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Candy Apples
and Other Tales of Entropy

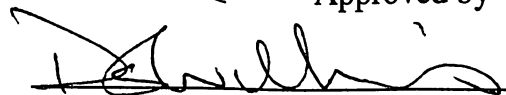
by

Brent H. Bonds


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

Oxford
May 2003

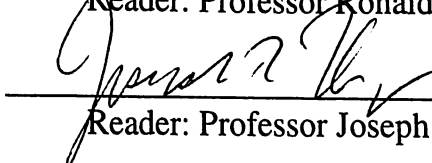
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Abstract

Brent H. Bonds: Candy Apples and Other Tales of Entropy

(Under the direction of Dr. Dan Williams)

The following is a creative thesis. Comprised of six short stories, the work is bound by the aim of each story to convey that awareness is hardly ever a moment of triumph, but the acknowledgment and acceptance of all the imperfections and the unknowns that exist in our world. Chief among the themes of these stories is the idea of entropy, that is, the natural tendency of all things to progress from a state of order to one of disorder. While the majority of these stories embrace these ideals through the use of the same characters, though, at various points in their life between the ages of 14 and 22, the last in the series does not. It has been included to show where the basic idea for the other pieces originated. The details of this origin are included in a preliminary introduction to the work.

*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.
-Hebrews 11:1*

This work is dedicated to all those whose support of me and my work could only be counted as faith, those who have given me hope, even when I had given them nothing to warrant their support, those who by giving me assurance have given me reason to believe in myself.

Special thanks to my parents Tommy and Wanda Bonds and to Dr. Debra Young, Dr. John Samonds, Dr. Daniel Williams, and Dr. Douglass Sullivan-Gonzalez.

The following is a work of fiction. Any resemblance of characters, places, and events portrayed to those of real life is purely coincidental.

(Et si illi credes, habeo pontem quod tibi vendere volo...)

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Introduction

As a general rule, I hate the people who call themselves writers. There are basically two kinds of these people. The first group is made up of people who never were and never will be writers. They carry on the pretense to impress people, either trying to make an excuse for not really doing anything with their lives, as if to say, "Yeah, I live in squalor, I dropped out of four colleges, been to prison, but, you see, I've just been gathering material..." or carrying out professions they don't believe are impressive or important enough in their own right. These people I hate for their pretense and for their deprecation of their own true occupations, jobs just as important as any other.

The second and smaller group of those who call themselves writers *actually are* writers. These people I hate out of good old-fashioned envy.

I am jealous of them because they seem to have no trouble at all transferring their brilliant concepts to the page. Me, I have ideas, tons of ideas, ideas that seem great while they're bouncing around inside my head. But when I get them out into the air and onto paper, they never seem so brilliant as they once did. For example, take the initial idea for this thesis. In the beginning, this thesis was going to be a group of linked short-stories entitled "Character Sketches: Drawn from a Dormitory." The stories were to take place in a community college dormitory, the dorm representing both a microcosm of society and a macrocosm of the individual. The chapters were to revolve around one central character, and while being in themselves witty works of existentialism, the piece as a whole was going to run parallel to Hawking's A Brief History of Time. Oh, it was going to be great.

I couldn't wait for people to ask me about my thesis. I'd explain it to them, and they'd say, "Wow" or "Ambitious" or "Impressive" and I'd pat myself on the back with my imaginary third hand, saying to myself, *why yes, yes it is*.

Then I went to write the idea out—it smarts a little when you realize how obtuse you have been. When I realized the idea wasn't going to fly, I had to come up with something new. What to do?

There were specific reasons I'd wanted to do the first idea. Chief of these was that I spent my first two years of college as a forensic chemistry major, and it was in physics and chemistry classes that I latched on to the two themes that underlie my writing today—Entropy and the Uncertainty Principle. Entropy is the natural tendency of all things to degrade. The Uncertainty Principle, dumbed down, means *the more you look, the less you know*. It was joy to first learn these things, because they gave me scientifically-sound, immutable excuses. The first I could use to explain everything, like why my place got progressively more and more unkempt as the semesters went on. The other finally explained to me why, after these years of college, I felt even more stupid than when I began. But at this point, they illustrated why the thesis idea hadn't panned out and why the more I thought about what to make of it, the more frustrating the whole thing became.

Finally I had an idea.

It happened that I had a couple of other stories that I had written earlier, mostly dealing with coming of age or loss of innocence. One of these stories, "Candy Apples," was really an okay piece. Two years after I wrote it, I still liked it, and that's rare for me. Even better, it fit in with the themes I was trying to project. What is coming of age if not

the evidence of perfect innocence degraded by time and the world. What else is it, but becoming aware, and in that awareness, realizing how little we actually know.

I took “Candy Apples,” aligned it with another story from the first concept, called “Risk Unending” and worked from there. I could drop the whole Hawking thing, and still say all I wanted to say.

With exception to the final story, “All That Is,” which I have included to show what the original idea was like, the stories on the following pages are results of the blending of these two stories. Much more autobiographical than I intended, the stories work primarily off the characters of Paul Jobison and Tucker Hudson to illustrate the idea that gaining awareness is hardly ever a triumph, the real triumph coming only in accepting the defeat often present in truth, even at its bleakest and most overwhelming. The stories show the characters trying to come to terms with the fact that the universe, including their own selves, is by its very nature dead-set against their quests for perfection—the fight against the chaotic, a struggle taken up only by the quixotic.

Candy Apples: A Remembrance from the Fall

As I reached the end of what I thought would be my last loop, I stopped for a minute just to take it all in one more time...

The air was cool, but comfortable. An odd breeze would blow through every now and again and bring with it the wafted smell of cotton candy, funnel cakes, and candy apples. In the distance, the various animal noises of the exhibit building could faintly be heard. But more closely, the sounds of music and laughter echoed all around, proving to be only slightly more overwhelming than the rhythmic creaks and screeches of all those hulking machines, their lights shining down in almost every color imaginable, completely animating some areas with vivid dancing rainbows, while at the same time casting wildly distorted shadows in others. And though partly in awe of all of this, I suddenly found myself thinking how, in another half an hour, all of these things would shut down completely and only be back again in another year—then strangely enough, I came to the conclusion I didn't really care.

The fair had been one of those yearly things that I always looked forward to; while it wasn't quite up there with birthdays and Christmas, *Arm-band Nite* still held its own as a red-letter event. A year ago, I would have ridden everything there twice, but after this night, I don't know, it just didn't seem the same. I wasn't really a part of all that laughter, and while I was certainly tempted by the sweet scent of those candy apples, it was nothing but a tease—stupid braces. You know, I didn't even enter an ear of corn or jar of relish this year. It seemed at this point, the only highlight was going around to all

the rides and stands and seeing that Tishomingo County wasn't really the home of the world's ugliest people, and we played host to these folks every year to prove it.

I looked back on the events of the night: The first two hours I spent in the 4H stand, flippin' burgers, which pretty much meant I missed the rodeo, or I shouldn't say *missed*—I caught it last year and for the past four it's always been the same, and you can only see monkeys riding on border-collies for so many years before even that loses its appeal.

After my shift ended, I took advantage of the free coke and hamburger, then caught up with my friend, Tucker, by the Tilt-a-Whirl.

"Come 'ere," he said smirking, blazing-eyed, unrolling something big, "lemme show you *this*."

Unfurled, it was a huge picture of this top-heavy blond in matching light green heels and bikini bottoms, trying real hard to hold back her chest with one arm, and using the other to feed herself a slice of melon. It said "Honeydew Me" at the bottom and was signed, "Pandora Peaks." Tucker was pretty impressed with it.

So was I.

"I won it on the 'Wheel O' Prizes' over there," he said. "You orta go get you one. They got this other cool one of this chick with a boa constrictor."

"Maybe later," I shrugged, saying no without saying no. *Honestly, yeah, I'd liked to have had one, but I knew that I'd come about as close to actually honeydewing that chick as I would getting my folks to let her hang around on my wall.*

Tucker grunted a "humph." "Anyway, one more click, and I woulda got a Switchblade-knife," he said rolling the poster up, taking a lot of care not to wrinkle

Pandora's edges.

“So you're disappointed?”

“Naw, some goofy girl after me did win one, when she opened the box, it all fell apart.”

We talked about the pitfalls of Pakistani knives (or Pakistani anything-else for all we knew) for a while, then Tucker went on to tell me how he pissed off the balloon-and-dart guy. Apparently the guy got pretty pissed off too—according to Tucker, he pulled a knife or something and got hauled away by the cops (then again, Tucker's the same guy who said he shot a squirrel with a 45 while ridin' his bike 35 miles an hour down Turnpike Mountain Road).

We made a few go-rounds and stopped at a freak-booth with a sign that read in big red-and-yellow letters, “See the Amazing Fifty-Pound Rat, straight from South America!!!” Yeah. It had three exclamations. Then it said under that in black, “Direct from the Congo” or something like that. The price was fifty cents—fifty cents I kept in my pocket. I really doubt they made any money on that poor thing; not so much that anybody there would really know that the Congo's actually in Africa or that the rat was probably just some kinda mongoose or muskrat or something, but that everybody who lives in Tishomingo County knows you can see real *seventy-five* pound rats for free in the culvert between the baseball field and the 72-Quickstop in Burnsville.

The rest of my time, I spent putting quarters into that stupid bulldozer-game—the one that always looks like it needs just one more quarter before it pushes about seven dollars worth into the slot. I came out two dollars in the hole before I wised up. I think Tucker had run out of quarters and was trying to jam in nickels and pennies in when I left

him.

