shirley pivoted back to look at herself in the man’s tuxedo. Silent, she was inspecting the cummerbund swallowing her waist.

“Mary, would you come sew a dress for me?”

“Where?”

“At my house. It’s walkin’ distance that way. My parents said you could come.”

“You want me to make you one of these dresses? No can do. We’re leavin’ town in less than a week and have shows every night except the last one here.”

“Well, come then!” Sensing that Mary wasn’t biting the hook, Shirley added, “The dress is for my mother. She and my dad were fighting over fixing some of her dresses the other morning, and I just want them to be happy again.”

Mary exhaled, and her chest fell. Finally, she agreed. “But only if it’s later than 7 that night,” she said.

“Deal.” The triumphant girl in the can-can skirt smiled a big smile because every minute that Mary was in her house was a minute that she could interact with a real actress.

“Mary, one last question.”

“What is it, kid?” Mary had dislodged the cigarette filter and the Marlboros by now so she could light one.

“Why’d you let me do this today?”

“Because I’ve learned that a life can be changed after finding somebody at a door step, even if that door step’s inside.”

Silence settled over the two of them, as Shirley pondered that comment for a moment and as Mary inhaled her cigarette smoke. Not fully understanding the comment, Shirley went back to looking at the different costumes, wishing that Mary could stay with her forever and ever.

X

Even though Shirley tried to sneak through the door, Lee called out to her from his chair in the living room. “Girl,” he said with a booming voice, “Come in here.” Shirley followed the sound, coming to stand in front of her father, still in his factory uniform, sitting in his rocking chair. Seeing his hands fiddling with something, Shirley looked closer to see that he was using his pocketknife to carve a monkey from a cleaned peach pit. He’d carved many before, mostly because they were the only thing he knew how to carve and partially because the large holes sliced in the pit between the monkey’s torso and his arms were big enough for them to be strung and kept with all the other peach pits that Lee had pondered over many evenings in advance. Shirley had seen the string of them hung across the top of her father’s closet when she was looking for one of his flashlights to borrow. She had turned on the closet light and looked up to find the source of the weirdly shaped shadows falling across her father’s belongings, and there they were: A line of peach pit monkeys strung across thin black trotline, suspended from the top of the closet by spring hooks attached to the closet ceiling.

“Where’ve you been?”

“Polly Hennington’s.”

“Bullshit. Now, gonna tell me where you were or lie to me again? Remember I can’t stand liars.”

Shirley swallowed the lump that had made its way into her throat, and her eyes landed on the knife in her father’s hand.

“I went to see a new friend named Mary. She’s the seamstress I told you about? She says she’s coming over tonight.”

“Oh, you did? Where’d you see her?”

Shirley paused and then reluctantly volunteered, “I went to her room at the Millsaps place. She performs in the show that’s here now.”

“You just walked into this stranger’s room?”

“She’s not really a *stranger*.”

“So, she’s a friend, then?”

“Well, no.”

“Exactly. So she’s a stranger, and you just walked into her room without anybody else with you?”

Shirley looked down at the floor, which Lee took as a yes to his question.

Lee stopped his carving immediately. “Sit down. Now.” Shirley sat in the wingback chair mirroring her father’s. He continued, “Did I ever tell you about how my friend Absalom Pritchard died?”

Shirley looked at him with confused rabbit eyes and shook her head *no*.

“Robby pushed him into a hay baler.”

“What?”

“Yeah, a hay baler. It ripped him apart.” He paused for a moment. Then Lee continued, “He had a disagreement with Robby earlier or some shit; and his baler wasn’t workin’ because it had sucked a stick or somethin’ in it, so I was over there helpin’ him look for it; and I’ll never forget it: We turn on the baler, and it’s rumblin’ like usual, except this time it’s not churnin’ regularly inside -- it’d stop for a minute or two and then speed up real fast and then slow down again; and me and Absalom were over the lip of it looking down in it, and then I was by myself lookin’ down in the thing.”

Lee didn't tell Shirley that all the blood in the body looks like gallons when a body's being torn into chunks or that he could remember the crunch of the bones in his friend's fingers but not his own screams or that a scalp starts tearing from the end nearest the source of the pulling and the rest of it follows as smoothly as a ball of dough spreads under a rolling pin. Lee didn't tell Shirley that the faulty baler went through several cycles of starting and stopping before the visible parts of Absalom Pritchard, his legs, went limp. Lee didn't tell Shirley that he spent a few precious minutes trying to process the scene in front of him or that, once he had gathered himself, the first and only thing he could grab to try and pull his friend out was the right tip of a work boot, and Lee didn't tell Shirley that Robby was suddenly there beside him crying and apologizing and pulling on his father's left boot until the machine ripped the boots from each of their hands. Lee didn't tell Shirley that he had wrapped his arms around Robby to keep him from jumping into the baler after his father and threw the boy down on the ground, partly to save him from jumping back in the baler and partly because he wanted to kill the boy himself. Lee didn't tell Shirley about the hatred for the boy that swelled within him like air puffed into enlarged anole gullets or the milky remorse in the boy's eyes that was so thick he could still taste it resting on his tongue.

Lee pulled himself back into the moment to see Shirley still processing the information. He said, "It all boils down to your life can change in an instant, even by the people who seem to care the most about you."

Lee sought to fill Shirley's silence. He leaned forward and whispered, "Dangerous, scary things can happen so fast and you won't even know."

The girl was still silent, seemingly melting into the wingback chair.

Lee continued, "Lucifer was an angel once. You know who Lucifer is, right?" Shirley nodded her head yes. Lee continued, "He lived in Heaven above and was in God's good graces. But he learned that he and the other angels would one day have to worship God in human form, so in other words, worship a human, and he revolted against God to save himself and his fellow angels from worshipping a mortal." The quizzical expression returned to Shirley's face. "And God cast him out of Heaven so quickly that even Lucifer didn't know what had happened."

Lee's gaze returned to the peach pit monkey he was carving, yet he continued speaking, this time more to himself rather than to Shirley.

"And that's why Satan likes saving people. He's never saved anyone before, but he's going to," Lee countered. His voice grew gentle, "When Lucifer returns, like Revelation says, he'll take the niggers down to Hell with him first, to save whites from pain because niggers don't burn as badly in Hell. Then Lucifer'll take all the broken whites, the defective ones -- the ones who don't have both their legs or can't speak or whatnot, to save extra pain from the good whites. He knows Hell isn't the greatest place, and that's why he's gonna make sure that good whites like us have to go last. And it'll happen *so* fast." Lee paused a minute for rhetorical effect. "Now go to your room."

Lee watched as Shirley gathered her wrinkled skirt in her right hand and left the living room, and then he heard her solemn steps up the staircase toward the room she shared with Cassie, each of her steps lingering on the previous stairstep like the pads of a cat's paw.

