

ABSTRACT

WARD, KIMBERLY BELLAMY-WOODALL. A Place Where Cotton Grows in Colors. (Under the direction of Dr. Thomas Lisk.)

The purpose of this collection has been to develop a creative body of writing which focuses on the Southern experience. The five selections form a diverse anthology which depicts scenes from the lives of several characters in North Carolina and Tennessee from 1887 to present day. The characters in four of the stories share Eastern North Carolina locality and aspects of plot. First person female and male voices are used throughout the stories to provide an intimate connection with the reader. While most of the stories are told in prose, the voice of the aspiring poet is also heard.

A PLACE WHERE COTTON GROWS IN COLORS

by
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Personal Biography

I was born in 1958 in Rocky-Mount, NC, and spent my childhood as a reader and pretender in Enfield, Hillsborough, and then, Cary.

My father was a highway patrolman turned security administrator. My mother was a high school English teacher turned real estate broker. My only brother puts buildings together, rides horses, and thinks about Jesus and Whitman.

I attended three colleges or universities following high school, and finally managed to graduate from NCSU in 1986 with a BA in English. I returned and earned a teaching certificate from NCSU in 1989. I have taught high school English, and more or less loved it, since 1992. I took a two-year hiatus in 1999 to stay home following the birth of my youngest son.

I have three sons: Colin, 20; Ian, 12; and Coleman, 3. I also have a husband, Sheldon, weathered, yet optimistic; a dog, Rose; a cat, Frank; and a goat, Darlin. We live in a 1938 farmhouse in Harnett County.

I fluctuate between joy and sorrow, tears and laughter. I write because it's part of what I do. Sometimes it feels really good.

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Is This a Story?

How's that class of yours going?

My dad and I are seated in my grandmother's den. It is Sunday afternoon and he has brought his usual peace offering, Krispy Kreme doughnuts. Just what I need in my eighth month of pregnancy. My grandmother (age 90) can't hear us very well and we talk too fast for her to keep up now, but she watches every move our mouths make and occasionally interjects with something completely incoherent unless we take the time to trace it back to something nearly like we said, which we usually do.

Good. I'm working on my final project. A story. You're in it.

Don't do that.

What?

Put me in it.

Why not?

I don't like it when you write about me. It scares me.

I'll try to be kind.

I know you will. And still you won't.

I'll make it my main objective.

(Deep, fairly disgusted sigh)

At least assure me that Tom Cruise will play my part in the movie version.

I'll do what I can.

Well, what's your idea?

It's kind of confusing.

Of course.

You sure you want to hear about it?

I'll try to keep up.

He wants to hear about it and I want to tell about it. It's one of the few safe topics. My writing. He doesn't think I'm very good, but he values the attempt. I don't think I'm very good either, but I, too, value the attempt.

Okay. It's a frame story--a story within a story.

I know what a frame story is.

Sorry. Of course you do. Well, the outside story is the conversation with you, the one we're having right now or something close. One story we read by Grace Paley was called "A Conversation with My Father." That's going to be my title. Then, I also want to somehow include the story of our Bobby Gentry concert.

Oh Lord.

What?

It sounds sad already. I'm going to look like a goon. I just feel it.

Stop it. That was a great night.

(Pause) Yes, it was.

So, I have the frame . . . conversation and Bobby Gentry concert. Then, within the frame, I have several smaller stories, related to readings we did in class. We read about two thousand short stories so I've thought of several ways of combining authors, putting them in these weird situations and places, and bringing out stuff about their lives and work. Speculative fiction.

You're right. It's confusing. Why can't you just tell a simple story?

I don't know. I just can't without it boring even me. If I'm bored, I know the reader will be. It always sounds like See Sally run. See Spot run . . . when I try to just tell a simple story.

Okay. Go on. What are some of your inside story ideas?

Well, one of my favorites is a small story about Flannery O'Connor meeting up with Edgar Allan Poe at the Mardi Gras.

Uh huh.

Like in Poe's story, "The Cask of Amontillado." He's at the Mardi Gras and he meets up with his enemy, but he's unaware that she (O'Connor) is his enemy. Anyway it would start off with Flannery saying something like...

The thousand injuries of Poe I had borne as best I could,

But when he ventured on insult, I vowed revenge.

Why would Flannery O'Connor be mad at Poe?

I don't know. We never knew exactly why Poe's narrator was mad at Fortunato, his enemy. It will have something to do with her writing. She feels stifled or trapped to perform a certain way because of the expectations he set forth. Anyway, she's so-to-speak taking him through the catacombs of her writing as they travel in her old VW bug through the streets of New Orleans.

Sounds confusing.

Bear with me. Now they meet at a street party. They've both been drinking. Everyone knows Poe can't handle his alcohol. But, here comes a fairly young and attractive Flannery and offers him a ride in the bug. He needs a place to crash and is flattered, not recognizing her, so

next thing you know, like I said, they're ripping through the streets, Flannery just railing against Poe the whole time about how, because of him, she feels drawn toward the horror of life, feels that that's where humanity is most human, in those horrifying moments, and wishes she could write something her mother would like, just once. On and on she goes, until he finally starts sobering up enough to realize he's in trouble, this is no chance meeting, and he asks to be put out on the next corner. To which she says, "And just where, and when, Poe, will you put me out?" What do you think?

Interesting. I'm still not sure who your audience for this thing is.

Well, who's my audience for anything? Who reads my stories? You, the professor, a couple of drafted friends, Colin. I'm tired of pretending anyone who doesn't have to is going to read them. I'm just writing this as an experiment. That's something we looked at in class . . . experimental fiction, stuff from the sixties and beyond.

The sixties. So that's where this is all coming from. I should have known. (Another fairly disgusted sigh) Speaking of the sixties, how are you going to get back to Bobby Gentry?

Well, I don't know. It was raining the night we went to the Bobby Gentry show. It'll be raining the night O'Connor picks up Poe. We rode in a car. They rode in a car. You railed about Bobby Gentry's lack of humility. Remember she wouldn't sign any autographs, she just stalked on by us. O'Connor rails about Poe's lack of humility. There are lots of tie-ins there.

I think you're stretching.

That's why it's called experimental fiction. It stretches.

Okay. (Pause) You know Bobby Gentry was common not to sign autographs. I never forgave her for that.

(My grandmother interjects) I remember Bobby Gentry . . . didn't she sing the "Ode to Billie Joe"? You were crazy about that song.

(Loudly) Yes, that's who we're talking about.

(Grandma) Well who's Flannery O'Connor? Is she some country star too?

No, She writes short stories.

(Grandma) Short stories? I have no idea what you two are talking about.

We're talking about my final story for this class I'm taking.

(Grandma) I thought you were a teacher. Why are you taking a class? Didn't you finish with school? Haven't you graduated? I know you graduated.

Yes, but I'm working on my Master's Degree. I'm going to write that book you always said I'd write. I'm trying to learn how.

(Grandma) Why do you need more school for that? Just stop having so many children and sit down and write it.

Well, I have a lot to learn and I learn in school. Plus, I like going to school.

(Grandma) Well, I'll say it again . . . I don't know how you do it all. I've never seen the day I could do all you do. I served on the PTA and kept house and that wore me out.

Well, Nanny, I don't do a lot of the stuff you did. I don't serve on the PTA or fix three meals a day for a family. Or even keep a very clean house. We just live very different lives.

(Grandma) Well, anyway what's your story about?

(At this point, Dad let's out an audible sigh. He fears we've lost our conversation.)

I'll tell you all about it when Dad leaves. You know he won't stay long. I want to talk with him about it. Remember I'm spending the night with you.

(Grandma) Okay. (Subtly pouting)

What other ideas do you have for the story?

Well, another little story could be about Raymond Carver meeting up with William Trevor in a late-night laundromat.

Who's William Trevor?

He's an Irish short story writer. He's really good. I'll lend you the book we read. I think you'd like it.

I don't read many short stories. I'm more a novels guy.

I know, but you'd like this. You can read a couple and then decide.

Okay. Back to your story. They meet in a laundromat . . . any reason for this setting?

Yes. Carver was a father, trying to support his family and write short stories on the side. So he had to hang out in laundromats and reflect about his life choices. He wrote an essay about the hold his kids had over every aspect of his life, even his writing.

Okay. How are you going to get the Irish writer in the laundromat?

He's traveling America. Trying to see the real America. He figures what better place than the laundromat.

So they meet. Then what?

Trevor and Carver talk, just men-talk at first. They're the only two in the place except for a wino passed out on a bench near the dryers, and a young guy with a ponytail reading *Atlas Shrugged* who doesn't make eye contact. So Trevor and Carver talk about writing and raising kids and wives and travel, but mostly about writing. Carver explains that he revises twenty, thirty times before even submitting a story for publication, then he's still rarely pleased with it. He just enjoys the whole process so much though that he can't imagine not doing it. Trevor talks about his own revision and about inspiration and observation. They sit down and create a story

about the wino and very quietly bring in the ponytailed reader. (They don't want to invade his privacy, but find him character-worthy.) Before they know it they're laughing and talking and Carver invites Trevor to his house the next day, which happens to be Thanksgiving. This could be a Thanksgiving story. What do you think?

Why Thanksgiving?

Why not? They're thankful to have met each other.

Okay.

Then, Trevor goes back to Ireland and writes a story based on his visit to the Carver residence. Because he realizes Carver is a true American character and that's what he was searching for anyway. They become pen pals, etc.

How are you going to get back to Bobby Gentry from here?

Mmm. Well, once inside the Carver household we could have a sweet scene between father and daughter--Carver tucking in his little girl after supper. Then switch to you and me riding home the night after the concert. Something like...

His daughter slept on the cold seat beside him.

Frozen rain pelted the windshield.

He stroked her hairline and regretted the smallness of his

Sacrifice, and what he could make out about their future.

The smallness of his sacrifice? I like that line. Did you just come up with that?

I've thought about it.

Where are you going from there?

Well, there are several stories we read dealing with father/daughter relationships. Ellen Gilchrist wrote linked stories about a girl named Rhoda who grows up to be a handful to her father. Joyce Carol Oates wrote stories like “Shopping” and “How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life Over Again” about young girls giving their parents a fit. So, I could move from our concert to another speculative piece about Rhoda meeting Oates’s girl from “. . . the Detroit House of Correction. . .” Boy, those two could do some damage.

Where would you set that story?

I could put them anywhere . . . the mall, a dance, the Driver’s License Bureau, anywhere. But, I thought about sending them to Margaret Atwood’s teen character, Lois, whose camp-buddy fell or jumped off a cliff.

Wait. Start over with this one.

Okay. Three girls. Rhoda, Oates’s girl, and Lois. Rhoda and Oates’s girl are street-wise. Lois is an innocent compared to them. Lois is the only witness (and she really has no idea what happened) to her camp-buddy’s disappearance from a cliff. The girl, Lucy, just disappeared and the camp was closed and Lois always wondered about and felt connected to the incident. There was even a nice suggestion that Lucy became a tree. So, Lois collected these pictures of landscapes to keep Lucy alive. She felt like Lucy was in the pictures of landscapes since that’s the last place she’d seen her. Something like that.

Uh huh.

Anyway, I think Rhoda and Oates’s girl could really do a lot to free Lois from her guilt, since they’ve got crimes they can identify and claim. Lois is haunted by the unknown, the other two, well, they’re well aware of their culpability. Rhoda could tell Lois all about her own

experience with landscapes--her trip with Johnny Hazard in the woods. And the Oates's girl, well, she could tell about the landscape of the city--her trip into drugs, sleazy Simon (her pimp) and the correctional center where she was beaten so badly she gladly went back to Father and his money. I think by the time these two got through sharing with Lois, Lois would feel pretty guilt-free. I could insert these two hellions onto the scene right after Lois's interview with camp counselor Cappie.

Okay, I get it. I don't like this story, but I get it now.

What don't you like?

Anything dealing with teenage girls and their transgressions. I'm still trying to get over some of yours.

So am I.

What else have you got?

Well, there is one more idea. We read a book called *Micro Fiction*. All the stories had to be 250 words or less. Some of them were a paragraph. I'd like to include one of those within my story. There was one we read about this couple, the Wongs. Their whole marriage and divorce was right there on those two pages. I could write the story of their mature years. Let me read you my notes on that one.

The second Mrs. Wong dies from cancer. The quick kind.

Mr. Wong barely has time to realize she is leaving and then

she is gone. He takes a job in the booth of a downtown parking

deck, just to have something to do with his days and make a little

extra money. The first Mrs. Wong comes into town to shop every Wednesday and parks the Cadillac in his deck. They always speak and even talk for awhile if no one's waiting behind her to pull in. One Wednesday she brings him two banana nut muffins. He always loved them and she thinks he looks a little thin. Several months pass and one day they meet downtown on his day off and they shop together and eat a bite of lunch at the counter in the Drug Store. It becomes a weekly date. They keep this from their three daughters who would not approve. They remember each other's birthdays and other occasions over the next few years with trinkets with which they each fill their apartments. A little glass unicorn, a dried flower arrangement, a snow village, candles, and Mrs. Wong's favorite--candy corn. When Mr. Wong finally gets too infirm to drive, he goes to a nursing home. Mrs. Wong gives up shopping and visits him instead. She is not there when he dies. Her oldest daughter calls and tells her he passed on comfortably. She hangs up and says she knows.