That pretty much brought me up to date and back to where I was now standing. I was getting kind of ready to go home, so I went looking for Momma, who was helping to take down the 4H booth—it was usually the first thing down. She said it'd probably be another hour before we left, so I decided to take a walk through the exhibits building. About half-way in, I came into the presence of a big burly man with a beard and more tattoos than teeth (and you gotta understand I'm not saying he had a lot of tattoos).

“Say, Big-Man, you wanna make some bucks?”

I didn't care for the sarcasm, but he had my attention.

“If you or some of ye buddies wants to make five dollars an hour, we gonna need some extra help gettin' a tent down.”

I had an hour. And I had nothin' to do really. And making five dollars sounded like a pretty good opportunity. And I knew enough about takin' down tarps from Boy Scouts-plus I'd get to see what it was like to work with the carnival. I guess that sounded like a pretty level deal for a 14-year old, or at least to me it did—I wasn't the brightest 14-year old.

So the guy took me to his set-up, which was a game where people threw dimes into fish bowls and fluted glasses to win stuffed bulldogs, inflatable baseball bats, and posters of Pandora Peaks. “Yer welcome to any dimes that are on the ground, but that don't mean any you drop, so don't get no smart ideas, and if I see you stealin' outta the jars—well, I just better not see you stealin' outta jars.”

Aw shit.

Yeah, I was pretty stupid for a 14-year old. I thought it would be really cool to

see what it was like to work with the carnival. Instead, I found myself in this situation: sweating beside some old guy everybody called Second-Strike Stevie for some reason, who only looked at me to make sure I was keeping pace and not dropping dimes. The guy that recruited me had gone back to his office, a green school-bus, and returned with a big thermos, a nasty attitude, and fruity breath. I got in a chicken-and-egg argument with myself over whether all these folks became alcoholics after they realized they were working with the fair or vice-versa. Of course, I didn't think too long, 'cause ol' Second-Strike began cussing me for not working fast enough, which caught the attention of the man with the thermos, who in turn found some four-letter words he had missed.

Luckily, about that time, Momma came up.

“What're you doin'?”

There wasn't really a way to sum up the situation.

“Well, come on, I'm ready to go.”

The man set his thermos down with a thud, walked towards Momma with slow, heavy, miscalculated steps and said, “Lady, he promised to work. He ain't finished to we get this tent down.”

“I have to go, and I'm taking him home, now-”

“The hell—”

Aw shit.

It seemed I was in the middle of what would probably be the biggest face-off I'd ever see—on one side, a hairy wad of toothless muscle powered by alcohol and backed up by Second-Strike Stevie; and on the other...my Momma. They just stared at each other for what I figured was about five minutes. The big dude kept swelling his chest up,

flexing his fingers in and out of fists. Momma didn't really do much of anything except arch her eyebrows. I was pretty scared, I'll admit. The thought of the balloon guy pulling a knife on Tucker kept running through my mind. It was sort of sad—my only comfort was in hoping Tuck was as full of it when he told me that as he was the rest of the time. But then, all of the sudden, the man pulled out of his stare long enough to roll his eyes, curse under his breath, and reach into his pocket. I couldn't believe it. He'd caved. He even went ahead and gave me five dollars even though I'd only been there probably only half an hour. I guess that was the first time for him and me both to learn that it don't matter how many tattoos you got, there's no standin' up to my Momma.

Momma and I left then, and as we walked away, I heard Stevie say something about "hope you enjoy your nice warm house and TV." I thought of tellin' him if he had a real job, he could, too. Then I decided it would be a waste for Momma and Deddy to spend all that money on braces and me lose all my teeth-hell, then I'd fit in with the rest of these guys. Naw, no need to push my luck—I'd said and done enough for tonight.

We walked on out toward the car, but I stopped for a minute. I found myself in the exact same spot I was before. I looked back over my shoulder. The bright dancing lights had tired out. The music and laughter had stopped. There was no longer a trace of the cotton candy in the air. The candy, the apples—all of it had gone, leaving only the soured scent of manure sweeping across from the exhibit barn and blowing over my shoulder, carried by what was turning to be a bitter-cold wind. The sights and sounds were all gone now, though I'm sure if I'd listened hard enough I could still hear ol' Stevie cussing about my TV set.

I don't know what I was expecting that night. I just know it sure wasn't what I

got. I guess it was kind of like I peered under the rusting cowling of what I once thought was a beautiful machine, and though I'd already begun to suspect it, was still disappointed to see that only greasy wheels and cogs turned inside...

Naw, the fair just wasn't what it used to be.

Risk Unending

It was seven o'clock and Paul Jobison had yet to show up. Bored with waiting, Uriah Thornton sat staring across the small coffee table and over the shoulder of his roommate, Nicholaus Marks, into the bare pale grayish-green walls of the dorm room. Except for the tiny perforations of the concrete blocks and the grid of thin smooth mortar lines that barely separated one block from the other, the wall was little more than one mass of the ugly shade. Posters weren't allowed-no islands in the sea of green. "You know, it's the same puke-green psychologists advise prison boards to paint cells to keep cons tranquil," he said as if he were surveying the dorm walls for the first time.

Nick looked up from the Risk gameboard he had set up on the table and over to Uriah, "Do what?"

"Hm? Aw, nothing. Thinking out loud. Nevermind. Should I go ahead and deal out the cards and set up the men on the territories so they'll be ready when he shows up?"

"Nah, don't do that. First thing he'll do is say we cheated, *Y'all peckerwoods rig my cards?* Like he don't always win anyway."

"You think he'll be pissed off about your new rules? You remember the way he acted about your new *Trivial Pursuit* rules."

Before Nick could answer, the door flew open. In it stood Tucker Hudson, spitting Skoal juice into a Mountain Dew bottle and looking stupidly about the room. Along with boots, Wranglers, and his intramural football t-shirt, looking about stupidly was a trademark of his.

“He not here yet?”

“No, I reckon he will be,” replied Nick, “I didn’t see him in class today, though. His roommate said something about him going to the doctor.”

“Five bucks says he takes off when you tell him the rules.”

“I’ll take the bet. I figure he’ll see the wisdom of it.” Nick eyed the bottle in Tucker’s hand, “I thought you quit chewing tobacco.”

“I did. But I started dippin Skoal to help me quit.”

Uriah, stared up from his neat formation of blue cannons, mounted horses, and footsoldiers: “Wasn’t the reason you started chewing to help stop smoking cigarettes?”

“Yeah, what of it?”

“Nothing. Just wondering what’s next.”

“Pot.” Tucker smiled, “Ooh, hey, can I turn your TV on?” he asked, having already done so. He fingered the remote until an off-key vocal rendition of “A Little Talk With Jesus” emanated from the box at full-volume.

Nick flinched. “Turn that crap down. What the hell is that?”

“TV-63.” TV-63 was a locally owned television station that aired transmissions of *The Trinity Broadcast Network* in the daytime and its own public access-type shows in the evening. “You never seen this before?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Nick replied, “the crying chick with the big titties and the pink hair-looks like somebody mixed Dolly Parton and Tammy Faye Baker together in a vat of strawberry Koolaid.”

“I’d do ‘er, Tucker said, plopping backwards onto Uriah’s bed.

“Who wouldn’t you?”

“Aw, sorry to offend, *Reverend* Uriah. I guess that counts as blast-flemmy to a preacher-to-be, huh?”

“Tucker, *atheists* would think doing anything with that woman is offensive—besides, I think it’d only count as blasphemy if she were actually an agent of God. I don’t think this crap even counts as Christian. Amazing. What’s supposed to be about meekness, spirit over the material, and giving your all for your Creator in the course of the world ends up being preached by men in toupees and women with boob-jobs and two-inch makeup who sit on mock-thrones and tell you if you just stick your hand on the screen, you can make it to heaven.”

Tucker glared at Nick. Nick sighed, “He’s been practicing this one, let him roll with it.”

“No wonder people think Christianity’s a fraud. We’ve let the frauds take it over—make a cartoon out of it. That’s man, though. We are all Anti-Midas. Agents of Entropy. Everything we touch, we corrupt—even the few most pure and beautiful things we have been given—” Uriah sighed, then grimaced, “especially the most pure and beautiful things, because...they’re the most delicate. It’s kinda like the memory of a great event, it slowly fades due to the weakness of our own minds—and, gradually, we invent new memories to fill the gaps until the memory is of what never happened. And we end up believin’ we have the perfect memory of a corruption instead of a corrupted memory of an event most pure. So we see stuff like this and think Christianity is screwed up. People dismiss the religion and move on to other philosophies—not realizing that they’ll just corrupt the new religions and philosophies the same way and repeat the cycle over and over. They don’t realize that if we’d just struggle against the odds—and our own

nature-to keep the memory pure to begin with...we'd be doing alright.”

Tucker fingered his whiskers, “So. What you’re saying is—”

“I’m sayin’ it doesn’t bother me for you to make fun of this crap.”

“Oh. Yeah. Okay. Anyways, Nick, the pink-haired chick is just on in the daytime though. Her and that sand-nigger who heals the people with his hands. At night it’s all these local idiots singing and playing and taking prayer requests.” He smiled. “One of the janitors here at the community college preaches at eight. You wanna go ahead and pass the cards so we can play when Paul gets here?”

“No, can’t do it. Paul’ll say we cheated him. So you gettin religion, or you just like the music that much?”