XI

Shirley ran her fingers across the provincial style molding edge of the door frame. In the moonlight coming from the windows, Shirley could make out the lines of her sister's figure standing in the middle of the room between the twin beds that each hugged an opposing wall. Shirley walked over to Cassie, wrapped her right arm around Cassie's back, and gently tugged Cassie's left arm toward her bed on the room's far wall. She placed Cassie's hands on the side of the bed and watched as Cassie felt the quilt for a few moments, getting a sense of the rose patterns in the patchwork. Toula had sewn the quilt years before as a housewarming gift for Lee and Helen and had modeled the roses after the knockout rose bushes that Helen had helped her plant when she was only a child. *It's a gift for your future, with images from your past*, Toula had said, handing the quilt to her daughter. When Johnny was born, Helen had put the quilt away in storage to save it for her first daughter. Four years later, Helen had first wrapped the quilt around infant Cassie and cooed at her while the doctor talked about *delivery complications* and *malformed cochleas* and *impaired corneas* and *potential standard of life*. All Helen could see were the roses surrounding her baby's face, while Lee had listened to the doctor's spiel intently. *I don't want it on any other of my children. Let it touch that one only. This is your mother's fake New Orleans voodoo magic shit*. Lee's words that day had ensured that Toula's rose quilt would be as constant throughout Cassie's life as her diagnoses.

Shirley took Cassie's hand and guided it toward the rose next to a small, pinky-sized hole in the quilt. Shirley had seen this ritual happen so many times that she knew Cassie wouldn't accept that the quilt and bed underneath it was hers until she had found that small hole. When Cassie ran her finger into the hole and recognized that the bed was

hers, she climbed onto it like a toddler: Two hands first, then one knee, then the other knee, until she was on all-fours on top of her bed. Shirley watched to make sure that Cassie could situate herself in bed from there. Cassie reached her palms out for her sister's hand, and she traced a *T* in its palm, which Shirley learned meant *thank you*.

Once her sister was tucked in for the night, Shirley changed into her pajamas, waited until her father had gone to bed, and sneaked back downstairs to let Mary in the house. Shirley told Mary not to worry about the quietness, that her family was full of early birds. She promised Mary that she could come in and fix the dress in the laundry room, since her mother had laid it out earlier that day and specifically requested loosening the darts on the sides — what Mary had said was a quick fix. Trying to keep Mary company into the wee hours, Shirley attempted staying downstairs, yet Mary sent her to bed when she fell asleep on the washing machine for the third time that night. After ascending the staircase, Shirley traded Mary's company for the comforts of her twin bed on the other side of the room from Cassie's. Not long after, complete silence blanketed both girls.

XII

Johnny saw August and September head even farther south for the cold weather coming. Logging couldn't be done safely during the winter time, Johnny was told, and so both he and Rett spent a much more considerable amount of time in the house in town. The ramshackle cabins they had sometimes stayed in during the logging months in the summer were a temporary thing, assembled and disassembled as quickly as a tree cutter could scale a tree and mark off the logs in it. Now that the cold had set in, the loggers returned home for the winter, with their occasionally venturing out to chop firewood being the closest thing to logging they ever got in the wintry air.

As the winter got colder, Rett got meaner. Johnny figured he was an outdoors man, cooped up in a flower-decorated house. Sure, there were the usual household distractions — a radio, a television; but Rett had repeated “*Ya sit down, ya go down,*” to Johnny enough for Johnny to know that Rett took the phrase to heart. And so he tried to move as much as he could, rearranging the stacks of potatoes in the back garage area or tinkering with the various guns he owned. Johnny noted that the tinkering had started with Rett disassembling them to see if he could reassemble them. When that proved too easy, Rett started trying to take them apart piece by piece and build them from scratch. *If I can put this barrel on this stock, then I could make a longer shooting range,* and so every night Johnny could hear the clicks and pops of what had become Rett's personal gun manufacturing center. Every morning was still devoted to scrambled eggs.

“Johnny!” Rett called from the kitchen, “Put on your coat and shoes and go down the road to Miss Ella's — the lady with all the hens runnin' loose 'round her house — and ask her for a dozen eggs. Tell her I'll pay her for 'em tomorrow.”

Johnny put on his jacket and laced up his winter boots. Then he left the house and began walking toward Miss Ella's.

"Hey, Johnny! Where you goin' on this fine day here? Mighty cold, itn't it?" A large man in overalls whom Johnny recognized as Porkchop Stevens sidled up beside him.

"Hi, Porkchop. Yeah, it is cold out."

"Where you goin'?"

"To Miss Ella's to get some eggs."

"Really? I was thinking your Paw done sent ya out here to find that damn magical turkey." Porkchop let out a huge rolling laugh that crashed against Johnny's eardrums in waves.

"Nope, not this time."

"Really? See rumor has it your paw thinks that turkey is magical 'cause it's all so white."

"Sure, Porkchop."

"Naw, really, I'm telling ya — Rett Ambrose got a reputation 'round here for looking for trouble. Ya know, doin' things normal people wouldn't never do. This whole turkey hunt is the latest one for him. After the turkey hullabaloo calms down, he'll be on to somethin' else. Mark my words."

Irritated by Porkchop's assessment of one of his family members, Johnny thought back to Fuller's joke. "Porkchop, you know you got a reputation 'round here for being a drunk? And beggin' on Miss Mable's porch like a stray dog? And wearin' overalls that are too tight in some places and too big in others? Go on back to Miss Mable's,

Porkchop.” Johnny, who had stood still for this latest spiel, started back walking toward Miss Ella’s like he had been. Porkchop looked stunned.

“I, I, I’s just tryin’ to, ya know,” Porkchop stammered, “I’s tryin’ to help ya by lettin’ ya know what’s happ’nin with your family. The Ambroses been cursed since years ago, and I wanted to make sure you understand what all’s goin’ on with your family.” Porkchop ran off away from Johnny and left him pondering the word “cursed” in the cold.

When Johnny returned to the house, eggs in hand, he asked his grandfather what Porkchop had meant. “He’s just an old drunk, Boy. That’s all. Can’t pay no attention to an old drunk just lookin’ for some,” Rett said in between bites of his omelet.

Johnny had dreams of Porkchop Stevens. Each was more terrifying than the last. At first they were mere reenactments of Porkchop’s walking and talking with Johnny that day. Then they progressed to featuring the same scene, except for the whites of Porkchop’s eyes were almost glowing. His eyes came to glow ferociously, to the point where Johnny had to strain to look into Porkchop’s dark pupils when he was talking. Then Porkchop, with his glowing eyes, started sprouting white feathers from his shoulders and back during the conversation. Porkchop writhed as the feathers broke his skin, as if the feathers weren’t feathers at all but rather visible extensions of Porkchop’s skeleton.

As he heard the snaps and creaks of branches breaking, Johnny lay in his bed and chalked the dreams up to his personal indignation at belonging to a “cursed” lineage. Even though Porkchop had said it, the word still stung.

XIII

In the Ellises' upstairs guest room, next to the girls' bedroom, Toula found herself unable to sleep. She had been struggling to recount specific instances — a problem that had been weighing heavily on her mind; and she awoke in the middle of the night from a dream in which she had been reaping wheat with her great grandfather's scythe, a family heirloom passed down through the generations. The tall amber grains brushed against Toula's waist as she, in the body from her twenties, held a scythe glinting in the summer sun. She knew had been cutting the wheat for some time before the dream began, as beads of sweat rolled down her temples. As the dream continued, Toula had begun to forget. First, she couldn't remember ever having seen the scythe before. Then, she couldn't feel her hand or arm. She knew that her right hand was attached to her body, but its sudden weightlessness was alarming. She took her left hand and touched her right hand. Nothing. She brushed the sweat beads off her forehead with the back of her right hand. Nothing. And she kept reaping this tall pale wheat, now involuntarily, with this instrument for which she suddenly had no name. The last thing she remembered was the instrument's curved blade curling around the grain stalks like a tongue before her gasping woke her.