That's the whole story. What's the point there?

Anything's possible. Once the Wongs got away from each other and became authentic individuals, they could have an authentic relationship, not dependent on anyone else's expectations. Maybe marriages often fail because of unrealistic demands from each other, from society.

I'd have to agree with you there. Is that it? How are you going to tie this all together?
How are you going to get back to me and you and Bobby Gentry from here?

Well, I've still got D. H. Lawrence's fox. He keeps bothering me. He's the hunter and the hunted. There seems to be a lesson in him. A neat moral that should connect everything somehow.

What moral?

Something like, be careful what you hunt and/or entice to hunt you. You just might find your skin draped over a bloody nail.

Mmm. Vivid image. But, who's been skinned in these stories?

Hasn't everybody? Me, you, Bobby Gentry with her one hit, then oblivion; the teenage girls; Flannery and Poe and the bug ripping through the streets of the Mardi Gras; the Wongs; Carver and Trevor as they dissect the world around them and then piece it back together. As Carson McCullers said, the heart is a lonely hunter. Aren't we all the fox, hunter and hunted? About all we can do is be discriminating, very discriminating about what we hunt and what we encourage to hunt us.

It always comes back to Frank.

Sinatra?

Yeah. I did it my way.

Yeah, I guess so.

Are we through with your story?

For now. (Pause) Want another doughnut? Cream-filled?

Not for me.

(Loudly) Nanny, another doughnut?

(Grandma) I think I could eat one more.

Riding with Emmy Lou

WRECKING BALL

Total Time: 53:05

1. WHERE WILL I BE 4:15 2. GOODBYE 4:53 3. ALL MY TEARS 3:42 4. WRECKING BALL 4:49 5. GOING' BACK TO HARLAN 4:51 6. DEEPER WELL 4:19 7. EVERY GRAIN OF SAND 3:56 8. SWEET OLD WORLD 5:06 9. MAY THIS BE LOVE 4:45 10. ORPHAN GIRL 3:15 11. BLACKHAWK 4:28 12. WALTZ ACROSS TEXAS TONIGHT 4:46 PRODUCED BY DANIEL LANOIS

WHERE WILL I BE: Tonight I will lay my head on a pillow at Aunt Nancy's. It will be a feather pillow and there'll be quilts on the bed that my grandmother Pearl, or her sister Hazel made a long time ago. I'll be bone tired from riding all day in this U-Haul-It, leaving a life, talking some of it over with Aunt Nancy on her porch. And I'll be home. Two of my three children will be there, and for the first time in a long time, I won't feel the hairy legs of a man I don't love anymore against mine. He'll be a state away wondering why I didn't even leave a note.

We listen to Emmy Lou Harris the whole way to Knoxville. Kate must have listened to Hank Williams coming down to Chatham County this morning. These are the only two singers worth listening to according to Kate. When the tape is over, she just pops it back in. It drives you crazy at first, but after awhile the songs get in your blood, and seem like the prettiest songs in the world.

Where will I be, Oh, where will I be, Oh, where will I be when the night trumpet sounds?

Everybody wonders, I guess. Where the road you're on leads. A lot of folks know where it leads and that's what makes it hard to crawl out of bed in the morning. Not necessarily that it's a bad road. Just known. Laid out like a picture of itself already. I know I took a sharp turn today when I stepped up into this truck's cab beside my kids.

Between what Kyle's been through with Ben and me, and starting high school this year, he's one teenager who really is almost as grown as he thinks he is. He told me last week when Kate called to work out the details, that if I backed out he was going back with her anyway. I sure wasn't ready to lose him. I don't know much, but I do know that Kyle and I still belong on the same road.

GOODBYE: I didn't even leave a note because there was nothing to say Ben would understand. He'd had a thousand chances to talk to me. Years of chances.

He asked what was for dessert. The night they came and repossessed his truck, his almost new Dodge Ram with the seat in the back nobody ever sat in. He came back in after talking to the men, plopped right back down into his recliner and focused on Jeopardy. Probably not quite so amazed by his own intelligence anymore. But, I asked him to talk, and he looked up over his pork chops (too dry, he said) and asked what was for dessert. I quit leaving notes after that.

I didn't take the time to say goodbye to a lot of folks. My friends at school. They'll be wondering what happened. When they all went down to eat lunch, I slipped out the back to the teacher parking lot where Kyle had joined Kate. I just couldn't get into it with everybody. My principal was the only one who knew why I wasn't in the cafeteria celebrating the teachers' last day of school like everybody else.

But I recall all those nights down in Mexico, one place I will never go, in my life again, Was I just off somewhere or just too high? But I can't remember if we said goodbye. No, I can't remember if we said goodbye, goodbye, goodbye. There are places I won't go. Lots of places. Places I went with someone long ago. Looking back, I don't know if it was that good or if I was just so young, so free all of a sudden. Somehow I managed to keep it good in my mind even when it turned so bad.

Some goodbyes are harder than others.

My first husband, Macon, never said goodbye. Ran off without much dignity. Pretty much like I did today, I guess.

I tried to see the loss of Macon, looked hard for it. But as hard as I tried, I never did miss him. Even the kids didn't seem to notice much that he was gone.

As Mama said, there just wasn't much to him.

ALL MY TEARS: And twenty cents will make a phone call. I cried the day I married Ben so some of it must be my fault. I'm being punished for saying "I do" and then wanting to take it all back five minutes later. Any man deserves better than that. I felt like I was going to fall the whole way back up the aisle, my arm slipped through his. I stumbled, opening the outside door of the church and burst into tears. I said it was because I was so happy. I've always been afraid he knew the real reason.

I cried a lot when he wasn't looking. I didn't want to have to explain or be accused of being a hormonal wench or even admit to him I was upset. Sometimes he'd come in our room and I'd look at the bookcase like I was looking for something to read. Part of me hoped he'd look at me close enough to see something was wrong. He never did.

When I go don't cry for me, in my father's arms I'll be. Sun and moon will be replaced with the light of Jesus' face. It don't matter where you bury me. I'll be home and I'll be free. It don't matter where I lay. All my tears be washed away. Kyle said the other day, we really have a long life if you think about it. First you're a baby, then a child, then a teenager, then a parent, then a grandparent, then heaven. That takes a long time. I told him that was a good way of looking at it.

WRECKING BALL: Kate and Kyle sit up in the cab of this U-Haul-It listening to "Wrecking Ball," expectant. Like they're vacationing to Dollywood, and know it's going to be open and waiting for them when they got there. Kyle breathing deep in spite of Kate's smoke. I look out the window and think a little about how much fun Ben and I had dancing the night we met. Just that word "dance" means being close to free.

Meet me at the Wrecking Ball, I'll wear something pretty and white, Meet me at the Wrecking Ball, and we'll go dancing tonight. It's a pretty song, but it's songs like this that send women like me down those aisles. I met Ben at the Holiday Inn (ladies' night) when he was traveling on business and I was enjoying a night out. He sure looked like Mr. Suave and Debonair to me, that thick mustache, nice suit, clean hands. I took it all in and saw a way out. I was tired of being on the road to H E Double L with my good intentions and kids in tow. I saw a way to comfort that aching place inside me bigger than the state of Tennessee. A way to go back to school and become a teacher, to fulfill my dream since third grade when I won the essay contest for "Why I Love Tennessee." That night was magical. A couple of other nights were magical too. I did wear white the night he proposed. On bended knee, he looked at me while I

sat there eating a plate of spaghetti with clam sauce just like I was a star fallen from heaven. I wanted to believe it. All of it. Dreams, magic, stars.

When I hear this song, I see Emmy Lou in her pretty white dress and cowgirl boots meeting Neil Young (he wrote the song) for a night of dancing and drinking cold ones. I know he's not good-looking but there is something sexy about a man who can write romantic, and angry, and bitter, and sad all at the same time. You'd be able to overlook his hair.

The air is dancing with specks of white, fireflies, pixie dust, I don't know what it is. They're dancing, holding each other close because they know the song will be over and they'll have to go back to wherever they came from.

GOIN' BACK TO HARLAN: When I left school this morning, I felt like one of those half-barbequed, quarter-chickens that Ricky Temple had been tending to all morning for the teachers' celebration lunch. Hot on the outside and refrigerator-cold near the bone. I guess a woman's got to stay cold where it counts to leave her husband even when it's over a hundred outside.

I figure he's going to want me back. Once he finds out Mad's not going to work, he'll probably call most nights, acting like he really wants to talk to me. I can just see him propped up on pillows lying on the bed with the sound turned down on the T.V. while he talks to me a state away. I'll bet he'll get quiet sometimes like he's crying. He'll just as likely be watching some commercial for Mountain Dew or McDonald's.

Times like that I'll have to remember Kyle and Rafe's real tears. Tears I had to stand by and watch them shed while Ben badgered them.

“What were you thinking?” That was Ben’s favorite question. Who’s got an answer for that an hour after the fact? “Can’t you do the simplest thing without messing up?” How do you answer that one without sassing or calling yourself an idiot?

Back then, I learned to keep my mouth shut. I’d leave the room when I thought I couldn’t stand it another minute and say, “Lord, take it.”

Next Tuesday I have an interview scheduled with the Personnel Director at the county office in Knoxville. Aunt Nancy says we can stay with her as long as we like. She’s right up the road from Kate’s studio. Kyle always had made friends easily. He’ll be all right.

Right now, I feel like I’m on this conveyer belt, and my destination has already been determined by somebody. I just can’t make any decisions right now, but to stay on the belt.

I’m goin’ back to Harlan, ohohohoh, I’m goin’ back to Harlan, oh yea. He’ll say things will be different if you come back. After two or three weeks of trying to wear me down on the phone, he’ll want to drive all the way up and go on a date. By that time, I’ll be thinking, okay, a date might be nice. But, I know he’ll be expecting more. I always wondered about women who left and went back. Now I see how easy it’d be. *Weepin’ and a-pinin’ for love.*

DEEPER WELL: That night back in March when we had the big fight, I wanted to fall into a deep well. It was my kids and my dead Mama that made me stand. Stand while insults rained down on me from the God of the House in his pale blue boxers. That big house might as well have been Graceland to me at first. But, I found out it was just missing the bars and wires. Found out I was there to keep it clean, have his supper on his T.V. tray when he was ready. That night he stood over me trying to see what he still had on me. I finally realized it wasn’t much. I

think he realized it too. He backed off a little after that fight. But it was too late. I just didn't have the will to try anymore.

My own great-great-grandmother drew water from a well for a family of nine. Died when she was thirty-one, after seven children. My great-great-grandfather married another woman who bore three more children before dying, then a third woman who bore six children. My poor great-grandmother, Linda, oldest of the original seven, didn't get much quality time as a child. Linda married the first scrawny boy to hold her hand, and raised five kids of her own. She ended up dying of fever at forty-three, begging anybody who'd listen to her to cut off her long hair. Nobody would.

I'm looking for water from a deeper well. Aunt Nancy says on the phone I need to get back to church. That's the deeper well I should be drawing from. I know she's right, but I've moved away from God these last few months. I guess I know what he has to say and I don't want to hear it. I try to pray but I find myself thinking about what's for dinner, or whether or not I'll get a job offer next Tuesday, or what I'll say or won't say when Ben calls.

EVERY GRAIN OF SAND: Faith. Today is so hot it reminds me what the preacher told us last summer when the air conditioner broke. He said Christians ought to count their blessings when they're hot because this is as hot as they'll get. He advised any stray heathens to take their programs with them to use as fans because it'd be getting a lot worse for them. I thought it was a cute way of helping us all suffer through the heat that day. Now I wonder which side of the heathen/ non-heathen fence I'd fall off, after walking out on Ben.

Sometimes there's someone else, other times it's only me. I am hanging in the balance of a perfect finished plan like every sparrow fallen, like every grain of sand. God, you know

every grain of sand, every hair on my head, every sparrow fallen. So, why can't I trust you to fix this mess? Not the first time you've heard that question, is it?

SWEET OLD WORLD: It is. My first kiss in the woods behind our house, brown leaves crackling under our feet on the path. Orange and yellow overhead.

The babies, smell of baby head, fingers and toes against my lips, first smile.

My first day as a teacher. Walking into that room seeing those new book bags lining the rows, those faces wondering if I was selling last year's mold or something fresh.

See what you lost when you left this world, this sweet old world. See what you lost when you left this world. This sweet old world. Ben will threaten with suicide. It'll get that bad probably. He has before. When I threatened to leave because he and Rafe were arguing so bad. But, it's not me that would ever make him want to leave this world, or the lack of me. It's him. He can't taste the sweetness and needs to watch me. That's the very thing that's got to keep me from going back. I'd like to be able to watch somebody else taste the sweetness once in awhile.

MAY THIS BE LOVE: If I was in love with Ben I wouldn't be leaving now, would I? Do I even want to be in love with Ben? When I lie down at night, do I say, May this be love? Love—maybe as close as I came to that kind of love was that day in the woods when I was fourteen. So it must be partly me. A grown woman with three children shouldn't have to think back to when she was fourteen to remember what love feels like.