“Lemme show you,” Tucker said smiling. “Lemme borrow your phone.” He picked the cordless phone from the desk, dialed, and spit while waiting, then spoke into the receiver: “Oh yes... *Hello, Sister!* I’d just like for y’all to encourage my friend...Uriah.” Uriah jumped up from the coffee table trying to reach the receiver. “Yes, you see he thought he was...well ... homo...ya know...*sexual?*” continued Tucker, grappling with Uriah until getting him in a shoulder-lock and clasp his mouth with his hand, all the time masking his effort with faux-zeal, “but, hallelujah! He has found the Lord and sees the error of his ways...could you maybe say a prayer for him on the air? Oh? Dedicate a song? *Amazing Grace?* Oh, sure! Oh, that would be...blessed! Yeah, that’s Uriah *Thornton*-yes, T H O R N T O N. Oh, thank you. God bless you.” He hung up the phone, cackling. For a big man he did laugh like a chicken. He released Uriah.

“You...”

“Ha Ha! Whatcha gonna say? You ain’t gonna cuss me, are you, preacher-man?”

He spit.

“Tuck, honestly, I was thinking pretty seriously about it, but I think instead I’ll just go down to the lobby to get a coke,” Uriah paved a smile, and taking the phone in hand, he headed down to the lobby.

“Tuck, your roommate not playing with us tonight?” Nick nodded his head toward the room to the left next door.

“Matt? No, he’s practicing—” Nick and Tuck would have sworn the door slammed without even opening had it not been for the man now standing in front of it, biting down on his left jaw and glaring back at the door as if pissed it had the nerve to respond to his rough treatment with such a loud-mouthed and insolent womp. He was not a tall man, but broad in the shoulders. He had thinning downy blond hair that rose in the front like a duckling’s tail. His face was an unusually hyper-tensive shade of pinkish red.

“Well, about time, Paul! Where you been?” asked Nick, now shuffling the Risk cards.

“Had to go to Tupelo.” Paul waved off the matter as if it were nothing.

“I called your room earlier. Lipmann said something about you going to the doctor.”

“Uh, yeah, I had to go to the doctor.”

“Nothing major?”

“Oh, naw. Naw.” Paul reddened.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.”

“You afraid to tell us?”

“Ohh!” Tucker piped in, smirking, “I told you what you’d get for messin around with Lacy!”

“Yeah, after all she is one of your exes. Can we drop this and play the game, please?”

“No,” Tucker said looking for a reason to stall, “Uriah’s not here. Come on. What is it?”

“Yeah, Paul, what is it?”

“Go ahead and tell, can’t be worse than what we imagine. We won’t laugh or nothin.”

“Alright! *Alright, dammit. I got hemorrhoids. You happy?*” Naturally, Tucker and Nick started laughing. “*Yeah, yeah. Ha ha,*” Paul mocked laughter, stopped abruptly, and gave the finger.

“Ha ha,” Nick laughed, “That the same one the doctor used?”

“Let me reiterate.” He, again, gave the finger. “Let’s play the game.” He crouched down to his chair at the table.

“Whoa, hold on, we’ll get you a doughnut.”

“Tuck, let’s play.”

“Yeah, Tuck,” began Nick in a straight face, “stop crackin’ jokes and sit down. Can’t you see he’s just itchin and burnin to play?”

“You know, I could leave.”

“Alright, alright. What color you want?”

“Red.”

“Gimme black,” began Tuck, a smile forming on his face as he looked at the mute

television, "Ooh, hey! Shh. Here it comes." He turned the volume back up to blasting:

Well, we just had two calls come in. This next un is going out to Mr. Thornton. His friends say that they encourage him in having found the Lord and returned to the straight and narrow. Praise God! Tucker, again, started laughing like he'd found a worm--

And we had another caller... We've also been asked to dedicate this song to a Mr. Tucker Hudson, whose friends would like to support him during his ailment and, it says here, they would like to remind him that if the Lord does not find it in his will to restore him to health, that "celibacy is a virtue."

A man with a lisp began a bluegrass "Amazing Grace" and Tucker shut the television off, not laughing. Uriah stood in the doorway, with a coke and telephone in hand.

"Shut the door! You're letting the cold air in!" Paul bellowed.

"Alright, alright. Geez. Don't pop a vein."

"Too late for that!" Nick tried to stifle his laughter.

"I miss something?"

"I got hemorrhoids. Before you even start." He held up his finger. The finger was to Paul what looking stupid was to Tucker. "Sit down and let's get started so I can beat the crap out of y'all." Paul shuffled through his hand of territory cards. "Aw, what is *this crap*? Mostly Europe and the middle-east! How can I do anything with that. Nobody can spread to the whole world starting out in the Middle East. Shit. Y'all peckerwoods rig my cards?" Nick shot a glance to the other two.

"No, I tried, Nick wouldn't let me." Uriah stammered, "Paul. What's it like?"

“What?”

“Hemorrhoids.”

“Whaddaya mean *what’s it like??* It’s a pain in the ass—roll for firsts.”

Tucker rolled. “Three. Shyeeit.”

Uriah, “Four.”

Nick, “One.”

Paul then rolled. Careful that the one-side was facing up between his thumb and middle finger, he flicked the cube into a straight-line tumble waving his hand over it until it came to rest. “Six. Read it and weep. Y’all go ahead and place y’all’s one man per territory while I figure out how I’m gonna win with this crap.”

Nick had always been apprehensive of the way Paul rolled. “You know, I don’t think it’s fair to roll the dice like that. You just as well set it on the table six-end up. You should *roll* it like you’re supposed to. Leave off that,” he waved his hand, “magic crap.”

“Nick, first off, magic is just what we call science we’ve yet to understand. Second, don’t blame me for learning how to get a six every time. Anyone can learn. If y’all don’t like my winning, learn to do it yourselves. I shouldn’t ignore a skill I’ve learned just because y’all can’t do it yet. Way I figure, if y’all all learn to do it my way, the game’ll go up to a higher plane—we can take most of the chance out of it and let it be pure strategy like it ought to.”

“You know the game is called *Risk*.” Nick thought of informing Paul of the new rules he’d devised, but figured this wouldn’t be the best time.

“Tucker, where’s Matt at tonight?” Paul asked, avoiding trying to deny the name of the game.

“Aw,” he spat, “he’s next door, practicing for the play tryouts.”

“Matt’s practicing for a play?! What is it?”

“*Hamlet*, or some crap. He’s doing it because he’s after this chick who’s into it.”

“Pretty surprising, huh?” Nick asked.

“Really surprising. Not so much that Matt would go so far as to try out for a play to chase a woman...hell, he’d do most anything. But, number one, I can’t believe that the community college is going to try to put on *Hamlet*. And number two, being as this is a girl that Matt is pursuing, then that means that there is a cheerleader who is interested in Shakespeare—that blows my mind.”

“How do you know she’s a cheerleader?” Uriah asked.

“Because it’s Matt,” replied Paul. “That’s all he ever goes for. Never actually gets one. But all he goes for. Doesn’t even really matter if she’s good-looking or not.”

“It’s true,” Tucker agreed. “Hell, put a pleated skirt on a goat, lay a megaphone beside it, he’d chase it.”

“Probably have better luck with the goat, though. Y’all done?” Nick tapped each side of his deck of cards on the table and started a neat stack to the side of the board.

“Hold on a sec,” Uriah said, “Got one more man to plant in Komma-koochie. So, then, Matt’s never had any luck with the cheerleaders?”

“Nah.” He spat. “Man, he does try though. He sure primps for ‘em. I swear, it takes him forty-five minutes to comb and spray his hair in the mornin. He uses two mirrors. Aw, and I hate to admit I saw this, but do you know how, uh, when you tuck your shirt tail in and it kinda... bunches out in the back? Well, I woke up one morning, I’z going to the bathroom, and there he was with his pants around his knees, holdin—

kinda...clutching his shirt tail in his...ass-crack. I was like, 'what the hell are you doin there, Pele?' and he got all red started talking about how it keeps his shirt from poofing out in the back and making him look fat if he just sorta...holds it with his butt and all until he snaps his pants-"

"He's always trying to sit at the cheerleader table," Paul added, anxious to take the conversation a degree off its present trajectory. "Won't hardly sit around us-I'm gonna start placing men ten at a time-it's sort of sad really...you can watch and see that they just tolerate him more than welcome him." The players began placing in turn ten men at a time on the board. As they did, a voice came bleeding through the left wall. With each turn it rose in volume and clarity, until it became obvious it was Matt's rendition of the "To be or not to be" soliloquy from Hamlet. The four men at the table looked around at each other, smiling nervously. It was a poor rendition. Beyond poor. It was embarrassing. Finally, Tucker rose from the table and beat his fist on the wall, roaring:

"Knock it off, Pele! We're trying to play a game in here."

"None of y'all ever think of, well, talking to him?" asked Uriah in a small but urgent voice, "I mean to keep him from making a fool out of himself?"

"*Shyee-it-naw!*" chortled Tucker without hesitation, "It'd just hurt his feelings. Plus, if he stopped tryin, makin fun of him wouldn't be so much fun."

"I figure it's better to just let him be a *romantic*," added Nick. "Let him chase so long as he has the illusion he is going to get something from it. As long as he thinks he'll succeed in the end, he's happy."

"I don't know if that's being *romantic*," Uriah replied. "Blissfully ignorant

maybe. Not romantic. I think for a person to be romantic, they have to see through the illusion, realize that they more than likely won't succeed, but try anyway."

"Shyee-it. 'At's not *ro-mannic*, 'at's just styupid! Sounds like all 'em damn knights we had to read about in the twel'th grade."