With moonlight inching through the window and carpeting the oak floor, Toula climbed from her bed and tiptoed throughout her room, gingerly, as if she were walking on a frozen lake, to avoid waking Shirley in the adjoining room and Lee and Helen in the room below hers. This dream was not the first of its kind. She had had others, all of them involving sudden weightlessness — the feeling of forgetting the presence of a limb or an

item somehow connected to her body — and her waking in a cold sweat, wondering what she would forget the next time.

She recalled that tonight's dream had been different from the others in that the scythe had been coming toward her as she awoke, coming to cut her waist in half as it had done to the grain. Her growing memory loss was consuming her, and tonight she decided that she would try trading her old memories for the ability to make and retain new ones. It was a long shot, she knew; but as a child, Toula had also watched her grandmother once burn sewing needles in an effort to ward off memory loss and to give all her time spent sewing back to God Himself. Whether or not the ritual had lengthened her grandmother's life was questionable, but Toula knew her grandmother swore by this idea even upon her deathbed. There was something beautiful and intangible — a generosity, perhaps, her grandmother had said, about taking the burden of returning useless things to dust upon one's own back with the hopes of gaining more insight.

Inspired by her grandmother's words ringing in her ear, Toula walked over to the simple desk that Lee had built from scrap wood and then painted a pale yellow per Helen's request. Toula remembered the day that Lee had finished the piece and brought it inside, only for Helen to call it ugly. Helen didn't want to look at it, she had said, hence its residing in the guest room. The yellow of the desk was the same color of the wheat in her dreams. Toula rummaged through its drawers to find a telephone phone book and a box of cheap matches, as she had been expecting. Knowing the desk's history, she expected it to be filled with inconsequential knick-knacks; and she had been right. A lone wooden block with the letter *S* on its side, loose papers, scissors, pens, buttons, a pocket-sized Bible, along with the phone book and box of matches. Toula took the phone book

and matches in her arms, carried them into the guest bathroom adjoining her room, and closed the door.

There, in the darkness, she lit a match and watched its head ignite in a tiny burst that mellowed to a soft glowing flame. Even alone, she felt almost as if the shadows of her face that this light suddenly cast throughout the small bathroom were company for her, a mandatory audience. She took a handful of toilet paper, placed it in the ceramic sink basin, and dropped the match on top of it. The fire caught the flimsy paper, crisping and then disintegrating it. Regardless, the toilet paper bought Toula time. While the fire in the sink was growing, Toula took the phone book and began tearing specific lettered sections of it out and placing each section on the counter beside the basin, just out of the fire's reach. She then began to place certain sections on the fire in the sink, careful not to overload the flames and smother them. She started with the Gs, followed by the Ss, the As, and the Ms, like the first letter of her father's name. Finally, she held the the Ws over the small bathroom fire. She glanced toward the ceiling, as if it were a suitable substitute for an evening sky, and prayed that this selective giving away of her earlier memories — those involving her traipsing through the woods with her first cousin Gilbert; her childhood home in Scooba, Mississippi; her mother, Adeline; her father, Matthew; and her first husband, William — would give her the mental space to keep the memories she had already begun losing involuntarily.

She dropped the Ws onto the fire, and the flames immediately leapt high onto the ceiling. Toula concluded that she had missed some chemical or spilled ink on the Ws in the darkness of the bathroom, even with the fire in the sink, for the fire to jump as abnormally high as it did. Worse, the fire had touched the ceiling, and Toula thought she

could smell a slight smoldering coming from the plaster. She hurried downstairs to wake Lee and Helen, with her socks slipping on the hardwood steps. Once her feet hit the bottom floor, Toula could smell the smoke wafting downstairs, and she knew that she had caught the bathroom on fire. At the moment, she was most concerned about waking people to get them out of the house. She'd tell Lee what she had done afterward. She burst into their bedroom to find that Lee was in bed alone. Shaking him, Toula struggled to pull Lee from his deep slumber.

XIV

May of that following year came, but Rett's bitterness never left. In fact, Johnny thought it had worsened with each passing month. It seemed that Rett's occasional noticings of the turkey had become a fascination for Rett, as he had begun talking to Johnny about how badly he wanted something that no one else had ever had every night at dinner. Rett's offer of prize money was still on the table, but to Johnny's knowledge, no one had yet found the turkey.

One day, Johnny came bursting through Fuller's ramshackle logging cabin door with a dead, defeathered turkey in his hands.

"What the hell, kid?"

"It's the white turkey! I found him out in the woods." Johnny beamed as he spoke.

"How'd ya kill it?"

Johnny said, "I said I found it, not killed it. It was out there under a pile of fallen branches from the storm a couple nights ago."

"And *that's* what killed it?"

Johnny could feel Fuller's skepticism oozing off his *that* and made a special point of rotating the bird's body to show a long raised bruise running in a line across the back of its neck. Johnny carefully monitored his facial expressions to lessen Fuller's already palpable suspicion, for Johnny couldn't bear to have Fuller guess that he took the back of an axe to one of Porkchop's pet turkeys and killed, defeathered, and planted its body to disguise it as *the* white turkey based off a series of uncontrolled eyebrow twitches.

Having seemingly taken the reasoning, Fuller then said, "Let me see its feathers."

Johnny led him to the edge of the yard where a pile of white feathers lay in a heap. Fuller picked up a handful of them, inspecting each. Johnny was worried that Fuller could smell the bleach he had used to whitewash the feathers days before, but Fuller didn't seem to notice. After all, Johnny had made sure to smear the feathers with mud and debris before showing them to anyone.

Suddenly, Fuller put the feathers back down on their pile and stepped away from it.

“Oh, God, it fuckin’ is. You found the thing. Go get your Paw and tell him now. We gotta cook it for ‘im.” Fuller grabbed the prickled body from Johnny’s hands and sent Johnny off running to find his grandfather.

Johnny ran and woke his grandfather from the light nap that had overtaken him.

“Paw, Paw! I killed the white turkey for you!”

“What?” Rett stirred almost immediately. Of course, Rett examined Johnny’s explanations of the details of the find much more carefully than Fuller had done.

“You were walkin’ away from the steam donkey —”

“Yes, and then I took a left to —”

“— To see how much the creek had risen?” Rett continued.

“Yes, because all that water fell the other night, and I was curious. So I was walkin’ toward the creek and came ‘pon a big bunch of branches in my way. When I moved ‘em, —”

“— There were the feathers.”

“There were the feathers,” Johnny confirmed.

After pausing for a moment, Rett asked, “And where was the bird while all this was happ’nin’?”

“Oh, he was *in* the feathers but *under* some branches.”

“So you brought him home, defeathered him, and then brought his feathers back to the same spot where you found them, which was out o’ the way in the first place?”

Johnny saw the crease that appeared when Rett was contemplating something draw a solid line between Rett’s eyes.

“No. I defeathered him right there in the woods because I knew you’d wanna come back to the spot and see everything yourself. Then I went and found Fuller with its body because I didn’t want ta leave a fresh meal laying out for somethin’ when we could keep it for ourselves.”

Rett paused for a moment and then let out a gruff mixture of a cough and a spit, but he stopped questioning his grandson, despite the skepticism resting in his eyes.

That evening and night Fuller built a bonfire as sizeable as the turkey and cooked it for the loggers who had also hunted the thing for so long. Of course, Rett served himself first, and then let his crew serve themselves. They were a grimy bunch, and all of them together made for a rough dinner party. Around the bonfire were a couple eye patches, a peg leg, men with fewer fingers than toes, Elmore Creekwood and his broken shin from falling thirty feet out a tree a month ago. And Elmore had gotten off light. But this ragged bunch had all tried to capture this bird for years, and it was huge anyway, like someone had been fattening it up all this time rather than it fending for itself out in the wild.

