TALES OF CAUTION

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fullfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

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Denton, Texas
December, 1993

This thesis contains five short stories. It begins with a preface which defines the stories' place in genre and their thematic content.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Tim Richardson for his aid with the technical preparation of this thesis.
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PREFACE

John Gardner draws a distinction between stories and tales: a story is a "realistic" telling of a possible series of events which "argues the reader into acceptance" while a tale may posit an unlikely or even impossible element in its premise and then "charms or lulls [the reader] into dropping objections. . . . The tale writer simply walks past our objections, granting that the events he is about to recount are incredible but winning our suspension of disbelief by the confidence and authority of the narrator's voice" (22,24).

The five stories presented here seek to utilize the freedom of the "tale." They vary in degree of employment of the fantastic, but the quality is not one which can be forgotten entirely even in "real world" settings; the fantastic is responsible for attracting even the most "realistic" and level-headed of adults to the daily act of living. Surprise gives flavor to all efforts, even the tragic, and makes things "interesting."

Of the grotesque and the imaginative, as opposed to what she perceives as a trend of realism in fiction since the eighteenth century, Flannery O'Connor writes,

If the writer believes that our life is and will
remain essentially mysterious. . . his kind of fiction will always be pushing its own limits outward toward the limits of mystery, because for this kind of writer, the meaning of a story does not begin except at a depth where adequate motivation and adequate psychology and the various determinations have been exhausted. Such a writer will be interested in what we don't understand rather than in what we do. He will be interested in possibility rather than in probability. (41-42)

This statement is as true today as when it was first published in 1957. Italo Calvino speaks of essentially the same impulse when he writes in Six Memos for the Next Millennium:

Were I to choose an auspicious image for the new millennium, I would choose [this] one: the sudden agile leap of the poet-philosopher who raises himself above the weight of the world, showing that with all his gravity he has the secret of lightness, and that what many consider to be the vitality of the times--noisy, aggressive, revving and roaring--belongs to the realm of death, like a cemetery for rusty old cars. (12)

Calvino speaks of this image in relation to "weight" in fiction. He states that "my working method has more often
than not involved the subtraction of weight" (3), which applied here in relation to the case of mystery versus realism functions as something of a call to arms for the imaginative. These two images--Calvino's leaping poet and Flannery O'Connor's writer moving beyond the explored depths of "adequate" motivation and psychology--figuratively head in opposite directions but are in fact complementary.

For example, in modern literature, one culmination of lightness and mystery can be seen in the magical realists of South America. One of the greatest writers in this camp is Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Of his technique is written:

Magical realism creates its aesthetic impact by fusing terms that are in principle opposed to each other. The effect upon the reader of such a fusion of fact and fantasy or innocence and knowledge is, however, not one of absolute identification with the characters but rather a mixed reaction of sympathy and comic detachment. (Williamson 46)

Frank O'Connor also comments on the place of this last aspect in fiction when he states that "identification between the reader and the character" is the domain of the novel; short stories take advantage of the ability to function without a hero (19). This is one element of Calvino's "lightness" in fiction.

The stories here may not be "magical realism"; they are
the product of another culture and a different outlook. They utilize the freedom of the short story to operate on strengths other than reader-protagonist identification, however, and they look forward to the future as they seek to capture that feeling of the unknown which is being drawn into the present by our very description of it.

The unknown offers not only the risk of being mired in weightiness but at times, and particularly for the very young, the constant threat of physical danger. Accordingly, "The Playground at the End of the Neighborhood" introduces a unifying thread for these five tales, a theme of caution. A boy tricked into a dare by cruel circumstance finds himself threatened on all sides, both by unspecified danger in the form of a dilapidated old slide and the all-too-familiar threat of harm at the hands of bullies.

Such situations are not unusual obstacles to the individual, if one takes the sequence of events here in any symbolic sense. When one cannot fly, one must climb. That the protagonist is brave enough to accept the "Old Slide Dare" and try to work his way through the predicament by playing along is a simultaneous blessing and curse. He faces his challenge admirably, but also rolls the dice, so to speak, risking disaster. If a reward is received--here, the epiphatic vision of Elysian fields--the price exacted may be high, even total.

Significant is the implicit tone of the narration--
shrewd, distant examination of a threat being combatted. Like the enigmatic figure on the swing set, the narrator is human but decidedly not motherly. The setting is alien and dangerous and no comfort is proffered; comfort would not be genuine and there are no lies here, simply the unknown and chance in its more terrible aspect.

The tone of caution is present also in "The Daylight Monster," a tale of super-scientific threat. Here, another prevalent characteristic of the five tales is introduced, the element of myth or fairy tale, with an attendant tone of the dreamlike.