"Well, whatever you call it, it's better that he believe he can actually get somewhere with one of these girls. I'm not gonna be the one to depress him-well, y'all are all placed. I am officially starting my conquest. Let's see, I get my three free men, which I will place right here in India, and I guess I'll be attacking Great Britain first. Tucker, lock and load, guv-na." Paul picked the game-box lid from beside the table leg and they rolled dice in it. He did the hand thing again. "I win. Like I was saying, I think it's better for Matt to be ignorant and happy than to be in the shape my ol' roommate is in--"

"How is Lipmann?" Uriah asked.

"About the same. Sleeps all the time. If he ever goes to class, he goes in his bathrobe. I think most afternoons, now, he goes home. He told me yesterday he was going home to chop wood for his momma. I think he was leaving again tonight. It's amazing the way that turned out. When him and Loreli-the chorus chick-started dating, she was the one depressed all the time. I'd listen to him try and talk her out of crying over this or that on the phone every night. Now she's broke up with him, and I see her around campus smiling just as pretty as you please with her new boyfriend, and Mike hardly ever gets out of bed. *What's the point* he says. I don't know if he'd have taken it so hard if she hadn't been his first."

"First what?" Tucker asked, donning his trademark.

“I reckon she was the first girl he’d made it with.”

“Sucked the life out of him—right through his pecker.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s about what I’m saying, Tuck—I’m taking your Ukraine now by the way.”

“I figured.” Tucker rolled the dice, “Three and two. Crap.”

Paul rolled, “Triple-six. In my opinion, though, that’s about all women ever do. If I can have the theology and classical mythology majors here back me up,” he nodded to Nick and Uriah, “it seems to me women are always trouble. Look at your mythology. Helen caused the whole war of Troy.” Nick nodded. “Take Gilgamesh. He had this wild rival he was scared would outdo him, so what does he do? He leaves him a whore. The Enkidu guy finds her, wears himself out, then realizes he’s subordinate to Gilgamesh because of it somehow. Heck, think about all the creation myths...sex with women always causes the trouble. The Greeks thought all ill came out of Pandora’s *‘box’*....Christians think it was Eve’s *‘fruit’*... Apples-hell. Dollars to doughnuts that was a cherry tree.”

“I’m not real sure about all that, Paul,” Uriah said.

“Makes sense to me, though,” Tucker said thoughtfully, “Just like in the Smurfs.”

Everyone turned to him.

“The SMURFS—you don’t remember? Gargamel made Smurfette to help kill all the Smurfs.”

“I appreciate you backin me up, Tucker. Now I’ll be taking Scandinavia from you.”

“Paul?” said Nick slowly.

“Hm?”

“How come you so late today? Surely you weren’t at the doctor’s the whole time.”

“Oh, nah. But I was there late. Buncha mess they put me through—incidentally, today’s words of wisdom: No amount of K-Y can slide room for self-pride into a proctology exam—then had to go to the drugstore. Then, well, I had to, well, Lacy wanted me to meet her while I was in Tupelo.” He reddened again. “Then coming home, I got stuck at that damned Baldwin red-light. Had to sit and wait while the line of yokels drove across the four-lane wavin’ at me!”

“Waving at you?” Uriah asked.

“Yeah, one of em saw I was pissed at having to stop, so he was bein a smart-ass, wavin and smilin. I waved back with as many fingers as he had teeth.” He got redder. “Is it just me or is it not the damn stupidest thing in the world for frickin interstate traffic to have to stop for a buncha slack-jaws on a county road?”

“A lot of people died crossing that intersection,” Uriah said.

“Well, shit! If some morons can’t understand that a big red octagon means stop, maybe we’re better off without them-called natural selection, ain’t it?!”

“Not to be a smart-alec,” Nick began, “but I never figured I’d be hearing Darwinism from a guy 5’6” that has premature baldness and had to wear braces for three years.”

“Well you know, he has occupied what would be Poland and is trying to conquer Europe...” Uriah said, looking at the board.

“Yeah, and I’ll be taking the whole map soon.” He heiled.

“Well, not exactly, Paul...” Nick flinched as he said the words.

“Say what?”

“Well, I’ve—*We’ve*—come up with some new rules...”

“Do what?”

“It’s kinda like what we did with Trivial Pursuit.”

“Whoa, you mean that stupid rule you made up where if you get all six pie pieces, you have to take three out, and give one to the man with the fewest? That was a load of shit! All we did was go around and around the board.

“Yeah, it’s kinda like that....see, when you get five territories, you have to give two to the person with the fewest men...”

“There’s no winner then?”

“Well, no, not one *altogether* winner...”

“So it never ends, then. This is the stupidest crap I’ve ever heard.”

“I think it sounds fair.”

“Hell! Fair to you. You always lose. Why should I give up winning just because y’all can’t do it?” Paul glared at Uriah. “What do you think about it?”

Uriah, stammering, replied, “Well...it is just a game. It’s not that important if I win or lose. It’s just a diversion. There are bigger things to me than winning this game.”

“What about you, Tuck, surely you think it’s stupid.”

“Uh, well, um, I mean, I’m just here to be here. It don’t really matter that much. I never expected to win anyways.”

Paul kicked his chair out from under him and looked over at the others. “So it just keeps going on—just different colors swapping back and forth dominating the board?

Well, that’s the dumbest thing I ever heard. I quit.” A second later, the door slammed and

he was gone down to his own room, which was to the other side of Tucker's.

"Should we put the game up?" Tucker asked Nick.

"No," Nick said looking down at the map-board, "world can't stop because we lose a player. It's your turn next. We'll just divide his men between us three."

"You think he's gonna be this way for a while, Nick?" Uriah asked.

"I doubt it. Probably won't be playing with us anymore, though. Let's play."

"That's five dollars by the way."

Nick fished out the five-spot for Tucker.

Paul flicked the light switch on in his room. The fluorescent light flashed and faded a few times before coming on. The room was much the same as Nick and Uriah's. He emptied his pockets on his desk and went to the mirror that hung above the lavatory sink. For a few minutes he stood looking into it, running his fingers through the fine hair that bushed about his temples. He reached into his mouth and pulled out his upper plastic retainer. He held it up, looking at the embedded prosthetics of the two upper lateral teeth that had never come in. He put the retainer, teeth and all, into a small Tupperware bowl sitting on the sink. *I am bald. I pull my teeth out at the end of the day, and I am an asshole—with hemorrhoids. Dear God, I am a codger at 20.* He looked at himself, giving a weak, now-gapped smile: *Guess I'm not the only one who thinks so, eh?* He gave himself a feeble wink: *Can't blame 'er, don't reckon.* He stepped back from the mirror and examined it as a whole. Contemplating. Something building. He stepped back toward it, suddenly grasped it at both sides, pulled hard, and ripped it upward from its fixtures on the wall. Behind where it had hung was a square cavity. Paul reached into the hole in the

wall and pulled up on two small ropes that lifted a little plank with a bottle of Jack, a bottle of cheap vodka, and a glass commandeered from the Union. Pouring some vodka, he put the mirror back, went to his bed, and lay back looking at the walls. *That's one ugly-ass shade of green. Like pus or something.* But as he gazed he began to notice the color somehow seemed calming. He lay there for a while. Then a thought came to him. Just a hunch maybe. He groped for the television remote and flipped to channel 63.

We got us another special request. This one is going out to Paul, whose friends want him to know they are thinking about him while he tries to recover from his illness. It says here, they would just like to remind him that his illness will always be behind him. "I'll Fly Away," Earl.

Paul nodded to himself. He had known Tucker for a long time. He flipped the television off, hoping for silence. But the absence of the television gave way to another sound. Bleeding through the wall to the right of him he could hear the voice coming through the pale green mortar:

...whether tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune or to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them...to die; to sleep...

He considered pounding on the wall, but decided against it. Matt had improved.

...No more, and by a sleep to say we end the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to...

Lying down, Paul sipped from his glass and stared into the wall--as if he believed he could track the voice's true origin not just to one desperate man next-door but to some unseen source, some welling heart—or many hearts—hidden deep within an ebbing sea

of grayish-green—

...tis a consumption devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep. To sleep,

perchance to dream...

—until he finally nodded off to sleep.

Into the Air

The thick smell of burning hickory and vaporized hog fat rose from the side-turned barrel and up toward the heavens. It hung up there a bit, a broad cloud shading the stars, hovering between the sky and the dark blue depths of the lake. Then it settled back again, saturating the cool October air around the pavilion. Tucker sat cross-legged on the bench of the picnic table fidgeting with his harmonica in one hand, holding a Black and Mild in the other. He watched the little bits of ash as they rose with the smoke from the cooker, cooled and came back to the earth in a gray fog. He took a deep breath, held his harmonica to his pursed lips and blew a weak chord, then looked around the pavilion, packed with people clapping their hands to the music on stage, sighed, and took a puff of the cigar.

Roger and the other old guys were picking and singing some Johnny Cash songs. They were doing "Ring of Fire." Roger was an old codger and had the voice for the song, low, sort of raspy, but smoothed out by a beery slur he'd been working on for the past couple of hours. Tucker looked back down at the harmonica. *Get out that French-harp boy*, he could hear Roger saying. *I ain't that good at it*, he'd reply. *By damn, son, play some of them blues, you do it fine*, Roger would say leaning back, bending the bill of his cap, cradling his beer. Tucker would pull the harmonica out of his pocket and play a few licks that, to him, sounded a lot better when he played them alone in his room.

Outside, the whining reeds didn't sound the same, nowhere near as rich. Inside, the bending metal tones would bounce off the walls, harmonize with themselves, and, on

their own support, seem to sustain themselves forever. Out here, there were no walls to reverberate off of. The sound just floated out into the air and died there. Tucker would look at the faces of all those around him as he played. Nobody smiled. Except Roger. Tucker would slide the harmonica back into the seat pocket of his Wranglers. *Damn good, son*, Roger would say, *We ort to get you to play at the hog-cookin'*. And they did. Sooner or later tonight he was going to have to be on stage.

