

Cycles of Love and Confusion

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In the Tunnel Comes Some Light

Water moving without wind in the dark closed space and it is running between my legs and I am hunched over following my brother who carries the light shining uphill in the long passageway and there are two friends behind me and they yell to echo and I look back and glimpse the small dot of light behind them and then we are moving forward again and occasionally water will drip down and I try to avoid it but I don't and that's ok and my brother stops and puts up a finger and then we are quiet and then we hear it like a low distant thunder and my brother's face turns on like the light and he yells and I am pushing back down the tunnel and then I am skidding on my backside and the rivulets from the metal tube are like a rough road and we are moving fast but one friend is too young and he starts to cry so we have to push him and that sound is getting louder and the small dot of light is getting larger but it is still far away and a fine euphoric panic has set in and we are moving like spilled water and the young one tumbles out into the light and I push the other one and then everything is bright and then green and then I look back to my brother who tumbles out of the metal tube and the brown water gushes out just behind him and I can't hear over the noise and my brother smiles at me and I look at the trees and the water flowing heavy and steady down the black slate waterfall and it is raining and I wonder how and why and I am aware of everything and then I think that maybe those movies and books are true sometimes.

Chapter 1: The Brick Yard

The dust was thick where the bricks were made, staining the factory walls that were bent and twisted like wooden torsos, piling on every flat surface inside where the machines pressed and churned, clinging to the mouths and getting in the eyes of the men who stacked the bricks on the rail cars. It clogged the machines. It made black men look white. It made it hard to see objects clearly. It made Shaun see the rays of sun that came through dirty windows and doors as solid geometry. And, as he walked from the shadows he would slow and stick out his hand to watch the light bathe his skin and change the way he saw the place.

Shaun liked the job in the yard most days. He was no longer a hacker, stacking the bricks in patterns on the rail cars as the machine pressed out more and more. He was the welder, but most times he just got lost in the unused parts of the factory and once he had followed a bird around the rusting machines as it searched for a way out. The bird hadn't found any opening to the outside air when he left for the day. The next morning he found it dead right at the base of a door. He picked it up and put it in a garbage barrel and saw that its black feathers changed colors at different angles. The white dust clung to its wings and underbelly and was pasted on its open eyes. The old man who shoveled the white lime saw him looking at the bird and he came up to the barrel and looked in and then said, that's a starling.

The first shift smoked dope and so he liked being able to do that and still know he was making money. He smoked with the old man a lot, at first because the old man did not smoke with him, and then because he just liked him. The other hackers complained a

lot but the old man just talked about the weather or he told stories about the way things used to be. Like always, he offered the old man the joint as they stood outside the door by the barrel. The old man, like always, said, no thank you.

They stood for awhile and watched the sky and then the old man said, when you moving on?

What do you mean?

I mean when you getting out of here.

Same time as I always do.

The old man stood quiet for a moment. That ain't what I'm asking. You been here for too long. I've been here a long time and you never really belonged here.

I haven't even been here a year.

Yeah. So when you moving on?

Shaun pulled on the smoke.

Got nowhere to go.

Well you ain't going nowhere here.

The old man walked away and Shaun watched him go and then he turned and walked back inside. The old man had never talked to him like that.

He put on his gloves and face shield and he started fixing a crack on a steel cover that protected electrical circuits. Sparks flew around him and then he stood up and thought about the old man. Then he thought about his son's black curly hair and then he thought of the stained shirts of the parole officer and the coveralls on the old nudist that worked on the second shift and then he stopped working and sat down to look at his large

hands. Sometimes ideas came at him like spider webs and he had to sit down and look at his hands.

He remembered the last fight just over a year ago. It occurred under the slanting light of mercury bulbs, on a surface of black pavement under a night sky illuminated with a faint mist. Three boys came at him in baggy clothes and clean t-shirts and gold chains. They had called him out of the bar. Shaun walked in front of them, out the door and into the lot. The people in the bar came to see.

He turned and waited for them and when the first one came charging at him he had his feet balanced below him. The one with the faint mustache was struck in the face and went down quick. A small trail of blood came out the side of the boy's mouth as he lay on the ground. The spectators and the other two boys paused a moment to observe this. The boys were more wary and so they circled for a bit.

Shaun did not let the boys circle long. He struck the thin blond boy in the midsection and the boy bent over holding his stomach. The other boy stood for a moment and Shaun stared at him. He knew what the boy would do, or rather, what he wouldn't do. The boy bent over to help his friend on the ground. Shaun stood for a moment and watched. The people in the bar watched him as he stood. Some of them cheered.

Shaun looked at his palms white under the light. He could remember thinking how it was different than before. He didn't feel the same, didn't feel much of anything. He thought, looking at the shadows and the glow of the mist, hearing and feeling the crowd around him, why do I call them boys in my head?

He could remember now, as he stood there fighting with the issue of being young and old, the people yelling at him to run, to go. He stood there and he looked at the mouths moving and when his girlfriend came up and touched him on the arm he just looked down at her and smiled. The only thing that he could remember after that was how his eyes felt as if they were pulled back away from his head like he was looking down a tunnel. Everything looked like that except for the small tear in the backseat of the police car, maybe because of the sharp edge of the plastic, or maybe just because he didn't think a police car should have a tear in it.

Shaun stood up then at the brick yard, looking away from his hands and up to through the dust in the hope of a bird. He thought that maybe that night should be more important in his life. But, he couldn't help thinking that the change in him had started earlier, that he had started pulling back from things before that night. He thought that maybe there were things about him that he had no control over anymore, and that maybe he never did. He didn't see any of the birds inside.

The welding sat unfinished before him. He knew that he could get to it later, maybe tomorrow. He walked toward where the other men were stacking the bricks and he watched them place the bricks on the cars, throw sand between the rows, and continue on and on. Shaun was a large man with light brown skin that maybe had a hint of yellow or caramel to it. His hair was short and dark and curly. His flesh was not defined by his muscles, but rather just filled his skin like a large cat. He felt big standing there, watching the other men, but he felt tired like his body would not stop resting.

The young foreman walked up to him.

You working or enjoying the view?

Enjoying the view.

Look, I'm going home for the day. I'll weld that plate in the morning, Shaun said.

The foreman looked at him.

All right. Something going on?

No. No. I am just going home.

Shaun turned and walked outside and into the dirty break room where the men ate their lunch when it was cold or raining. He grabbed his thermos and his long sleeves and he looked around the room. He noticed some empty hooks on the wall. He walked out to his car and he started the engine and he pulled out of the lot slow, but he still kicked up a small cloud from the dust that had settled on the ground.

He didn't go to his small apartment but turned down Main St. and passed the empty stone buildings of the downtown on his way to his mother's house. His girlfriend would be there with his son. He parked the old car on the street and he saw his mother sitting on the porch. He walked up and slumped down beside her in a chair. She pulled out a cigarette and handed it to him. His mother was a short woman but she was big and had pale skin and graying blond hair. She wore a white t-shirt and baby blue sweatpants and she had on old slippers.

Long day?

Yeah.

Shaun lit his cigarette and he sat back.

He looked across the street and the houses that needed paint and new windows. One of them had a porch that had collapsed at one end. He remembered when it wasn't collapsed like that, when the porch was strong and painted bright green, when people would put out flags for the Cleveland Browns or the Indians, and put up bright Christmas lights for Christmas.

Old friend of yours in the newspaper.

Who's that.

Jim. . . Jim. . . you know the one always came down here to play basketball.

Oh yeah. Jim Fielding.

What's he in the paper for?

Says he wrote a book. Shaun's bent down beside her and picked up the paper to hand it to him.

Shaun skipped through the pages and saw the grainy black and white picture.

Yeah, that's him all right.

Shaun began reading the article.

You used to write, always scribbling away in them notebooks, she said.

That was a long time ago.

Yeah, I guess it was, but you ain't so old.

Says here, Shaun said, its about him growing up in a small steel town in Ohio.

Yeah, sounds familiar, his mom said.

Shaun read out loud. It says, *Fielding depicts the destitution of the post-middle American steel boom with an accuracy that permeates a part of the United States that we*

rarely hear. Get this, He illuminates the place and people and shows us the human values that survives a violent and troubling representation of our heartland. Sounds like big words for he wrote a good book.

I saw him a couple of years ago up at the pool hall, Shaun said. He paused and looked across the street and thought about telling his mother but he didn't.

Well? His mom asked.

Well what'd he say at the pool hall?

Just hello. . . you know.

But Shaun remembered it well. He thought of it sometimes and it made him smile. Jim had come up to him and shook his hand and put his arm on his shoulder and he said, it is good to see you. He had looked him in the eye and he had meant it. They sat down together and talked quiet under the loud music of the DJ and the young men and women who interrupted them because Shaun was a person that people talked to. He had become a person that listened to other peoples problems and he thought how good he was at that and not so good at dealing with his own. They had talked about stories and Jim had told him that he was smarter than most of the people he worked with, just a whole lot more fun to be around and then he had laughed. He had never asked Shaun while he was still in town. He knew but he didn't care. The only thing he had said before someone interrupted them for good was that if he ever need anything. . . anything, that he should just get a hold of him. Jim had looked him in the eye and he had meant it.

Shaun sat on the porch with his mom and remembered. That time with Jim had only been a few months ago, but they had been corresponding for awhile. An old blue Ford Tempo pulled up and his girlfriend got out and she opened the back door and picked

up some groceries and then she opened the passenger door and she picked up their son and she walked toward the porch.

You get that money? She asked as she walked up onto the porch.

It's good to see you too, Shaun said.

She stopped at the top of the stairs and stared at him.

I told you I don't get paid until tomorrow.

You can't ask for an advance?

Let me see that guy, Shaun stood up and took his son into his arms and he sat back down. He held him up to his face and looked at the small wrinkles in his cheeks.

Hey Julie did you remember to get bread? Shaun's mother asked.

Yeah, I got a whole truck load with the money he is bringing home. Julie walked inside and let the screen door slam.

Somebody had a bad day, Shaun said to his son's small face.

Somebodies been having a bad year, his mom said under her breath.

Shaun laughed and he sat on the porch with his mother and tried to make things normal but he kept standing up and walking around the porch and then he would sit again and find himself staring at the road or the bricks in the house across the road. Julie came out and took the child from his arms and then she went back inside and let the door slam. As the sun began to drop below the houses the light filled the spaces with a subtle glow and Shaun thought maybe that was the best kind of light. That light that made things seem more real than normal.

They all sat around the television set and watched sitcoms and a movie about a two high school cheerleaders who plotted to kill their teacher. Shaun sat in a chair and

held his son until he fell asleep and then he put him in his crib upstairs. His mother and Julie sat on the couch. They ate macaroni and cheese for dinner in front of the television.

Julie smoked on the couch and after the movie she went upstairs to bed. Shaun sat with his mother in front of the television. As they sat and watched the news his mother spoke to him.

How's things?

Shaun looked at her for a moment.

What are you talking about?

I've seen it before. You're face, the way you been looking and moving around. Too much like your dad, all your body on the ground and your head in the clouds.

Shaun watched the news, the broadcaster with too much make-up.

I don't know, he said.

His mother looked at him. Shaun looked up and then he looked at his hands. He listened to his mother.

You remember this, you ain't no kid anymore.

Shaun looked at his mother and then he leaned forward and looked at the carpet. He looked at his hands.

I just. . .

Quiet now, I'm trying to watch the news.

He looked at his mother. He looked at the television. He looked at the worn arm of the chair. He got up and he walked up the stairs to the bedroom.

He undressed in the dark and crawled in beside Julie. It was summer and so they only had a sheet. She was on her back and he put his hand on her stomach but she turned

over on her side and he knew she was awake. He lay in the dark. He thought how things in his mind seemed to be swimming but he thought how distant they were. Like someone else was thinking his thoughts for him and he was just watching and listening. He knew he would get up but he wanted to be still awhile. He wished he could see the sky and the stars and not just the smoke-stained ceiling.