Dreams impress the dreamer with all the majesty and authority of enlightened allegory. "The Daylight Monster" is an attempt to convey the fuzzy half-logic of the dream within a host environment which supports its structural integrity. Dreams cannot be carried "back to reality" and the conscious state with any accuracy--indeed, what is an "accurate" dream?--but the feeling can perhaps be duplicated for the purpose of artistic pleasure.

The popular writer Stephen King is quoted in an interview as postulating that "our minds are the same nutrient bath all the way down to the bottom and different things live at different levels. Some of them are a little bit harder to see because we don’t get down that deep" (Epel 139). Fish to which we are accustomed have their high-pressure equivalents in the depths:
bright fluorescent, weird, strange things with membranous umbrellas and weird skirts that flare out from their bodies... that we don't see very often because they explode if we bring them up close to the surface. They are to surface fish what dreams are to our surface thoughts. Deep fish are like dreams of surface fish (139-140). When trying to make sense of dreams--a step on the way to utilizing them in fiction--King suggests that:

what the conscious mind brings up may be the equivalent of an exploded fish. It may just be a mess. It may be something that's gorgeous in its own habitat but when it gets up to the sun it just dries out. And then it's very gray and dull.

(140).

"The Daylight Monster," in contrast to "The Playground at the End of the Neighborhood," sets out figurative nets to troll these very depths. Where "The Playground" is a tale about children, "The Daylight Monster" is one seemingly written for children, which is its method of dredging the depths of the imagination.

As a narrative approach, this too may harbor complexity. Two of Marquez's best short stories, "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" and "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World," are labelled "A TALE FOR CHILDREN," but no child could hope to unravel the subtleties of the two tales.
In truth, this approach functions not for the benefit of the young but to allow for a narrative freedom such that the story, like Marquez's decrepit "angel," may launch itself above mundane restraints.

"The Daylight Monster" requests--and shares this characteristic with the magical realists of South America--a separation from what categorizes the majority of contemporary novels in the United States, a propensity for portraying "normal people with real life problems." Myth has become increasingly difficult to utilize--indeed, seems almost to have lost its place. Horror novelist Anne Rice says that because of her upbringing in New Orleans, which she calls "the only Catholic city in America," she really thought it was fine to write a book in which everybody was a vampire and they all talked about good and evil. The industrial revolution and Protestantism came together in America in a way it [sic] didn't in any other country in the world, with such force and power. To see our literature finally dominated by things that used to be Saturday Evening Post short stories is really the final triumph of the Protestant vision in art. It's basically a vision that says if it's about God and the Devil, it has to be junk. It's science fiction; it's dismissible. (Diehl 60)
Ironically, just as the Roman Catholic Church adapted Pagan rites, beliefs, and myths to its own ends—often "watering down" until they were fit for children tales previously taken quite seriously—so the Protestant trend made of Catholicism a comparatively sterile, "safe" regimen. With the absence of saints and mysticism, the fantastic—which existed for a purpose—has been relegated to the back alleys of pulp fiction and comic books.

The dream logic of "The Daylight Monster" attempts to operate mythically in a traditional fashion. As did Poe, the tale relies on the importance of dreaming as "an instrument of knowledge. . . . Thanks to it the poet can reestablish the network of universal correspondences and the Unity of Creation which intelligence and analysis have fragmented" (Zayed 144). Calvino writes that, "At one stroke Edgar Allan Poe initiates the literature of aestheticism and the literature of the masses, naming and liberating the ghosts that Puritan America trails in its wake" (Uses of Literature 20).

The legacy of another of America's colonial cultures is introduced in "Union, Justice, and Confidence," a story named for the state motto of Louisiana, home of the Acadians, or Cajuns. This is the most straightforward narrative tale of the group. Here, details are solid and personal, in contrast to the unearthly air of "The Daylight Monster." This is a story which deals with the natural
conflict occurring between generations and cultures and the responsibilities of the individual who finds himself paying respects to the sensibilities of more than one "world," each with its own standards.

Caution comes into play here in two respects. First, the protagonist Dan must apply it in not the negative sense of "The Playground"—how do I make it through this scrape?—but in an active sense. He feels the need to protect others from his own actions. Personal pain is felt even as possible harm is avoided—here, the difficulty of confronting the older generation of Cajuns' bias and outright prejudice. The anguish of the boy facing the dare in the playground becomes an interior self-dare, one without established rules or clear explanation of what exactly is at stake. Defining these parameters is the first half of the test, a personal trial of conscience without comment from the audience, without applause or encouragement.