Tucker frowned. He took a puff of the cigar, holding the smoke in his mouth, then he puckered his lips, widened them, and thrust a ring of smoke into the air in front of him. He watched as the little widening halo struggled upwards, almost coming to rest above his head before the draft mangled it to twisted wisps and carried it away. He looked around for his aunt and uncle. Couldn't see them anywhere. His cousin Nick was nowhere around.

Well. Shyeeit-far, he whispered to himself. He thought of going back to their camper. Then he saw what walked up.

Dear God, what walked up.

Her blond hair bounced and swayed as she stepped through the smoky haze, through the throngs of old retirees and weathered weekend outdoorsmen scattered in their lawn chairs around the pavilion. She glowed from out of the grayness, stepping lightly, smiling wide-eyed at all those she passed. It was as if the smoke couldn't touch her, couldn't obscure her, as if her light flowing hair was a wind of its own, a golden glowing mist that in its saturation left no room for anything else. Tucker stared into her face, knowing he recognized her from somewhere. *The county newspaper*, he thought. *If anywhere*. Something told him that he could recognize her even if he'd never seen her

before, recognize the pure perfection that we are all pre-programmed to recognize, and yet the perfection that exists only on paper.

Tucker threw his cigar down.

* * *

She'd come up and talked to Roger for a bit and was gone again. Tucker looked around for where she'd disappeared to, which was hard since he was trying to avoid eye contact with Roger for the time being. Any of that and the stall would be done. He couldn't see her. He did spot Nick, who was on his way over.

"You played yet?" Nick asked, slapping him on the back.

"Nope."

"Still smoking those nasty Black and Milds, huh?" Tucker had forgotten he left the pack on the table in front of him.

"Actually, I think I just quit."

"Well. What prompted that?"

"Girl."

"That figures."

"Howzat?"

Nick plopped down on the bench next to Tucker, "Smokes for a girl. Even trade. Think about it. Both make some dudes a little watery at the eyes when in the same room, both can give you a little buzz when you take them to your lips and draw in...and both slowly kill you from the inside out."

"Ain't you damn witty."

"Something Paul told me. A girl, though? I thought most of the chicks you date

smoked, too.”

“Not this one.”

“Got a name, does she?”

“I’m sure she does. I don’t know it yet. I’z hoping you could help me with that part. You know a blond girl hangs out around here?”

“Ohhhh...”

“Ohhhh-what?”

“Oh, Hannah-Kate Cooper, that’s what.”

“What do you know about her?”

“Preacher’s daughter. Does a lot of beauty pageants. I think she’s cutting a gospel CD. Too good for you.”

“Screw you.”

“Exactly. She’s not into ‘screw you’ guys. Listen, I’m telling you, it wouldn’t fly. And don’t sully up like that. She’s not the easy type.”

“That’s the whole d—, I mean, that’s the whole point.” Tucker looked down at the table where the harmonica and the pack of cigars lay. “I’m tired of all them slutty chicks,” he said, screwing his mouth to the side. “I mean, I’m tired of all these girls, all I gotta do is walk up and say, ‘Hey, I’m Tuck. How you doin?’ and they look me up and down and in twenty minutes, they’re saying ‘touch me.’ I don’t want that. Don’t know that I ever did. Just what I got when I opened my mouth. I mean, is it really too much to ask to want something decent?”

“What I’m saying is—”

“Hush up. There she is.”

And there she was. She was whispering something to Roger up near the microphone. Roger nodded to her, said something to the band, and walked to the side. The guitars lit up a light strum, the drum fell in, and, *Dear God*, she was beginning to sing.

“What I’m saying is—”

“Hush up.”

It was an Allison Krauss song: *It’s amazing how you can speak right to my heart...*

“I’m just—”

“Dammit, hush up. I’m trying to listen.”

Without saying a word, you can light up the dark...

It was beautiful. She smiled as she sang. It was hard to believe that such sound was coming out of her, she showing no effort at all. It was almost as if it wasn’t coming out of her mouth at all, but that she were simply whispering her wishes into the wind; and that air, shifting and smoky as it was, was smitten obeying her, stopping dead and clear to make and carry a song for her like bagpipes clean across the lake. He imagined all those late night trot-line runners, drawn by the song, crashing their boats into the driftwood and rocks at the shore.

But it was even more than how she sang. It was what she sang:

...you say it best, when you say nothing at all...

Words always escaped him. No they didn’t escape him. That was the problem. They couldn’t make it out of him. Instead, they dammed up in his head, his mouth for some reason not *big? good?* enough to carry them out. When he tried to say them, they

either came out mangled in stutter and *I-mean's* or just sounding simple and stupid. What seemed like silver thoughts tarnished as soon as they made it into the air. Like now. In his head, Tucker was trying to describe her song. He was imagining a chorus of crows, jealous of the mocking birds, flying into the night sky, pecking out the stars, and once returning, opening their beaks to flood forth to the darkened world a melody of pure warmth and light.

“Damn. She’s good.” made it out in an oxidized whisper. *That crow crap was stupid anyway.*

She finished the song, everyone clapping for her. Tucker sat and stared. To his right, Nick had begun talking about some observation or the other he had made. Something about all the people in campers being people who used to live in trailer-parks who’d made enough money to live in houses now but came to the campground because they couldn’t get the white-trash out of their blood. Tucker screwed his face, glaring at him, *Why is it he can use words, and wastes them on crap like that?*

Turning back to the girl, he met her smiling eyes. She waved. *To me? No. To Nick. And, Dear God, she was coming over.*

“You’ll introduce me to her, right?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Nick replied. “Won’t do you much good, though.”

“Scr-, I mean, if you say so.” Tucker snatched the pack of cigars from the table plank and wrestled them into the back pocket of his Wranglers. *But now. What to say?*

Nick and Tucker stood as she approached.

Can it be said?

“That was really nice,” Nick said to her. Tucker nodded.

By me?

She smiled, looked down and back up, her eyelashes fluttering, doing little humble bows of their own. “Thanks,” she said. She turned to Tucker. He nodded.

“Oh,” Nick said, “this is my cousin, Tucker. Tucker, this is Hannah-Kate Cooper.”

She smiled at Tucker, waiting for him to say something.

This is it. What to say? Something. That, “Hey, I’m Tuck, how you doin’” crap just isn’t going to cut with this one. It has to be perfect. I got it!

“Hey. I’m Tuck. How you doin’?”

Shit.

She looked him up and down. She smiled.

* * *

Tucker wouldn’t have traded anything in the world for the look on Nick’s face when Hannah-Kate asked him to walk to her camper with her. Her camper was in the far-lot, built into the slope of the hill opposite the restrooms and gray-water dump. She had to retrieve something of her mother’s and didn’t want to walk alone. He stood at the door of her camper, waiting for her to come back out, trying to smell his own breath for cigar smoke, pinching the chest of his t-shirt and pulling it to his nose to sniff. *Good. Barely there.*

“Got it,” she said, closing the screen door behind her. Whatever it was must’ve been small. “Let’s walk by the little path next to the lake,” she said.

Tucker agreed, and they walked alone together, mostly in silence. He looked over to her and started to speak, then faced forward, attempting to smell his breath again.

Okay. He turned back to her. "Were you? Were you like, in the paper a couple of weeks ago?"

"Hm? Oh, I don't know, maybe," she half-smiled and let it fade slowly. "I'm not really from right around here. But I imagine so. I don't even keep up with it, now."

"Don't keep up with it?"

"All this stuff Momma has me do, pageants and things. She sends articles off to papers and stuff, but I don't keep up with it."

"You don't like doing it? The singing, though. I mean, do you not like to sing?"

"Well. I used to." She stared out across the lake.

"Now?"

"Not so much." She turned to him, "I mean, it's like this isn't the stuff I want to do. It's what Momma thinks I should do." She stopped, and he stopped beside her. "It's pretty, isn't it?" she asked, looking back out across the water. Away from the pavilion, the thick grayness of the smoke didn't block the stars, and the water so mirrored the sky that they looked like one starry sea separated briefly by the thin line of loblolly on the opposite shore. She put her hand on his shoulder.

"It is that." He turned to her, his eyes meeting hers. *What do I say now?* "Almost as pretty as you." *Could've come out worse.* She smiled at him again.

"Want to sit down a while?" she asked, lowering herself to the sandy, leaf-littered earth, her hand running down his arm.

"Fine by me," he replied, watching her lower herself down. When she bent her knees, her shirt rode up and her jeans rode down, revealing the orange thong of the bathing suit underneath. He stared, then turned away, scolding himself. How could he

insult her chastity like that? *There's thong-staring girls, and then there's these.* He sat down beside her, and she scooched closer.

After some time, he finally made the difficult decision to put his arm around her and found himself looking in her eyes again. He hadn't noticed it before, but the light was enough here to see that they were gray and not blue like he thought. She moved her lips as to say something, but apparently changed her mind, and bent her head in to his. He faltered, but then followed through.

They kissed.

She was a lot more *enthusiastic?* than he expected. He felt her tongue reaching for the back of his throat, felt her hands rough-pushing down his back, down to his belt then up again. He felt the hands drawing around front, then grabbing on to his hands just above the wrists, spooning them, spreading and pulling them palm-out toward the base of her rib-cage, pushing them upwards against her breasts. She moved her head to the right, tracing with her nose and lips a light arc from his mouth to his ear. "Touch me," she whispered in a heavy breath before returning her lips to his.