I can see a rainbow callin' me, Through your mystery, my sweet waterfall.

ORPHAN GIRL: The Bible says, Blessed are those who believe and have not seen. It doesn't say much about those of us who have seen, so believe. Jesus seemed to get along pretty well with Thomas so I've always assumed the best for those who do see. Surely we're just as blessed too. I saw Jesus in the room the day my Mama died from over-work and a heart attack. Flowered, floured apron still tied around her thick waist. I can't tell you about it though. You have to see it or just believe it for yourself. Anyway, Mama went with him, and I don't blame her for it. I'll do the same thing when he comes for me.

I was the only girl out of five children. She loved me best. She's bound to have because those boys were mean, except for Lester, the baby. Of course, he's twenty-seven now and lives in Chattanooga with a pre-school teacher named Doris and her two kids. Doris is kind of big, but she's real sweet. Acts crazy over Lester. Anyway, he was the only one of the boys who didn't break Mama's heart. I think I was her favorite though, being a girl and everything. We talked about things I know she didn't talk about with the boys.

Daddy left early. Just took off like a lot of men do. Mama said he couldn't stand the poverty in the light, the crying babies in the night. What I do remember about him is kind of like what I remember about Macon. Not bad men, just slow. In school, the kind who don't test well.

BLACKHAWK: Black hawk, flies in the night when everyone else is asleep and the girl (me) dressed in white (again) is lured to her window by the sound of his beating heart. His wings flap against her pane. She opens and smells the cold night air and flies, flies, flies.

When I dream this, I ask him why I am the only one who sees him. He says I'm the only one who wants to.

The black hawk is somebody I really trust, my dead grandfather. Or Johnny Cash. But he isn't dead yet, is he? The black hawk is somebody dead. Come back for a night ride.

I love the wind against my lifted face.

WALTZ ACROSS TEXAS TONIGHT: If I mean to waltz again, I'm going to have to talk about Rafe. My oldest son. Only a mother knows what those three words mean. He was one of the best baseball players Chatham County had ever seen, and that's saying something because those boys are raised on baseball, rodeos, and Sunday school.

I don't even know where he is. I hope he'll find out about my move and come to visit or maybe even stay, but I didn't leave Ben just because of that hope. Knew better.

Ben was proud, oh boy, he was proud of Rafe and his ball playing. But, Rafe became a teenager, a man child, like they all do. Ben wanted Rafe to have everything all figured out already and talked to him too hard, too mean, too much when he messed up in any little way. Coming home fifteen minutes late, smoking a cigarette, things teenagers do. Push came to shove and Rafe left.

I should have stepped in between them before it came to that. He moved in with a friend the end of his Junior year and barely graduated. No scholarship, no nothing. He blew it. Ben blew it. I blew it. I just can't seem to get over that. Especially Ben's part. I kept thinking I'd forgiven him and then, when something else bad would happen, my tears, my pain kept taking the form of Rafe. I just couldn't seem to fix it for too long.

I'm waltin' darling across Texas tonight. It may sound crazy, but I'd be waltzing with Rafe if I was waltzing, or to Rafe, or about Rafe.

Everybody said, you won't lose him, but I did. I can't lecture him when he needs, it, I can't meet his girlfriends. I can't go to bed at night knowing he's asleep in the next room. He's gone. If that's not losing, I don't know what is. I just have to hope I'll get that strand of happiness back some day.

Kate says we're going to need some Mexican beer and limes to go with Aunt Nancy's supper. Kate's requested our favorite dinner with cheese, beans, vegetables, and rice. Kate says we're celebrating my new teaching job, even though I haven't had the interview yet. She knows I'll get it. Kyle's going to ice the chocolate cake I made yesterday and brought up here wrapped in Saran Wrap.

As we listen to Emmy Lou waltz across Texas, I feel almost good. Maybe that's how it ends. The good feelings gradually take over until you realize you're basically okay again. Different, but okay.

I tell Kate to turn it up.

Cheap Seats

Elsie and Bruce

Elsie:

Who am I to judge? The other day person 1 told me she'd lost all respect for person 2. And I said to person 1, you just can't ever say that. Think of Elsie's worst day. Well it isn't pretty, I can tell you that. I just can't judge. Course Linwood don't think like that. I just can't talk to him about some things. It's a limitation I've learned to live with. When something crazy happens, he don't get it. But I do. And Ruby did.

I remember when Betsy Tippet put her head on the tracks and waited for the train to come and chop it clean off. Which it did. Linwood said, What in the world? Sitting right there in his recliner waiting on dinner. What in the world? I coulda told him if he'd alistened, which he wouldn'ta. I coulda said, hey, worst day. That old track would feel kinda cool against your neck. Heck, you could turn your head and face the other way. Wouldn't even have to look. Wouldn't even feel it probably. But he wouldn'ta got it.

But Ruby did. I could talk to Ruby about anything. Crazy or not crazy. That's what I miss.

That time after lunch. Still afternoons at the library when all the other women in town were home napping (doctor's orders for half of them), and the men were sitting around in big chairs with their pants unbuttoned in the back rooms of filling stations and hardware stores, wherever they worked. Nobody working though, not from about one thirty to three in the p.m.

anyway. Nobody coming in for books, or getting their hair fixed at Mary Ann's across the street neither. Whole town still. Folks don't do that anymore. Go, go, go. That's the way now. But can't nobody ever take those quiet afternoons away from me. And I shared them with Ruby for a few years when our lives belonged to that little library.

Good gosh, Ruby did love herself some books. Just like they were children or bars of gold. Why, I don't think either one of us ever stopped to consider that there were other libraries in the world. As far as we thought, we were it. It was up to us to promote literacy in our little town, so it might as well have been in the whole world. 'Cause back then, there wasn't T.V. We actually thought we were important. And those books, why those books held everything our town needed to be noble, and free, and whole. And Ruby had read more of those books than anyone I knew. Said all she'd ever wanted to be was a librarian. Not like me. I just took the job 'cause the hours were good when my children were in school.

But Ruby was smart. She and her brother too. They were both a few years ahead of me in school, but I remember when her brother, Brother they all called him, won the spelling bee for the whole county. And no wonder, they were raised by two school teachers. The Pittman sisters, Mary and Sarah. Ruby read a lot, and she understood what she read. You know, pretty soon, I figured I might as well read too, since I was working in the library and all. And wasn't long, like I said, until we were talking about all kinds of things. In books and out. Crazy and not. It's not every day you get a friend like that. Matter of fact, hasn't been but one time for me.

But she's gone now. Passed on to a better place, I'm sure. And one day, God willing, I'll pass on to that better place too. Maybe we can sit around and talk in the afternoon while everybody else naps up there too. That's part of my idea of heaven. Getting to do what you want when you want without too much company.

I got to thinking about her today 'cause it was a day 'bout like today when she died. Weather with that first cool to it. She died kinda quick, but that's the way it happens sometimes. You go to the doctor one day with a pain and next thing you know, they're preparing you for the worst. Cancer. The big C. Claimed its share around here, I'll tell you that. At least Ruby's was the quick kind. Stomach. Six months between the diagnosis and the leave-taking. That's a blessing. I don't care what people say about getting ready, ain't no getting ready. When you go, you go. Ain't no benefit if you ask me to getting a lot of forehand warning.

And I know I'm thinking about Ruby for another reason too. That fool daddy of hers has been on my mind since I saw him last week at the rest home out on 301. I was visiting a lady used to work for me years back, Lilla Ruth. Bless her heart, she don't have nobody to care about her. Her fool children run off out into the world every which a way as soon as they could. They probably sick somewhere theirselves by now. Anyway, I went to see her. Lilla Ruth Reed.

Anyway, lo and behold, there's old Bruce Pate sitting in a chair in a dirty pajama shirt and a pair of old britches looked like he'd had on since World War II or something. Mess all over them. I tried not to look too hard. About turned my stomach. Well that whole place does, tell you the truth. It ought to be closed down. If there was anywhere else for the poor to go, it would be closed down. Don't even have rooms, just curtains dividing the beds and everybody who's been there awhile got a little dresser. Anyway, it ain't where I hope I end up but I'm sure about everybody up there hoped they wouldn't end up there either.

So back to Bruce. There he sat in a mustard-colored chair with the stuffing coming out of one of the arms. You know I did not speak when I passed by him the first time. One, 'cause I wasn't thinking about him at all, I was thinking about seeing Lilla Ruth. And two, 'cause I ain't ever been friends with him so I don't have to speak to him anyway. Surely not now. He don't

know me from Adam. But you know how the Lord works sometimes. He just won't let you get away with doing less than he wants from you. The whole time I'm visiting with Lilla Ruth, there's God saying, you need to speak to that man, Elsie. What's it gonna hurt you? You're walking out of here. He'll stay right in that chair, surrounded by all this dirt and sickness. Least you can do is say hey.

And I'm arguing back in my head while Lilla goes on and on about everybody in there and their business. That woman does stay occupied, I got to admire that about her. She can tell you everything about everybody. You got any questions about this town, inside or outside that rest home, just ask her. Anyway, I'm arguing with God, like I do, though there really ain't no point, he always gets his way or makes you wish he had. And I'm saying, well, you know, he never knew me. He don't know me now and he don't care to. All those years ago, he ain't gonna remember meeting me that one time in the library. He didn't even look at me good that day. Couldn't take his eyes off Ruby the whole time he was in there. And besides, God, he don't look like he's feeling up to company. He looks kinda sick and you know when you feel sick, you just want to be left alone. And, if that all ain't enough, he ain't friendly. Everybody knows that. Like I said, I coulda saved myself all that talking, 'cause God, he don't care about any of your little arguments. He just wants you to go along with his plan, like it or not. That's part of being God. He gets to make the plan.

So, on the way out, after me and Lilla had visited and I watched her take one little bite of the orange cake I brought. I gave her half and kept the other half at home. I wasn't trying to be stingy, she coulda had the whole thing if I thought she'd eat it, but she won't. And ain't nothing in the world wrong with that cake. Matter of fact, it's real good. Anybody with an appetite'll tell you that. But Lilla ain't got no appetite, not now. So I just brought her half of the cake and I

practically made her eat a bite in front of me just to prove to her it was good. What she does with the rest, well that's her business. It's a gift so I got no control over the rest of it.

Anyway, I stopped in front of Bruce Pate's chair on the way out and said hey like God wanted me to. Told him who I was and that I knew Ruby and I remembered that day he came in the library and visited her. Told him I knew he was sorry she'd passed on the way she had and reckoned she was in a better place now. I told him I'd come in to visit Lilla Ruth and pointed over at her already talking to some old black woman looked asleep in her chair. Lilla just talking away though, orange cake on the dresser between them.

Ruby's daddy just ignored me like I knew he would, and I went on out into the sunlight, asking God what that was all about. Basically, none of my business, was the answer I got from him. That, and next time you go to see Lilla, take Bruce Pate the other half the cake you make for her.

That's another thing I've figured out about God. It hardly ever stops with that first hey. That's usually just a test so he can see if you'll do the rest of what he's got planned.

Bruce:

I got to admit, that's about the best cake I ever ate. Ate every bit of that half she brought wrapped up in slick paper. Don't know why that lady's being so friendly to me, but you just don't never know what's going through people's heads.

Anyhow, I'll take the cake and say thank you too. Was a day I woulda been mean to her and cut her off when she starts rattling on about her and Ruby and that library and things that happened a long time ago. But nowadays I don't let what people say bother me a bit. Grew a tolerance for it I reckon. Folks want to pull up a chair and talk to me while I sit here awaiting to

die, why what the hell. Let them come. Not that there's a flock of them. She's the only one taken an interest, and she's the only one I expect will, and I don't expect her interest to last too long. Most folks got a thousand things they'd rather be doing than talking to some old man ain't got five cents in his pocket. But if she wants to talk, let her talk. I got nothing else to do and like I said, that's some of the best cake I ever ate.

She says she does it 'cause God tells her to. Well, I've seen the day I could say something real mean to her about her God. Something make her get right up outa her chair and walk right by me coming and going next time she comes visiting that old granny she brings the other half of the cake to. But I don't. Like I said, people wanta go on and on about how good some God is to them, well that's their affair and it ain't gonna bother me none the way it used to. If I wanted to get into any of that with her, I'd tell her, Yeah, lady there's somebody in charge all right. But it ain't no white guy with a beard, no Santi Claus, though he is wearing a red suit. Got a pitchfork and horns too. That's who seems like is running this place to me. Seems like he's been in charge the whole time and you folks in love with this other guy is just fooling yourself.

That is exactly what I told that little preacher boy who come up here a while back talking 'bout, 'Mr. Pate, you got to get right with God.' Little fellow looked like he just got his first facial hairs that morning telling me about God and getting right. I told him to get on away from here and come back when he'd seen a little bit more of the way this old world works.

Now this lady, this friend of Ruby's, she's old enough, so I reckon she's seen some things too. Right and wrong. Just seems like most ladies is willing to stay on the God side even when the evidence is staring them right in the face. Stubborn, I reckon. So I let her talk. Who am I to say she's wrong? Nobody, that's who. For all I know, she's right. Some hohoho talks to

her all the time, tells her to bake cakes for mean old men in rest homes just 'cause she knew their daughters.