When he got out of bed quietly she didn't even say anything. She was awake but she pretended to be asleep. As he put his picked up his boots to put them on outside the door she spoke quiet but clear.

He's your son too.

Shaun stopped in the doorway. He looked at her, still on her side under the sheet.

I know, he said. He paused and he wanted to say something more but he didn't know what so he didn't say anything and just stood there for a moment.

Shaun put his boots on in the hallway and then he went into the room where his son was sleeping. He looked down at him but he didn't touch him. Somehow he didn't feel right touching him late like it was. His skin was white but held a hint of brown like sapling bark. He could hear him making small breathing noises, the moisture in his small nose creating a faint gurgle. He smiled and he turned away and walked down the stairs and he didn't look at anything but just felt tight in his head and in his shoulder and in his stomach.

His mother was playing solitaire in the kitchen and he opened the fridge and he made two sandwiches of bologna and cheese as she clicked the cards down by their edges. He wrapped the sandwiches and he poured a glass of milk and he drank it down straight. He knew there was something he should say, but he didn't know what. He put

the glass in the sink and he picked up the sandwiches and he bent awkwardly and kissed his mother on the forehead. He walked out the back door and he never saw her face or her eyes, he just heard the clicking of the cards and the door as it creaked shut.

Shaun walked into the back alley and let his legs lead him. He tried not to think about anything and he didn't too much but he couldn't help feeling ashamed. He hated the fact that he felt excited. He walked for several blocks in the night under the street lights and he knew he was going to where the old man lived.

Chapter 2: The Old Man

The sound of the steel shops and the rail cars was constant and erratic, like storm winds, but those familiar deep rumblings and shrill whistles that once beat comfortable under his skin had become a piercing jazz that seemed to echo in his head and blow him off balance. So . . . he found points ahead. The way the a street light made sharp angles on the tall buildings. Looking down lower, the red neon of the bar sign, glowing and warm and inviting. He looked to a lighted window ahead, half closed his eyes, kept walking and realized then that he could hear the sound of his shoes on the concrete.

He knew the way to the old man's house, knew the roads and alleys, the tendencies of the police when driving. The old man didn't have a car, so he had given him a ride home a few times in bad weather. Shaun found himself following the dark

parallel of the telephone wires out of the empty downtown towards the tracks, where the poles became wooden again.

The old man lived above a warehouse that had been emptied for some time. It was brick and you got to the door climbing the metal fire escape in the back. He walked around the building through an alley, got to the step and thought how late it was, how maybe the old man was asleep, but he kept walking up any ways.

A thin sliver of light was visible under the door, muted and soft. Shaun knocked and heard a stirring inside and then the old man opened the door and looked at him. The old man was wearing an old t-shirt and faded jeans. His form was thin and sinking but his forearms stuck out like thick healthy oak limbs.

Kinda late.

Yeah, Shaun said.

They stood for a moment, the old man holding the door.

You gonna come in?

Yeah.

Shaun stepped in the door. He looked around at the place, the light was dim and he saw the piles of books scattered around—three chairs, a coffee table, a few lamps. A doorway led to a thin kitchen and one other door was closed.

Take a seat. . . I got whiskey or water.

I'll have some water.

The old man went to the kitchen and Shaun heard the faucet run. He came out and handed him a glass of whiskey and a glass of water. The old man sat down. Shaun looked at the whiskey.

Nice place you got here.

Ain't so bad. . .Where you at?

Over there on Elm, round the corner from the old Anson Market.

Yeah, I remember that. . . good people. Fire wasn't it?

Yeah. They did all right with the insurance. I think they were about ready to retire any ways, Shaun replied.

A book was folded over the arm of the old man's chair.

What you reading?

Book about birds.

Birds?

Birds and how they relate to dinosaurs.

Any good?

I don't know. The guy seems to be making some pretty big leaps, takes only the information he needs and ignores anything that doesn't fit in.

How can you do that?

That's how its done

Shaun sat leaned forward on his chair. The old man had his legs crossed and his thin torso was set back and one of his thick worn hands held the glass on his knee.

You read?

Used to a lot.

What'd you stop for?

Shaun paused for a moment. He looked at his hands and then he took a sip of the whiskey and then he took a sip of the water.

I don't know, he said. Maybe just didn't seem like it mattered one way or the other. Shaun wanted to pull the paper out to share it with him, but he didn't, just felt it sitting heavy in his back pocket.

They sat quiet for a moment then. Shaun looked at the dinosaur on the book, morphing into a bird. He remembered when he had went to that camp up on Lake Erie. The school had picked him to go, to look after some of the smaller kids, a reward in sense. The teacher who had picked. . . Mrs. Appleton. . .because of his potential. A nice lady, a long time ago. He remembered the fish spawning in the stream, the eggs being squeezed from the white abdomen. He remembered the horse, how much bigger than him it had been. How he'd liked the smell of the straw and the shit—how the kids looked up at him with big eyes.

The old man got up then. He went to a shelf and pulled down a book. He walked back and handed it to Shaun.

Look on 86.

Shaun opened up the book to page 86 and he saw a picture of a Catalpa tree.

You know that tree?

Shaun looked at the shape of the tree and then he saw the long bean pods in a smaller picture.

Yeah, a bean tree. We used to whack each other with those as kids. Shaun smiled. There's one our block now.

Yeah, I know a few around too. Now look at the range of the Catalpa tree, the old man said.

Shaun looked at the shaded diagram of the range of the tree. He noticed that it didn't cover Northeast Ohio, didn't come near Alliance.

What's that all about? Different tree?

No. . . no, the old man said. I checked that. It's the only tree with those type of seed pods.

Shaun looked at the cover of the book—a big cypress on the cover, a tree identification book.

Well then how. . .

It's wrong.

It's wrong?

I called them, told them it was wrong. Said they'd check on it and then they hung up on me.

Huh.

The old man and Shaun each took a drink of the whiskey. Shaun turned the book over in his hands. They sat uncomfortable for a moment, not used to each others company there in the old man's place, but it wasn't a bad uncomfortable, just the kind when you're getting used to something. The place smelled like cat and book mold all at once. The old man's tabby was poking its head around the kitchen entrance and looking at Shaun and he saw that one of its eyes was discolored and cloudy. The old man turned to look at her when he saw Shaun's eyes.

Little shy with strangers.

Shaun bent down and rubbed his fingers together to make a soft brushing noise and the cat's ears turned toward him.

She used to rule the roost outside around here, till she got that eye out and got old so I brought her in here.

She looks like a tough old bird, Shaun said.

Yeah.

Shaun had trouble keeping the talk simple and wanted to ask questions about the old man, his past, his family, why he was at the brick yard. . .but he didn't. He waited, watched the cat with the one good eye and drank some whiskey. He tried to keep his brain still, noticed that he found himself pulling lately, quietly, pulling on his wrists to bring loose the arms from his shoulders.

It happened then. Just like before. He was in a good place there with the old man and the cat, but his vision began to pull away from his hand that held the whiskey. Everything drew away from his eyes, like a scope focusing on a far away point. He crossed his legs to lose the vision but it was still there and then he looked at the old man and spoke.

I gotta go. His voice sound hollow to him.

The old man looked up, and then looked at Shaun good.

The old man saw his eyes and when Shaun looked away quick he knew and so he nodded his head and he got up from his chair and led him, taking his elbow, his head just reaching his shoulder, slowly to the door.

Come back when you can, the old man said.

Thanks, Shaun mumbled.

He started walking down the rusting metal fire escape and he looked down through the spaces in the grates and he realized that he was walking over a tree when the

birds flew away under the sound of his feet. Turning quickly he looked back at the old man and thought a thought had never thought of before. . .walking over birds.

Come back when you can come back, the old man said.

Shaun looked down and he nodded slow as he heard the last of the birds fly into the night.

The alley shadows drew him in then, their contrast on the gray stone, the sound of the city came back and his mind still felt pulled in different directions, like it was readying to morph in to a bird or a cat or some new species with a head shaped like a bullet.

He didn't want to go home, he knew that. So, he walked back through the alley to Main Street. The neon of the bar was tempting but he looked in and saw the old steel hands and tired women bellied up and slumping over so he kept walking to the gas station on the corner.

He tried the door and expected it to open to bright and shiny plastics and linoleum but it was locked and he remembered it was late and then he thought, looking in, how you might get everything you needed in a gas station all wrapped to go in different colors. A bleach blond woman appeared behind the glass and she pointed to a little slot in the wall on the outside. Shaun walked over and spoke into the little microphone.

Can I get some beer?

The woman looked at him through the glass as if she didn't hear and so he stared at her a moment and then leaned towards the microphone again.

Aren't you Shaun? She spoke as he leaned forward to speak and her voice was changed through the electronics.

Yeah.

I went to middle school with you. You remember me.

Shaun looked at her and she smiled fake and he thought she looked old, older than he felt sometimes.

No, I'm sorry.

I'm Tanya Denson. I used to have a crush on you.

Oh.

You're still looking pretty good.

Thanks.

She looked at him up and down through the glass and Shaun looked to the ground and then leaned towards the microphone again.

What can I get you honey? She asked as he went to speak.

She paused in front of the microphone again.

One of them big High Lifes.

Sure.

She disappeared for a moment and then he saw her go back to the collar and pull out the beer. She walked back and ran it through.

Buck thirty-nine.

Shaun took out two dollars and put them in the metal box that flipped open towards him and he smiled that the last time he did that it was his keys and wallet and a small pen knife.

She sent back the beer and the change and Shaun looked at her and thought he could see the rest of her life like a map—a few men, a few shitty jobs, some kids and her

body getting a little older at a time but everything else the same, except she would like new things as much, and then she would be an old woman all the sudden and then maybe she would change a little for better or worse, bitter or kind, depending on how she handled things, thoughts of her death. He didn't like thinking that way and he glanced away from her, but it wasn't her in particular it was the way things happen for certain people and sometimes he wished he knew that about himself but he couldn't read his own map or his own range and he thought maybe that's why he went to see the old man—maybe he could see some things.

He picked up his change from a small styrofoam cup and picked up the beer in the paper bag and he saw his hands again, growing older, and he thought he hoped he just didn't want information from the old man because he liked the way he would be standing there at the brick yard looking at nothing and then just smile at whatever was out there. He just liked the old man.

Thanks, Shaun said.

Uh huh.

And he walked away under the islands of light by the gas tanks with the bleach blond watching his silhouette and the sounds of the steel and the sounds of his feet and the words in his mind took a brief rest because he had thought of the river and the old rail trestle and his legs took him in that direction. For once the now in the moment like smelling rain storms or placing your hand on the flank of a horse not hearing the sounds of the city.

Chapter 3: The Mahoning River

The Mahoning River was muddy, flowing south through factories and sickly young trees, harboring only carp and catfish that suck on leftovers at the bottom of the bed. A film of oil covered the surface and created rainbows in bright light and heavy metals stirred when it rained but mostly just sunk into the mud and created extra eyes for those fish still living.

Shaun came to the river having walked through the rusting steel foundries, watched the bright orange flames and billowing smokestacks flowing against the horizon and stars. He walked through some short brush and trees that scratched at his clothes and head and stood on the old rail trestle over the river. He wanted to lean on the steel cross-pieces, or curl up in the water and feel the dark pour over him until it washed his muscles and tendons into long sinewy lines. He stood considering this and then he looked at the water and saw the carp poking their heads through the surface, making small dimples that spread out in patterns under the light of the moon. The dark creosote on the railroad ties came to his nose and he sat on the edge of the trestle on the worn wood and watched the carp some more.

He had lied to his mother today. Jim Fielding had been sending him work for a few years, but he hadn't told her when she saw the article in the paper, hadn't told anyone. The writing was always different—stories or poems or words that didn't seem to hold any form he knew of. He had wanted to show one to the old man, but then he couldn't tonight, couldn't do much of anything around other people right now.