And there it all went, straight to hell.

For the split-second before he pulled away, he didn't taste the sweetness of her breath, just the carbon char of his own. *Was he tasting it in his mouth or hers? With his tongue or hers?* He didn't know. She pulled for him to come back, but he stood, frozen.

"What's wrong?"

"Everything...and me."

"What?"

"I'm sorry, Hannah, but I have to go." He turned from her, facing now back to the

haze that surrounded the pavilion. She said nothing.

He didn't stop to talk to Nick or Roger before he left. He didn't really want to say anything to anyone, much less play harmonica. *Why am I leaving?* he asked himself, getting into the car. He felt he knew, but couldn't explain it clearly, not even to himself.

One minute alone with me and that's what happened to her. I spend all this time cursing the air, and how—how the hell—am I any better?

* * *

He sat on the foot of his bed, twirling his harmonica in his fingers. The drive home had been both slow and fast. He'd thrown the Black and Milds out the window somewhere on Turnpike, vowing never to smoke again, never take in another draw-only to exhale it, set it loose where it should never be. He had the feeling he was going to make several vows, the specifics and consequences of which he'd yet to figure out. *That's what tomorrow's for.* For now, he was worried only with the crinkled newspaper to his right. He crackle-flapped the pages open to where she was, beaming in a white dress and sliver tiara, and tried to block out the reality of what had happened, what had corroded, dissolved into the air. He let the reality, corrupted ideal, slip back into the mind, into memory, where it can be either hidden or rarefied and made pure again. Right now, he could only hide it, save it to face another day. For now, he would only allow himself to focus on the perfection that exists in the clean vacuum of the mind. Only in black and white.

Striking the Set

Matt and Grace sat together on the weathered brown couch in the lobby of the community theatre. The play had ended. The run was over. Besides the director and three others striking the set, they were the only ones left in the building. Matt played with the script in his hands, folding it over, riffling the pages, shuffling it in and out of the playbill he held with it. He looked at her bare feet, as they lay in his lap, and traced with his eyes up her body, planting them on her resting face as it lay like a lamb in a bed of sandy blonde straw spilling over the arm of the sofa. Her lids were closed, replacing her dull greenish brown eyes with two smooth, sensual ovals of violet shadow.

“Tired?”

“Hm?”

“Tired?”

“A little.”

His face contorted as if he was beginning to pass a thought too big for his mouth to carry, as if he'd forgotten the words to do it. He looked back down to the script. From between the pages he pulled out the graffitied playbill and began looking through the signatures of the other cast members. He turned to the cast biography page and smiled faintly. There she had written in that bright pink ink used only by girls under the age of 15, or those who wish they still were:

Matt! Hey Babe! You're a great actor!

Below that was a heart with a dash and the letter U. Then her name, Grace Lewis,

and beside that in big bubbly cheerleading letters, DANCER! Matt looked away from the script and back at Grace's feet. Again he traced up her body, this time stopping where her Umbros, blue ones, hung loosely, revealing her large and dimpled thighs. He turned back to the script and playbill.

"Matt?"

"Hm?"

"Was I—? Hm."

"Hm?"

"Was I—?"

"Was you?"

"Was I—"

"Was you what?"

"Was I okay today? Did you like it? It didn't feel right to me. Something was missing."

His eyes shot down to the big pink DANCER. He glanced over to the big white legs, then back to the DANCER.

"Uh, yeah. You did okay, as far as I could tell. I, uh, I'm not an expert. Not something I've really done before, I mean. But I mean, yeah. Sure."

"Matt?"

"Hm?"

"Are we talking about the same thing?"

"I guess. Wait. What?"

"What?"

“What are you talking about?”

“What are you talking about?”

Matt paused. He was back to the biographies in the playbill, this time his eyes landing on the words Communications Major in the clear black letters under his name.

“Well?” She asked, sitting up, drawing her feet from his lap and her knees to her chest.

“Well-what?”

“What were you talking about?”

“Dancing. I thought. What were you talking about?”

“Dancing.” She sighed. She looked at her legs, straightened them, and yanked downward on the Umbros. “I’m not losing any weight. I think I’m gaining. I need to get back to where I was. Since I don’t cheerlead it’s hard. I’m getting fat.”

Matt was nodding yes. He stopped. “You are eating right, aren’t you?” He narrowed his eyes.

“Yes.”

“You’re not trying too hard to lose again?”

“No.”

“Get those things out of your purse?”

“Yeah. You had no right to look in there, you know.”

“Yeah, but I was right for doing it.”

“Matt?”

“Hm?”

“Kiss me?”

“I don’t think that’d be a very good idea now.”

“It was a good idea before.”

“Well, before, we hadn’t—”

“Shut down the lights,” came a yell from inside the auditorium. The lights in the lobby went down.

“They’re getting ready to go,” Matt said.

“No, they’re still hammering and drilling in the workshop—they just turned it off not to waste electricity. They got to save. Grant didn’t come through. Matt. Kiss me, please?”

“It’s not right.”

“But this morning—”

“It wasn’t right then, either.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I made a mistake.”

“Maybe I like mistakes.”

“Yeah, I guess you must.”

“God! When did you turn into such an asshole?”

Matt sucked a chestful of air, then spewed it between his tongue and teeth. “I guess if that’s what I am now, then I’ve been one for a while,” he said with a calm contemplative grimace. “I said I’ve made a mistake. What can I give you? What else do you want?”

“For it not to be a mistake.” Her eyes became a little less dull.

“I can’t help that.”

“What’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing’s wrong with you.”

“I’m what? Too dumb? You said it.”

“I never... I never said you were dumb. Damn. I never said anything like that. You are a beautiful, wonderful girl. Listen we are just too diff— No. Too the s— I mean, I am 20, and you’re—”

“Yeah, you keep saying that. It’s really, though, that you think you’re too g—”

“I care for you. That’s why I’m doing this.”

“That makes a shit-load a sense, Matt!”

“It makes sense to me. Now, anyways. I’ll probably second-guess myself in a coupla weeks.”

“I won’t be here then.”

“I know. That’s probably a good thing.”

“You didn’t seem to care about any of this, this morning,” she said more to her knees than to him. She yanked at her Umbros.

The sounds of dismantling had stopped. The volunteers had gotten the stage down and were leaving.

The director and one of the volunteers, Ken, passed by the lobby door, the director calling out, “Gracie! Gracie, we’re leaving. Come on.”

“Matt?” she asked.

“Hm?”

“Let me see your playbill.” He held it out to hand to her. She snatched it, flipped through the pages in a bustle and began to scratch and scribble with her pink pen across

the thin black letters and her own. She handed the program back and ran out to her father.

Matt stood up from the couch, squinting to make out what was written. Or what was struck through. There was a big pink block over *Hey Babe!* The heart was still there, but flanked by an F to the left and a scrunched-up c and k to the right, before the dash. She'd left *You're a great actor*. She had underlined it. He was looking at the DANCER, when a hand closed lightly, almost girlishly, on his shoulder.

He winced. "Hey Ken."

"Hey, Matt."

"Lay off the touching, dude."

"Touchy, touchy. Well, play's over. You doing the next one?"

"Nah. I really doubt I'll be able to. I'm not much of an actor anyway."

For Sake of a Passenger

About ten minutes past the Baldwyn red-light the radio cut out again.

It's such a small thing til you don't have it anymore. I make this two-and-a-half hour drive from Iuka to the University once, if not twice, a week. I work for my dad doing construction and landscaping on the weekends and come back Sunday nights to go to school. It's a long drive, and time only makes it longer. I need the radio. If nothing else, to keep me from thinking too much. From daydreaming myself off to the gravel shoulder. From replaying mistakes in my head, figuring out the way they should have gone. From thinking about where I'd be if they did go that way. From looking in the rear-view to see if I'm getting balder. From thinking about how much time I'm spending just tossing back and forth between two places, neither of them home.

In Iuka, I work doing construction and landscaping for Deddy, but I've never learned to do the work well. I was the third-born and the bookish type. There was a long time that I wanted to do nothing more than farm and 'scape alongside my Dad. But Momma never was too big on me helping when I was young. *He's gonna get hurt*, she'd tell Deddy. By the time I got old enough to calm her fears, I didn't know what to do. And it was hard being the guy learning all the time. I was years behind both my brothers and was always being corrected for mistakes made from lack of experience or the lack of attention that comes from the years of being alone at the house, the only world to explore, my own. I am the guy they describe as "book smart, but not a lot of *common* sense." I

can't deny it.

At the University, I do well, but can't help but feel that I'm behind everyone else. Maybe, because I went to community college first. Maybe, because I didn't have all the resources the other guys did when I grew up. Maybe, I'm just making excuses. But it always seems like there's something I missed out on.

So here I am swinging like pendulum from two places; the one, where I'm too bookish to fit in with the home-town folk, and the other, where I'm still too hick to fit in with the academics. They say in the fractions of fractions of a second where the pendulum comes to rest at its highest point, preparing to swing the opposite way, there is nothing but pure potential. But what the hell good is that potential when it's wasted only in swinging? The pendulum is at least keeping time. Me? I'm wasting it.

That stuff generally occupies my mind. On top of that, though, this Sunday had not been a particularly great day, and, by virtue of being so shitty, it was, naturally, foremost in my mind. Halfway to Tupelo, I found myself back in the bathtub:

I palmed the lather into my crew-cut and dunked my head under the water. As a kid, I remember thinking that if I held my whole body under water long enough, and thought real hard, I could come out of it and find myself in a different place, be a different person. I didn't figure out that that was what baptisms were about til later on. I pulled my head out of the water and twitched the water out of my ears. I heard Momma and Deddy talking in the kitchen just to the other side of the wall. I strained to make out what they were saying.