“Can’t say I’m too happy for you, Johnny,” Fuller said with a full mouth. “Wish it woulda been me who killed the thing.” He grinned and some brown gravy ran down the corners of his mouth onto his chin, caramel coloring against his sable skin.

“Yeah, you lucky bastard,” Elmore Creekwood said entirely too loudly, causing the loggers all to look in his direction simultaneously. Elmore looked embarrassed, so he then hissed, “You lucky bastard” in Johnny’s direction, as if whispering the profanity somehow mitigated it.

“Hush up now. Quit bein’ jealous. The boy done a mighty good thing by killin’ the bird and then sharin’ it with all of us. No need in callin’ him names now.” Rett Ambrose punctuated each of his sentences with a bite of turkey drumstick. “Besides, he gone be a local hero ‘fore it’s all said and done.” Rett smiled and patted Johnny’s shoulder.

XV

What had begun as an attempt at appeasing his grandfather, like that of a child holding a pitiable painting up to his mother for recognition, had turned into a source of anxiety for Johnny. That night, Johnny had another dream, only this time Rett Ambrose grew white feathers instead of Porkchop Stevens. Johnny watched as his grandfather, seated at the table among the loggers, fell on the hardwood floors and writhed about as each of his teeth became hard, bony feathers. Without their fluffy edges, they looked like little skeleton trees protruding from Rett's mouth. Then the feathers started to sprout from Rett's fingers around the turkey leg he was continually holding, wrapping themselves like skeletal snakes around the turkey bone and his fingers. As the whites of Rett's eyes began to grow these feathers, Johnny woke up screaming.

"My God, son, what is it?" Rett heard Johnny's screams and cracked the door just enough for his gaze to fall on the boy.

"Bad dream. A bad dream."

"All right. Try to get you some rest now."

"Yessir." Rett shut the door and left Johnny in the darkness.

Johnny's mind began to wander. What if they knew? What if someone found out? It was only a matter of time. Rett had been so happy at the dinner that night. To let him down on account of a lie — it was something that Johnny couldn't risk. He decided that he would bury the feathers deep in the swamp on the night with the next full moon. He had lived with his grandparents long enough by this point to know that there was a marsh about two miles southwest of town going toward Onward.

XVI

Meanwhile, a smoky smell and soft crackling noises woke Shirley. She followed the scent into hallway and saw tendrils of smoke drifting from under the guest room door, where she knew her grandmother was staying. She grabbed the metal door handle, which burned her palm at the touch. Yanking her hand away, Shirley felt tears well up in her eyes. A layer of her skin still clung to the metal handle, and she passed out upon seeing it.

When she awoke, she was in the arms of her mother's blond lover, being carried downstairs to the house's main hallway. She had to save her sister; and she tried to get up, but the smoke filling the bottom floor by this point made her standing nearly impossible. She crawled along the floor and noticed that her palm had been wrapped in a trouser sock as a makeshift bandage. It was painful, but the sock provided enough cushion for the pain to be tolerable and enough of a covering for the smoke not to sting Shirley's exposed flesh.

She crawled along the hallway, finally reaching the open laundry room door and pulling her face up to see a dark heap in front of her. She could make out some mounds and valleys within the heap at first. Shirley pulled herself closer on her hands and knees, almost sliding along the floor. At first, each movement ached, but it helped her move past the pain. Before long, she wasn't aware that she was aching anymore. The smoke and the terror of the fire made her invincible, stronger. She slid across the floor toward the heap of cloth, over the fallen and overflowing laundry basket, under the folding table, until she came face-to-face with Mary's open, glassy eyes.

"Mary!" she screamed. Now on her knees, Shirley picked up Mary's face and held it in her lap. She pinched both of Mary's cheeks as best she could and pushed them

in and out, trying to make Mary breathe again. The blood from scratches on her legs and her badly burned palm covered Mary's body, staining her dress. When Shirley looked down and saw that her own blood had pooled atop Mary's open eyes, she realized that the red eyes staring back at her were dead and that nothing was going to revive them. There was nothing she could do for Mary. She dropped Mary's head on the floor, mustered her strength, stood up, and ran as much as she could through the smoke. She had to save Cassie. She looked back one last time, and all she could see was Mary's head staring at her, resting on its right ear, with trails of blood dripping from the eyes across the face and onto the floor.

Shirley rushed to the hallway to get to the staircase and then up to her sister, but she could barely see anything. She tripped on an extension cord and pulled a lamp from the wall, and she ran into the door frame leading out of the laundry room. She clamored to get up, to remember where she was going. Out of the smoke, Lee's hands grabbed Shirley's ankle and used her as an anchor to pull himself to the wall. She struggled to help her father up, as his plastic prosthetic leg had melted and he was forced to use crutches. Pausing in the doorway, trying to regain her sensibilities and balance her father, Shirley thought she could see the blond man carrying Cassie down the stairs.

"Hey!" Shirley shouted as loudly as she could, which wasn't very loud given that the roar of the fire now devouring the house was enough to drown out even the loudest of noises. Surprisingly, the blond man looked up, and all she could make out through the smoke were bone-white teeth. He dropped his head and let go of Cassie's hand, running out the front door and leaving Cassie stranded on the second stair. Shirley placed her father's fingers on the wall, so that he could steady himself, and then rushed forward and

grabbed Cassie. She had no time. She had to get her sister, father, and herself out of the house.

Shirley grabbed her sister and pulled both of them outside onto the front lawn. Coughing and gagging, they gulped at the air like fish taken from the water and thrown on the river bank, while their family home burned behind them. Once they caught their breath, Shirley grabbed Cassie's hand and traced the outline of a question mark in her palm, a symbol that Cassie had learned over time meant "What happened?" Cassie responded in the only way she could: She reached for her sister's peeled palm -- the right palm, like the one that the figure had used to guide Cassie down the stairs -- and dug her fingernails into Shirley's flesh until Shirley ripped her hand away.

XVII

Rett Ambrose squinted into the newly risen sun. “All right, son, you gon’ learn what a prescribed burn is.”

“Won’t that kill the trees?” Johnny asked.

Fuller piped up before Rett could answer, “Naw, boy. If anything it’ll make ‘em stronger ‘cause you put all these nutrients in the ground.”

“Yeah, Fuller’s right. You won’t have good strong trees without burning the little ones. The little ones are nothing more than competitors for attention, so you burn ‘em before they get big, too. Then they rot and replenish the soil that the big ones use to grow.”

Johnny shook his head as if he was absorbing the information but still processing it, too.

Rett continued, “Good forests are nothing more than cycles. Four soon-to-be trees burn so one can live comfortably. And it goes on and on.”

“Yup, he’s right on that one.” Fuller sucked his teeth until the suction made a slight popping sound escape his lips.

“And you gotta be active. You gotta run at your problems and try to skirt around them. The safest place to be when a tree falls is at its root and not its branches,” Rett said.

“What about the animals who need the brush?”

“They’re small,” Rett said. “If they wanted to live, they shoulda climbed up high. Anything that stays on the ground is asking to be killed and controlled all its life. Predators stay up high; prey stay on the ground. I bet the little things expect it at this point. We burn every couple years when we can.”