The second half of Dan's ordeal is the reconciliation of two paths, or lifestyles, each loved in its way and each begging attention. Dan cannot be true to both; can he be true to either? Caution naturally enters into the equation. To follow every desire may be to fall into a sin of revelation, one which will bring about more pain than joy, though joy may seem so desirable as to demand the attempt.

Simultaneously, the narration echoes Dan's caution with its own careful consideration. A light touch is called for,
but not one so abstract as that of "The Daylight Monster."
As Flannery O'Connor warns,

sentimentality is an excess, a distortion of
sentiment usually in the direction of an
overemphasis on innocence, and that innocence,
whenever it is overemphasized in the ordinary
human condition, tends by some natural law to
become its opposite. (147-148)

The fairy-tale atmosphere of "The Daylight Monster" is
again picked up in the story "Traction." In addition, this
tale of the aftermath of disaster may be seen as a
continuation of "The Playground at the End of the
Neighborhood," in which the fate of the protagonist is
necessarily left inconclusive; that tale is about taking a
chance on the Old Slide Dare and the possible repercussions.
"Traction" deals specifically with the picking up of pieces
after tragedy occurs.

The pain and confusion felt by the unnamed skier in the
story clouds the narration and thus all perceptions of
reality; there is a return to the rules of the dream-depths.
This cloudiness establishes the "rules of reality" for the
story. "The spectacle of mental disintegration" has been
named by Allan Tate as "Poe's major discovery and legacy to
the twentieth century" (Wuletich-Brinberg 30). Though this
tale is hardly gothic in setting or diction, it owes
something to Poe's use of ongoing nightmare in narrative--
his sense of unshakable dread. Where "Traction" differs is in its avoidance of horror. It is a tale of a man's rational grasps for survival not before but after a terrible "end." It picks up where Poe continually left off.

In "Traction," survival can be achieved only by working with and through the nightmare and not fighting against the reality of the horror as Poe's protagonists were wont. The man in traction must trust in the dream elements--present here as voodoo, something he, and the rational world, can neither prove the existence of nor completely ignore. The swinger of "The Playground" returns, in a sense, in the active role of Tana. She is the center of the dream logic. To obey the rules of this dream requires an act of faith, something which cannot be institutionalized by any hospital, for faith is an internal battle, as in "Union, Justice, and Confidence." Confidence is exactly what is required of the man confined and helpless in the bed. "Medicine" in the aboriginal sense can be the only source for recuperation when science has reached its limit, and on another level there is the parallel of a quest for redemption, something else requiring faith.

Finally, "Exercise" is in its way both a fable and a lesson from life experience. The "epic" journey described is a test of self-discipline and faith, as in "Union, Justice, and Confidence" and "Traction." The tone, and its endorsement, is the final message of caution, a friendly but
annoyingly clever narrator's way of dealing with threats both external and self-possessed. The story is about safety and distance, and reaching a prescribed goal in the simultaneous presence of both. It is about the power of dream and the power of will, in culmination.

The setting is deliberately ambiguous: perhaps, like "The Daylight Monster," post-apocalyptic, perhaps contemporary, perhaps antebellum. Though not specifically "science fiction," it utilizes the distance from real times and places which that genre is known for in order to grant its theme universality. Ursula K. Le Guin writes that science fiction, though thought of most often in its extrapolative facade, has as its real strength a descriptive power. This is done by saying in metaphor what cannot be articulated in simple language.

Fiction writers... go about it in a peculiar and devious way, which consists in inventing persons, places, and events which never did and never will exist or occur, and telling about these fictions in detail and at length and with a great deal of emotion, and then when they are done writing down that pack of lies, they say, There! That's the truth! (Left Hand of Darkness xiii)

All of this is true of any work of fiction, but the distinction here is on the special abilities of the fantastic, and thus the mythic, to capture with
universality—and a Calvino’s "lightness"—its themes and arguments. Like Le Guin’s "philosophical parable," (Spivak 159) "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," which has been described as "a Borges pastiche" (Malzberg 8), the tale "Exercise" takes advantage of a non-existent setting to function more fully as symbol—of dream, of the power of the "imaginative" harnessed as a tool, of the inner grappleings of the mental battle against "disintegration" and complacency.