"He's up earlier than normal," Deddy said.

"He's got a date."

“A date? He not going to Church today?”

“No, he’s going to Memphis with some girl to see a play. 'Hair,' or something like that.”

“Not going to Church. A play.”

A lot of things are filtered out by paneling and studs. Disappointment isn’t one of them. It made me glad at least that Deddy’s limited knowledge of theatre kept him from realizing that what I was skipping Church, his Church, to see was about two hours of dope-smoking, draft-dodging, free-loving hippies sporadically breaking into song and dance.

I dunked my head under the water again. I pulled the stopper and stepped out of the sudsy water, letting it gulp and gurgle on down the drain...

When I came up on Tupelo, I pulled off to go through a drive-thru, though I decided to go in and get my food. I wasn’t really all that hungry, but it’s nice just to see the people. I’ve found myself doing that a lot, stopping in just to see people, but getting food since I’m there. As a result, I’m about 15 pounds heavier than at the beginning of the semester. It’s sort of ironic in a way. In an attempt to branch out to people, I’ve gotten bigger--but it seems rather than having more surface area for people to come in contact to, I’ve only increased the area for me to get lost in. *Nope, the radio still wasn’t working.*

When I pulled out of Tupelo onto 78, the clock in the car read 10:43 pm. In my mind it was about 10:43 am; I had driven out to Selmer to pick Alysia up, and we were on our way to Memphis. I was looking over at her, she’d rolled the window down and the wind was whipping over her milky white skin, lifting up her long blond hair. She’d put in these little violet-pink barrettes, it was like looking at a tulip tree caught in a gale. She

had on a pair of tight, beige, bell-bottom corduroys and a snug sweater that matched her hair-pins. She had her left hand on the console between her seat and mine. I put my right hand on top of it.

"Can we change the station?" she asked. The radio was playing then. I had it set on the classic rock station, and it was playing "Radar Love."

"Not a big Fog Hat fan?"

"This stuff sucks. Change it."

"What do you want to hear?"

"Something that has some meaning to it. Velvet Underground or Radio Head or something." Alysia is so far from anyone I've grown up around, she's hard for me to describe. Really liberal, big in to punk, she's the kind of chick I'd expect to hang around a bunch of beatnicks in black, but at the same time, she's preppy. She'd wear the black turtle-neck, as long as it came from Abercrombie and Fitch. For sure though, I can say she's really anal about music, big on songs being "deep" or something like that. I never could fathom it. To me, the whole point of music is to keep you from thinking, not encourage more. Give me some AC/DC or something that like that, "Highway to Hell" or "Shook Me All Night Long": *She was a fast machine, she kept her motor clean...*

Straight-forward stuff with more emphasis on blood-pumping melody than words.

I fished around on the dial for something to suit her, but couldn't find anything.

Then I remembered I had a Tom Petty tape in the back seat.

Let's get to the point. Let's roll another joint, and head on down the road to some place I gotta go...

Surely, that's a compromise, I thought. I reached back into the back seat, swatting

for the case. I looked back trying to find it, hanging onto the wheel with my left hand. Then I heard the tires crunching onto the gravel. The car had veered off to the right shoulder of the road.

I tried to correct it by swinging back to the left, but I went too hard and was now off that shoulder. I saw the flash of oncoming traffic across the median, and swung her hard to the right, again. The car went into a spin.

"Shit, Paul!" she screamed, grabbing on to the console and the passenger side door.

I'd swear we turned around two and a half times. The car came to a halt, tail-end first just off the right side of the road. I looked out the windshield, praying for no transfer trucks. Lucky, there was nothing behind (in front of) us at all. I looked in the rearview. Another two feet and I'd have taken out the "Buckle up Mississippi" sign. Back out the windshield, I saw the tracks we'd left, several feet of black rubber French-braid arcing over the white center line.

Alysia was cussing to herself and me. I didn't know what to do. I patted her on the head like a dropped kitten, as if enough petting could retroactively undo any damage done, "You okay? You okay?"

"I'm fine. Shit, Paul!"

The smell of burnt brake pads and rubber was stout. I again surveyed the triple-helix leading up the asphalt to the near-missed sign, "You gotta admit, though, since we're alive and stuff, that was pretty damn cool."

In retrospect that probably wasn't the best thing to say.

She glared at me, not saying anything, and she wasn't really in a talking mood for

most of the ride to Memphis, which was bad, because that's when the radio started going out. She didn't talk, and I didn't try to, either, and I sure as heck didn't try to put my hand on hers again.

At least the play was good.

"The smoke they used smelled like real marijuana smoke," Alysia told me, walking back to the car.

I took her word for it. I, honestly, didn't know.

"You know," she then said, looking at me, "I never realized how short you were, before."

I took her home.

Had it not been for me near killing her, the whole thing could've worked out well. I thought about what it might've been like, but for such a small moment of grasping for something we could've made do without.

I'd skipped out on Church. Hurt Deddy. And what had I gotten? Truth is, though, I'd skipped out on Church long ago. I don't know when I started losing my faith, but I can sure feel it now. Used to seem like such a small thing... Still, though, I can't help but wonder if things like what happened with Alysia aren't messages from God, saying *Hey, Dude, I'm really here. Better buckle down.* I think about it. I'm a twenty-two year old virgin. Nineteen of those years I can chalk up to religious principle. The last three, to lack of opportunity. I've even said "No" to girls way back when. Now, something always comes up to keep me from getting that far. When I lost my religion, I thought, there'd at least be the lack of restraint to make up for the doubt and emptiness, but I haven't gotten the chance to experience that. I'm just in the middle. Hard for me not to think, sometimes,

that it's Providence picking up when faith left off.

I've condemned myself to the world, but I'm still too naive and guilty to make a palace of it.

New Albany. Forty more minutes to the University. I pulled onto Number Thirty. Past the corporate limits on into the county, the radio came on. It was "Art Bell: Coast to Coast." They were talking about some bottomless hole in Oregon. It was pretty interesting. Apparently this guy fell in, and they could hear him months later, still yelling, but not yet making it to the other end. I was into it, until the commercials came on:

Guys, are you balding? I know how you feel. I was there, too, once. When I began to lose my hair, women just didn't look at me the same way, and, boy, did that hurt my confidence...

I changed the station. I guess there are some balding guys that get suckered in by that. I just get pissed off at it.

Attention singles. Have you heard of the Match-Network?

I reached down and cut the radio off. And, then, when I looked up, there was this old black dude standing in the middle of the road, waving his arms. I threw on the brakes. He wasn't as close as surprise made him seem—still thirty feet in front of me when I came to a stop, so I pulled the car on up and over, and he came running up to the passenger side. I rolled the window down.

Then I realized the old black guy was a young black girl. She was tall, rail-thin, and wore a baggy shirt and pants of no noticeable shape or color. Her hair was pulled back into tight corn-rows, and she had these lolling, bloodshot, opaque-black eyes. You couldn't tell where the pupils stopped and the irises started, they were just big black dots

floating in a milky sea of red and white. Altogether, they looked like they belonged to a cow with a case of the pink. She opened the door.

“Can you give me a ride to the Bee-Quick?” she asked. I noticed she didn’t have any teeth. I looked down from her to the passenger seat. It was filled with my clothes, groceries, and all the other stuff I’d brought with me to last the week. I was about to say “No, I don’t have room,” but she was already sitting on top of it all by the time I had “N-” out. I looked where my crushed shoe box poked out from underneath her left buttock. She shut the door.

“Well. Sure. I guess so.” *What else could I say?* “I’ll take you as far as I have to turn off on my road anyway.”

I rolled the window up and started back on the road. I glanced over at her. She caught my glance, and I turned back to the road ahead, then watched her out of the corner of my eye. She was looking all around the car, her eyes shifting this way and that.

What in the hell had I just done? I’ve gone and picked up some chick strung out on crack, probably desperate enough to take me for all I got. If not kill me. I looked over at her again, trying to figure out if I could take her if it came down to it, and trying to see if there was anything that remotely resembled a gun anywhere under those baggy clothes. I guess I wasn’t exuding the façade of coolness I thought I was. Her big pink eyes stopped their rabbit-darting and burrowed into my own:

“I ain’t gon’ hurt you, baby.”

I was relieved.

“So...how much money you got?”

I wasn’t relieved anymore.

“Pocket change, baby. I mean pocket change. Surely you got a dollar or something you can give. You got a dollar?”

“Yeah, I got a dollar.”

“Got five?”

“Yeah.”

“Then give me five.”

“I’m not giving you five dollars.”

“You got five, though?”

“Yeah.”

“Then give me ten.”

“I ain’t giving you ten damn dollars.”

“Aw, cummon, honey. I’d suck yo’ dick fo’ ten dollars.”

Now...

This is a situation I’d never been in my whole life. I wasn’t about to engage in prostitution, though I won’t lie to you and not say that some demon or the other did flit it across my mind to remember that this chick didn’t have any teeth and that it might well be worth ten dollars. I was trying to think, though, *what’s the right way to say no here?*

What finally came out was, “No thankyee, Ma’am. I don’t need a ‘dick-suckin’ right now, but thankyee anyways.”

“You sure?”

“Pretty sure.”

“You won’t give me no money then?”

“Listen, I only have sixty dollars to last me through the week. I’ll give you a dollar or two.”

It was mostly silent after that. I glanced at her, and she caught it again.

I hope she doesn’t think I’m racist.