This time both Fuller and Johnny nodded as if they were still soaking up Rett's words. Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of a man falling, spewing profanity along the way. They turned to see a very drunken Porkchop Stevens stumbling after them.

"Rett! Rett! Rett! I done saw it, I'm a-tellin' ya. I saw it, I saw it! Y'all is haunted. Y'all's got a ghost!"

"Go home, Porkchop. You're drunk."

"No, no, no no, no, I seen it this time, and I knows you ain't jokin' round. You remember when we was little and we went —"

"Enough, Porkchop!" Rett interrupted, but Porkchop kept speaking and jumping around, so much so that his bulging overalls revealed extra flasks hidden in the pockets with each jump.

"— and broke in Old Mrs. Norton's and she told us she was gonna hex us 'cause we was nuisances and then she took her cat and spun the thing around in the air by its damn tail? And then she —"

"Shut the fuck up, you —"

"— held the cat — *Bastard* was its name, right? —"

"Bastet," Rett gritted through his teeth. Jaw clenched, Rett appeared to have given up trying to silence Porkchop by this point.

"Right! So she held Bastard in her arms and told us she'd make the spirit of her dead mama come up out the ground and foller us wherever we go. Ya remember?"

Porkchop took Rett's lack of reaction in stride. "Well, I done seen what she was talkin' about. Y'all's got a ghost over there! In the shape of a turkey, too!" Porkchop

pointed to the steam donkey, the motor most loggers in the area used to pull logs out of the woods with steel cables as thick as Johnny's arm, cables that would leave metal splinters embedded in the skin to fester if handled without gloves. In this operation, once two saw hands scaled a tree and delimbed it, they then would cut it into logs, and the logs would be tied to a cable which would then be pulled toward camp by the engine's winch system. In the distance, Rett could see the machine sputtering its usual smoke in the distance, as if it were an actual donkey foaming at the mouth.

“It's a fuckin' machine, Porkchop! You're too drunk to know anything. Git on!”

Rett shooed Porkchop away as if he were a mangy dog on his doorstep.

“Ya can say what ya want, but it's comin'. That ghost's a'comin'.” Porkchop pointed his index finger at Rett, held it there, and then stumbled his way back towards the clearing, both falling and leaning on the trees surrounding him.

Rett squinted his eyes at the vanishing figure, incredulity over his face.

XVIII

By now, a crowd had gathered around the remains of the Ellis house. For a moment both Lee and Cassie supported themselves on Shirley and stood in front of the house in complete silence, their hands on Shirley's shoulders and the eyes of both Shirley and Robert Johnson gazing at every flame. Arms suddenly interrupted the girls' stunned staring, as a sobbing Toula found them and enveloped each one in a massive hug. They all were sooty, so much so that Toula let go of the girls and began rubbing soot off Cassie's face, which became more of smearing than cleaning it. An ambulance arrived on the scene and loaned Lee a crutch while individually checking each survivor.

Finally, Shirley spoke, "Where's Mom?" Toula said nothing, looking instead at Lee.

"She left." His words were crisp. Lee breathed in a large gulp of air and then exhaled.

"Is that everybody?" the medical physician asked Lee.

"Everyone's out who needs to be out."

Shirley's eyes widened. "M-m-mary! She's still, her eyes..." Shirley was beating her father's only leg by this point.

"Hush, child! Calm down. You're not making sense right now."

The girl still stammered at her father, even as Toula came to hug and simultaneously subdue her. After she grew quiet, Shirley whispered to her grandmother, "Mary's still in there," and Shirley could feel her grandmother's lungs quick constriction as she inhaled. Holding Shirley as she gathered her own composure, Toula soothed the whimpering girl until she calmed down. Toula then approached Lee, who was standing in

the yard and staring at what was once his house, and whispered in his ear, “She says there’s still somebody in there. A *Mary*?”

“Doesn’t matter at this point. Everything in there is gone.”

What shocked Toula about her son-in-law’s response was not the flat, emotionless tone of his voice or that his voice and physical stance didn’t so much as flinch when he said it. The shocking bit was that the fire was reflecting in Lee’s squinted eyes so much so that it consumed them, as if the flames were trying to size Lee up, to see just how destructive he could be, and as if Lee were doing the same in return. The sight chilled Toula, and she was suddenly aware of the soot surrounding each of the follicles on her forearms. They looked like tiny ant hills, blackened, like the ant hills on which she used to shake her father’s gas cans and sprinkle with leftover gasoline as a child. With Lee, Shirley, and Cassie standing near her, dazed, exhaustion hit Toula. She worried about Helen coming home to nothing, but at least her daughter hadn’t witnessed the fire. With the sun already starting to rise, Toula helped Cassie over to a garden bench nearby, sat down on it, and dozed off, leaving Shirley and Lee in the yard staring at the embers of their house.

XIX

Rett had always told Johnny that the safest place to be near a falling tree was by its base. *It's hard, but if you see a tree falling and it looks like it's gonna fall on you, run toward its base. A tree can fall on other trees, but it can't fall on itself.* A few instances for Johnny to practice this very advice had popped up thus far in his time with the crew, and Johnny had found himself almost trying to get in the way of falling trees. He liked the practicing. Running toward something that had the power to kill him but not the knowledge made him feel brave, heroic, like he was an actor on some Hollywood set. He loved last minute dodging, and his now bulging calves proved he was developing impressive skills at it.

While Johnny's skittishness around the logging operations diminished, his nightmares continued. The fear he had of his grandfather discovering that the turkey was a lie had grown into near terror whenever his grandfather so much as made eye contact with him. As such, Johnny had come to be quite good at dodging both falling trees and Rett Ambrose. There was one close call right after the dinner one night, but Johnny made up a quick lie. Surprisingly, Rett bought it, and Johnny learned in that moment how to exhale without both noise and visible motion.

Deep in his thoughts, Johnny walked toward one of the far trees. He was learning to scale and delimb lumber, and Fuller was teaching him. For the past few days they'd been walking toward a desirable tree far away from most activity, climbing it with the help of spike mounts strapped to their boots and spiked handles in each hand. Once they reached the first branch, they'd both strap themselves to the tree's trunk by tying a rope around it and securely planting their feet into its sides. Fuller would untie the hand saw

strapped to his belt, throw the other end of the saw to Johnny, and together they'd delimb it, letting the limbs fall without having to worry about consequence because of the distance away from most camp activity. They both would then crawl down from the tree and clean the area as best they could, grabbing the limbs with their calfskin gloves and carrying the fallen branches toward the brush pile near the circle saw, to be chopped into sawdust and sold. Fuller, Johnny found, did not believe in waste, even if that meant eating a salted raw onion for lunch or spending twenty minutes cursing at the remnants of a tree for weighing so much as they carried its heavy branches back to the main part of camp manually. For most of what they were handling, hooking branches to a cable connected to the steam donkey would have been more trouble than the branch was worth, but fallen branches, like fallen logs, were yet to be chopped sources of money lying on the ground. The intensive labor was worth the payoff, Johnny kept telling himself.

On this Saturday, Johnny and Fuller were following their same routine of practicing scaling and manually dragging limbs. The ground was cakey, as the rain from two days prior had made the ground envelop most anything pressed into it. Johnny noticed that he forced several twigs to clayey graves just by treading across them. He came from a people who took things out of the ground, so forcing something back into it was a new, individualized sensation for him.