All I know is he don't talk to me 'bout nothing. Quiet as death, that's what he is for old Bruce here. Quiet as death. But that other guy, the one with the horns and the red suit, he been talking away since I was a boy. He stays close to old Bruce. Always has.

I grew up out in the country, I told Elsie yesterday when she asked about me as a boy. I thought she'd come right outa her chair when I actually answered her question. Grew up with my mama and my older brother, Keith, I told her. He was already fifteen when I was born, and my paw died when I was three. My sister, Julianne, why she was already grown, so it was just me and Mama and Keith living out there in a old farm house. Place fell in completely a few years back.

Mama was old when she had me, and it was like she was there and she won't there too. I don't ever remember her smiling. Keith was in charge of me and he must not liked being in charge. He'd snatch a switch every chance he got, and jerk me back behind the barn. Hit me 'til he got tired. He musta started it soon as Paw died. He'd take me back there over and over 'bout every day. It was what he did.

When I cried, he'd say, hush your sniffing, sissy boy. Mama never asked no questions far as I know. Whatever he did was what got done.

I remember one time Julianne come out to the house for a visit. I musta been 'bout five or six by then. Just me and her was sitting under a big shade tree in the back with the leaves rustling, and she'd brung me a piece of watermelon. She reached over and touched the whelps on my legs with the tips of her fingers, real soft. Later when her scrawny husband come to take her back home, she climbed up onto the seat beside him on the wagon. I kept watching them all

the way down the dirt road to see if she'd look back but she didn't. I was gonna wave at her. She didn't come too often. Like I said, she was grown herself.

It don't matter, I told Elsie. Lady, everybody's got a story if you really want to know it. Ain't nobody, not you, not me, not Ruby, not your little buddy over there, Lilla Ruth, not got a story. Most folks got switches in their story too. And most folks got a big brother or somebody just as bad who's in charge holding the switch. So don't feel sorry for me lady. I ain't got nobody to blame but myself for my sorry little life. And I don't blame nobody else neither.

It won't women that did me in. I want to tell her that when she asks about me and Kerri. It was liquor. But I don't tell her none of that. She strikes me as the type that believes in love and happy-ever-after and all that, and more power to her is what I say. But it ain't been like that for me. Even before Kerri, I decided it won't gonna be no woman who got me. I picked my poison and it came in the liquid form. It was a whole lot quieter than any woman I knew and a whole lot less trouble. Naw, Kerri was about on her own, especially after that third baby of ours, that little girl that died. I never wanted not one of those children, but I was right sorry for Kerri about that baby. But I just let Kerri raise Ruby and Brother the best she could with what she had. Seem like after that little one died, she got sicker and I just got drunker.

When Kerri died I reckoned the best thing I could do for those two left was to let those rich teachers raise them. Was the best thing for them too, from all I ever heard.

That boy was some kinda book smart and Ruby worked in the library her own self. Of course, all that boy's book smarts didn't save him from that bullet that killed him in Germany. And Ruby's dead from cancer now. But that ain't none of my doing. None of that. That's the doing of old Elsie's God. And Kerri's God too. She believed in all that. Anyway, I hope she was right for her sake. Maybe she and those children are up there singing loud right now. For

all I know they got their own solid gold mansion of glory. But, they don't have to worry about me moving in on them, that's for sure. And that's just fair. Like I told that little preacher boy, it ain't heaven if old Bruce shows up, now is it? No, I'll just stay here with my guy in the red suit and eat cake and wait to go the other way when the time comes.

Elsie:

Well, you know what I'm thinking. What in the world? What in the world, Julianne? Then I remember Betsy Tippet and the steel railroad track and I can't think that way, now can I? 'Cause that brings me back to Elsie on her worst day. And we all know that ain't pretty.

So I got to let little Julianne ride off on that splintery wagon seat, and do her best making something out of the life she's got for herself. I don't remember hearing much about her. Seems like she was kinda pretty. But they was all country people and I've always been a town girl. Such as it was. The town that is.

But I do know that brother of his with the switch. Know him from a mile away. 'Course he's dead now, and a good riddance I got to say, after hearing Bruce's behind the barn story. But Keith Pate was a successful businessman in this town. Ran the grain and feed store for thirty, forty years I reckon. Didn't own it. Old Man Reeves owned it, just like he owned most of the town at one time, but Pate ran it for him. And far as I heard, ran it fair. Seems like his wife was sickly. She stayed in a lot and they lost a child if I remember right.

I think about Julianne touching those red whelps on Bruce's legs. Maybe she thought they were just watermelon juice at first. Anyway, I can't help but think about my little grandson, Lucas. He don't have whelps, but I've heard that Chris boy Misty's got living with them say things to Lucas 'bout make me rise up out of my chair and pour a glass of tea over his head.

Right here at my own dinner table. Talks low to him like he doesn't deserve respect. I'm not one to spoil a child, but some folks don't know the difference between teaching right and wrong, and just pure meanness. I think this Chris boy who Lucas has to call Daddy is just pure mean. And I haven't said too much about it either 'cause I don't want to make Misty mad. 'Fraid she'll stop coming at all.

She's had a hard time. Brought every bit of it on herself but knowing that don't help none. She knows everybody's disappointed in her 'cause of what happened with Lucas' real daddy, so I haven't talked to her about this new boy.

She calls him her cosmic mate. Hah. Something about that boy ain't right. You can tell by looking, he just ain't right. Looks like he just got a spirit of evil sitting on him and don't even try to shake it. So now I'm thinking maybe I'm being a Julianne with Lucas. Not mentioning his whelps to nobody, pretending they're just watermelon juice, if you know what I mean.

Ain't we all just a mess? Don't you know God must look down at us and just shake his head? Just can't believe we can't do no better than we do. What in the world? He must be thinking, what in the world? 'Cause God can judge. He ain't had no worst day, far as I can tell.

I do remember what it feels like to think you might get a cosmic mate. Maybe that's part of why I haven't said anything to Misty about Evil Chris. I hate to burst her balloon. Was a time I looked around, wondering if my cosmic mate was walking by me every day and me not noticing. Was a time when, if I'da seen such a man, I'da probably done something crazy. Mid-life crisis they call it now. But it was right after Betsy and the railroad track (something like that'll get you thinking). I walked around this town at night thinking crazy thoughts. I thought, "Hey somebody out there, how about hold me and show me I'm still alive? Cause I feel pure

dead. Like I'm walking dead." But I think I knew soon as I thought it, wasn't nobody coming. God wanted me for himself. Not the sex part but the intimacy that goes with it if it's right.

Which it wasn't ever with Linwood. 'Course he didn't seem to mind not having the intimacy. Told me a hundred different ways those first years we were first married that everything was just fine the way it was. And these last few years, seems like they've been the best between me and Linwood, and me and God. Guess it was me all along-- not Linwood-- who needed to straighten out some of my thinking.

I remember those thinking and walking nights though. And I look at Chris talking mean to little Lucas, and I think about Misty just walking those streets like most of us have to do, and so far, I haven't been able to break the news to her that he ain't coming. And he sure ain't sitting there eating chicken with his fingers with his elbows on my table. It's a hard pill to swallow to a person that age that God wants you for his bride. I remember enough to know that.

I'll tell you something. Bruce Pate isn't any worse than the next man. I'm finding that out. There's lots of men left their children. Left them with wives who ain't strong enough or rich enough or sweet enough to raise them. Left them with relatives who don't even love them. Left them with pure strangers who were just standing around or passing through. Left them with anybody who'd take them and not looked back. Lots of men in that crowd. Bruce left them with two of the finest women in this town and you got to give him a little credit for that. Or, maybe you don't. Maybe, like he said, none of it matters a bit. Everybody's dead now anyway. Everybody but me and him and Lilla Ruth and Mary Pittman (97!) and little Lucas and Misty and that boy, Chris. We're who's left. The rest of them gone on to higher ground.

And maybe Bruce is right about the whole Hell thing too. Maybe he ought to just go on to Hell. Like I said, who am I to judge? He feels like that's where he belongs, maybe he's right.

I got a feeling though, that if he's right, the rest of us got to go there too. 'Cause like I said, the more I think about it, the more I know he ain't no worse than the next man.

I guess the young must fall in love. It is what they do. They must try it. I don't know many who haven't tried it. Misty's trying it with that Chris fellow like I tried it with Linwood. And Ruby musta tried it with her husband, Joe. She didn't talk much about Joe and I didn't ask much. He seemed real crazy about her but she acted quiet whenever he was around. I never knew what their business was. When she died he gave her a nice funeral and last I heard he was courting some widow woman lives over in Roanoke Rapids. Well, it's been more than a year so he can court who he wants to I reckon. But that falling in love stuff is for the young and only for the young if you ask me.

Spent a lot of time referring to Elsie's worst day, and the preacher this morning told us one way to overcome obstacles (he named the top ten ways) was to focus on the positive over the negative. Said, there's about a million books out teaching folks how to be positive, but not one on the shelves teaching folks how to be negative. We do that naturally. Which sure is the truth. So, here's a best day story.

I'd had my children. Was raising them too. Like I said, I took the job at the library so I could go in late, and they'd walk down after school and do their homework and read with me and Ruby until closing time. Had two little boys, Billy and Landon. They were two years apart and just as different as day and night. Billy, Mr. Sociable, Mr. All A's, Always with a Smile. Landon, Mr. Stick Close, Mr. C's are Just Fine With Me.

I was crazy about both of them and Ruby was too. You know, she couldn't have her own. Never did know the details. I figured she'd tell me if she wanted me to know so I never asked her and she never told me. But she loved my boys. She'd give them change for orange-

ades sometimes and they'd go down to Biven's Drug Store. Anyway, I was done with having children.

Okay, best day...Forty-second birthday. Ruby made my favorite, a pineapple upside down cake, and after the boys came in from school, they sang Happy Birthday and we were sitting there eating off little plates and drinking orange-ades and I started feeling kinda sick and the next thing I knew, I'd thrown up into my little plate. The boys got upset, and I said something like, Gosh, I musta got a virus or something. I've been feeling a little peaked.

Ruby smiled at me from across the little table in the kids' section where we always had our special celebrations and said, just as calm as a cucumber, I don't believe it's a virus, Elsie. You got the glow. Well, you coulda knocked me over with a feather, I'll tell you that. But she was right. I found out the next day down at Dr. Craig's I had the glow all right. That glow turned out to be Misty.

So, best day. Eating pineapple upside down cake at the library with Ruby and Billy and Landon. Sitting in little chairs at the kids' table and throwing up and finding out I got the glow. Seems like even your best day's liable to have a little throw up in it.

Bruce:

Dear Elsie,

I never been much of a writer. Never took a interest in it. I reckon my mama must of liked it though. Here's part of her diary. I got it after my sister, Julianne died.

That old husband of hers turned out to be good enough I reckon. He brought it to me when I was staying with some woman in town. I wouldn't want to say who. But she kept the heat turned on and let me drink, so we got along all right.

Anyhow, Wylie come in one afternoon about sundown when I was sitting in the dark, about half drunk in front of the T.V. He said that little beat-up book was all Julianne had of our mama and she'd want me to have it. Then he sat right there beside me on the old couch and cried like a little baby. I sat there looking at Sargent Carter holler at Gomer Pyle. Then he left. After all them years, I reckon he did love her.

I thought you might like the diary. Pieces of it I reckon. But that's all that's left. The rest is probably buried somewhere deep. Maybe that daughter of yours, the one that writes, might like it. That little boy of hers was mighty cute when you brung him up here. I could tell right off he was smart too. Talking about his cat and how him and his mama takes walks.

I meant to give this to Ruby that day in the library but I reckoned I'd see her another time. She never had much to say to me. Especially after her brother dying. I know they was close when they was both alive, and that is a help to me. Least they had each other.

I had whole years when I didn't think of either one of them children much. Brother would find me at Christmas and bring me a little present, after-shave or a fancy writing pen, a key chain I still keep in my drawer beside my bed.

But I never had nothing to give him or nobody else neither. I warn't too nice and it eats at me now. Yeah, I can tell you that. It eats at me just like this gnawing in my gut. Maybe worse.

Thanks for the cake. And the talking. It warn't wasted. Maybe ain't none of it wasted.

Bruce Pate

Elsie:

I sent it right to her. Misty promised she'd read it and get back to me. Said she was excited about having Bruce's Mama's diary. And, well, she ought to be. It's a real find.

I never saw nothing like it. The hubbub that diary has caused me. My heart launches out to that woman. I just want to take her in my arms and tell her she don't need to write to that dead mama of hers anymore. She's got Elsie now and she ain't gonna have to sleep in a barn or have to kill no babies or even breathe the air of that low life husband of hers ever again.

But, you know, the woman is dead. Long dead. I can't help her any more than I coulda helped Hester Prynne when she was standing there clutching strange little Pearl. Me and Ruby read that one together. Any more than I coulda helped Jackie O before she was a O, or Hillary Clinton either live with the fact that their man betrayed them with a nation looking. Any more than I coulda helped Betsy Tippet take this whole world's sorrow one more night.