Jim was his friend and he looked forward to getting his work. The last one had come a few days ago, but he hadn't read it yet. When he had first told him at the bar that he was going to send him stuff, he hadn't believed him. But when he got the first piece, they had just kept coming every month or so. The only time he talked to Jim was when he came into town to see his family, and they always met at the bar. It was funny, even though he only saw him a few times a year, he was someone that counted, someone that looked him in the eye and knew and listened and realized that everyone around here was in their only little space and that this fact was sad, maybe sadder than anything.

Jail was when Shaun first started to understand Jim's work a little bit, and maybe the process was good and bad at the same time, although mostly he liked to think it was a good thing even though that was when his brain had started to split apart a little bit, wandering through cement cells away from his body and coming back worn and energetic all at once. That first time in was only a few months, but it felt like forever had happened and he had come out still trying to figure out where he was.

Looking down at the river, Shaun took the top off his beer and tasted it and then he reached in his back pocket leaning forward and pulled out the envelope. It was dark and hard to see, but the moon was bright enough if he looked hard at the letters. He opened it up and pulled out a single page. There was a note at the top—

Hope all is well. Just a quick short narrative here, hope you like it.

Jim

Shaun bent his legs and put his elbows on his knees. He took another swig of the beer and he began to read.

Floating down a river in Western Pennsylvania one time on a beat up inner-tube that had duct tape over the leaky valve and I am watching the shore and I notice the sun goes away so I look up and see these dark clouds and then all the sudden I can see the rain coming across the hills of trees and then its coming right for me on the river and it is a hard summer rain and I prepare my skin for it and right as it comes across the water in a wall it stops and I am watching the water explode two yards away from my outstretched

hand and time just stops there for a few seconds and then it rushes over me and forgets that I was there.

That's what I thought of when I found out that the weather began to recognize the world's geographical landmarks. There wasn't any warning to anyone, and I was up early driving to work when it happened. I'm crossing Broken Sword Creek, which is the county line, and there was this slight snow falling, the first day of winter with the sun coming up. That's a nice little area with a few old growth sycamores and so I am driving slow over the creek to see the water and that is when I notice it. The snow is falling in a perfect line along the bending of the creek. I stop the car on the bridge. Flakes are falling on the trunk of my car but not on the front. I get out of the vehicle after a few seconds and I notice that as far as I can see there is this perfect line of snow in either direction. It is moving or shifting, just a straight line that goes all the way up into the sky. I look around hoping to see someone so I can tell them, but there is nobody there just the sound of my windshield wipers squeaking dry on the glass. After a while I start to get cold so I get in my car and I have trouble driving to work because my mind is a little funny:

I get to work and I need to tell somebody what just happened but nobody is around, and I hear this sound and I go in the break room and everyone is crowded around the television and the first thing I see is a sky view of the Canadian border and the snow is packed up a couple feet high on one side and when it hits the border it is gone like somebody cut the thing straight with a knife. Then the television clips to this tornado in Texas and it is going strong and then it hits the San Antonio city limits and just turns on a dime and skirts the city bouncing along like there is some kind of glass wall. Nobody is really talking right then, nobody even notices I came in and so that is when I think about that time on the inner-tube and the rain in Western Pennsylvania, and then I think a few more thoughts that I can't remember so well.

Later in the day they came on and explained the whole thing and the weather never stopped recognizing human borders after that. This is all well and good, but what is really important is the fact that on that morning it was the time when I realized I didn't need the proof anymore. . . I've felt a whole lot better since then.

Shaun liked to read slow and when he got done he dangled the paper between his legs and he started laughing, laughing out loud towards the river and he his eyes started to blur he was laughing so hard. It had been a long time since he had laughed out loud and when it caught him he couldn't stop. He rolled onto his back and he felt the small pebbles pressing into his skin and he looked at the fuzzy stars and eventually he sat up to take a drink of the beer but he ended up spitting it all over. When he got under control

again he tried the beer and then he heard a sound in the bushes and small trees and so he looked over and saw someone emerge on the end of the trestle from the dark thin path.

I thought that was your jackass laugh.

Shaun watched a young man walking on the trestle, looking down at his feet so he didn't fall through the spaces. He could see his bushy red hair and his thin frame and gangly arms and legs and he knew it was Lenny George.

What'chou doing out here? Lenny asked.

Just sitting.

Lenny walked up and Shaun stayed seated and so Lenny sat down beside.

You mind if I take a hit of that?

Lenny grabbed the bottle.

You on something crazy? What was you laughing at?

Nothing.

Shaun folded the paper and the envelope and put them in his pocket.

What you got there? You rolling something with that or jerking off?

Lenny laughed at himself and looked around quick at the trees and the trestle.

It's nothing, Shaun said.

I was walking down to my girl's house when I heard your crazy ass so I come over here and man I haven't been here since I was a kid.

Yeah, Shaun said, you still dating Julie?

Yeah, fucking bitch's got me running all over but I keep telling her to keep it up and I'll throw her ass out.

Shaun had never liked Lenny, and had just laughed at him in high school, but now he found him putting his nerves on edge again above the river.

She still work at the library?

Yeah, she's in the children's department and keeps harping on me to have some but I don't want none of that shit. Damn you see them fish down there? Big fuckers looks like.

Lenny jumped up then and he walked to the path and came back carrying a big slab of concrete.

Watch this shit.

Lenny held the rock over the water and when he saw a carp push its head up he dropped it and the splash and the sound were loud in the night.

Damn I missed it to the left. Probably scared the piss out of him though.

What'you been up to? When'd you get out?

Few months ago.

You working? I been hauling fridges and shit for Mculley's up there on State and Lincoln. Got me working like a dog and I told him he don't start giving me some more money I'm gonna start telling his customers some inside shit, you know what I mean?, and then his ass'll be in a sling. He hadn't said anything yet though.

Shaun took a drink of the beer.

You got anymore of them?

No, sorry.

That's all right I got some back at the girl's house. Man'd you hear about that fight last night up at Folley's?

No.

Big fucking mess. Blake Furman got the shit kicked out of him by them crotch-rocket riders from Youngstown out in the parking lot. Fucked him up pretty bad. Broke a collar bone, messed up his face good. But I ain't worried about that shit anymore I got me one of these.

Lenny pulled a small handgun from inside his pants and pointed it at the fish.

Man I'd love to smoke one of them fishes but I ain't got my permit yet and I ain't in the mood to be dodging no fucking cops.

Yeah, Shaun said.

You want to see it?

That's all right.

You sure? This is the real deal man. I got it from the new pawn and fireworks store out on 44. They got a whole back room full of used shit. . . rifles, shotguns, small pieces. They even got some weird ass grenades and shit. I almost bought me a forty-four but I figured it was too big to be carrying around. Yeah, Julie don't like the thing but I told her it was for her too, cuz I mean if somebody fucked with her they'd be taking one quick.

Yeah, Shaun said.

You been going up to Folley's much anymore? I usually go up on Tuesdays and then the weekends cuz Julie just stays home and I ain't in to that shit all the time. I mean on her birthday or a holiday or something that's all right but damn just wanting to stay home all the time and it ain't like she's tired she really works at a fucking library. I'm hauling shit all over all day and I can still go out.

Huh, Shaun said. I usually just have a few downtown.

Fucking shit hole down there man the tvs don't even work half the time.

Yeah, it's all right.

You should come up like you used to man. I remember you fucked up them three fucking posers trying to act like the shit coming from out on the farm and putting on some fucking chains and FUBU's and shit. Put all of em on the concrete man that was some shit.

I'm not into that stuff anymore.

You going preacher or something? Working for the pigs? Nah I'm just kidding I know you just getting soft with your half-black ass.

Lenny slapped Shaun on the back and started laughing. Shaun looked at the light reflecting off the surface of the river, waiting for the fish to come up again.

So what the fuck are you doing out here?

I'm just drinking a beer.

Like a fucking bum or something, you gonna start sleeping on benches with that brown bag special or what? I mean Jesus ain't even nobody around? You want to come over and have a few? The girl's gonna be sleeping already so it ain't no big deal.

Shaun paused for a moment.

No. . . no that's all right. I think I'm gonna head home.

Suit yourself, I'm gonna go burn one and have a few cuz damn we got a lot of work to do tomorrow. Gotta go out to Ravenna and drop off a hot water tank and them are some heavy mother-fuckers.

Hmm, Shaun took a drink of the beer.

You sure you don't want to come over I got some good shit.

No, I'm just gonna go home.

All right then I'm out. We'll see you later.

Lenny walked back to the road skipping over the rail ties and fumbling through the brush. Shaun sat on the trestle for a moment, until he couldn't hear him anymore and then he tried to get back to where he was for a moment, sitting there and watching the fish and laughing at a story. He tried to picture the rain falling, splitting the Mahoning River in two, cocked his head sideways to see it there stirring the water. But, he couldn't right then. Lenny, he thought, loud fucker. He knew he had to move then, so he got up and walked down the trestle and just as he got to the path the carp started to rise again looking for food and stirring the surface of the water in ripples.

He walked back through the factories and the downtown, but he didn't see anything but the ground. He walked with his head down and his feet moving fast in the night. When he got home he tried to be quiet on the creaking stairs and he paused by the door to his son's room. He stopped in the doorway and put his hand out in front of him flat and saw that was all it took to cover his small body. One hand that took him away from his vision and he didn't know what to think about that. Turning away, he undressed and crawled into bed and she didn't stir there, just kept laying on her side with her back straight towards him. The skin of her back was split by the small valley of her spine and he wondered if it had ever rained on one side of her skin and not the other. He thought maybe sometimes he was being rained on all over, drenched, or just drying like a piece of old driftwood, caught on land from being in the wrong place at the wrong time. He smiled at that in the dark, and closed his eyes.

Forest Without Mirrors

Two young men walk in folds of stone. They have a dog with them and occasionally they throw rocks for him but mostly they just talk. The land is fissured and great ferns grow out of the rock and the trees make a proper canopy over their heads. They walk a lot together. They talk because they live in a world of mirrors and the only place they can catch their breath is this place where they stand on land and rock. When they stop they take off their masks and the muscles in their faces take deep breaths. The dog knows about mirrors and masks. The two young men know that the dog can find a stick in the darkest of forests. They respect the dog and they like when the dog is happy. On one of those walks one of them throws a rock and he turns to the other and he says, at least he knows what he is chasing. They laugh. When they are not walking together they cannot throw stones. There are too many mirrors. Mirrors, they know, cost a lot.

Space Between Them

The first rays of sun that came over the horizon were very old but as they filtered through the thin cirrus and the thick needles of the evergreens the haze they made coming through the folds of the tent felt bright and new to Carlos's eyes. He woke and crawled out of the tent slowly and the smells of the pine forest and the soil greeted his nose in the valley of the Clarion River.

Paul and Thomas were already awake in the camp above the river bottom. Carlos relieved himself and joined them around the cold fire. They sat in their three point circle amidst the glacier stones, just above the base rock and ten-throws from the river. Large pieces of stone scattered themselves amidst the trees and over the bedrock. The tent was on a bed of pine needles.

We should get some coffee, Paul said. He was the tallest of the three.

Yeah, Thomas said. He scratched his bearded face.

There is a camp store just across the bridge.

All right, said Carlos.

Do we have something to put the water in?

I've got a two-liter in the car.

Good.

We should finish smoking.

Yeah.

Do you have the pack?

Yeah.

Is everything in it?

Yeah.

This is going to be a good day.

Yes it is.

They got in the car and drove to the camp store down the winding road. They crossed the river on the iron bridge and the water flowed beneath the car and they watched the water through the windows. The river wound through the hills of western Pennsylvania, and there it made time seem old and wind the fastest of movements. They drove slow, the three young men, hoping perhaps that the slowness would offer some kind of clarity, hoping perhaps that the still of water or the growth of trees could connect them in some way. Carlos stared out the windows as they moved across the bridge on a warm fall day, towards the old camp store.