Despite the less than optimal conditions (loggers hate rain the way doctors hate superstitions), Rett made the crew go out. He told them that he had stayed up until the rain stopped the night before, went out and walked the grounds, and determined that most areas were safe for the equipment. The dragging day did call for some messy work conditions, but the crawler tractor hadn't gotten bogged down; and the steam donkey

could pull the logs, even though they weighed more after being caked with the mud and drag path debris. Johnny had just dropped off a few branches into the brush pile and was on his way back toward a far tree when he looked over to check on Fuller.

Johnny paused next to a wide, sturdy oak tree and wiped his brow with his forearm as he felt his boots sink inches deep into the earth. The suction pulled him close, almost as if the earth wanted him to leave this newfound world of his and return to the ground itself. Since nobody seemed to be looking his way, he propped himself on the tree, resting for a moment. He wanted *to be* for a moment, to have a time when he wasn't physically moving or running from bird-like humanoid creatures in his dreams.

Industrious all morning, Johnny's pausing made him finally aware of his hunger. He had eaten a hearty breakfast, but his stillness made him question whether or not he had eaten enough. As the smoke of the warming up steam donkey wafted through the air, Johnny imagined croissant rolls, blueberry muffins, and eggs. He thought of biscuits, which made him think of his mother's bread pudding, which led to his craving for her monkey bread, a cinnamon and carbohydrate concoction that the Ellises never ate except for during Christmas. Thinking of Christmas made him think of apple turnovers, which were usually Christmas breakfast, and the turnovers led his thoughts back to breakfast foods. As soon as Johnny thought of the crunch of white bread breakfast toast, the steam donkey tautened the steel cable hiding in the clayey ground and surrounding the base of the tree upon which Johnny was leaning, strapping him to the tree and literally severing his legs from his body mid-thigh.

XX

Where Helen's beautiful, rose-covered antebellum home once stood was nothing but a raised pile of wispy rubble surrounding a still-standing stone chimney, and the crowd of spectators had disappeared from the scene now that church services were beginning and that the entertainment of the fire had disappeared into the rubble as well. Helen scanned the scene and then confronted Lee, who was sitting by a napping Toula and Cassie, under an oak tree in the yard.

“What happened? You burned down the fucking house while I was gone?”

“You're seriously gonna give me shit when you've done everything else you possibly can to destroy it? Fuck you.”

Helen pursed her lips and paused for a minute. Then she asked, “You couldn't save anything?”

“They're out, aren't they?” He pointed at both Cassie and Shirley and then chuckled sarcastically, “Oh, wait. I didn't save them. Your cripple husband didn't save them. Instead, you had your little replacement for your cripple husband do it, didn't you?”

Helen hadn't expected such anger from Lee. The past few years she'd come to expect nothing much from him at all, and an impassioned Lee was something she wasn't used to handling. Helen felt herself sucking the insides of her cheeks against the sides of her teeth, and Lee caught it.

He continued, “Yeah, thought I didn't know that you sneak off and fuck him God knows where, huh? And you thought I wouldn't see him rush in and get our girls? Yeah, I did. Shirley and I saw it.” By this point Lee was struggling to get eye level with his wife.

He grasped onto the oak behind him for support and pulled on it until he was tall enough to rely upon his crutch. He stood and looked his wife in the eyes, and then he lost his footing and fell back against the tree.

Helen looked at her husband and didn't offer him any help.

"You look like hell," Helen said.

"So do you." Lee still looked to be half asleep when he said it. Helen caught her instinctive smirk and reigned it in, lest he somehow manage to see it. She walked over to Shirley, who was still digging through the rubble.

"What are you doing?"

Shirley didn't even look up at her mother, instead focused on the crusty bricks in front of her with the intensity of a retriever. "There was a woman I saw in the fire, I know it. I'm trying to find her. She's here somewhere."

Helen knew exactly what her daughter meant. Yes, the minstrel show seamstress was supposed to have come over the night before, but Helen had left for the night by the time that must have happened. Either way, Helen figured it didn't matter now. The seamstress girl was dead; finding her body would lead only to more emotional trauma for Shirley; and Helen's need for a church dress paled in comparison to the family's need for a house. Helen told Shirley, "Nobody was left in the house. The only ones who were were you and your father and Cassie and your grandmother, and all of you got out." Helen leaned over and pulled Shirley's arm, but Shirley snatched it from her mother's grasp and shot Helen a look.

"Let go of me."

“Fine.” Helen loosened her grip on the girl’s arm enough that Shirley could yank her arm free and continue scrounging, stopping only for intermittent yawns.

Helen left the girl alone and went to wake Lee. “Get up. We have to get moving.” She kicked his knee, shaking his entire body.

“The fuck do you want, woman?”

“We have to get moving. Nothing’s here for us anymore. We can’t just sleep in the yard like dogs.” Lee wanted to fight her, but she had a point.

“Where can we go? My parents would’ve taken us in, you know,” Lee looked toward the ground.

“Yazoo. For a while. There’s nothing left for us here right now anyway.”

Lee seemed less than enthused at the prospect.

“You can buy a new leg and work with my father on the crew — or you could make yourself a peg,” Helen looked at Lee’s missed leg, “and we’ll take her back.” Helen motioned to Toula.

Lee paused for a moment.

“You know I’m right,” she said.

Begrudgingly, Lee admitted that she had a point. “It’s just that,” he paused, “this is my *home*. I’ve never lived anywhere else, and my family has lived in this county for generations.”

To that, Helen stepped toward him and said, “Lee, if there’s one thing you’ve taught me, it’s that somebody’s *home* quits being his *home* when it’s got nothin’ to offer him anymore. Now, c’mon. We should go.”

Lee looked physically and emotionally broken at that realization, and a part of Helen enjoyed it.

“Yeah,” he said. “Help me.”

XXI

When the Ellis car finally clamored onto Yazoo soil, soggy gravel roads greeted them. Traveling the twenty minutes from the county line to the Ambrose house, Shirley and Toula awoke on account of the bumpy road. While Shirley drifted back off to sleep, the tension in the car left Toula unable to do the same. Not wanting to break the silence, Toula looked out the window at the trees she had come to miss over these past few months. The air inside the sedan felt thick, like the edges of Toula's favorite dough bowl she had left in the top right cabinet in her kitchen or like the guilt she felt for the events of the previous night. Looking into the front seats, she could see Helen staring out the passenger window, her blank lipsticked reflection visible against the blurred passing pine bark. Lee's sighing interrupted the silence as rhythmically as the the car's tires swung slightly out of balance with each rotation, adding a sway to the car's rolling.

While coming up the driveway of the Ambrose house, Lee's cautious driving became aggressive upon his seeing a frantic scene at the house's porch. The front door was open, and sweaty, muddy men and teenagers were running around, crowded like herded cattle. Toula, Lee, and Shirley practically leapt from the sedan and rushed to the crowd, while Helen stayed behind to help Cassie out of the back seat. Taller than most, Rett saw his wife, son-in-law, and granddaughter running toward the group and met them mid-way in the yard to stop them.

"What's happened?"

"Let me go!" Shirley writhed against the hard brace of her grandfather's left arm, while Lee held the right arm, shaking it as if information would fall out of it like the stuffing of a ripped stuffed animal.

“You can’t go in there.” That’s all Rett could repeat to the two people clinging to him. “You can’t go in there.”