But I decided I could try to help my own flesh. Looked like a clear sign to me when I read Bruce's letter and then that diary. I said, Lord, if this isn't a sign from heaven I don't know what is.

I just got to pray now. Pray Misty sees what I find what I found in Jeannie Rae's story.

Jeannie Rae and Misty

Jeannie Rae's Diary

Late August, 1887

Mama,

I been running, three nights. Cox wouldn't stop since Lettie married Pone, so I run off. Lettie said, Just wait. Just wait, I'll come back and get you soon's Pone settles down a little. Soon's Pone's satisfied I ain't going nowhere without him, I'll come get you and you stay with us.

But I ain't waiting. Not no more. I took your quilt and some bread and run far as I could into that full moon. Stepped on a snake and told him right out loud, you come on with me if you can keep up. Heard myself giggling for talking to a snake. Ain't no snake going to keep up with me anyhow. Cause I got legs that can fly, legs like wings, lift me right offa the ground sometimes.

Run all that first night until the dew got real close all around and I stopped to breathe the water in the air. I was in a open field with nothing but stars and that big old moon, thick dew cool from my face to my feet. Felt real clean. And I knew I warn't going back. Nothing to go back to. My Mama's dead, ain't you, Mama, and Nettie is married, and my brothers, well, they can just take care of their own selves.

Didn't need to run so fast, now I see. Warn't nobody running after me. Don't care. That running warn't wasted. I found out I could run like the wind when there warn't even no wind. Been three nights of running in a world holding its breath, so still, letting me get away from fourteen years. Far, far away.

These past three nights, seem like I seen who's in charge. Seem like maybe all them stories Mama told me ain't just stories. I feel a God when I run. I feel him big and sweet and quiet. Real quiet. Only comes out when the people sleep. When the boots and the strong arms and the mouths telling hate get closed down for a minute. Then God comes out and watches the snakes and rats and stars. And the running little girls in the fields and the woods.

Misty

Musings

May I claim the name of Poetess?

Sounds like Duchess or Princess.

May I lose myself in alliteration?

Hide headless in hyperbole, or hover,

hear gray owls' hoot hoot?

Who may render rhyme

and rhythm in her time,

click click according to her meter

down a street strewn with the sweet gardenia,

blossoms of unutterable promises,

hallowed? May I compare

this one's eyes to the moon,

this one's lips to Lucifer, this one's

words to knives, kisses to rays

of morning sun? If I will

but claim it, may I feel

the hem of Dickinson's white gown

in the winds while Milton sails

by donning a crown?

May I seek redemption
in this fallow field?

Jeannie Rae's Diary

August 1887

Mama,

Rain drops, plop plop, fill a leaf, make a pretty little pool while I almost sleep in the wet moss under this tree. And I'm free. So free this writing on a page, these words are strange. Cox hated me writing. Writing and reading. Think that's some of why I did it. Now I ain't sure what it matters if I write or not. Nobody but me and maybe you gonna read it, and wouldn't nobody understand it if they did. Doing it now to see if I still have words. Been in these woods four days. Where my mind's been don't need words. But soon as God quits all this rain, somewheres, I'm gonna get some dry clothes. Reckon I'll need words to do it. Mama's quilt is soaked. My bones is soaked. Whole world must be soaked. Close by there's got to be a nice lady with some dry clothes though. I got to believe it. That's who I'm hunting soon as I get out from under this raining tree.

Lettie. Oh, Lettie. Mama, I say her name right out loud like maybe she's close by. I sure miss Lettie. Been a time or two I wished I'd waited on her and Pone. A time or two I warn't sure what that rustling around me was, and from the sound of it, it warn't nothing too small. Those times I just miss Lettie and her soft skin against mine under the covers. She got the softest skin in the whole world, don't she, Mama? I used to lie awake listening to her sleep some nights afore she run off with Pone. And I know she woulda come back for me as soon as she could. But I just couldn't wait. And that I know. So when I hear that rustling around me I says, Jeannie Rae, you know who it ain't, don't you? It ain't that filthy Cox that laid with your own sick Mama, boots still on his stinking feet. It ain't that Cox, clawing hands after you about

ever night since Lettie left. Thinking of him about turned that rustling friendly. About turned it to a little breeze sent for company.

When I find that lady with the dry clothes, I'm gonna find something to eat too. I miss Lettie but I might miss her cornbread even more than her. Berries and old bread's fine for snakes and rats, but I need something warm. Something that'll stick to my stomach.

Been thinking these last four days. Thinking with and without words. There's more than just a hunger in my stomach I got to fill. Hunger in my heart too. Look to me like lots of folks got hunger in their heart. Look like most folks do all that evil trying to feed that hunger, but that don't work. Think it's this running fills mine. Dark nights. Lettie thinks it's Pone for her, and I ain't saying it ain't. She is happy when he's in a room, and he likes her too. I know he does because he married her when she ain't got nothing but herself to offer. Which is a awful lot but most folks don't see it that way. I sure ain't met a person it is for me. Don't truly expect to. Those dark nights running, that's when I feel filled up.

Visiting with you when the grass is wet and the stars is shining and my feet is flying. I feel you wrapped around me closer than that quilt. Those nights I appreciate God being so generous with you, and you know I tell him so too. He don't have to let you come down like that. But he don't hold you. You's free like me, freer because you don't have to worry about the hungers, that stomach gnawing on you from the inside out. I'm scared about all that's liable to happen to me once I come out of these woods and fields. One thing I know. You's gonna have a harder time visiting.

Misty:

Snapshot #1

Man comes along, wants to take our picture,
says we are just so pretty, me and Lucas,
as we stroll in front of our muddy yellow house.
So I let him and next week he brings by a glossy print,
me standing behind Lucas posing in his stroller,
both of us squinting into the sun.
Man's right. We are so pretty.

Snapshot #2

Lady says to her husband, "Aw,
look at that. Isn't he cute?!" Man stops
and squats
down in front of Lucas,
says, "My, you sure do make that ice cream look good."
Melting around his mouth,
all down his chin, green with mint flakes,
he smiles into Spring's
first sunny Sunday afternoon

at Raleigh's flea market.

Snapshot #3

He accidentally-on-purpose throws his shoe out
just to see what a little red tennis shoe looks like
flying out a car window.

I pull over, dodge traffic 'cause
he's just got the one pair.

Know I ought to be mad but I'm not,
as I get back into the car and he smiles.

I hand him his shoe, reach over him
to roll up the window, place a kiss
on his knee.

Though I am tired from all day working
not to watch seconds tick off
an ugly black clock, my kiss (yes,
sometimes it is my kiss)
is like a ray of morning sun wafting
through our tiny beat-up car.

Jeannie Rae's Diary

October 1887

Mama,

A barn ain't such a bad place if it's full of hay. 'Specially one with a cat or two. Keep the snakes and rats out. I ain't got nothing against snakes and rats, but I don't aim to sleep with them anymore unless I can't help it. Miz Pate's got two cats out here, a big yellow one and a smaller gray one. She says she don't remember where they come from or if they're related to each other. They sleep curled up in the straw beside me ever night. And I still got your quilt to keep me warm when it drops off in the night. Me and that quilt, we're staying together, Mama.

I come out of those woods one morning after I'd about run myself to death. Come out behind Miz Pate's barn and smelled something cooking right off. I knew I was gonna have some of whatever it was, come hell or high water. Knocked on the door of the screen porch and she come on out, took a look at me and asked me was I alone. When I tole her, Yes m'am, she tole me to sit down on the step there and she'd tend me. Got cool water at the pump and fixt me a plate of some of the best blackeyes and ham I'd ever eaten. Chunks of ham in it. Tole me I could sleep in the barn if I was willing to help with the washing and cleaning. Been here ever since doing whatever it is needs doing that she asks of me.

Miz Pate's got two boys. Different as night and day. One fair headed boy name of John Lee, stays real quiet, and one dark haired name Jacob. Jacob's a talker, ain't but ten. Always singing railroad songs and cowboys songs. They ain't got no daddy and

John Lee's always working and frowning. Tired I reckon. But Jacob brings me my supper ever night and sits with me. Talks while I eat. Talks about horses and food and folks from town I don't know. Tole me his daddy got kilt by the last Indian in these parts, but you can't never tell if Jacob's telling the truth or a story. He's mighty good company though. It ain't like I get lonely so much as thoughtful. Jacob helps me come out for awhile.

Miz Pate says it ain't right for me to stay in the house, me being a runaway and all, but she don't reckons nobody'd fault her for letting a little girl sleep in her own barn. I don't care about staying in the house anyhow. Been so long. And it ain't my house anyways. I'd soon eat and sleep out here in the barn with the cats. Don't bother me a bit.

Misty:

Passings

How many leaves fell the first autumn day,
marking it as a beginning of an end?

A few when none had fallen, or one
more than the day before, or only one?

Passings not marked until they've blown by,
crunch drawn and brown beneath
someone's small half-clenched claws.

Joy soars best on wings,
without willful words (unencumbered,
willowy). Free from embellishments,
dimestore jewels dangling from the lobes of stars,
bridges that splinter under light foot.

Sorrow, though, must borrow sound
to bear it up, string's or horn's
low tones (lonely, roam).

The poet doesn't court sorrow,

rather wakes to a shadow
on the pillow, longing for
some name.

Jeannie Rae's Diary

November 1902

Mama,

A storm's a-coming. Winds shift a time ago and I smelt blood of the hog John Lee kilt this morning. Rocking and holding his own innards the whole time. John Lee was. Didn't see me stand here at this window looking neither. Didn't see me stand here mumbling, "sic him." I don't know if it's me or the Lord or both of us together, but I'm willing to call it mine own unless the Lord wants to take holt of it for hisself. I hex that man and let me tell you, I been sleeping better ever since. Just open my mouth and let the thunder roll one night and it's been rolling ever since and he don't know what hit him. Notice his broad hand's slowed down some, slowed down on me and Keith both. He ain't so quick to use it hard as a bed slat on a woman and a boy, now. Is he?

A storm's a-coming. We gonna have plenty a fat back for a time. He'll sell the meat. But we gonna have plenty a fat back for a time. The dirt looks right pretty back there dancing around in the wind. Barn door steady-flapping 'cause storm's a-coming.

Twarn't none of it nobody's fault but mine own. I told him that. And that's all I told him. Woulda been a whole lot better if he'd a-kilt us that day. I woulda been anyhow, and Keith too. If he'd a never been born. But that woulda been too kind of John Lee. He don't operate thata way. Just stood there in the door, that same barn door there a flapping now, and eyes went to gray and ain't come back blue yet, and I don't expect they will. 'Twarn't none of it nobody's fault but mine own. I reckon I coulda stopped

Jacob but I didn't. Didn't want to. Hands felt so good against my back, and then that kiss sent me swinging but real gentle-like, like just a breeze pushing me.

Later, I tried to take the baby like before with John Lee's but didn't take. Seem like Keith just wanta be born, warn't nothing else I could do. Part of me prayed it was John Lee's. I knew things would be a lot easier iffen it was. But I figured it all along it probably warn't. And soon as I seen Keith with that head full of those wet black curls, I knowed it was Jacob's. And my heart fell and leapt at the same time 'cause I knowed it was gonna be hard but I knowed I got a piece of him with me from now on.

Storm's a-coming. Ain't too far off now. September'll be six years. The world ain't stopped. It ain't likely to over nothing I done neither. Wish it would mosta the time 'specially at night when John Lee lays on me 'til he's done, looks through me with those strange gray eyes like I'm a part a the bed or the floor or the wall- wherever he's got me. Ever night since that first one after Keith was born. Blood and all. Just come right in and got on me and rolled offa me long after the world went black. Went on back out to the barn and slept where he's slept ever night since. Same thing ever night and ain't no way a getting out of it. Iffen I try, just makes it worse.

Ain't said fifty words to me I don't reckon in close to a year. Reckon he don't have nothing to say. I reckon I don't have nothing to say neither. Not now.

You could find those two babies I kilt that warn't yet big enough to fill up your hand. You could find them iffen you dug for them, and knew where to dig. But only I know that, and that was a long time ago. Long time before Jacob come walking back outta those woods and said he'd work for food and a roof. Long time before that summer when it was so hot your whole body sweated ever time you drawed a breath. Long before

he brought those blackberries to me for a pie. Long time before I heard myself laugh, before I gave him my Mama's old quilt to keep him warm in the barn when he didn't even need it cause it was already too hot to sleep. Long time before I let him brush my hair down around my shoulders, before all that time.

Sometimes makes me sick now to recollect it all. Sick in a wave just like the morning sickness with those dead babies.

They're buried deep but you could find them iffen you knew where to dig.

I'd tell the Lord iffen I saw him, it ain't about forgiveness no more. I ain't asking for it and I don't deserve it neither. It's just about a little peace. One night maybe when John Lee ain't in there with me holding me against my will, making me go inside myself until I am just that bed or that floor or that wall. One night ever once in awhile when I could just crawl into that bed and sleep until the morning. Sleep dreaming of Jacob's kiss, his hands, even his tears, without John Lee all mixed up in there with it. I'd tell the Lord all that iffen I saw him. But I don't expect to see him prancing around here. About the closest I ever come to seeing him was that morning Jacob walked outta those woods and you know what that come to. We all know what that come to.