The camp store was a low structure set back on the pebbled lot. Behind the store the land fell down toward the river and the back of the store was on bent wooden stilts. There was a gas pump between the road and the store. Paul got out of the car and he began to work the gas pump.

Carlos saw a telephone booth by the side of the road and it was a glass box outlined in silver. He watched Thomas get out of the car and walked to the phone. Thomas walked into the booth and noticed a crumpled jacket on the floor. He picked it up and it was heavy wet suede and it pulled apart slow and he saw that there was a raven sewn into the back and there were maggots crawling in the wet folds on the raven and he quickly let go of the jacket. Carlos watched him throw the jacket down and pick up the phone and dial. He saw him glance at the dark jacket on the ground.

Carlos got out of the car and walked into the store. A cigar-store Indian stood posed beside the camp store. Carlos stopped and he looked the Indian up and down before he went inside. The paint was chipping off its wooden skin.

He walked through the aisles until he found the coffee. He filled three large cups and looked for sugar but he couldn't find any. He went up to the counter and put down all the coffees at once and he saw a triangle of circles form between his hands. He reached into his pocket.

Three boys popped up from beneath the counter all at once, and Carlos thought that they must have been sitting on the floor behind the counter. They straightened quickly and stood waiting and watching. He glanced at them startled and pulled the crumpled bills from his pockets.

Do you have any sugar? He asked.

They all looked at each other and the one in the middle shook his head no. Each looked at him and he saw that they all had the same gaunt face. Each was but a little different, all very tall but just barely different lengths of thin. He thought of sick pale aspen and he wondered at their great paleness and then he noticed that they did not have any freckles or any marks, just the powdery white of their skin and some thin blond hair on their heads. They were quiet as the one near the register put his change on the counter.

He picked up the coffees and he looked at the change.

Don't worry about it, he said.

He picked up the three cups and started towards the door.

Oh, I almost forgot. How much for the gas?

The three pale boys looked at one another with large gray eyes.

We're all out. They said in unison.

All out?

They nodded.

Well. . .o.k. Thank you.

Paul came in then and the small bells above the door filled the room with a soft sound that was an echo like an old record playing tin pan music.

What's going on with the pumps? He asked.

They're all out.

All out? How the hell do you run out of gas?

The three pale boys shrugged their shoulders.

Well, when you getting some?

The three pale boys looked at one another and then they shrugged their shoulders again.

Jesus, mother of Mary. Did you get some coffee?

Yeah.

Paul turned to go and Carlos followed after him. The three boys watched them leave and Carlos turned in the doorframe.

Thanks fellas.

The three young men met at the car and they stood leaning on the hood and Paul looked at the pump and shrugged his shoulders.

Yeah, said they're out.

They were out? Thomas asked

That's what they said. Some odd birds too, Paul said, looked like they were going to try and sell me a bible or something.

A Gideon's or King Jame's? Thomas asked.

They laughed and sipped their coffee and started to get back in the car.

They stopped when they saw Carlos looking across the road. He looked at them and then pointed with his arm and finger across the hood of the car.

Thomas and Paul followed his line of vision.

Would you look at that? Thomas said.

Well, that's strange, Paul said.

Several hundred yards up the slope, across the road, on an outcropping of stone, stood a large woman leaning on an axe. She stared down at them, and although her eyes were hidden in the distance, they could see that she was looking at them. Carlos thought that it must be the mother of the ones inside.

That's a big lady, Thomas said.

Yes, yes it is.

All at once she turned and hopped down from the stone with the axe held out with two hands, graceful like a large animal. Before she disappeared into the trees she paused and looked down at them again.

Well. . . that ain't something you see every day, Thomas said.

No it's not, replied Paul.

They climbed into the car.

Hey, how'd you do on the phone Romeo?

Thomas shrugged his shoulders.

I bet ten dollars that says she hung up on you?

Paul looked over at Carlos and smiled and they all knew what had happened.

Thomas shrugged his shoulders.

Well, you're here and not there.

Carlos sipped his coffee . . . and a good place it is, he said. Yes. . . a good place it is.

There was well-water by the trail head. They pumped the rusty machine and it drew water from the earth and the sound was a blood cough. The water came up in a smooth and clear stream. They filled the two-liter and checked to see if they had everything and then they made their way to the trail head.

Carlos watched Paul get out the map and Paul pointed to a place on the map and then he looked up and pointed to a trail marked Livingston. The trail was not very steep and they glanced up its length. They saw it bend around and they all wondered when in would start going up.

What do you think?

I think we should get started.

The trail began to climb steadily but they were well rested and they walked slow and easy. They stopped and sat in a circle after some time. They got out the pack and

they got out the water and it tasted good washing away the sick warm taste of the morning. They smoked and their free hands rested on the damp earth and they smelled the decomposition oranges and yellows and reds. They were good young men and they were trying to do things that felt right. They were all different, different in social graces, likes and dislikes, but they were all trying to do things right. Not the right that is placed upon by others, but a right that comes from inside, and they were growing into it, escaping lives of fast and lonely and trying to *live* instead of just falling into distraction.

They took to the path again. It began to rise and they met a stream that was carving away stone and flowing against them. They pushed harder up the mountain trail. Sweat from under their clothes began to bead up and run down their skin. They paused and listened to the sound of the stream.

Carlos picked up a rock and threw it into the stream and it hit hard upon the smooth stones before sliding into the water. He stood for a moment. The other two glanced at him and continued up the trail.

The footing began to get slippery as the path turned over to wet shale. The layers of flat slate broke and slid as they tried to step through them. For the first time they began to notice their muscles and the thinning air. When they got to the bridge they stopped to rest. Carlos watched the water flowing around the rocks and his eyes followed a splinter of wood as it made its way twisting and turning down the stream.

The trees began to change as they got higher. The rhododendron grew shorter as the soil thinned and the cedars began to bend and shape like ancient hands. The sun came through the canopy in larger and larger rays and it grew warmer as they pushed up the trail. Eventually they came to a steep slope and they had to use their hands to keep from

sliding on the mix of soil and stone and roots. They climbed slow and began to help each other with hands and looks and short words of caution. Their eyes no longer held the trees or the sky. They watched the trail and their feet and they passed a red tail hawk resting on a branch and it watched them climb. They missed its gaze in their concentration.

They stopped again to rest and they took the water from the pack.

We almost there? Thomas asked.

I think so, said Paul.

I can't imagine many people make it up this thing.

You wouldn't think so.

How much farther do you think it is?

Can't be much more than a few hundred yards.

This thing better be worth it.

It's still a pretty good hike.

Yeah.

Carlos nodded.

The last part of the trail was steep and they walked through large outcroppings of stone. As they came out of an opening in the rock and turned to continue on they all saw it at the same time.

It stood tall on a flat patch of ground and the metal frame was outlined against the sky like pole wires or a chimney smoke or the direction on a barn being turned in the wind. Somehow the geometry of metal seemed older than the trees and the rocks of the place. They stood for a moment and walked towards its base.

Now underneath it, they stood and their heads were bent back looking up its rusting metal and wooden stairs.

Here it is, Paul said.

Yeah.

It's pretty tall.

Yeah.

You say they don't use it anymore?

Don't need to.

Why not?

Carlos pointed to the sky beyond the clouds and he left his arm out like he was waiting for a bird to return to its perch.

He's right, they don't need to, said Thomas.

Satellites?

The new eye in the sky.

Makes sense.

Too much sense.

Maybe.

They began the long walk up the old stairs and it was sturdy but for the wind that picked up the higher they went. They stopped at every level to look out at the change in the scene and the distance from the ground. When they reached the top they found a square wooden platform with a chest high wooden rail. They were well above the tree line, at the highest point for miles around. Each went to a different corner and their positions cut the square wood floor in half and Carlos thought of the triangle they made

and then he looked over the land and his thoughts spread to the four corners in the wind.

The platform was the size of a small square room.

Thomas got lost looking down into the leaves and the tops of the trees as they shifted and turned in the breeze. Paul had sat down in his corner. He leaned back and looked at the sky and he let his eyes go loose in the blue. Carlos looked at his friends and he smiled. He thought how much he liked them and then he thought how sometimes he felt as old as the ground or the trees or an aged stone tool. He turned away from them to survey the land.

The patterns of the land made a map of stone and green and shadow. Above the terrain was the line of the horizon and above that the powder blue of the sky, but he looked at the land. He saw the highway they had traveled and it was like a new river twisting and turning before it had begun to carve away the earth. He saw the Clarion River and the bridge and the dark waters and the white of the ripples and crests. Just past the bridge he saw the camp store like it was a painting and not real and then his eyes caught a pattern in the water. The river widened just past the bridge after a sharp turn behind the store. Breaking the flat surface of the water was the shape of an arrow with a circle on the end opposite the point. There were dashes in the shape to let the water through, but there was no mistaking its deliberate geometry. Peering close at the scene he saw three small pale figures carrying rocks into the water and he knew it was the boys from the store.

You bring those binoculars? Carlos asked.

Yeah, in my pack, said Thomas.

Carlos grabbed the binoculars and went back to his corner and he adjusted until he had sighted the bridge and then he panned over to the river behind the store. He focused until he saw the three boys and they were carrying stones and placing them in the water just so and then he took the glasses away and he again saw the shape of the arrow and the circle made of stone. The arrow stretched across the whole width of the water.

I'll be damned.

What? Thomas asked.

You gotta see this.

Carlos was looking through the glasses again and as he got ready to hand them over all three of the thin pale figures looked back up toward the tower and then all at once they jumped from the water onto the shore and were gone.

I'll be damned, he said again.

What? Thomas said.

They left.

Who?

Those thin pale guys from the store.

What the hell are you talking about?

Remember that lady up on the hill? Well there were these three guys inside, I think they were her sons. They all looked the same, tall and thin and really pale. . . and they were just kind of off, peculiar, you know?

So?

Well look down at the river, right behind the store.

Paul took the glasses and looked.

I don't see anything.

Thomas took the glasses and looked.

He pulled the glasses from his face and he looked startled and then he looked into them again.

What? What do you see?

Paul grabbed the glasses again.

Look for a pattern on the river, said Carlos.

Oh. Oh. I see it now.

What in the world do you think that is?

The arrow with a circle on the end, right?

Yeah.

You say those three guys were out there?

Carrying the rocks, yes.

That must have taken some time.

Yeah.

The three young men looked through the glasses again and then they sat down and talked about the shape and the three young men and the woman with the axe.

Occasionally one of them would get up and look down at the river.

Carlos sat quiet then. He thought of how much was lost to him and he wondered if he wasn't losing more all the time. He wondered if filling something up could make it empty. He turned his head and looked at the shape in the river and he wondered. It was a mystery to him, and the time aloft above the earth, the time coming back to him, was suddenly changed with the curiosity of it.

The descent was much faster than the climb. The sun began to fall in the sky and they took to the hill quick sliding down the shale and letting gravity work their legs. When they reached the trailhead the sun had created long shadows and the glow of the late summer filled the air like a great many lanterns had spilled their soft light onto the earth.

They started the car and drove toward the camp store and they crossed the bridge slow to look down into the river but the bend covered most of the rocks in the geometry and only the stones on the edge of the circle could be seen from looking between the rusting iron beams. It had been a good day and they pulled into the camp store.

The quiet one of them, Carlos, began to feel a little wary and so when they pulled in by the gas pumps he said, I think I'll check to see if they have gas yet. Paul and Thomas nodded their heads. Thomas walked towards the phone and Paul walked into the store passed the wooden Indian with the chipped paint. The small bell above the door marked the entrance.

I am going to get some coffee, Carlos said.