As Le Guin calls Calvino’s thematic style "a subversion of order by the strange" (Dancing 279), so he comments on the power of fantasy in his collection of Italian folktales:

> Those who know how rare it is in popular (and nonpopular) poetry to fashion a dream without resorting to escapism, will appreciate these instances of a self awareness that does not deny the invention of a destiny, or the force of reality which bursts forth into fantasy. Folklore could teach us no better lesson, poetic or moral. (Italian Folktales xxxii)

At this time in history, the Second Millennium is still destiny. To go forth with "lightness," with the freedom to leap over barriers that hem in creative expression, requires an extra effort on the part of the creative mind. Thanks to technology and the distributive wonder of current media, communication is not the problem. Expression is another
matter. As with Poe's tortured protagonists, this battle is within, a fight against the self. The "magical realism" of Marquez points to a solution: a return to myth, but new myths under new rules, and with powers never previously possessed. This mythology need not have heroes. It need not be personal, merely personable. And through superior lying, it can be all the more genuine.
Dale stumbled forward into the dirt. He didn't turn, didn't send an accusing glare at whomever had pushed him. No one told him to get up. The older boys stood, waiting. Bickley, the leader, took a step closer, and this was all the cue Dale needed. He didn't wait to be pushed again, or smacked on the back, or worse. He shoved himself to his feet and stepped forward into the playground.

He'd never been to this one--it lay at the far end of the neighborhood, maybe a mile away from his home in the new, clean section of houses by the freeway. This playground was in the old part of the neighborhood, the really beat-up part full of houses who knew how ancient? Maybe fifty years old. Houses with paint flaking off, and lop-sided Beware of Dog signs, and hoses that were never coiled away, just left sprawling in unmown grass to rot. Dale had never been this far before, even on his bike.

The playground was old--no forts made of railroad ties, no exercise stations of parallel metal bars, no racquetball courts. It didn't seem to be attached to a school, or even a recreation center. No sign identified it. It was just this old park, with thin patches of grass, one steel-roofed picnic pavilion eaten through with rust, and a swing set with all the paint peeling off. Two of the swings--only
half-attached to the upper support beam--hung there like fish on a line.

Dale couldn’t see over to the low side of the playground. Woods? More houses? Maybe a big road? He realized there wasn’t any traffic in sight, and no people either.

No, he was wrong. There was one person, an older boy, or maybe a really skinny man, on a swings. Dale hadn’t seen him a moment ago. He was wearing black warm-ups and had long hair, dark hair that whipped around his face as he swung.

There was a wind here, though the old playground didn’t seem to be on higher ground than the houses. If anything it sat on low ground, in a depression. Dale looked around some more. Paul and Terry were standing right next to him, kicking little clouds of black dirt against his pant leg. Bickley was jumping up and down on a merry-go-round that was chained to a pole. It bounced with a terrible creaking. Matt stood a distance away, under a tree though the sky had gone cloudy. The heat was still bad, but everything was dimmer and Dale blinked and looked around. He couldn’t tell if the man on the swing set was looking at them. Or it might be a woman, even. The person just kept swinging.

"The Old Slide is that one," Bickley said.

Dale looked and saw an old red slide, the kind with steps on one side of the front next to the metallic slide
and a tunnel formed by a fiberglass roof over the top of the slide. But this roof was mostly gone, eaten away by weather or maybe animals. And the slide part wasn’t all that shiny, but green. The steps were covered in mud and tangled dirty branches from pine trees. The pine needles looked like hair.

"What do you do?" Matt asked, stepping away from his tree.

Doesn’t Matt know? Dale wondered.

Dale didn’t want to do this. He didn’t have anything to prove, but they’d dared him. It was the Old Slide Dare, famous among these older boys, the ones who hung out with Bickley around the Stop-And-Buy. Dale usually avoided them, but he’d woken this morning with money left over after buying a new Super Nintendo cartridge yesterday. He’d made the money mowing the yard for Dad. He had enough cash left to buy a Coke, or maybe an ice cream, the kind that comes wrapped up in paper and you get out of the glass freezer. Dale was greedy, was the problem. He wanted that ice cream. Strawberry. And so he’d bicycled up to the little store, knowing better all along, but thinking, well, just this once, maybe nobody’ll be hanging out. They might all be at somebody’s house watching movies, or tying two cats together by the tail and throwing them over a telephone wire to watch them fight. Or something.

They weren’t. The four older boys were right there
clustered around the garbage dumpster, one of them seated on top of it, and their eyes all swiveled onto Dale as he walked his bike around the corner of the store with his strawberry cone freshly unwrapped, not even two licks off it.

Paul was the one on top of the dumpster. He was the smallest of the four, but somehow the loudest "Hey. Looks like lunch time," he said.

His brother Terry, the large boy, giggled. There was nothing funny. Terry just giggled.

Matt, a red-haired younger boy with glasses, didn’t say anything, but looked at Bickley, the leader. It didn’t take the skinny boy with the close-cropped hair long to make up his mind. They were bored, the lot of them. They wanted something to do. "Give me some of that cone," Bickley commanded.