Misty:

Coming Back from Vacation

We fly, slice water down I-95
red and gold sombrero from Pedro's
South of the Border blocks the back
Window, and thunder rises like bile between my ears but I hold it,
I hold it so Lucas can sleep on the seat.

Man says he wants to make a honest woman
of me, next time we come sleep
on the heart-shaped bed, just the two of us
(not that Lucas on the cot slowed him down much),

but next time, Man says, Baby, you wear that red dress
I like so much and I'll make a honest woman out of you,
and I think, you don't want no honest woman.

Mister, that honest woman done stole this car
and left you looking at the girls in the 7-11,
that honest woman gotta be a big woman to take you on,
that honest woman, she lop off those hands always litter-box pawing,

She'll dangle them like fuzzy dice from your rearview mirror
while she flies down this slick highway,
that honest woman, she gonna open her mouth
this thunder going to rise up, fill up this night, South Carolina and North Carolina too.

Naw, Mister, you ain't ready for no honest woman.

You just sit over there and drive,
plot your evil you call love,
and I'll sit over here
and try not to wake this boy of mine.

Ruby's Story

Me and Brother hide under the porch making pictures in the dirt with our fingers. When Daddy comes out I whisper, "Brother, just sit still. Please, sit real still. Still as this ground." I hear Daddy pick a switch from the switch bush and know it's Brother's day. 'Cause my day was last. Daddy gives us a spanking when it's our day 'cause he says we need one. Says he don't need to tell us why neither. In Brother's case, I guess he's right. I seen him do a couple of things just this morning. For one, he kept on walking when Mama called to him to come in and see her. I know he heard her too, cause I heard her. But I can't ever think of nothing I need spanking for. Anyway, I tell Brother to sit still, whisper it over and over. But Brother, he usually can't sit still unless he's not meaning to, so he rushes right out when Daddy calls. I watch his little legs get torn up by that switch and hear him holler and cry. A crying child is a regular sound on our street, just like birds singing and grown ups hollering. We've got lots of children must need spanking.

When Daddy walks off down the road to do nothing, I come out. One difference between me and Brother is that he gets over a spanking quick. Mine sit on me the rest of the day. He's never mad at Daddy when he gets home late that night or the next morning. But I always try to find something to do in another room when Daddy's home. By the time I'm out from under the porch, Brother's pulling on old Yellow Cat's tail. That cat looks pure sick to get caught walking through our yard again.

I sit down on the step, watch Brother and Yellow Cat awhile, warn Brother that that cat's going to bite him if he don't stop. I think about the day ahead. Me and Brother, we've about worn out our welcome all over town. Yesterday, Miss Sykes's daddy told us to stay out of the store unless we was gonna buy something. It's a shame too, cause Miss Sykes, she's a excellent listener. I just talk and talk while she puts stuff on the shelves, or figures on her paper, and she says, "Uh, huh," "Is that right?" in all the right places. So, I know she likes me. But, ain't no telling with Brother. Maybe her daddy's still mad about that chewing gum. Like Mr. Sykes said, "It ain't like you can put back chewing gum after it's been chewed."

And we don't go to Parker's Pond no more since that day we seen Daddy and Rosalee's boy, Billy Earl, down there fishing and drinking whiskey in the middle of the day. That must be where Daddy goes since he ain't got his job at the peanut place anymore. I heard the preacher tell Mama that the whole country's lost its money. He said it's a sign from God that the country ain't doing according to His will. So it ain't just Daddy. Brother got real excited when he seen Daddy and Billy Earl that day and run right over. But Daddy looked all mad and yelled at me across the pond to take Brother on home. Said we wasn't supposed to be there. Said Mama'd be worried about us. To get on home. Which we all knowed wasn't true cause Mama's in bed. Too sick to worry.

I figure we can go play at Ava and R.T.'s house. They live across the tracks and nobody gets mad when we go there. Nobody except R.T. who's always mad whether we're there or not. Ava's Mama ain't sick and she's always cooking like Mama used to do. If we go before lunch she invites us to eat and she always fixes a big lunch. Not

leftover biscuits, not lumpy oatmeal like I fix at home. She has fried chicken or country ham with corn, butterbeans, okra, and dessert. And pickles. She fixes the best pickles.

Ava's daddy comes home every day for lunch from the Texaco station where he works at. As soon as he steps in the door, Ava's Mama puts the ice in the glasses and pours the tea. By the time he's washed his hands, we're all sitting at the table waiting for him. He always folds his gray fingers over each other (you just can't get grease out) and closes his eyes tight to say the blessing. That man loves to eat. He tells Ava's mama what a good cook she is over and over. But she just smiles and says, "Why, thank you," like it's the first time she's heard it. After lunch he sits at the table and talks to Ava's Mama while she clears the dishes. Watches her move around in her apron and smiles. Even R.T. is sorta nice when his daddy's home for lunch.

I love Ava's Mama and I love Ava. Ava's long hair is always shiny and her Mama pulls it back in a braid every day. Ava always talks nice like her Mama. She has toys and she shares them too. One time I saw R.T. snatch Ava's doll, Lisa (the one with the brown hair like hers except Lisa's is yarn) right out of her hands, and throw it hard, like a ball, against the wall. Ava just looked at R.T. like she felt sorry for him and then started crying softly. She didn't even tell her Mama. R.T. laughed at her and called her a bad word and ran out of the room. I don't like R.T. at all and I tell him too. But playing with Ava makes up for him being around.

Now I tell Brother to stay in the yard. Say it real mean so he'll listen. When he doesn't answer I say it again, loud and mean, and he says okay. Then I go on into the kitchen and then on into Mama's room.

Mama sits, propped up on pillows in the bed, and that is a good sign. A lot of people have died in that bed and I'm always afraid I'm going to come in and find Mama's gone off to be with them in heaven. There's Mama's own Daddy and Mama, and our baby, Rose Evelyn, who died last February. All of them died lying right on that same bed. Mama hasn't been out of bed since the day Rose Evelyn died that I know of, except once I found her sitting in a chair in the kitchen and had to help her back to bed. Well, she does get up to go to the outhouse, leaning on me or Daddy or Rosalee, who comes to clean sometimes. I don't like to help her if I can help it 'cause she looks like the skeleton hanging in Miss Sykes's store window last Halloween except with that light blue nightgown and a little skin draped over her. She's not scary though, just sad.

Now she smiles when I come in and I climb in beside her, my head against the hard headboard. I scrunch as close to her as I can without thinking I'm hurting her and she moves a little toward me too. We lie there like that until I know she's asleep by her bumpy breath and then I get up and go back to the kitchen. Cleaning last night's dishes. I wipe the table and put everything in its place 'cause I'm the only one who sees that things have a place. Brother's too little and Daddy doesn't think about it.

Sometimes when I lie down beside Mama, she calls me her gem. Not Jim like a boy's name, but g-e-m. Meaning precious jewel. She says she named me Ruby 'cause her favorite color is red, and I'm a precious, red jewel to her. My middle name's Elizabeth after her Mama who she loved so much, and everybody called Liza. She says my name is the most beautiful name in the world to her and when she's alone in bed sometimes she just thinks my name over and over. Ruby Elizabeth, Ruby Elizabeth, Ruby Elizabeth. She says it's a prayer. Just lifting my name up to God. Her gem.

Miss Mary Pittman came by one day last week and brought me some books and sat beside Mama's bed on a chair from the kitchen. She's my teacher from second grade, and third grade until I quit going cause Mama's sick. Miss Mary and her sister Miss Sarah neither one, has ever been married. They live together in a big brick house on Main Street, same house where they grew up in. Miss Mary tells me they were little girls one time just like me, except they didn't have Brother, they had each other. Now they're both teachers and wear lots of poky dots. Miss Mary is the oldest, but she's also the littlest. She's not much taller than me and I'm just nine. You can see them walking around town any late afternoon, unless it's raining. They love to walk. Miss Mary says she does it cause it keeps her feeling young.

When she was visiting, I heard her tell Mama that everybody's having a hard time these days but to hang on 'cause Mr. Roosevelt's going to set things right again. I wonder how the President knows Mama. Then Miss Mary said she's gonna send Rosalee by here two mornings a week to help me until Mama gets back on her feet. Mama thanked her and cried a little. After she left, I looked at the books but couldn't figure out most of the words, so now they're in my closet with the other books Miss Mary let me bring home last summer. She says the books can help me catch up, but I don't know most of the words in them.

I don't miss school. I'm stupid. Everybody always looked at me when it was my turn, thinking, "She don't know the answer." And they were right. I didn't. Mostly, I didn't even know the question. Miss Mary would rush to the next person when I didn't answer right away. So, I'm glad to stay home and tend to Brother and clean up a little.

Mama said my main job is Brother, but whenever I have a free minute I straighten things too.

After I finish the kitchen, I go out on the porch to check on Brother. He's sitting on the step crying 'cause Yellow Cat clawed his hand and run off. Just a couple of little spots so I tell him to hush his fussing, we're going to see Ava and R.T. He sniffles and sucks on his lips until he gets hisself quiet. I make him go to the bathroom before we leave even though he says he don't need to. He always says he don't need to, and one time Ava's Mama had to give him some of R.T.'s pants to wear as soon as we got there. They were way too big. He had to keep one hand in his pocket when he walked to keep them on. Ava's Mama washed Brother's pants for him, and hung them on the line and they were dry by the time we left. That was real nice of her but I don't want her to have to do it again. Don't want to wear out our welcome over there. Plus, R.T. called Brother a baby. That made me mad but I couldn't really say anything 'cause it is what babies do. So I tell Brother, we ain't going to see Ava and R.T. until you try. He goes on over to the outhouse and tries, I reckon.

We don't get much past the Thompsons' yard and their big black dog, Dog, who's on a chain but always forgets it until he's hurt his neck again lunging at Brother, when here comes Rosalee, walking all busy. She sees us from down the street and hollers (she never hollers) for us to get on back to the house. I'm thinking, what happened? 'Cause I know something big has happened. So I yell out, "What?!" And she just says again to get on back up to the house. So Brother and me, we turn around and walk back by Dog, who I guess figures it's Brother hisself that hurt his neck 'cause he barks and growls and

lunges so hard I almost forget he's on the chain. Then he sulks off as far as he can get from the road, lowering his head, growling like his feelings are hurt.

Rosalee almost runs into the house, about stepping on us waiting on the steps. She lets the screen slam behind her, and I hear her go straight into Mama's room and close the door. I can't hear nothing after that. I get up and push Brother on the tire swing and think about Rosalee and Mama in that room with the door closed. In awhile Rosalee comes out and tells me she'll push Brother 'cause Mama wants to see me.

Mama's eyes look that bad pink color, but she smiles a little when I climb up beside her. She tells me that something awful has happened. A terrible accident last night. Happened at Ava's house. Then she says, Ava is dead, honey. She says, the grownups were sitting on the front porch and the children were playing under the street light. She says, you know Ava's Uncle Ferris, the policeman, he had dropped by for a piece of warm yellow cake. And, nobody knows why, but R.T. went into Ferris's car and found his police gun on the seat. R.T. took it out, pulled the trigger, and Ava fell down. According to Rosalee, Ava's Mama ain't said nothing to nobody since it happened.

In my head, I see Ava's Mama leap off the porch and run down to Ava's fallen body, thinking maybe it's just a coincidence, her falling down like that just at that minute. It must be. Then Ava's Mama presses her into her own chest thinking that heartbeat she feels could be Ava's, knowing deep inside it's her own. Seeing Ava's braid tipped with blood in the dirt street. That's as far as I can get though. I can't imagine them moved from there. Can't imagine Ava's Mama walking back past the porch and into the house by herself. And she wouldn't leave Ava alone in the street alone anyway.

Mama combs my hair with her fingers and says, “Nobody don’t know where R.T. is, but maybe gone with Uncle Ferris.” I think about R.T. and I can’t imagine him anymore either. Anywhere.

And it just don’t add up. How can Mama’s God who she prays to and likes so much, how can that same God who Mama says gives us all our gifts like singing and clouds and each other to love, how can he trust R.T. even for a second with a gun in his hand? Seems like anybody could see that’s a mistake. But I don’t say any of this to Mama. I just lay there with my hand on a sunlit spot from the torn shade, thinking. Thinking about Ava and R.T. and Ava’s daddy and Uncle Ferris. Thinking about where are they all right now, and what God’s saying to them today. Or is he just staying real quiet about the whole thing?

Mama lets me stay like that awhile and then she says she’s got somewhere for me to go if I feel up to it. She says, go down to Dr. Craig’s office, and take Brother with you. Says, tell Mrs. Craig to send the doctor when he gets time. I know for certain, Mama’s never had a doctor, not even when Rose Evelyn was born and died. Just had Mrs. Clarke come in, who hunts and fishes like a man, to come in and help her. And then later, the preacher showed up to try to comfort Mama. So I ask Mama why she wants Dr. Craig and she says she’s been in bed long enough and wants to get well if she can. Says she wants to maybe plant some tomatoes before it’s too late this year. I tell I feel up to it.