Toula caught up to the three of them around the third repetition. Out of breath, she locked eyes with her husband and noticed that worry lurked in the lines of his usually solemn face. Rett’s having logged their entire marriage had hardened Toula’s husband to violence and tragedy as his skin had leathered over years in perpetual sun. He normally came home exhausted or dirty or both, usually covered in hydraulic oil. The stress lines in his face came not from working long hours. Rather, they came from a place that even she couldn’t comprehend, a place where a simple *How was your day?* could be met with a *Fine* just as easily as an *I saw my friend get carried off the site in bags*, a place where a single stumbling meant losing several toes if one were lucky; and Toula didn’t need to see the commotion just beyond her husband to know the gist of what had happened. She knew by his set jaw and the crease running down the middle of his forehead that more than a simple stumbling had happened that day with the crew.

“Y’all go on back to the car. Git on.” He semi-shoed, semi-pushed Lee and Shirley back to the still running sedan. Toula stayed behind and hugged Rett. “Who is it this time?”

“Johnny,” he tried to whisper in her ear but couldn’t because his voice broke.

XXII

Across the yard, Helen held Cassie still. She had been helping her across the graveled driveway and grassy yard when she saw her father stop both Lee and Shirley. She then saw that both of them had left her parents in the yard, embracing with her mother's back to her, while they walked back toward the car. Curious, Helen edged forward with Cassie next to her, and she thought she could make out *Johnny* on her father's lips. Suddenly, it made sense: The commotion, her father's barricading them from the house, the entire crew's lack of working in the middle of the afternoon. She dashed out of sight while everyone else was occupied, dragging Cassie into the crowd with her. In the house, they found themselves funneled toward the kitchen in back of the house, past the mauve colored living room and turquoise bathroom, past the dining room with the Toula's "fancy" chairs, and toward the checkered formica kitchen table, on which Helen could see red-soaked towels. She elbowed her way closer, forgetting Cassie, until she could make out the table scene: A young man, severed at both kneecaps, legs lying beside him on the table as well, pale from massive blood loss. And on this young man's cheek was a faint, inch-long scar that resembled the one her son had gotten while playing baseball as a toddler. This mangled body was her son, and the realization made Helen's womb contort in ways it never had before. She was shocked and overwhelmed, at first wanting to see her son's face and then realizing that she'd see his face in that state for the rest of her life.

Clutching her stomach and nearly writhing from pain, Helen ran away from all the body heat inside that house and outside to the family barn turned storage shed. By this time, her abdomen was burning in the same way that ignited gasoline peels away

anything it touches. She wrenched open the door and thrust herself into the darkness of the former barn. Light streamed in through some crevices in the walls, enough for Helen to make out loose outlines of the items in the shed. She grabbed hold of a lawnmower handle and her father's toolbox, using them both to stabilize herself against the pain and nausea. There, somewhat in the dark, Helen felt alone and surrounded simultaneously. Hoards of field spiders called the shed their home, and their many neon eyes shone throughout the barn's floor, ceiling, and walls; but Helen felt as if even the spiders were no company, that she was alone and in pain in the darkness of the shed. She could see that the sun was setting outside in the waning light coming through the cracks. Soon she would be enveloped by darkness.

Seized by a particularly aggressive contraction, Helen braced herself against the gardening equipment again and cried out into the night. After several of these, she felt a wetness between her thighs, but this felt differently than the nights when she and Lee were first married. This was a heavy, thick wetness, like that which covers a baby bird as it emerges from its shell. Helen reached down once, and her hand returned covered in what seemed to be black goo. She wiped the ooze on her skirt just as another painful contraction hit, for which she found she needed to bend her knees and come close to the ground. Widening the space between her pelvis felt natural, eased her pain if even for just a tiny bit. She felt her abdominal muscles clench once more, and suddenly she felt a release. Of what, she did not know. Panting and sweating, Helen took a minute before reaching down and grasping the tiny, semi-formed human that had just left her womb.

Holding the creature, Helen could feel its heart trying to maintain a steady rhythm. She could see its blood pumping through its tiny blood vessels, but she couldn't

feel her own hands. In front of her, she felt that they were connected to her body but also weightless, like the hands within her vision were floating, belonged to someone else. She felt faint and weak, and the warmth that had once amassed between only her thighs had trickled down the insides of her legs by this point. The struggling heart in her hands continued to beat, miraculously, as she wondered how it had come to be. She and Lee hadn't slept together in over a year, Helen instead opting for her former blond lover who had left her before she left Hazlehurst for Yazoo. As she realized that this tiny creature in her hands was not her child but rather the product of her fruitless affair, its heart stopped. Helen felt the blood stop circulating, its breathing cease. This little being had died in her hands, and all she could do to wrap her mind around that fact was think of the creature as an *it* that needed to be hidden. She took the body and buried it temporarily in a nearby hay bale, hollowing out a cavity and then filling that cavity with the body she placed inside.

Dazed, Helen wandered toward the house. Upon seeing the victim's mother covered in blood, the crowd assumed that she had been holding her son and gave her no second glances. Gradually, the loggers and saw hands left the house, leaving just the grieving Ellises and Ambroses. Someone had called the coroner earlier to get an official ruling on Johnny's death, and the body had been taken to a nearby funeral home. Helen hoped that he could be buried in Yazoo, where she had been born and raised.

XXIII

Over the next few days, people from Toula Ambrose's Sunday School class brought casseroles and lasagna dishes by the house. Representatives from the funeral home brought packets with different casket and urn types. Rett and Toula handled the incoming calls and gifts as Helen and Lee each had become withdrawn, barely eating, let alone talking. Shirley had taken to helping Cassie move around the house, but Toula took Cassie under her watch after Shirley's recently rougher than usual handling of her had resulted in Cassie leaving more nail marks in Shirley's hands and forearms. Shirley eventually withdrew into herself, leaving Cassie to wander around Toula's home alone while Toula and Rett entertained visitors and made funeral arrangements for Johnny.

One such visitor was Porkchop Stevens. The accident had happened on a Saturday, and he came by the house on the following Monday while Rett was away with the logging crew. Toula answered the door.

"Hello?" She greeted him through the screen door.

"Yez, Miss. I'm a-lookin' fer the fam'ly of the boy cut in two?" Toula winced at both his phrasing and the scent of alcohol drifting through the mesh separating the two of them.

"They can't talk right now. I can take a message?"

"Yez, jus' tell them Porkchop is so sorry fer their loss."

Toula nodded her head. "I will. Thank you." As Porkchop wobbled off the front steps, Toula checked the screen door latch for good measure, even though she knew it was closed, and then closed and locked her house's main wooden door.

XXIV

While Toula was speaking with Porkchop, Cassie had been fingering the lock of the house's back door. The locks caught her attention because their metallic finish was cold to the touch, a sensation that Cassie hardly ever felt living in Mississippi her entire life. She fiddled with the doorknob and opened it, then did the same with the latch of the screen door. She felt the floor beneath her give way to a fluffy, spiky sensation on the bottoms of her feet, and she enjoyed the firm plushness of each of her steps. She followed that feeling until she collided with a rough exterior whose skin fell off when she touched it. Since this exterior had a metal handle, Cassie barely nudged the u-shaped metal, her hand wrapped fully around the oblong semi-circle, and it opened wide for her. She suddenly lost the squishy feeling beneath her feet, instead trading it for compacted grit with the occasional hard spot. She continued walking, arms outstretched, until she tripped over more metal and landed on what felt like massive ants nipping at her skin. She was itchy, and the ants covered her until she found something moist in the middle of the them. Not only did the dampness soothe her itching shoulders, face, and arms as she smeared it wherever the ants had crawled, but it also managed to knock the ants off her and onto the ground. She felt like she was just stepping out of the bath, in the moment between fully clothed and sopping wet; and she favored the feeling of near suspension among the water droplets. She enjoyed this feeling more so, though, because these ants and this moisture were some of the few things she discovered on her own.