Dale looked at the strawberry cone. He’d never heard of sharing ice cream. Shouldn’t everyone just get his own? But he was still new in this neighborhood, and he didn’t really know how they did things. He’d hate to ruin the cone though. He bent to take another lick.

Bickley snatched the cone out of Dale’s hand. "Give me that," he said, voice rough as garbage. He took three big licks. Then he looked at Dale, narrowed his eyes, and took three more.

Dale stared at the banana seat of his bike. Bickley
handed the cone to Paul. Terry took a big bite and just let it fall out of his mouth. Dale watched the strawberry cream begin to melt on the hot concrete. In only seconds red ants were rushing out of the cracks to examine the trails of strawberry streaming in all directions. The little trails were like rivers to the ants. Their antennae waved in excitement as they rushed all around the find.

"What do you wanna do now?" Matt asked. He pulled the front of his shirt up over his head and let it rest behind his neck, baring his flat, waxy stomach. His belly button was an outie.

"Let’s play football," Paul said. "Terry’s on my team."

"We don’t have a ball," Bickley reminded them, before anyone could get too caught up in the idea, especially Terry, who’d already begun to mime plucking a spinning ball out of the air and dancing around in his imaginary end zone.

Dale thought about the hot day. All his friends were indoors, probably watching movies. Where Dale wished he was.

He backed up across the parking lot, pushing his bike by the handle bars. "Well, I’ll see you. Later," he said.

The boys said nothing. Each of them looked at a different spot on the ground or the horizon. Very cool.

The rear portion of the bike swerved independently of the front tire, causing Dale to twist as he stepped back
into the seat. He heard a scraping sound.

Turning, he saw that he'd backed into a red 280-Z. The back tire of the bicycle rested against the passenger door.

The four boys exploded into motion. They ran over to the car, hooting, and inspected the door.

"Ah man! You scratched it," Paul yelled.
"Look at that," Bickley said.
Terry, the big one, guffawed.

Dale turned and looked at the door. He couldn't see a scratch, just red paint covered in dirt. He'd wiped some of the dirt off.

The bike was yanked suddenly from his hands. Bickley walked it over to a patch of grass between the parking lot and the street. He threw the bike onto the grass.

Bickley walked back and stepped up into Dale's face. "This is our friend Bill's car."

"Who's Bill?" Matt, the red-haired boy, asked.

"Bill works in the Stop-And-Buy, stupid!" Bickley said. He pointed. Turning to Dale, he said, "He's gonna be mad."


"He's our friend," Bickley said. "I better tell him. He'll have to call cops."

Dale was quiet and felt ill. He looked at his bike. The front tire was twisted at a bad angle beneath the weight of the frame. "Don't tell him."
"Whinin' like a Baby," Paul sang.

"Why wouldn't I tell him?" Bickley demanded. When Dale couldn't answer, he asked, "What'll you do for us?"

"Make him join the club," Paul insisted, incongruous.

"What? What club?" Bickley asked. Then, staring at Dale, he said, "Oh yeah."

"You want to be in the club don't you?" Bickley suddenly said to Dale, who was walking forward as slowly as he could.

"What club?" Matt asked.


"Yeah," Paul said, nodding. Matt sighed.

"What kind of club?" Dale asked. He was worried about his bike. They'd made him just leave it there.

"You have to take a dare," Bickley said. "To be in the club."

"What for?"

"Because."

"Because that's why," Paul emphasized.

Dale didn't cry.

Bickley stared at Matt for a minute, then spat on the ground, right near Paul, who jumped out of the way, even though it hadn't really come that close.

"You climb it," Bickley said. "Then you have to stand
on the top." He paused, thinking. "Then you have to stick both legs over the side. Then you slide down."

"Backwards," Paul added.

"Yeah, backwards," Bickley agreed. He looked at Dale. Dale wanted to go home. He felt kind of hungry.

"Do you want to be in the club?" Bickley asked.

"Everybody has to be in the club."

"Did you do it?"

Bickley laughed. Dale looked at the guy on the swings who moved his legs in steady rhythm.

"Hell yes, I did it." Bickley said. "Everybody did it. Even Matt did it."

Matt looked at his bare stomach. Dale had seen Matt in school, those few weeks Dale had attended the local public school when he'd moved here right before the end of the year. Matt was always making things which the art teacher liked to show the lower classes. But Dale had heard him called to the office more than once. Still, Dale thought if Matt had climbed the slide, it was probably cool.

A slight wind stirred the dead leaves at Matt's feet and he pulled his shirt back down from behind his head.

"Go," Paul said, picking up a stick--just a pine branch, but with some needles on it.