All right, said Thomas

Carlos poured the coffee and heard the buzzing of the cooler which held the sodas and the bait and the packaged meat. He took the coffees up to the counter and looked

around for the three pale boys but no one was there. He looked at the cash register and then he looked at a box that held small stones with googly eyes and pipe cleaner smiles—the pet rocks. He picked one of them up and shook it in his hands and the eyes jostled back and forth. Suddenly, one of the pale young boys popped up from behind the counter.

Ca. . .Ca. . . Can I help you, he said.

Sure, is the gas working yet?

Paul, the tall one of the three, was wandering in the back of the store. He heard the voice from the front. He started to turn that way when he heard a stirring from behind a door. There was a room at the back of the store toward the river, nestled next to the case that held the assortment of hunting gear and small wood hatchets and utility knives. He walked over toward the door and it was slightly ajar and he looked through the opening.

He saw one of the tall thin boys standing near a wall and he noticed that he only wore a pair of old jean shorts and he noticed his pale skin outlined against the stained wall and he noticed his skin stretched without mark, clean across his thin chest. The boy was looking toward the middle of the room and so Paul leaned further to get a better view and he saw the woman from the hill, the mother, leaning over whispering into the ear of the other pale boy who had his shorts around his ankles and dark red welts across his lower spine and pale backside. The woman was holding a wooden paddle of some sort. Paul shifted his feet, startled. The thin boy against the wall looked up at him through the crack of the door and their eyes met wide and alive.

At the front of the store Carlos was still talking to the boy at the register.

N. . .N. . .No we're still out of gas.

Carlos stood for a moment undecided. He looked at his feet. He looked at the boy and he made a decision.

Hey, you guys the ones that built that thing in the river back there?

The pale boy looked quickly to the back of the store and then he looked at Carlos, what do you mean?

You know, that arrow made from stones.

The pale boy looked again quick to the back of the store and then he smiled at Carlos and looked sheepishly to the ground.

Well, it is pretty neat. What's it for?

The pale boy looked up and then he glanced at the back room and he said in a whisper, it's so that they know where to find us?

Who knows where to find you? Carlos asked.

The pale boy leaned forward and then he glanced up and pointed his finger to the sky. Up there, he whispered.

Carlos leaned back from the counter and he looked at the boy.

In the back of the store Paul was still staring at the other boy that was leaning against the wall.

You need something? The mother's voice broke the stare deep and low.

No, no. . . no I was just looking, said Paul.

She got up and walked toward the door and she moved with large animal grace. She opened it and looked him up and down and she could see the piece of worn wood she held in her hand.

Well, this ain't the place to look.

The mother was large and she pushed through the door and turned toward the front of the store and she said to Paul, you the only one in here?

No, no my friend is getting some coffee.

She walked heavy to the front of the store. Paul glanced into the room and the boy bent over the desk was pulling up his pants. Paul followed the mother to the front.

Carlos was leaning over talking to the pale boy at the register when the mother came into view.

What you tellin' him? She bellowed.

The pale boy at the register dropped his head and folded his hands in front of his waist.

I asked you a question? The mother said.

N. . .N. . . Nothing.

She turned toward Paul and Carlos.

You boys up there at that tower today? The mother asked.

Carlos and Paul looked at the lady and then they turned and looked at each other.

Yeah, Paul said.

You see anything interesting?

Carlos and Paul looked at each other again and before they could respond the mother interrupted them.

You see anything here'et interests you?

Carlos and Paul dropped their heads and looked at the floor and then Paul looked at the mother in the face and he saw her eyes hard and he thought she was like a mammal

caught out of its realm. Paul looked at the mother for a long time and she stared at him hard and he could feel a strange red rising in him and it wasn't his thoughts but a feeling that can come from smell or vision or a sense that makes no sense but is real all the same.

Thomas was waiting outside and he was staring at the telephone booth and the dirty glass reflecting the sun and the shadows of the trees. He was sitting on the tail end of the car and his foot was tapping on the fender. He found that he could not take his eyes from the glass and the reflection and his mind wandered to the maggots in the booth crawling and eating at the damp suede jacket with the raven sewn into the back. He could not shake the vision of his head until a soft wind came through and brushed his hair so that it tickled his ear. He got up and began to walk inside to check on Paul and Carlos.

Paul was still looking at the mother and he felt his mouth moving and it felt like his eyes were far away from his voice. Then, the strange red surged again and his eyes came back and his body bristled and he felt like the smell before a storm.

I said anything here that interests you?

Paul, the tall one of them, paused and smiled.

I find a lot of things interesting about you and this place, Paul said. First is your boys here and the fact that I saw you beating one in the back room. That's not so interesting maybe, but just kind of disturbing. Second is that you seemingly have no regard for customers and you got your boys out back building some strange symbol or some shit in the river. And lastly, the only times I've seen you, you've got something in your hand that keeps a person on edge. I don't know how interesting that is, or how interesting you are for that matter if I was to get to know you, but I do find you to be a

curiosity, and a curiosity can lead to interest—although I am not so sure in this case if I am interested.

Carlos looked at Paul with wide eyes and the pale boys, standing on either side of the mother, looked to the floor beneath them. One of them shuffled his feet. The mother stared at Paul and their gaze held for some time and was only broken by the sound of the bell on the door. Thomas took one step in, looked at the scene, and then he stopped.

The mother continued to look at Paul and then she closed her eyes and took a deep breath and exhaled like a low growl and then she began to speak.

Let's make this simple, she hissed.

You get the hell out of here and we won't have to worry about anything. Just take your coffee and git.

But is it that simple? Paul replied.

Paul stared at the mother and their gazes locked and a strange quiet fell over the room.

You boys keep your mouth shut, the mother said. You get in your car and just go.

She lifted the wooden paddle and held it in two hands.

As Paul began to reply Carlos stepped forward.

Ma'am, we will be going now. I hope we didn't cause any harm and you can be sure we will stay quiet about all this. We just came to have a good time. Whatever you have going on here is your business and it will stay that way.

Carlos looked at the mother. Is that OK?

The mother paused and looked at Carlos.

You're a smart boy. You make sure that these two can keep their mouths shut.

People have a way of not understanding difference. You know what I mean?

The thin pale boys smiled and stared sheepishly at the ground.

Is that OK? She said.

That is just fine.

Carlos stepped forward and grabbed Paul by the arm. Paul jerked away and said, fuck this.

The mother hit him with the edge of the paddle on the temple. He dropped quickly and when Thomas started forward she hit him a glancing blow on the head. Thomas went to the ground and yelled in the quiet. . . shit. . . shit, shit.

Carlos stood where he was and then he glanced at his friends on the ground and then he glanced at the mother. The thin pale boys were looking at the ground. Carlos stared at the mother.

You *are* a smart boy, the mother said. She walked around the counter and laid the axe handle on the counter. Carlos stood still.

Help him take those two out to their car, she said to the thin pale boys.

The two largest boys picked up Paul, one grabbed him under the shoulders and one took his feet. The smallest of the boys opened the door and the bells tinkled and mixed with the sounds of their effort and Thomas making small groaning noises on the ground.

I turned on the gas, the mother said. You help this other one out, fill up your tank, and then start driving. Carlos was staring at the counter.

Hey, she yelled, ya here me?

Carlos looked up and then he nodded slowly and moved, shuffling forward to help Thomas to his feet. He got Thomas up, still hunched over, and Carlos led him toward the door. The smallest of the thin pale boys held the door open. He smiled at Carlos.

Hey, boy.

Carlos turned his head to look at the mother.

You don't believe in nothing do you?

Carlos paused for a moment.

I don't know, he said.

The mother paused and she stared at him.

We do. We believe in something. . . that looks to be more than what you've got.

Carlos looked at the mother. She stared at him and he noticed her eyes. He dropped his head and turned, helping Thomas out the door.

When they got to the car Paul was already in the back seat. The two largest boys stood waiting with the car door open. Carlos put Thomas in the front seat. Thomas was still holding his head. The mother stood at the door.

That'll do boys, she said. The thin pale boys walked towards the store and the mother moved so that they would go inside.

Carlos moved towards the gas pumps. He unscrewed the cap on the tank. His hand was shaking. He got the nozzle and put it in the tank and pressed on the trigger. He could hear the numbers clicking on the dial. He glanced up from his hands across the road at the hills of the valley. He could feel the eyes and then he saw that the sun was so low it almost seem to light the hills from below, to light the hills from inside. Carlos

stood watching the light and the shadows, the filter of pine trees, and he drove them home to the comfort and distraction.

The Gift of the Apple Pariah

Johnny Appleseed is kin to me. He who walked with a pan on his head in ragged clothes, spreading the seeds of apples, smelling of fermentation and blossoms. This grand bearded figure who walked through the Northeastern forests planting trees was either brilliant or a lunatic or both. I would have liked to sit down and talk with him even though he was probably quiet or he probably wouldn't let me get a word in, but I still would have like to talk to him. There is a festival in his name on the Beaver Creek each fall in the low hills of Eastern Ohio. My grandmother and my mother and my siblings and I would go to this festival each autumn. The people there would dress in the clothes of their people before them and they would sell apples of all varieties, and sell apple cider, apple butter, apple dumplings, and have contests of apple bobbing. The smell was intoxicating. They had a covered bridge and an old lock and old mill powered by water. I could sit and watch the water there for hours. I was with my family and my past. Johnny Appleseed was there too, maybe just passing through. I remember wondering then, as I do now sometimes, if I walked around my life with a pan on my head, smelling of fermentation and apple blossoms, what kind of drug they would put me on.

The John Henry Project

It is still not known, amidst the great variety of people in that sputtering industrial steel town of Alliance, Ohio, who came up with the idea¹, but it can probably be said the idea began to blossom somewhere in the mayor's office. From there, it somehow made it to a small advisory committee², and then was presented to the city council who was in the midst of a long campaign called REST (Revitalize, Economically and Socially, the Town). The city council embraced the idea in what can I only imagine was a last grasp for the council to just *do* something. When they presented it to the mayor, she jumped at the idea as the project that could save a career that had gone sour after her divorce with the head of the steel union due to irreconcilable differences and uncountable indiscretions.

It was entitled the John Henry Project. The idea was to have a machine challenge one of the townspeople in an industrial competition that would bring to light the economic strength of the town and its hardworking people. At first, the competition was supposed to utilize the steel industry, but after the mayor's staunch interjection and

¹ 1A good portion of the population can probably be discounted here, namely anyone who lives in the "old" part of town and not in the new allotments where all the houses cost over a \$100,000 and look strikingly similar except to those who can see the slight variety in the number and type of the various beige shingle-like decorations that adorn the front of the house. I base this judgement on a number of variables, but mostly from the fact that I grew up in this town and nobody in the "old" part of town has the "ear" of the mayor except for an old black woman who is the head of the Women's Auxiliary and the PRP (Parks Reclamation Project), board member of the Presbyterian Church (the black one) and the local MADD chapter (the black one), and who is so busy she simply does not have the brain space to come up with such an idea. And, the only other person to have the ear of the mayor is the head of the local steel union, who you will soon see is quite logically not an option.

² The advisory committee consisted of a dentist, a lawyer (disbarred for his part in the cover-up of a police funded sports parley), and a retired history teacher who could not hear after an explosion he created while subbing (his last day before retirement) for a chemistry class.

the inability to come up with a suitable competition,³ it was decided that the event would center on the town's oldest factory—the brick yard.⁴ Everyone on the council was happy. What could be better than a brick stacking competition at the oldest factory in town between a town native and a machine to bring this town together and illuminate the strength of its economy?

When the council officially announced the idea to the press and the public, the dentist-councilman actually hopped out of his seat in excitement, the mayor smiled hugely (almost obscenely seemingly trying to show all of her teeth for some reason), and when it was passed out in an outline the retired history teacher on the board unofficially mouthed the words “What the Fuck?” It was a grand and jovial winter day, lots of pictures were taken, and the great event was scheduled for July 4th of the following summer.⁵

A lot of planning and several serious obstacles stood in the way of the city council. Committees were formed—the recruitment of the competitors committee, the planning of site and rules committee, the committee for advertising and heartfelt

³ Unfairly dismissing the “aesthetic molding of molten steel” in my opinion.