Don’t ask me why of all things that’s what I thought, then. I may well be the only guy in the world self-conscious enough to offer a ride to hitch-hiking crack-whore and then worry about her opinion of the content of my character. I extended my right hand to her, “I’m Paul, by the way.”

“Io,” she said taking my hand in hers. She didn’t shake or grip it. She just held it. For a long time. Long enough for me to *feel* her hand. It felt weird. I could feel the soft of flesh and the hard of bones on the inside, but the outside was still dry and cold. It reminded me of a sack-lunch I’d found a week too late back in grade-school, brown and crinkled, holding within something that could have once been wholesome, but now only moldy and unappealing, having been neglected to the dark depths of my backpack.

She looked me in the eye again. I tried for the radio. No dice.

“You’re sure you don’t want me--?”

“Yes, Ma’am, I’m sure. If I need anything like that, I’ll take care of it myself later tonight. I appreciate it, though.”

It was quiet again after that, except for her smacking her right arm once with her left palm. “Fly,” she said.

I noticed she was looking down into the floorboard. I had a case of Diet Pepsis down there.

“Ooh, hey, can I have one a those?” she asked. I was about to tell her to help herself, but saying that really doesn’t have the effect it should have when the person has already in fact helped themselves. She’d pulled the tab, and I watched the fizz blow up and drip down onto three folded pairs of khakis.

“You don’t care if I roll the windows down, do you?” I asked, then explained, “It’s warm in here, and my air-conditioning has gone out.” My air-conditioning had not gone out, and it was not warm. It was the fall. It was just beginning to smell in the car.

Finally, I saw the sign showing the intersection of 7 and 30 was coming up. I eased the car to the shoulder about two feet from the sign.

“Well, this is where I have to turn to go to my house. I’ll let you out up here. You can catch another ride on to the Bee-Quick.”

“No.”

“What?”

“No. Take me on to the Bee-Quick. It ain’t a half a mile.”

She wasn’t budging.

“Well, sure. Okay.”

It wasn’t all that far. I pulled up next to the convenience store and parked, waiting for her to get out.

“You gon’ give me anything?”

“I gave you a Pepsi.”

It was a damn sit-in.

“Okay, okay, here’s five,” I said handing to her the crumpled bill. She took it, reached down and got another Pepsi from my case, and got out of the car, saying nothing

else. I watched her walk over to another car to hassle, or hustle, some other guy, then I took off.

Three minutes later I pulled up in the drive-way. Home. Well, at the apartment, anyway. I carried all my junk in, then went to run some bath water. I took my clothes off, watching the clean well-water streaming into the tub. *How does a person get that desperate*, I wondered, *willing to sell themselves, live whole lives of desperation, for such small moments of joy*. I walked to the mirror and looked in, staring at the inch wide shoreline on my forehead where the hair had gone to perpetual low-tide. In high school I had acne; I was self-conscious about it, so I got on this medication. The medication cured my acne, but caused my hair to start falling out. I flexed my chest and arms. I used to catch a lot of flack for being small. I started to work out. I got hemorrhoids. I don't understand it. All this effort. All this going. And only to get to somewhere else just as uncomfortable. All this time on the road, and I'm getting nowhere. Just back and forth in the middle. My name's Paul. I guess I figure if I stay on the road long enough, one day I'll see something to make it all seem worth it.

I went to the bathtub and cut the water off. I pulled the stopper out of the drain and put my clothes back on.

* * *

I had a philosophy that if you put yourself in the wildest situations, there's only two possible outcomes: One, you die, and there's nothing left to worry about. Two, you live through it and have a story to tell. Sometimes I tell people an anecdote about the crazy crack-whore I picked up one Sunday night during the fall on my way to the University. I never tell the end though. I never tell them how I went back to the house

only for a few minutes before taking my keys and wallet and getting back on the road, heading for the Bee-Quick. I had ten dollars, but I wasn't looking for anything more than conversation with Io. I wanted to hear her story. Understand where she came from. And, even, again, feel of that brown paper hand on my own.

She wasn't there, and that's just as well.

In a day, I lost one girl to the road. In a night, I picked up her shadow. Still, though, I can't help but think one day, maybe, the road could be home. If only I had someone in the passenger seat. Someone to hold my hand.

All That Is

Will Thompson liked to read about the universe. He liked metaphysics. And though, as he read the books, he didn't really consider himself to be a scientist or philosopher, he dreamed of it sometimes. A lot of the time. *If I was a little smarter, I'd prove to 'em relativity is just a bunch of crap* he often thought. His idea was that everything was really very simple, and too many people looked beyond the scope of where they should and lost themselves in what some call the Gestalt. To him there was the unit, the infinitesimal, and the infinite. *Searching for the infinitesimal, one gets lost in the unit, searching for the infinite one gets lost among the units and is no longer able to grasp the simple idea.* He liked this idea that simplicity was the key because he believed himself simple. He also liked the idea introduced in one of his books that the universe didn't begin and will not end, but is constantly expanding to a point where it will collapse in upon itself, and then again at a point of high density begin to expand and repeat itself over and over. The idea the universe is manic-depressive. He really liked it, for, though he didn't have it on paper, he believed himself so.

Fourth dimension my ass he said to himself as he threw A Brief History of Time down onto the desk lit by a blue fluorescent bulb that was the only apparent source of light in the small dormitory room. The bulb had once been one of a pleasant amber shade that was much easier on the eyes, but it had shot long ago, and this was all Will had found to replace it. He had come to like it.

Will shared the room with a guy whom he had gone to high-school with and, like

him, had gotten the room by scholarship. Will and the roommate, Matt Faris, hadn't ever been very close and still weren't, as Matt never actually stayed in the room. He instead took the thirty-minute commute back home every day to see his sweetheart still in high school back in Tashuka. He had only taken the room because he said it was "stupid to turn down something that was free," and though he never used the bed, was glad to have a private toilet at his disposal or *for his disposal* in case he should need one. In all reality, the dorm was all Will's. Will liked that, too, for being alone seemed to agree with him. People did not.

He thought about the day that had passed before him. The people that he had run across, or had run across him—*however it is with time* he mused. There was the guy named Hoss whom he had English Lit with at 9:00 and who was one of the few people Will admired. He too was quiet most of the time, and when by others drawn from his silence-- it seemed to Will--he offered his protest by being as wry as possible in the few words he deemed necessary to guarantee his return to self. This was particularly interesting in the case of the professor of the class, a woman Will believed to be cartoonish in appearance and personality—a stork-faced woman who wore skirts shorter than the coeds and loved to talk on end of nothing. Today she had asked what Hoss thought of Washington Irving. Hesitating, he replied, "He was a flaming smart-ass...I liked him a lot." Will agreed. The professor, *goose in a mini*, laughed as if she believed she'd coaxed him into embarrassing himself. She laughed that type of needy laugh that begs for others to join in the picking, something like the call of a vulture to the others, saying, "have a taste of the exposed raw flesh I've just discovered."

After Hoss and the professor, Will recalled Wesley Coats, a tall boy who fit into

the group most label as “prep”. It was Wesley who had interrupted Will’s lunch, a ritual of solitude, a piece of fried-chicken, and much coffee, to show him his new achievement—a MENSA card. Why he showed him this, he couldn’t understand. Wesley cared as little for Will as Will did for him, so Will ruled out this move of blatant pride as a search for approval and labeled it just an attempt to impress. A failed attempt.

“So why exactly is it you have to have a card to prove to people that you’re smart?” he asked, looking back down to his chicken. Wesley stood for a moment, either recuperating from the blow to his Achilles’ ego or groping desperately for some form of counter-wit before realizing the necessity, if not honor, of retreat. He smirked himself into an air of indignance, cursed under his breath, and let his defeat quickly build back up to proud Ralph Lauren stride as he went, card in hand, to the next table over.

Yet now at his desk Will wondered what it must be like to be a genius on paper. He never yearned for such things before and *still did not*, but was curious. *Who gives a rat’s ass* he thought *those tests don’t prove anything anyways...they test for people looking in the wrong direction. What if I took an IQ test and it said I wadn’t smart? I know I am. I am simple, and that is smart—*

Will heard the sudden jingle and click of the key in the latch of the dormitory room’s door and knew that Matt must be coming in to make an afternoon deposit before going back home to waste hours in conversation with his lady-love.

“Son, you ever gonna get out of this room in the evening?” Matt asked as he sped by unfastening his belt and making his way toward the small room in the back.

“Don’t reckon so,” Will replied, “guess I just like it better in here.”

Matt laughed a laugh similar to the professor, “Whatever you say, pal...” And in a

couple of minutes he was gone again, leaving only a foul scent superficially masked by cinnamon Renuzit in his wake. Will saw in this incident the basic scenario for everyone he had run across, or run across him—*however: All wrapped up in their stinking affairs, hiding behind their superficial airs...looking down on me cause I'm simple. They don't understand me, cause they're lookin in the wrong goddam direction!* He smacked the desk with the palms of his hands. The more Will thought about the ignorance around him, the more he detested all that lay beyond himself. He began to wonder if there really was anything beyond himself. This wasn't a new feeling. Again Will Thompson found himself in the down-drop of what he had supposed to be his uncertified malady. At this moment he seemed to hate everyone—Matt, Wesley, the professor—he was sure he could find a couple of things to hate about Hoss. And yet lost in hatred of all but himself, Will slowly began to smile an odd smile, remembering his singular comfort...

As the slow passing time drew the remaining light off the evening, leaving behind only a desiccate of pure night, it too left Will, still sitting quietly between four thin gray walls and one locked door, smiling to himself in a cloud of faint blue fluorescence past which there was only darkness, glorying in his singular presence—the personification of all that is.