So I get Brother from the tire swing where I reckon he’d swing all day if Rosalee’d stay out there with him. I tell Rosalee what Mama said and about the tomatoes and she smiles a little and goes back in. Tells us to hurry up over her shoulder. I don’t

make Brother go to the outhouse, just hope he can make it this time. It ain't that far to Dr. Craig's office.

I feel like I'm moving funny, like under water that time we went swimming at White Lake. And it don't feel all bad neither. Brother's usually hard to wait on, or maybe it's me that's hard to keep up with. If he sees a bug or a stick or a rock or anything else he wants to look at close, why he stops and picks it up or squats down and looks at it. He stops at every store window and looks even if it's the same dusty tools that's been there forever.

Today, me and Brother got the sidewalk mainly to ourselves, not like on Saturdays when the farmers in straw hats and sunburned whiskery faces come into town. Just a couple of ladies in flowery dresses and smells, and us. Brother ain't bothering me with his slow ways today. I about have to work at it to keep up with him 'cause my thoughts keep going back and forth from Ava to Mama.

I figure this means Mama's going to get up and maybe start cooking and cleaning again. Maybe even singing like she used to do. She's got the prettiest voice in the world. Used to sing in the choir at Holiness before she got sick and you could hear her over everybody. I've never been to Dr. Craig's before but I've peeked in the door and seen steep steps leading up to another door where his office is. I always wanted to go up those steps.

Nobody can figure out why Dr. Craig married Mrs. Craig, least not me. Mrs. Craig looks old, and she don't smile at you when you smile at her. Usually she don't even say hey when you say hey to her if you meet her on the street. I heard the ladies at church say she was an old maid before Dr. Craig came along and started courting her.

Said she already had that house they live in from figuring books for different people. She still figures the books for all the business people in town, except for Mr. Sykes who does his own figuring.

But, Dr. Craig, why everybody likes him. He walks like Brother except not quite so wobbly. But he's always looking at stuff too, even bugs and rocks I reckon. And he's always smiling. Kinda makes up for Mrs. Craig never smiling. Another thing I noticed is Mrs. Craig don't like color. She always wears brown or gray, and Dr. Craig, he don't wear a white coat like you'd think a doctor is supposed to. He wears bright plaids with stripes like Brother likes to do. Of course, I've never seen him in his office so maybe he wears a white coat when he's in there.

We finally get to the door and go in. I take those steps slow, looking at each one as I step just like Brother. I notice the spots of some of them and the wood swirls and dust in the corners. I think about those spots dripping from bleeding people trying to get to Dr. Craig to save them. I like the smell. It smells just like I hoped it would. Like wood and alcohol and old clothes in a closet that hasn't been opened for a long time. I hold Brother's dusty hand and he holds onto the skinny wooden rail on one wall. I am sad 'cause my friend Ava's dead from a bullet.

But also, I am full of hope like before the fair that time when it came to our town. I didn't know even what a fair was, but I could tell I was gonna like it cause everybody talked about it so excited. And then it came with a big ferris wheel and merry-go-round playing music. Seemed like it'd been there all along and wasn't ever gonna leave. But it did leave. The next week, when I walked by the lot where it had been, it was gone. No sign that it'd been there at all except a little extra trash and my memory of it.

Anyway, I feel full of hope climbing the wooden stairs, like before the fair came, because Mama might get up again. And, I ain't sure what that'll mean but I know it could be sorta like the ferris wheel at night with the lights on and music. It'll be like it's always been there and can't never leave. Like she wasn't even sick. I'm full of sadness for Ava, and full of hope for Mama.

But, Brother, I find out, is full of pee. Because right at the top step, he wets his pants. At first, I don't know what it is. Warm water at my feet. Then I understand. And I know right off I can't open the door to Dr. Craig's office. I can't go in there and tell Mrs. Craig sitting behind her desk with her closed face the way I picture her sitting, that Brother has peed on her top step.

So I shush Brother and we creep as quick as we can without making much noise down the dark steps back out into the sunny street. And I don't even wait for him while he tries, for once, to keep up with me. I'm so mad I act like I don't even hear his whiney I-didn't-mean-to's. I'm thinking I don't know what I'll say to Mama when I get home so I slow down a little. I wonder what I coulda done better. Now Mama might not get up and it'll be my fault. I slow down a little more 'cause I notice my eyes ain't working right. There's gray patches in front of the stores and trees.

Coming back into the yard that day is when I fell. Not over a root either, but over air itself. Walking one minute and not the next. Rosalee helps me into the house, talking soft about ain't it just a shame, don't know what else could go wrong today, do you see this, Lord?

Then I lie in the dark front room with Mama, but not in her bed, on the floor beside her bed on a pallet Rosalee musta made using every blanket in the house. Coming

and going, I hear soft voices but seems like in a dream, and one time I see Brother's face right down in front of me, just staring at me and smiling but not saying nothing. First I think I might be in a dream or dead, but the next time it happens, I know it's him cause I feel him wiggle. Another time when I wake up and he's just rolling around all over the floor between my pallet and the fireplace. Of course there ain't no fire in it cause it's so hot in here and ain't nobody gonna make a fire anyway.

And then Dr. Craig is here with us. I don't know who fetched him. Maybe Rosalee. And Daddy crawls out of the woodwork just like a big roach with flimsy horns. Seems like a long time since I seen him last. But here he is now, says to Dr. Craig he ain't got no money to pay him with and Dr. Craig says, "Let that be the least of your worries, Bruce." And Daddy says, "I ain't worried a bit. Just didn't want you to think I could pay you, that's all."

And Dr. Craig comes over to me and talks real soft and gets Rosalee to bring me some cool water. It's the best water in the world. And Dr. Craig holds my wrist and rubs my hair back from my forehead and says I'm a pretty girl and smart too. Says I've been sick awhile, but I'm gonna feel better soon. And I know I am gonna get better. He tells Brother he can come back in now and lay beside me if it's all right with me. I say it is. Then I drift back off to sleep.

When I wake up it's dark and Brother is snoring a little beside me. I get up to look at Mama in the moonlight. Mama looks all white. Around her closed eyes the skin is all sunken. Her breathing sounds real slow too, like she's thinking about whether or not to take another breath, and she decides at the last minute she might as well take one more. She smells like she didn't make it to the outhouse and I wonder where Rosalee is.

But then I remember it is night, and Rosalee's got a house to go to at night even if it ain't got no real windows or doors.

I lie back down and listen to Brother snoring and Mama slow breathing underneath, kinda like two people singing a song together, but it's two different songs, but two songs that go together to make a whole new, real pretty one. I listen for what seems like a long time until I hear a change in the song. So I try to think about good moments, but even the night at the fair on the ferris wheel ain't helping much, so I just try to think about nothing at all. Mama says that cleaning your mind, like taking a little broom in there and sweeping the floor, can help you sleep. So I sweep for a little while then I musta dozed off 'cause next thing I know I'm waking up and it's starting to get light outside.

I get Brother up and lead him under the front porch to wait for somebody. Not for Daddy, and not even for Rosalee either. For I-don't-know-who but I know I'll know it when I see them. And then, we watch a lot of feet go back and forth and hear a lot of voices. Voices first talking soft and then calling for us soft. Finally voices hollering for us. And Brother, for once just sits there with me, don't make the first move to go out. I hear the screen door slam over and over again, feel the porch sag and relax, sag and relax.

We draw a whole new town in the dirt with our fingers. We draw stores and two fairs, and dogs with big smiles, and cars, and even a train. Right after I notice the sun through the slats of the porch almost right on top of us, I see Miss Mary's high heels and navy poky dot dress-bottom start to go by, then stop. And then her upside down red curls and her smile, and I know she is who. Who I been waiting for.

She says, “Come on out now, Ruby, and bring Brother with you.” So I do. And she holds us tight and tells us we are going to be all right. Over and over while we cry into her skirt, she promises. We are going to be all right.

And Miss Mary was right. As right as she could make herself anyway. Mama died. And Daddy didn’t want us. I was glad he didn’t. But we had, and have Miss Mary. And she says, God willing, we have her for as long as we need her. And I believe her.

Boy, she really took a shine to Brother, too, once she got him shiny. Cleaned him from stem to stern, she calls it, with soap and water. Then went off and got him a all-white kitten named Lewis who sleeps right in his big bed with him. Lewis never scratches or bites Brother’s little hands, just purrs when Brother pets or holds him. And I have my own big bed too. Nobody’s ever died in it either. She says she knows for sure. And we have our own books to read, and a tree house. It’s a whole lot more fun to play in a tree than under a porch.

At first I was afraid Daddy’d come for us, snatch us out of those big beds and take us off to live at Parker’s Pond with him and Billy Earl and the fish and the whisky. But he didn’t.

After we were here awhile, Miss Mary asked me if I thought me and Brother’d like to belong to her until we grew up, and then we could belong to ourselves. I knew it was my duty to remind her that I wasn’t that smart. So, I told her, she might want to wait for a smarter little girl whose mama had died to come along to take care of. She said, I was plenty smart for her, and plenty pretty, and sweet too. I said, Daddy might not like it, but she said she talked to him and he thought it’d be okay. He was kinda at loose ends, she called it.

Miss Mary is a lot like Mama, but different too. They're both pretty, of course, and she can sing good like Mama, but not so loud as Mama and not at Holiness. Now we go to the Methodist Church three doors down from the house.

Everything's real clean there and they got men standing at the door and passing out a paper that tells you what page to turn to in the song book, and when to get quiet for the sermon. Brother draws pictures of horses and cats on his paper, and counts things when he gets his paper full. He counts things like all the bald men, the ladies in hats, the ladies with hats with flowers on them, the men with blond hair. One Sunday there were five men with blond hair. That surprised all of us that there were that many. The Methodists let you go right at twelve o'clock sharp. That's so you can go home and eat a big lunch.

Miss Sarah does all the cooking at our house. Miss Mary says everybody's got special gifts and one of Miss Sarah's is cooking. And lots of Sundays we have company. The first and third Sunday every month the preacher comes and eats with us. He doesn't have a wife yet, and he told Brother he hadn't found anybody else who could cook as good as Miss Sarah, and looked like she was too smart to have him. Miss Sarah said, Oh stop that, Cole, but she smiled at him. She calls him Cole when he's at our house, but everybody else always calls him Preacher or Mr. Rouse. Anyway, he told Brother to keep his eyes open for a single woman who was looking for a fat man who could quote scripture, and eat the better part of a fresh apple pie in one sitting, but not necessarily at the same time.

He's not the only man who comes to eat either. Sometimes Mr. Bivens comes. I'm used to seeing him at the jewelry store with those big glasses on his head, but when

he comes to eat, he don't need his glasses. He looks at Miss Sarah, and Miss Mary too, like he can see just fine. Miss Mary said he only needs his glasses to look at the diamonds and pearls. He always says everything's mighty good but he don't ever get seconds, and he rushes out after we eat like he's not really supposed to be there. Me and Brother always get seconds; we just have to eat our firsts first. Miss Mary says, that's good manners.

Me and Brother, we like to look at Miss Mary and Miss Sarah too. They both got red curls and lips and little bitty middles. They got a lot of men looking at them and neither one of them has ever been married. Miss Mary says she don't care to be. She likes things just fine the way they are and reckons Miss Sarah does too. She says she came close one time but that's all over now and you can't cry over spilt milk.

We walk everywhere. In the mornings, we walk to school and we're the first ones there because Miss Mary and Miss Sarah are the teachers. I let myself take five deep breaths as soon as I step in the door 'cause it smells like books and morning air, two of my favorite smells. When I grow up I want to work in the library 'cause it's full of books and I'd get to smell them every morning.

We found out Brother's real smart. He won the spelling bee for our whole school and he's the youngest student ever to go to the county competition. That's 'cause Miss Mary and Miss Sarah love to spell and read. They say words are worlds, and all you have to do to go to new places is open the door of a book. Anyway, Brother spells all the time. They call out the word, he has to spell it, and then he has to tell what it means. Miss Sarah says, it doesn't matter if you can spell a word or not, if you don't know what it means.

I like reading the best, now that I got all the letters straight in my head. Before, I couldn't ever remember how every letter sounded. I'd get some of them right but not enough to make the whole word. Now, I just remember things Miss Mary tells me like "L" means your tongue goes to the top of your mouth and you get to sing a little. Or like "R" is tough like you're mad, and the sound comes from inside you. Now I like the letters. They are like people with different feelings except each one stays the same all the time. People might feel one way one day and another way another day. Miss Mary says that's just the way it is. But, "L" always feels like singing, and "R" always sounds mad.

I'm still waiting to like Math. Miss Mary can explain it and explain it and most of the time I just don't see it. But sometimes, all of a sudden, I'll see part of it. Then maybe a little more until I see the whole thing. But, most of the time, seems like somebody's holding a bed-sheet over it just to be mean so I can't see the whole thing. Miss Mary says, maybe Math's just being shy, not mean, and I have to be real patient and work real hard to help it come out and visit. So I try to be patient, but I still feel like it's meanness, not shyness most of the time.