"Yeah, your turn," Terry said, walking around for a moment till he found a big branch lying in the dirt behind the merry-go-round. He whacked it once against an iron bar
and the top branches of the limb snapped off and spun across the corrugated metal. He smacked it again and the stick held solid. A hard ring sounded from the merry-go-round.

"What if I don’t want to be in the club?" Dale asked.

"You’ve got to be in the club," Bickley said, walking toward the slide.

"Don’t get to play football if you’re not in the club," Paul said, poking pine needles at Dale’s shoulder. Dale stepped away. He followed Bickley over to the slide. The others walked behind them.

They stood in front of the thing. It was high, much higher than Dale had first thought, higher than any slide he’d ever seen. The support poles were sunk into big patches of concrete underneath and the ditch under the mouth of the slide was deep. The bottom was covered in a dried mud, all cracked like the tread of a car tire. Dale saw a little spider walking around the lip of the pit.

Matt picked up a rock and threw it at the top of the slide. The rock ricocheted off the tunnel roof with hardly any noise and disappeared into the grass.

"Go ahead," Bickley said, propping one foot on the long first step. The fiberglass sank a little under his weight. He stepped up on it and bounced. The entire structure shook but didn’t make a sound.

"Go," Paul said, throwing his pine branch onto the slide. It struck halfway up and didn’t move. Terry threw
his stick, which spun over the top of the slide and vanished.

Dale couldn’t see the platform from the first step. He looked at the tops of the trees around them. A bird circled high overhead and Dale watched until Bickley shoved him in the small of his back. Dale pulled a sock up and climbed the first step.

"Blam!" Paul yelled. Terry and Bickley and Matt laughed. Dale made no response, but set one foot on the next step, then the third. An old pine cone crunched under his foot. Dale noticed that several of the steps before him had light coming in through their bottoms. One had a crack clearly visible through the entire width of its back.

Dale half-turned. He was a little above the other boys now. He could see the tops of their heads. Terry’s hair wasn’t very thick. Paul looked even smaller. Dale looked over the side. He could jump off from here if he wanted, and even if he landed on a rock it wouldn’t hurt. But the other four were still right there, and behind the slide was only the hill, wherever that led. Maybe nowhere. Maybe to a wall. Dale realized that he could probably see what was on the down side of the slope if he were standing on top of the slide.

"Go!" Paul yelled, stepping around the hole at the base of the slide and kicking the red fiberglass. A slight thud threw up dust.
Dale felt the reverberation beneath his feet. He took a step, testing his weight.

"Climb!" Bickley whined.

Dale set both of his feet on the fourth step, then took another step quickly and caught himself on the handrail as his foot sank several inches. The rail swayed a bit to the side so he let go of it and shifted his weight against the wall. It gave a little with an audible groan, so he ran up several more steps quickly. He stopped three from the top. He smelled something rotten.

"Yeah," Paul cheered. Dale turned, happy at the support. Everyone was standing at the base of the slide with their mouths open.

Dale looked over at the swing set. The guy on it was swinging really hard now, going all the way up to the end of the slack, then hanging there weightless for just a moment before falling back down and rising to the other side. Dale couldn’t make out the face, though he was on level with it. Dale wondered if his bike was still at the Stop-N-Buy.

"Finish, asshole!" Matt called.

The platform was just before Dale, though he couldn’t see onto it or over the back. Avoiding the rail, which was rocking with every motion, he took first one step, then another. He feared for a moment his foot might fall through the bottom, but the material held. Only one step left now. Dale was extremely high over the ground but the air seemed
heavier to him instead of thinner. He noticed the stench again, like old rainwater, or a pile of dead leaves. A bug buzzed his ear. Dale swatted, almost losing his balance for a moment, then steadied himself against the red tunnel. The fiberglass moved and Dale saw that it was cracked along the bottom. He sucked in a deep breath and, as the whole structure rattled beneath his feet, jumped up onto the top.

One foot slid from beneath him as it landed on a bed of moldy needles. The other foot hit solid and with the railing Dale managed to keep from falling. He tilted backward a few inches, then fell onto his knees. He breathed and clasped his hands onto the lower of the two rails before him. He realized suddenly that he could see—he could see down the far side of the hill.

There were no trees there. There was no school or ball field and there was no more playground but only a steep field of weeds, then beyond, water. It wasn’t just a pond, but a lake. He’d never heard of this lake but there it was. The water was green in the noon sun and choppy in places. A wooden boat sat in the middle, with a man in it. The man cast out with a fishing pole and Dale saw splashes as tiny heads popped to the surface, snapping at bugs. A concrete path circled the lake, miles long, and behind the lake sat a dense forest. At the foot of the woods were picnic tables, some rest room buildings, and a boat launch. Someone was driving into the parking lot in a blue truck. Dale thought
he could hear honking. He'd had no idea this place was here. He smiled and took a deep breath.