A hand jerked Cassie away from her finds and pulled her feet onto the plush, spiky feeling again. Her exploration time was over.

After half-walking, half-running across the spikes, Cassie felt her arms forced above her head and her shirt taken off. Then her legs were separated, and fingers managed to unbutton her pants. She had tried digging her fingers into the hands, as these hands jerking her body were not familiar at all. They were larger than Shirley's and rougher than Toula's and more determined than Lee's, as these hands continued manipulating her body so that her clothes could be taken off more easily.

Standing there, naked, Cassie felt ice cold water run from her face to her toes. The sudden deluge made Cassie inhale a mouthful of water; and after her choking subsided, she began crying out unintelligible mutterings. When one of the rough hands placed itself over her mouth, sharp pain suddenly raced through Cassie's left leg.

XXV

“What’re you doing?!” Toula half asked, half screamed.

“She wandered out and cut herself pretty bad. I’m cleaning her off.” Helen’s back almost broke under the weight of her lie. She could feel her mother skeptically inspecting the girl for a gash, a source of all the blood. “Look, she was out here alone and tripped over some of Pop’s shit in the barn. Blood’s everywhere in there, too.” As her mother turned away to go inspect the barn, Helen plunged the serrated knife into Cassie’s thigh, pulled it out, and threw it across the yard by a few dying oak trees. Despite Helen covering her mouth, Cassie wailed like a field mouse caught by wild dogs, and Toula turned sharply at the noise.

“Water got in the cut. She’s fine!” Helen made Cassie pivot to show the gushing wound to Toula, who, upon seeing it, changed her course and went to gather bandages and old clothes with which to wrap the wound and stop the bleeding. Hands full of Rett’s old clothes, Toula turned off the water and began to wrap Cassie’s thigh. She threw a shirt at Helen.

“Put this on her for God’s sake. Make the girl stand here bleeding and naked.”

Toula and Helen led the semi-clothed Cassie into the house once her leg had been tied with old the old shirts. Of course, inside the house, both Lee and Rett came to hear Toula’s recounting of what Helen had told her. Shirley followed not long after. While the rest of the family was looking at Cassie, who had grown silent and pale, and her wound, Helen took an eyeglasses-sized wooden box her father had made for her as a child under her arm and hurried out to the barn. Once inside, she took the somewhat hardened, hay-covered mass and forced it into the box, bending its spine around its head and crossing its

legs around its neck to make it fit within the box's confines. She then brought the box inside and placed it back on her bookshelf, where it had been sitting since Helen was Cassie's age.

XXVI

Over the next few days, Shirley watched through the Ambroses' window as Rett took some of the lumber the crew harvested and, with Fuller's help, fashioned a humble casket for Johnny. Simple, her grandparents had decided, was the route Johnny would've liked the best; and the pre-made caskets were too expensive compared to the one that Rett could make one with the extra lumber lying around the sawmill. They finished the casket in two days' time, making Johnny's funeral in the nearby Yazoo Baptist Churchyard fall on a Thursday. A handful of the Ambroses' friends gathered so that his family did not have to see him buried with no one in attendance. Some of the logging crew attended as well. Judging from the odd fits and occasional cheerful colors of their shirts, Shirley assumed the majority of the loggers were donning what were the only non-stained clothes in most of their wardrobes. Since the church's pastor was ill and the only other pastor in town was Missionary Baptist, Toula's Sunday School teacher gave the eulogy. When the time came, the family stepped forward to place their offerings to their son on top of his wooden box, which was separated from the massive hole underneath by resting on a couple boards and sturdy branches. Rett and Toula placed a handful of roses midway up the casket; Lee placed the small pocketknife that he had passed down to Johnny on one side of the roses; and Helen placed a tiny, wooden, eyeglass-sized box atop the casket. The handful of ramshackled guests held hands and prayed with the family around the casket. As they all stepped away, Cassie's healing leg faltered, hurling her onto the ground. Helping her sister up, Shirley saw the softened, serrated soil particles which had molded themselves about Cassie's hands and taken up residency underneath her

fingernails, so that she took a bit of the earth with her when she stood, like their mother's family had for generations.

XXVII

Even a week after Johnny's death, Fuller could have sworn he saw faint white glimmers in the forest shadows. It couldn't be possible. The turkey was dead. He had cooked it, and then they all had eaten it. But Fuller hadn't seen the original scene himself, and while he had inspected the feathers and the body that Johnny had brought him, he hadn't seen the turkey die. Then Porkchop Stevens wandered onto the logging site.

"Fuller, you ain't seen a white turkey 'round here lately, have ya?"

"Actually, yeah. Why'd you ask?"

"I don't think that Ellis boy did anything with that white turkey. Where's Rett? I got somethin' for 'im."

"Rett! Porkchop says he got somethin' he wants ya ta see," Fuller hollered out at his boss across the woods where they were working. When Rett came over to where Fuller was, both Fuller and an overalled Porkchop greeted him. Porkchop was holding a bucket.

"What is it?"

"He says you oughta look at this." Fuller nodded his head in Porkchop's direction and watched as Rett took in the sight in front of him: Porkchop Stevens holding a bucket with brown downy feathers matted and dried to the inside of it in his left hand and a small bloody axe with the same dried, matted brown downy feathers on the blunt edge.

"What's this mean?"

Porkchop said, "One o' my turkeys went missin' 'round the time your grandson *found* that white turkey." Fuller watched as Rett's expression didn't change.

He continued, “And then this mornin’ I found these stuck in my shed sitting on dried blood.”

Fuller watched Rett’s expression morph into a mixture of confusion and offense. “So you’re sayin’ that my grandson — *you* are sayin’ that *my grandson*,” Rett repeated for added emphasis, “lied to all of us?”

Fuller spoke up, “It looks like it.”

Rett appeared agitated now. “Then how’d that turkey have white feathers then?”

“The liquid that these matted feathers dried in was bleach,” Porkchop said, “And I know it ‘cause I can smell it on ‘em.” Porkchop lifted the bucket so that a pungent odor ran across Rett’s nostrils.

“Too, these feathers,” Fuller added, pointing to the feather fragments that had still retained their semi-dark color, “are naturally lighter than the ones you’d find on a fully wild turkey, meanin’ Johnny dyed the feathers of a domestic turkey.”

“Yeah, one like mine,” Porkchop added.

“He did seem like he didn’t really know what he was talkin’ ‘bout with that story ‘bout how he found it. And none of us saw the thing get killed.” Fuller spoke this more at Rett than to him because a saddened confusion washed over Rett’s face, and Fuller felt badly for him. Fuller could remember how proud Rett was of his grandson being the one to finally kill the turkey.

“Wha’d’ya wanna do, Rett?” Fuller asked after a moment of silence.

Rett looked up and caught eyes with both men before him, “Nothing. We do nothing. Porkchop, I’ll pay you for your turkey. Fuller, I’ll pay you for your silence.” Rett looked almost pleading as he said, “Let my family have this.”

Porkchop and Fuller exchanged knowing glances, and silence settled upon their lips like fog blankets the earth.