⁴ None of the members of the city council had ever worked at the brick yard or knew anyone that had, or realized that they had at that time seventeen employees including seven convicted felons, a nudist, a man with two wives, and one policy for whether you worked the first or second shift—alcohol consumption on first shift, marijuana consumption on the second.

⁵ I was at college on the East coast interning for a literary arts magazine when my mother told me about the brick laying competition that was on the front page of the newspaper. I approached the Editor of the magazine and asked for leave to do the story and he said no. So, I quit, dropped out of school, and rushed home. Yes, I am a member of our current bored and disillusioned generation. However, I have decided not to be one of those dark and sulky types who complains all the time or the type that decides that they may as well escape into the Eddie Bauer SUV and the beige cookie-cutter house if everything is going to suck so much.

encouragement, and so on and so on.⁶ After all of the committees were formed the disbarred lawyer on the council realized that nobody had contacted the brick yard. The mayor, upstanding woman that she was, declared that she would act as the brick yard liason and would immediately go there to establish relations.

It was a windy wintry day and when the mayor finally found the brick yard on the East end of town and she got out of her Cadillac her loose dress wrapped itself around her head and momentarily got stuck on a pin that was holding her bun in place. The young foreman stood in the doorway to the factory with a cup of coffee and chuckled at her light brown panties and garter and her pale white legs. The mayor gathered herself quickly and approached the foreman and introduced herself. The foreman invited her into his small office and suggested a tour.

During the quick tour the mayor only noticed the incredibly thick lime dust, the dark rusting train cars, and the great roar of the machines (interrupted sporadically by various cat-calls), and then they retreated back to the office. The mayor herein gathered herself and told him about The John Henry Project. The foreman, just eighteen years old, was not really listening. He was looking at the mayor's thighs and thinking about her dress flying up in the wind.⁷ He walked around his desk and brushed against her and closed the door. He turned and asked her, "So what do you want me to do?" She stopped talking and looked him up and down and then they rushed each other and started sexing

⁶ Most of the internal specifics about the city council I have garnered from the retired history teacher who I remain close friends with. When I had him as a teacher we shared a fondness for Civil War trivia and the philosophical reasoning behind the downfalls of great civilizations. Even now, with his hearing deficiency, he remains a keen observer when he wants to.

right there on the desk. This, emphatically “sealed the deal” although the details of the arrangement weren’t specified until much later.

After the mayor’s visit to the brickyard, rumors started to buzz around the place about the summer’s events. The foreman told the men as the shifts changed that some suits would be around working out the specifics of the competition and that they should just ignore them. He also told them that they would be in the running for being the person who would be the “John Henry” going up against the machine.⁸ They asked questions about the machine that the foreman couldn’t answer. It hadn’t been ordered yet. In fact, it hadn’t been designed yet. They all wondered about that. But, all in all, the workers at the brickyard didn’t really give a shit.

The problem of the design of the machine was left to the recruitment of competitors committee. After realizing that there were no machines designed to stack bricks on railroad cars they consulted the disbarred lawyer who struck a deal with a Hong Kong company to design and manufacture a brick stacking machine by July 4th. The cost, unfortunately, was seven million dollars.⁹ This money was taken from the fund to make improvements on the old middle school. The only person who complained about

⁷ The latter and following information about the mayor’s trip to the brickyard was related to me by the foreman’s older brother with whom I played high school basketball with and smoked some pot on the weekends. It was related in much greater detail than I care to offer here.

⁸ Most of the men there were not particularly excited about being the “John Henry” after they found out that they would not receive overtime and they would have to be at the brickyard on the evening of July 4th when they all planned to be drunk or stoned or both. The only person who perked up to the idea was our hero (if we may call him that). His name was Demetrius Peagarden and he had two claims to fame. He was a state champion in the shot put in 1993 and broke Dan Dierdorf’s county record when he threw over 60 feet. He was also denied scholarship and entrance into every major college because they all thought he was lying when he filled out the racial profile on the application. He was, you see, a mix of thirty-seven different racial and cultural backgrounds including Scottish, Thai, Armenian, Nigerian, Creole, Pequot, Romanian, Micronesian, Peruvian, Catholic-Irish, Serbian, and Dutch to name a few. His mother, for the record, was a Rastafarian and thus Demetrius worked on the pot-smoking shift.

⁹ The actual cost of the machine is questionable because I could not maneuver my way through the paperwork. Done, of course, by are aforementioned disbarred lawyer who undoubtedly pocketed his fair share.

this was the black woman who had the ear of the mayor and she quieted down when the mayor promised to speak at the all-black Presbyterian church around Easter.

After this, the recruitment of competitors committee and the committee of site and rules decided to visit the brickyard together. A week or so after the mayor's visit they arrived on a milder day in early February. All of them wore suits including one bookish middle-aged woman who was the only public lesbian in the history of the town, although the other committee members liked to joke that she was one of the only asexual woman in town.¹⁰ The foreman met them all at the door to his office.

He greeted them and gave them all hard hats and offered them coffee which the dentist agreed to and after looking at its contents and putting it to his nose never touched for the remainder of the tour. The tour was cut short because of the lime dust and the loud noise. There were no cat-calls but several members of the council reported seeing the nude figure of a man appearing and disappearing on a catwalk as they walked through the small factory. The dentist did see Demetrius Peagarden on the tour. Or rather, he saw his hugely broad shoulders and hands working at stacking the bricks onto one of the railroad cars. This had a profound affect on the dentist.¹¹

After crowding the nine committee members into his office the foreman asked if they had any questions. After explaining to the committee of sites and rules that the lime

¹⁰ This joke was not funny the first time it was told. I was told this joke seven times and each time it was whispered in my ear with a hand on my shoulder. It never became funny. As a matter of fact, I began to have irrational phobias about its telling and one seemingly never-ending dream where I was at a tuxedo function and every time someone came up to me they told me this joke and just walked away.

¹¹ Questions of the dentist's sexuality remain unclear to this day, although I wonder now why he gave the physicals for the high school sports teams I played on as he is a doctor of dentistry and not a general practitioner.

dust was necessary for the production of bricks,¹² the foreman told them that he would give them a layout for the brickyard so they could figure out seating for the event. He told the recruitment of competitors committee that no one had volunteered to be the John Henry. The committee was stunned. After an awkward moment of silence the dentist inquired about the “big man out there stacking bricks”.

“Demetrius?” The foreman replied. “Well I’ll bring him in here if you want. He’s pretty quiet though.”

The foreman left for a minute and brought Demetrius into the already crowded office and he smiled down at them. His face and skin were white from the lime dust and it made his eyes stand out. He was also stoned to the bejeezus. They asked him if he was good at stacking the bricks. He looked at the foreman and then he said quietly, “sure.” They asked him if he would like to be in the competition against the machine and he looked around at them and then he said quietly, “sure.”

The recruitment of competitors committee was very pleased. They all shook Demetrius’s hand and they all wiped their hands on their pants as they walked out. And, when the foreman gave the committee of sites and rules the floor plans, they were also very pleased. All in all, the trip was a great success.¹³

The feeling of the town was stirred that spring. An excitement was in the air. The committee for advertisement and heartfelt encouragement had only advertised

¹² The lime dust in the factory is incredibly thick. It is a fine powder and every flat surface is covered with it. Spending even a few minutes in the factory means that if you choose to bathe later the water will look like dirty skim milk when you get out.

¹³ For unexplained reasons (although I have a strange theory of human cleansing and sterilization that I won’t bore you with), three of the nine committee members drove to Wal Mart after visiting the brickyard for three different reasons. I know this because after this meeting at the brickyard I had to drive out there and pick up some toilet paper (my mother will use a brand that can only be found at Wal Mart). None of them acknowledged each other but each seemed to react as if they were bathed in a pure and somehow religious light.

through Wal Mart, but this was enough to work the town into a frenzy because there were no more local shops and this is where everyone went except for the rich people who heard the news through the committee members.

As the spring turned into summer the excitement and curiosity increased. People started visiting the brickyard during the day and the workers began to become somewhat like celebrities.¹⁴ The John Henry Project update was added to the list of announcement at all the churches. The newspaper ran a special column for breaking news and events. The mayor, amidst her planning and public speaking (seven members of the congregation fell to sleep at the Easter service speech), daydreamed and masturbated with a picture of the young foreman in her head. The dentist found himself unable to concentrate with all his excitement and had three law suits for malpractice pending for various damage to gums and in one case damage to a young boy's cornea. The lawyer began to mysteriously pay off debts and he was always seen now with a slight smile on his face. I didn't appreciate the full extent of the event's effect on the populace however, until my mother started baking furiously and, more importantly, I drove by Demetrius Peagarden's house and saw him sitting on the porch looking at his hands in obvious concentration and contemplation.¹⁵

¹⁴ One of the workers actually stopped drinking on the job declaring a renewed sense of self worth, but this hiatus lasted only six hours under the bewildered eyes of his first-shift coworkers.

¹⁵ I was told that Demetrius had started to take his work very seriously and had started smoking only the very best Jamaican pot so that his mind would stay clear. I did not approach him for a pre-competition interview for a variety of reasons, but mostly just because it didn't feel right (and I thought smoking pot with an interviewee unprofessional (I am a sucker for good pot)). So, I spent some time following him at a safe distance and watching his activities. . .well, spying. The information I received from my voyeuristic tendencies made me grow very fond of Demetrius. He seemed very pure in many ways (I never ever caught him doing anything that seemed unnatural or embarrassing). More often, I found him being overly gracious and kind. I never once saw him open a door without allowing all the people within a five-yard radius to pass through. And, I observed one-hundred and seventy-three occasions where people put there hand on his shoulder in a friendly and loving gesture.

The days before the event were a scurry of activity. The brick stacking machine from Hong Kong had not yet arrived, and it was learned by the recruitment of competitors committee that a small delegation would not arrive with the machine until the morning of the competition. The lawyer was the only person who seemed confident with this arrangement. The committee for sites and rules laid out the following plan for rules and seating.¹⁶

Competition Rules

1. An equal amount of bricks (14 lb. base construction bricks) will be pressed out to be stacked and patterned on railroad cars at equal rates of two bricks/ten seconds.
2. If, after 2.5 hours, neither competitor has amassed more than four bricks that have not been properly stacked and patterned to provide stability (to be judged by three brickyard representatives from randomly selected brick producing industries and or brick transportation agencies), a five minute break will be issued for repairs or a “natural function” break. This break will continue every 2.5 hours until one of the competitors has stopped stacking or made a mistake that causes serious instability of the bricks on the rail car (again decided upon by the aforementioned judges).
3. In the event of a power outage caused by natural events (lightning strike, tornado, tidal wave, etc.) a break will be given until the aforementioned is fixed. The utmost security will be provided to prevent *unnatural* events from occurring by our recently reinstated SWAT team from the drug prevention program of our local law enforcement.
4. These rules were established without regard to race, creed, gender, monetary worth, or any other thing that might make us look bad.