The stench hit him deep in the chest and the mucous lining in his nostrils burned. He turned quickly, a little dizzy. The platform shook beneath him and the bar along the stairs rattled.

The slide tunnel was filled with pine needles and leaves and branches, all black. There was an old wasps' nest on the underside of the roof and an aluminum can--its color faded to white--rested on top of the detritus. Sudden motion caught Dale's eye.

He looked and saw the figure on the swing leap off straight from the highest point of the arc. The dark blur hung in the air for a moment, barely floating forward. Long hair whipped back and Dale saw that the person was female. She had a pale, bony face and a thin mouth. She wasn't smiling or laughing, seemed caught up in the free fall, maybe a little worried. This was all Dale could make out before she fell down to earth. She landed hard on her feet, hurtling forward, as the swing clanged down to the bottom of its length. The chains spun wild.

Dale blinked. He was watching with such intensity that only the smell brought him back. He looked down.

The squirrel was under his foot, its dry, bristly tail resting beneath the toe of his right sole. He could see its spine through the torn fabric of skin and he could see the
ants crawling around in the hollow sockets of the skull.

He fell back through the railing as it gave under his weight. He tried to avoid the iron pole but it gave him a sharp whack in the side. He spun once, trying to orient himself.

The boys were gone and Dale didn't know. The sun was peeking out from the clouds and Dale felt the heat on his face. He breathed but didn't move. He felt pain but didn't think.

The woman stood above him. She looked down at him and decided that the injuries couldn't be that bad. She thought of something her father had said once when she was small, after dropping her on her head as she tried to climb on his shoulders: "Kids are resilient as hell. You can just drop 'em and they get up and laugh."

"Are you okay?" she asked. Dale did not move. He seemed to be holding his eyelids tight. The woman looked up and noticed a red-haired boy watching from behind a tree at the edge of the playground.

"You'll be okay," she told Dale.

"Take it easy," she said as she walked away.
THE DAYLIGHT MONSTER

After the end of civilization monsters ruled the days. People lived only at night.

A girl, her teacher, and some scientists lived in a secret cave under a broken academy. Then they met a thief, and he moved in with them because they were the only people they knew off.

The girl was growing up after the end of civilization, so she had to find new ways to live. She did not know the old ways. The scientists were busy measuring effects of the monsters.

The daylight monsters came from the sun. They had escaped as the sun grew larger, springing from the light and heat onto the earth. Each claimed its own territory, like a dog. They walked like dogs, but were mean and never friendly. They could not be trained.

The daylight monster radiated tremendous heat. Waves of heat shimmered around it, melting the light. The daylight monster appeared--viewed through scientific instruments at a distance--as a magnesium-bright quadruped, always crouching, hopping swiftly from perch to perch in the rubble. The monster could not be outrun.

The girl could not remember what day looked like.
Daylight was a danger to the people, who feared the monster which ruled the ground above them. It burned other creatures for fuel. The thief ventured out, but the teacher called him a bad influence. He was always risking himself for booty in a time when profit no longer mattered. Her teacher told the girl that comfort was not important. What could be foraged during the short night was enough.

During the night, the heat of the day pushed free from every surface on the earth. Concrete burned the feet and body, even through clothing. But this was not enough to provide the monster from the sun its necessary environment. It vanished at night—sleeping, the scientists speculated. Where? They did not know. Somewhere hot.

Each night, the scientists searched for the monster’s lair with their machines, and they searched for more machines. They tried to build more, but lacked raw material. Most of their city was burnt. Nights were very short. The close sun filled the sky always. They searched quickly. The girl led the scientists, tending and watching over them, for they paid so much attention to their finds that they forgot themselves, forgot the time.

The thief was brown from the sun, despite his layers of clothing. He returned to the cave with little treasures, innocent items from the past, which the girl stared at for hours during the long, long days. He never returned with tools or pieces of machines, only simple artifacts. The
girl loved a glass bowl the thief gave her—a delicate glass fruit bowl, glittering despite the dust, and empty. The thief never returned to the cave with hardware.

The girl and the teacher were trapped. The new day came when they were out in the open country. The teacher had pushed out far from their home in search of apparatus for the scientists, who were building an important machine to test the monster. The girl had been impressed with the teacher’s determination. She had hesitated, failed to remind him of the hour. They were caught. They took refuge in a flat building buried in the black rubble. The building had many rooms and ran back deep into the earth. They pushed into the dark, deep corridors of the building, so that the monster’s heat could not reach them, should it come.