Miss Mary says feelings are good and she likes it when I talk about mine. She said we all have them and we should talk with people who love us, like me and Mama used to talk to each other when I'd lay down with her. She tells me about her feelings, like when she gets sad reading her books, or happy when it rains 'cause we need some and she's been worrying about her flowers. So I came home after I saw Daddy downtown that time, and I told her how he walked across the street when he saw us, and how Brother's eyes went from happy to sad when he watched Daddy cross the street. I told Miss Mary I was sad, but mainly for Brother, but I didn't know what to say to him

‘cause I didn’t really understand it myself. She said some things are not understandable even for us, but it’s okay to feel sad about some things. She said she’d talk to Brother and see if she could make it better. And, far as I know, she did, ‘cause he hasn’t seemed sad at all lately.

Miss Mary took us to see Ava’s Mama yesterday after school. I didn’t hardly recognize her, even after she’d opened her own front door and let us in. She looked too skinny for one thing. The Ava’s-Mama I used to know had some meat on her bones. And her smile was real tight, not showing her pretty white teeth like before. Her hair looked like mine used to look after Mama got so sick, and before Miss Mary started working on it again. Broken looking. We all sat in the living room on dark flowered chairs, Miss Mary holding the lemon pie she’d brought. Ava’s Mama didn’t even see the pie when Miss Mary first tried to hand it to her. So Miss Mary just held it in her lap the whole visit, and then put it on the kitchen counter right before we left. I thought Brother was going to itch himself to death in his chair, but he was real good, not saying anything until we went back outside. Miss Mary told us she was real proud of us for our company manners.

At our house we have itchy living room furniture too, but we never sit on it. Miss Mary says we have to call it ‘our house’ now because it is. Anyway, Ava’s Mama didn’t say more than twenty words the whole time we were there, just smiled that skinny smile while Miss Mary told her about me and Brother coming to live with her for good. Then Miss Mary talked about school, and asked after R.T. Ava’s Mama said R.T.’s gone to live with Ferris for awhile. And that’s all she said too. Looked like every time she had to

answer a question she couldn't find the right words. I didn't smell anything cooking for Ava's daddy's supper neither.

Miss Mary said, once we got outside, the Lord never gives you more than you can handle, but seems like he must think a lot of some folks since he gives them so much to carry. Then she said, forgive me. I wasn't sure what she wanted forgiving about or who she wanted to forgive her, but I held her hand the rest of the way home. Brother held her other hand, of course.

Some nights Miss Sarah doesn't eat with us. Even though we see her at school and in the mornings, some nights we don't see her again until Miss Mary's reading us a story. We usually pile in Brother's bed because Lewis is in there and he likes to sleep while we read. We are real careful not to disturb him when we get up and down off the bed because if you wake him up, he might get up and stretch and then you can't wrap your legs around him while Miss Mary reads. Brother is good about letting me wrap around him when we are all together, because he says he gets to sleep like that all night with him.

Last night, we were like that when Miss Sarah came in. All of us in Brother's bed reading Brother's train book. Miss Sarah stuck her head in the door and she was smiling so big, even for her, that we all knew she was going to say something good. And, guess what? She and the preacher, we get to call him Preacher Cole now if we want to, are getting married. Looked like Miss Mary was going to fall right off the edge of the bed. Then the two of them started dancing around the bedroom, long red curls everywhere. They grabbed our hands and started swinging us around, and poor Lewis

woke up and looked confused and Miss Sarah picked him up and held him up under his arm-pits so he could dance too.

I had a hard time getting to sleep after that. I lay in my bed last night just thinking for a long time. I started to get my broom and sweep out my head like Mama taught me, but then I remembered something else Mama said. She said, sometimes if you have a lot to think about, maybe you need to just lie there and think more than you need to sleep. I decided I'd had one of those days.

I'd gone to school this morning. Seemed like days ago but it was really just that morning. I'd learned about Pocahontas and John Smith and how she saved his life and how he found out Indians were nice. I'd practiced my 6's and could do most of them now. Tomorrow I'd work on my 6's some more and maybe move to my 7's. I was starting to feel a little friendlier toward Arithmetic. We'd played on the playground and I'd taught Mamie Anderson how to make a house in the dirt by lining up sticks. Then, right there at the edge of the woods where we could still hear the other children playing kickball, we'd played house. I was the lady of the house and she was my friend who dropped by for coffee.

After school, I'd gone with Miss Mary and Brother to Ava's Mama's house and we'd sat on those itchy chairs and looked at Ava's Mama trying to smile without Ava. Then we'd held hands on the sidewalk and come back home. Then we'd had meatloaf for supper and mashed potatoes and green beans. And then we'd done our homework and read books with Lewis. Then Miss Sarah had come in all smiling and we'd found out she's marrying the preacher.

And it seemed like a long time ago, even though it was just last June, since I'd laid awake trying to sweep my mind listening to the song of Brother and Mama's breathing, then just Brother's. And I found out just last night for the very first time, that I knew the moment Mama died, and somehow I'd gone on to sleep just like it was going to be okay. Maybe there was an angel that came to get Mama who put me to sleep on their way out. Maybe Mama got one last look at me and Brother there on the pallet beside her bed, and asked that angel to look after us since she had to go. Maybe it was that angel that sent Miss Mary the next day in her poky dots to get us out from under the porch.

I prayed right then for Ava's Mama to get her angel, and I prayed for that angel to send her a Miss Mary so she could start cooking supper again.

Maybe, I thought as I drifted off to sleep last night, it just takes awhile sometimes before you feel like cooking or smiling or learning the 6's or dancing with the cat. But it does happen. It just takes awhile sometimes.

Accidents

Men in pickup trucks line the street's soggy shoulders out of respect for Pop. Ladies bound for The Cut and Curl and their weekly hair burning ease in behind them in Cadillacs bought with cash (tobacco money). *As the World Turns* won't wait, but they can catch up if anything good happens. Quiet for the dead this minute. And I'm a chosen one. Chosen to help escort him down this sleepy Southern street that he escorted me down so many summer mornings. My grandfather lies in the hearse ahead.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

The clammy, young preacher says, I shall not be in want. So dedicated, sure. Chosen. I was, as a boy, chosen like Tonto to accompany the Lone Ranger, into dark silence.

But, I never minded the silence back then. Truly, I bartered for it. I still do, I guess.

I remember that particular night. It smelled like all those nights, starless, lightning, summer. My feet were propped up on the grimy split dash of his giant wrecker. I was staring straight ahead, just like him.

We pulled up on the scene and I could tell right off it was a bad one. Soon there would be lots of other colored, rotating lights. We passed what I believed was the only vehicle, a large, barely identifiable blue Buick, or Ford. He prepared to stop, then made a small sound, taking in a little air, and instead of stopping, moved on up the highway.

Sure enough, about an eighth of a mile up, there was another vehicle, alone.

He parked, told me to wait inside.

He makes me lie down in green pasture

Pop can get some rest now. We sit under a tent on cold folding chairs that are damp from this morning's mist. We won't be here long. Soon we'll turn, leave him beside his son, Bobby, who's been here waiting for a neighbor for thirty years.

I used to come visit him, ride my bike up here. Talk to him, trace the shotgun and basketball engraved on his cool foot stone with my finger.

Nana sits straight beside my father. Dozing or praying? She slept on the couch those many nights before they finally put Pop in the nursing home. Said it was a lot like taking care of a newborn baby, but she was just too old to do it anymore.

Everyone was his enemy those nights, "Stop it! You never loved me! I always loved you! Why are you doing this to me?" Tears, accusations rained down as the sky lit up with heat. Smudged memories, like thunder, then he slept again. He might have dreamed of carrying the dead from busy highways.

There was a boy. What was his name? He was a good boy. He was quiet.

He leads me beside quiet waters,

Pop struggled with his maker. When I was ten, their bedroom smelled like Old Spice powder, Yardley's soap on a rope. After his shower, every night, he got down on his knees. Sleeveless undershirt and boxers, faced his bed, hands clasped. He prayed.

Was he seeing a half-full juice cup through the back window of a crunched-up car, a Raggedy Andy, Little Golden books?

I peeked inside the cracked door, breathed deep.

He restores my soul

That night when he finds that wrecked car, he tells me to wait in the cab. I watch him moving away from me through the bright wrecker lights. I want to call him back. Then he walks around that car. I pray out loud, Walk with my grandfather tonight. See him, touch his warm hand.

He wrestles with a door. Other men show up from the darkness. They all struggle and it springs open. He reaches in, pulls someone out.

I know even before I can see that it's a child, a boy. I watch in harsh lights as men lay him on the ground, hover over him.

I bite the inside of my mouth and pray, God, save that boy. Help my grandfather. Make him proud of me somehow. Save that boy.

The men sag like someone has thrown a blanket over the whole group, the whole night. And I know that boy is dead.

He guides me in the path of righteousness for his name's sake.

While he dies from pneumonia in that nursing home, we travel in dark silence. Returning from a weekend trip to my mother's near Myrtle Beach. My windshield wiper blades need replacing, but I always seem to forget until it rains. I drive while my wife soothes our boys. The baby sleeps.

Ahead, those colored, rotating lights. We ride through, witness a family torn apart.

Once there was a sleepy dad who saw the tail-lights too late. Now he lies in the road, blanketed by steel and glass. I ask my wife, “Did you see that?”

“Yes.” She reaches back through the dark to pat one of the boys.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

When we walk away from his grave’s side in a few minutes, we will create valleys with every footfall. It’s still November and there’s mud everywhere.

That afternoon, going into the nursing home the only and last time, I held tight to my four-year-old son, Sam. I stepped carefully onto the new white sidewalk, pushed our way in through the door, out of pouring rain.

Lemon cleaner, new paint. Down a straight, long hall and into a small room where he sits, bent and covered in a burnt orange blanket I’ve never seen before. Blue eyes stare past us as he softly complains of cold. A kid with a ponytail comes in, silently puts tube socks on Pop’s cold feet, then goes away.

I touch his transparent, veined hands. Those hands that pumped gas, wrapped a lover in a blanket, held death, motioned for me to come out into the night. He looks right at me like I’m a familiar ghost.

I will fear no evil, for you are with me;

Those nights that he didn’t come in I stayed awake late, listening to the cuckoo’s chide every half hour. Two o’clock, two thirty, three o’clock.

What's wrong? Can't you sleep? Cruel memories, emboldened by my sleeplessness. Boys back home who called me Fatty and laughed when I ran. My dad, red-faced when I brought home bad grades. My mom, hair-sprayed, outreached arms, pink Maybelline mouth. My sister, singing herself to sleep about raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens.

Other nights I'd hear the phone ring. Please. Please, open the door and see me here in the dark.

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me

Some nights, when he prayed after his shower, I imagined he saw his dad dead from a heart attack in the outhouse. He's only four. Or, his older brother, ready with a switch in that outhouse because he fought at school. He's seven.

His Rebecca, my Nana, small and young, wrapped close in a blanket. Rain hits a tin roof. He's seventeen.

There's Bobby, still handsome in his little-boy coffin, polio no longer interested. Pop's forty-three.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Summers after I turned eight, I got paid five dollars a week, plus moon pies and sodas, to do almost what everybody else around the station did. Pump gas, clean windshields, check tires. I hear him say,

“Miss Sadie, is that a new hat you're wearing?”

Her bright eyes flicker with school girl modesty and joy.

“Why no. I just haven’t worn it in awhile. I’m going to see my daughter in Rocky-Mount today and thought it looked nice enough with this dress.”

“You’re right about that. Just lovely. Now you have a good time. I’ll send one of the boys over one morning next week. It’s about time for an oil change.”

By one of the boys, he means James Robert or Monk, since I’m not old enough to drive on public streets, even in Enfield.

Monk and James Robert, especially Monk, are great mechanics. Pop is patient. He can do anything and fix any mess, but it might take some time with him.

He gets mad when Monk goes off riding with one of his buddies, all the way to Washington, D.C. Monk says his sister lives there.

Pop says, “Sister. Some sister.”

But Monk always shows back up in a couple of days, just as we’re locking up, wearing a new suit, a surprising purplish color. The passenger in a long car that sounds like it’s a good thing they’re back. We all know Monk can get them home no matter what.

Pop rants about Miss Louise’s brake job having to wait, or having to tell Miss Lila it’ll be next week before he can get to her while Monk stands before him with his own new hat in his hand, and says, “Yes sir, yes sir, I know, yes sir.” Finally Pop tells him to be at the station by six in the morning. We go home and eat fried chicken, fresh corn on the cob, butterbeans, tomatoes, and Nana’s biscuits and sweet tea.

Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,

In the nursing home, he mumbles of dead strangers and warmth. Summer storms, Jesus. I walk out, back down that long hall, holding Sam's small hand. Sam looks up at me when I pray right out loud, Walk with my grandfather tonight. See him and touch his cold hand.

Outside, it's still raining. I lift Sam, wrap my arms around him tight.

Stepping off the sidewalk, I slip, but save Sam and myself from falling in the mud. We move toward the car.

And I will dwell in the house of the

LORD

forever.