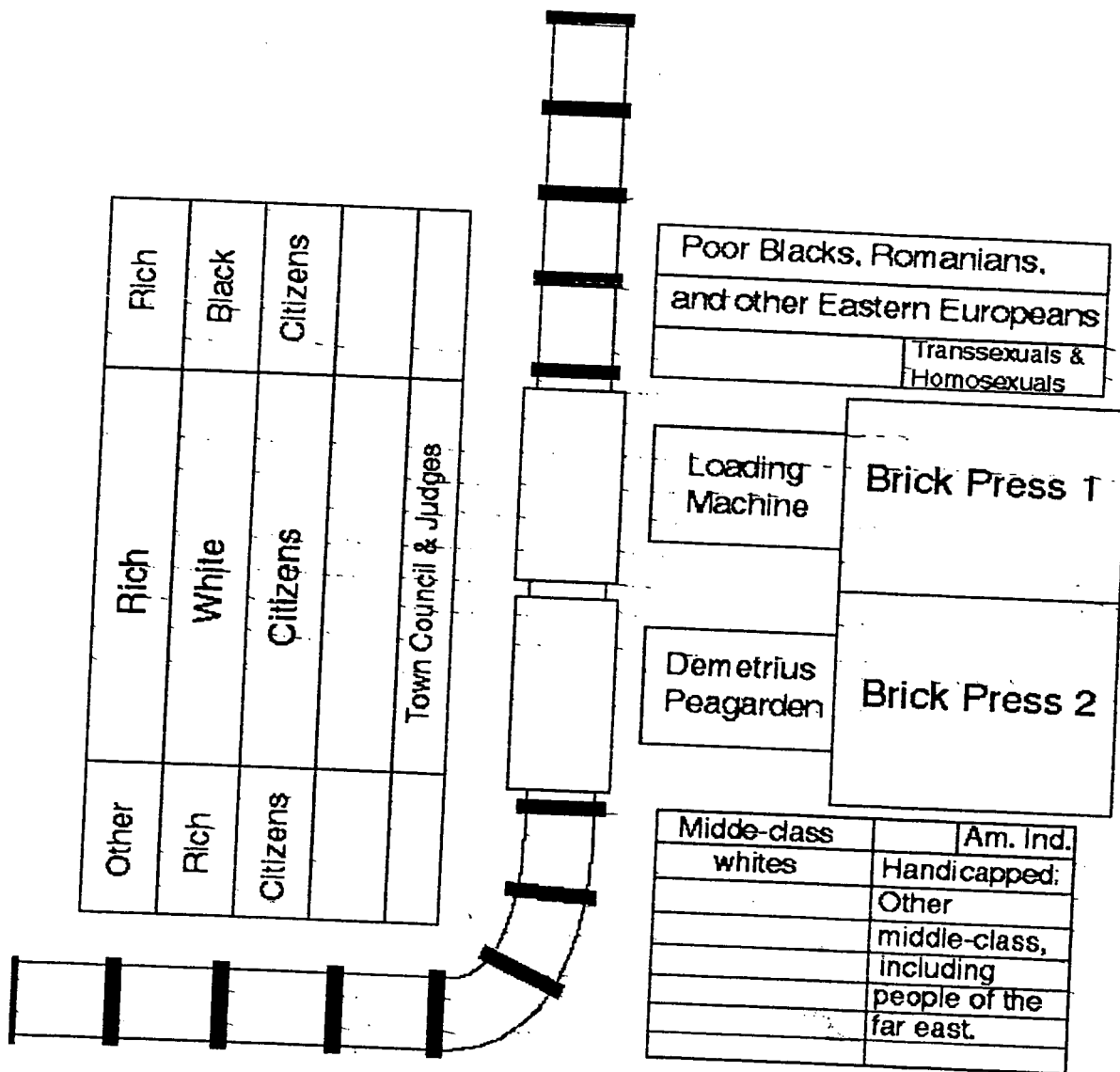
The seating was a hot topic amidst the committee and finally they decided to have a first come/first serve seating, based upon a specific number of seats for specific “types” of people, designed to be fair to all demographics.¹⁷ The history teacher, when he found out the final decision, quit the committee and officially notified the town council of his

¹⁶ An unprecedented number of people had requested tickets for the event. A lottery was dismissed to quell fears of ticket corruption in favor of a more “P.C.” system.

¹⁷ Wal Mart was consulted to insure proper statistical analysis of the town demographics. They charged the city \$5,000 for the service.

objection. He cursed so loudly at one point that paperwork was put in progress to have him either replaced in the town council or have required anger management counseling.

The following is the chart the committee provided for the ticket salespersons at the door.



I had kept up my “watch” on Demetrius and had found him surprisingly calm in the days before the competition. He went to work as usual, spent a lot of time on the porch with his mother in the evenings. I did notice a subtle change in the way he smoked cigarettes.¹⁸ Instead of the hurried way of inhaling that most addicted smokers get used to, Demetrius seemed to draw in the smoke slowly and enjoy his efforts. In fact, it seemed he was moving at all times with incredibly slow and deliberate movements.¹⁹

Some summary of our other characters may be helpful here in those days right before the competition. The delegation from Hong Kong was making last minute adjustments before the loading of the brick-stacking machine. The machine was made from stainless steel and weighed in at three and one-half tons. They left Hong Kong exactly twenty-eight hours before the start of the competition.²⁰ The lawyer was to pick them up at the airport at 5:00 A.M. on the morning of the contest.²¹ My old history teacher was in the midst of an alcoholic binge. On the evening of July 1st I spent the evening at his house and we drank single-malt scotch until the sun came up.²² The dentist was in a severely depressive state. He closed his office for two weeks and told

¹⁸ A differentiation between smoking cigarettes and joints is noticeable in almost all who partake in both of these mediums. Joint-smoking seems to beg for a slowness, while cigarettes seem to be more often associated with quick jerky movements.

¹⁹ I have the sneaking suspicion that Demetrius knew he was being watched. I don’t think he ever saw me (I fancied it kind of a challenge for him not to), but the changes seemed to reflect and outward appearance that is necessary under certain conditions (we must remember Demetrius did have a good amount of acclaim and attention when he was the state champion in the shot put). However, I also recognize that the spotlight of the competition—his coworkers, people at the grocery store, etc.—could have brought upon these changes as well. Or, it could have just been the actions of a man who is waiting for something grand, like a pre-fight boxer or a sprinter loosening in the starting blocks. And, it may very well be some romantic idealism on my part that I think he “knew” I was watching. Probably he didn’t, in fact, but we must let a writer have his creativity and misconceptions.

²⁰ There were three members of the delegation, all who were high-level employees of their company and friends. They viewed the trip as a holiday and reward for gaining notoriety for supplying the winner of the yearly hot dog eating contest (The cousin of Thomas Wang—member of the delegation and graduate of the University of Minnesota and still record holder of Alpha Psi Omega’s tequila shooting contest). Yes, I know, very strange coincidences.

²¹ The lawyer was in Florida two days before the competition. My old history teacher believes he has another family in Miami whom he visits every month or so.

everyone he was on vacation, but his wife informed me that he had barely left the basement couch. She said that he “gets like this when something big or exciting is coming up”. The mayor went about her days in relative normalcy, except it took her three days to escape her lackeys and find the perfect lingerie to wear under her suit for the big event.²³

The most important events in those few days before July 4th was the feeling of the town. I spent as much time as possible in public places to get a feel for the atmosphere of the people. It was very hot and the town was in the middle of a two-week spell without the temperature getting below ninety on its high end and so I expected the mood to be somewhat laconic. However, instead of the normal heat-induced complacency, the people of the town seem to grow in the heat and humidity. It was as if the town was secretly eating truckloads of jalepenos or szechuan Chinese because the people gathered in outside places, and regularly smiled and wiped the sweat from their brows as if the stifling heat were a challenge and affront to them and the community. Particularly amazing was the fact that I would see small groups of people standing right beside the shade and seem to prefer the blazing hot sun and the sweat that smeared make-up and caused glasses to slip right off the head.²⁴

I did not see Demetrius’s mother until early in the morning of July 4th, the day of the brick-stacking competition. She and Demetrius sat on the porch at dawn smoking one of the largest blunts I have ever seen. They did not seem to talk but rather watched a

²² I will never, ever, drink single malt scotch again.

²³ I found out later that the “winner” was a tight black leather body suit with a hole around the navel that was formed with a sterling silver ring the size of a grapefruit.

²⁴ I, myself, regularly took breaks in the air-conditioned library (and I still had sweat that ran down into my boots) where I never once ran into another person that didn’t work there. Although, even though I am not quite sure, I would swear I saw a nude figure darting through the biography section upstairs.

steady rain fall, the leftover of an overnight thunderstorm that had cooled the town and given everyone a much needed long night's sleep. Both had a look of calm and casual contentedness.²⁵ They were drinking coffee.

The competition was to start at noon. The brick stacking machine had arrived and was set up and tested that morning.²⁶ Vendors began to arrive and set up in the parking lot in the mid-morning. A line started to form about an hour before the competition. However, most people planned on coming later in the evening, closer to when they believed the competition would become more heated, so many loitered around the vendors and some people brought instruments and the atmosphere began to resemble a circus or county fair (without the rides and large mammals of course). Most of our characters arrived and were let in the brickyard about a half an hour before noon.

Demetrius arrived about fifteen minutes before noon and sat on the platform where he would be stacking the bricks. Many of the other brickyard workers crowded around him and gave him words of advice. Demetrius mostly just nodded his head and smoked a few cigarettes. The mayor and all of the town council milled around and everyone met the judges and got a close look at the machine.²⁷

²⁵ I was seated on a branch in a large oak tree that morning near their house. Most of my covert devices had been used up and it seemed to me the only way to get a view of Demetrius before the competition. Actually, that is not entirely true. I have a "thing" for sitting in trees during thunderstorms. I believe it has something to do with a combination of the sound of the water on the leaves, the smells, the rain on my face, etc. However, there are certain things I try not to analyze too much. This happens to be one of them.

²⁶ The delegation from Hong Kong arrived drunk off the airplane and the lawyer proceeded to take them to the nearest bar where they continued to drink far into the early morning hours. Chen Xie, cousin to the famous hot dog eating champion, ran out of the bar at one point, shouted at the sky and the rain, and proceeded to fall down, passed out in the gutter.

²⁷ The machine was brilliantly designed. It had two long robotic arms that were attached to a human-like cylindrical torso that sat on a rectangular base. Long claws or pinchers were attached to the arms and the machines movements were controlled by a complex system of motion detectors, an infrared sensor (the bricks are slightly warm right after they are pressed), and one sophisticated mainframe that was housed in its rectangular base (a large fan was also housed in the back of the base). Technology is not my forte, but I watched one of the test-runs and the machine seemed to work with a flawless and powerful efficiency.

The atmosphere at noon was one of mixed feelings. The people inside, witnessing the beginning of the competition, had an air of excited expectation, craning necks and whispering excitedly to one another. After the lawyer introduced the foreman and the foreman introduced the judges and then Demetrius (to loud cheers), the mayor came up to give a speech thanking everyone for coming together and supporting an era of new prosperity in the town. Her speech was interrupted when a small child screamed and pointed up to the boardwalk where the lime was mixed into the machines. Several people looked up quickly enough to see the streaking image of a naked man on the upper reaches of the building. The mayor continued her speech but nobody was really listening. When the foreman finally got a chance to start the brick-making, accompanied by a loud cheer, the crowd soon found itself slightly subdued by the slowness and subtlety of Demetrius and the quiet efficiency of the machine.²⁸

The first several hours went by and the people began to fall into the pattern of the competition. Two bricks would come out onto the conveyer belt, they would be picked up and placed in a pattern on the rail cars. When a row was filled on the rail car sand was scattered over to help prevent toppling.²⁹ The machine had little variation in its pattern, and Demetrius would only occasionally break pattern to light up a cigarette and let it

²⁸ In the parking lot outside some other feelings were beginning to surface. The seating arrangement system was announced and some ill feeling began to arise. People had to run home and grab tax forms to prove their monetary status. When the middle-class white section was filled, a young couple tried to paint themselves black, but they were turned away at the door when the young man tried to wipe some sweat off of his forehead. Luckily, one of the door managers knew some of the musicians, so he had them play soothing music until they could retrieve the karaoke machine and distract the audience with other forms of entertainment. However, with my press pass (forged of course), I began to feel slightly uncomfortable walking in and out of the building.

²⁹ The machine caused a murmur at first because it had a neat little scoop that came out of the "forearm" of its claw and flicked the sand quite evenly over the whole stack of bricks. This too, however, soon became commonplace.

hang loosely from his mouth as he stacked, drawing on it as he waited for the next two bricks.

The first break was at two and a half-hours, and the bricks stopped being pumped out of the machine. Demetrius went to the bathroom, came back and sat on the edge of the platform, drinking some water. The crowd mingled within their assigned seats. Most people had brought food and drinks, and they ate contentedly, although the dust was starting to form and people with open beverage containers complained about the milky film that formed on the top of the liquid. Members of the town council milled around, except for the dentist who sat leaned forward, transfixed by Demetrius sitting near the bricks. The mayor kept trying to catch the glance of the young foreman who was with the judges checking and chatting about the stability of the rail car and the efficiency of the machine. Outside, the mood had calmed a bit, as people began to sing karaoke and eat late lunches in the parking lot.

The competition was fairly non-eventful through most of the evening. Demetrius and the machine kept up their regular pattern, stopping every two and a half hours for a short break. The town council members and the people inside would regularly take breaks and going outside where the action (or lack there of) was relayed and people were having a regular fourth of July bonanza with karaoke and small fireworks and kegs of beer donated by various downtown drinking establishments.³⁰

It can be noted that the mayor and the foreman were regularly making eye contact, the dentist had not yet taken his eyes off of Demetrius, the lawyer and the Chinese

³⁰ It was against the uptown franchise bars' policy to pass out beer without proper permits, although many of their eerily clothed representatives were passing out coupons for free chicken wings or fliers for DJ and drink specials. It may also be noted that the two Wal Mart representatives had several liquid "hits" of LSD

delegation were exchanging shots from a variety of flasks, and the retired history teacher arrived late (and drunk) and was escorted outside to the parking lot for excessive swearing.³¹

The only other event that was of any note before midnight was the helicopter that landed just as the sun was going down. It was two Pequot Indians from Manhattan (distant relatives of Demetrius) who landed and were immediately ushered in to fill the only two remaining seats in the house. They created quite a stir, not because of their presence, but rather the amount of dust that their helicopter kicked up when it landed and the fact that the loud noise interrupted the constant stream of karaoke.

Demetrius did not seem to be tiring one bit. He had the same calm demeanor as the night went on. Besides the dentist,³² nobody seemed to be paying much attention anymore. Demetrius did not seem to notice. And, although I watched diligently, I never saw him look at the machine that loomed on the other side of the platform.³³ It was, in fact, becoming more of an exercise in patience for most of the crowd, rather than the exciting competition everyone had imagined it to be.³⁴

slipped into their cola and one of them, a young crew-cut blond, was sitting in the middle of the karaoke crowd cross-legged staring at his smiley-faced yellow button.

³¹ Once outside, my former teacher began singing karaoke and is currently on the competitive circuit (currently in Omaha, I believe) singing a variety of Frank Sinatra and Dizzy Gillespie tunes. The last time I saw him he told me that he had a child on the way with a hula dancer in Seattle.

³² The judges were still checking the rail cars and keeping a close vigil over the competition (I did notice that the lawyer and the Chinese delegation were spending a lot of time at their table.). Demetrius's mother was not inside the building. She refused to put out her "blunt" citing federally mandated religious freedom.

³³ I am a big fan of sports psychology and I can only imagine that Demetrius was not looking at the machine because there was no chance of intimidating it. Great athletes (and Demetrius was) almost always are a part of the action and aware of the interaction of their own mental state and those competing with them. Often, especially in competitions of endurance, a well processed mental framework is the key to victory.

³⁴ My theory on this "state of boredom" is related to television and fast food and, again, Wal Mart. The townspeople (excluding many members of the "low class"—specifically those on welfare) were and are so used to having everything quick and packaged for convenience that when an event/action is subtle and drawn out they get panicky and bored because they are forced to entertain themselves through internal means or what they consider inefficient communal interaction. Not a new theory, necessarily, but a "goodie" in my opinion.

It was not until midnight that the pattern of competition was changed and the event took an unexpected turn.³⁵ The machine, after twelve hours, began to grow warm. The device for cooling the machine was the large fan attached to its base. When it first kicked on a huge cloud of dust was thrown up all over the section that was filled with the “middle class blacks and other eastern Europeans”. This caused a great roar of laughter from the rest of the crowd. When the fan shut down they saw that everyone was covered from head to toe with the thick lime dust. One toddler was crying and choking on the dust and after he was escorted out by his parents the laughter increased and soon the whole crowd was finger pointing and the people who were covered with the dust began slapping each other on the back to watch the great plume that went out underneath their hands.

The crowd outside heard the laughter and a great mob of people made its way from the karaoke machine over towards the door to see if they could get in. The small toddler barely made it out before the rush. The laughter had died down but the conversation and energy level of the crowd inside was at a high. The doormen had a tough time keeping the crowd out and eventually had to shout over them a summary of the event that had took place inside.³⁶ This seemed to quiet them a little but the mob did not move away from the doors.

Demetrius glanced up at the machine for the first time when the fan went on and I believe I saw a small smile perk up on his face. He kept stacking the bricks. Now, from

³⁵ It should be noted that a large amount of alcohol had been consumed by almost all of the people watching the competition inside, and more than large amounts of alcohol were and had already been consumed outside in the parking lot.

³⁶ The Wal Mart representative on LSD had made his way with the mob and was wandering through the crowd poking people in their ribs to check their reactions (before he had dropped out of school for losing his federal aid for possessing 1/64th of an ounce of pot, he had been a promising sociology major). The

this point on I would like to say that I had a clear view of the rest of the evening's events, but when the machine's fan came on for the last time, nobody could see much of anything for the duration of the competition.³⁷ The dust was so thick that at times you could not see your hand if you held it out in front of you. However, the dust was swirling so occasional glimpses could be made. It was, if you might imagine, like being in a thick cumulus cloud.

Now, when the fan reached its highest gear, and the entirety of the competition began to be enveloped in a great cloud, there was a short time when all sound and time seemed to stop, except the steady drone of the fan and the sounds of the brick-pressing machine. Even the crowd outside seemed to pause as if they were a many-headed voyeur with an ear to the door. The break in this moment of peace³⁸ came from a great cowboy yell in the rafters that somehow echoed through the dust and resounded through the whole building. This "Yeeehaaawww" caused a stir of movement and panic that I will try to do my best to relate.³⁹

I stood still for a moment leaning in an aisle between the exit and the seating of the council and the rich folks and listened to what I can only describe, although I've never been privy to the sound, as the great stirring of a herd of elephants being roused into movement. I am quite sure a great many people fell down. I know that people were

most exciting response so far was a punch to the chest that hit his smiley face button and drew blood on his chest that soaked through his shirt.

³⁷ I was able to extrapolate much of the following information in later interviews and investigation of the scene.

³⁸ I call it a moment of peace because it seemed to be one of those moments when everything is in balance, where all focus is concentrated and clear. I liken this to arm hairs standing up before a storm, some intuitive nature we all seem to have. I have even heard a theory that whole communities might have this feeling for an extended period of time. These communities that are cohesive and whole (most of these communities are "primitive" and thus now gone) and they seem to know when natural disasters or even significant human events are coming, often years and years before the event.

panicking from the screams and yells and repetitive cursing (shit shit shit shit SHIT!). Chairs were being overturned and people began to grasp and grapple with one another. As I was close enough to the door, and from what I heard later, the mass of people outside were crushing up to the doors to get in. This scene was not quite as interesting I am told, to the one inside, just a simple mob-mentality forcing its way to a single goal.⁴⁰

Eventually people began to stream past me to the door but were unable to get out. I decided to make my way towards the bricks to see if the competition had halted. It was on the way that I caught a short glimpse of the mayor and what I know now was the foreman. I believe I saw her, in classy black leather lingerie, straddling him. She was holding what I can only presume to be some kind of whip.⁴¹ I did not see the lawyer while the lime dust was thick in the air, but I am led to believe that he stole a yuan from a member of the Chinese delegation and used it to pleasure himself amidst the chaos.⁴²

As I was making my way slowly up to the platform, having to step between two railcars, I bumped into a man who was covered with white dust but did not have any other discernible clothing. I grabbed this man by the arm (carefully) and I asked him

³⁹ Again, I was not able to see all of these occurrences, but I will try to recreate them to the best of my ability.

⁴⁰ Two areas of note here. First, somehow nobody was hurt in this town mob, due mostly, from what I am told, to the fact that the Wal Mart representative on LSD (for some reason I believe he deserves his name mentioned for his heroics—we shall call him Mark Ritchie) began break dancing to Jimi Hendrix's national anthem recording and caught the mob's eye with an incredible head spin just as the weight of the crowd would have begun to cause bodily harm. Second note, Mark Ritchie became an exotic dancer and paid his way through college without Federal government assistance.

⁴¹ The mayor had a child some nine months later. The foreman became the youngest councilman in the history of the town the next election.

⁴² First, I would rather not say how I came across this information. Secondly, the Chinese delegation simply passed out drunk when they realized nobody could see them. They were found sprawled on the floor when the dust cleared. Thirdly, again, I would rather not say how I came across the aforementioned information.

who he was. He replied with a soft indistinguishable accent, “*I am the brick mixer.*” Then, he yelled “Yeeehhhaaaa!” and ran on his way.⁴³

As I approached the platform I could hear the machine still stacking the bricks, and as I put out my hand to feel the edge, I tripped over a lumpy form on the floor. I bent down and looked close at the face of the person and I realized it was the dentist and he was out cold with a fine red welt on his jaw line. I could see the dust caked to his lips and the small particles of dust moving in front of his mouth, so I knew that he would be ok. I scooted his body towards the platform so that he wouldn’t be trampled and then I hopped up on the platform.

Demetrius was sitting on the conveyer that brought out the bricks smoking a cigarette. I could see his outline and the faint red ember in front of his face. I walked over and hopped up beside him.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey.”

“I’m Patrick.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“D’you hit the dentist?”

“Yeah.”

We paused then for a moment. I must confess that was a strange moment for me. After watching Demetrius from a distance for so long, here I was right next to him, and I could ask him anything. But, it didn’t seem right, at the time, to be too probing.

“Stop stacking?”

⁴³ I continue, to this day, to be plagued by the vision of a naked man on my periphery anytime I am in a structure with high ceilings and more than one level.

“Didn’t seem much point to it anymore.”

“Yeah.”

And so there we sat, with the stirring of the town settling down around us and the dust beginning to thin. They had finally opened the doors and most of the people had cleared out into the night air. The machine was still working behind us, stacking and stacking and stacking the bricks.

“You could probably keep stacking,” I said.

“Probably.”

Demetrius kept smoking and then he offered me one when his went out and we smoked and watched the dust settle to the ground—on the chairs and a few bodies, on the bricks and our own arms.

“It doesn’t really matter what I do,” he said. “They are just going to do what they want any ways.”

“Yeah. Town’s got a mind of its own.”

So we continued to smoke and the dust settled and people went home and one of the judges came in and shut the machine down and helped out the dentist and woke up the Chinese delegation. We heard a helicopter take off outside. We sat for quite some time like that until I felt the hairs on my arm stand up.

“Storm’s coming,” Demetrius said.

“Yeah.”

We sat and listened to the first drops begin to patter on the roof and we were just two people watching the same thing, and maybe seeing it in some of the same ways.⁴⁴

⁴⁴This is the end of the story and I would like to be able to tell you that the rains came and washed away all the dust in the air and in eyes. I would like to tell you that the John Henry Project made Demetrius proud,

that the politicians and businesses saw people as human, but none of this happened. The rain pushed people back into themselves, or to Wal Mart to steal glances at one another, or to jobs in boxes, or to TV dinners and ashtrays. People just don't seem to know how to be together anymore and I think this makes them unhappy. It makes me unhappy. I think I am going to leave soon, again, under cover of the rain and dust, while it's quiet and nobody is watching.