In a dark room, the girl found a wicked artifact, a television. Its tube glowed blue with captured radiation. The teacher realized that the entire building—every object in every room—was deadly. The monster had been here before, contaminated all. They were not safe outside and were not safe within. The thief came and led them away.

The girl found a pool in a courtyard in the center of many buildings during the brief night. She supposed it was the last pool anywhere. The sky above—she could see it
through the cut between buildings--was a sad black. The sky rested from the cruelty of the heat for such a short time. Neither the sky nor the earth were allowed enough time to cool.

In the last pool's surface, the girl saw first the black reflection of the sky, and then the white of her face, her red hair, her smudged cheeks. She pictured her teacher standing behind her, though he was not there. He did not know of the pool. It would soon be gone.

In her room the gloom of cave life crowded in around a small dim bulb, stewing. The girl's room was only a small space set off by black boards and maps strung between walls. The chiseled stone of the walls had been cool in the old time. Now the heat of the day above reached down into the stone, piercing it. The girl sweat while she slept. All the people were sticky, always. Their clothing was covered with the salt of their dried perspiration.

The thief watched her sleep.

The thief took her during the day. The others would not follow. The teacher did not dare follow.

The heat deprived her of vision and touch--she felt only the invasion of radiation, its abuse to her covered skin.

How could he see?
The thief took her to his special place, a garden of rock beside a ruined power station. There was no shade. The thief apologized. He set her on a flat rock where she baked, hearing a hum, not feeling, tasting only the teeth in her mouth.

The thief put on a little play to explain himself. He was shy. He could not speak directly. He put on a play of one person.

He was not one of the people, one of the last. He was new. He came from the sun—perhaps from the monster, perhaps with it. He did not understand himself. He had been a thief in the light always.

The girl heard the play and understood.

The thief thought there would be a new world. He thought the heat about them would stabilize, at least as it was. He took a great deal of time to say this, while the girl waited, prone, her muscles slack, her jaw working itself. The thief thought they should start a new race to live in the new world. This would not be an "after" time, but a new time. He wanted to start something, not play out an ending. He collected relics of the old world to provide them with clues for a future, a new culture, but he did not collect the tools of science. He did not know its place; perhaps it had caused this evil.

The heat of day soaked the girl's thoughts away.
When night came, the teacher sprang from the mouth of the cave. The scientists could not keep pace because of their gear. The teacher leapt from rock to rock. He had the only weapon, a sharp instrument the scientists had constructed from tainted tubing. It glowed blue. They had intended it for a final test which would reveal how they might live, survive in a world where the sun came closer every day and the merciful night fell shorter, failing in function.

The teacher searched, flailing the spike.

In the night, the girl understood the love of the thief. The garden was not his, but theirs.

The teacher grew closer. In the night, he followed the trail of the thief, which could not be detected in the harshness of day. He found the garden. He came upon the new couple at dawn.

The daylight monster sprang forth, surprising them all. The monster had been hiding in the power station, feeding even in its sleep. The teacher stood before the thief and the girl. They regarded each other. The thief saw the anger in the teacher’s gaze and knew he could not overcome it. His heart was with the girl. He was no longer a thief. He had changed, to be that which she required.
She was grown. He had seen it first. The teacher saw it now as he gazed at them, first the other man, then the woman.

The daylight monster plunged into their midst. It growled at the people in fury. For long had it been denied its fuel.

The couple held each other. They were disappointed but not afraid.

The teacher felt only terror. This was the moment he had loathed for so long.

The monster knew the man’s fear and despised it. It leapt upon him. The heat from the creature raked at them all.

The monster fell not on the teacher but his instrument, impaling itself on the mechanical spear. The monster lacked sight, being so bright--knowing and being only the most intense light--that it possessed no shadows within it by which eyes might know gradations of intensity.

The monster did not understand what happened and felt no pain as the rod absorbed it, consumed all the multitudinous energy of that monster.

* * *

The garden was blackened by the creature’s absence. The man and woman regarded each other. They were alive and together.

The scientists arrived and examined their device. The
beast from the sun was alive but trapped within the metal and wire. They had not foreseen this circumstance. The monster had been absorbed, and the teacher with it—indeed, his presence served as catalyst; he held the creature in place now. He was the wick and the creature the captured energy in this new, mechanical candle.

The couple took the metal candle, knowing they must always guard it. The teacher’s sacrifice held the creature at bay. He would not be forgotten.

Quickly, they returned with the scientists to the cave. The man who had been the thief in the light now did not dare his former activity. He had a purpose and a family now to defend. With this territory now freed of its ferocious tyrant, a new monster from the sun was sure to move in. The scientists would now construct many, many spikes.
UNION, JUSTICE, AND CONFIDENCE

Just as he had left it. And now he was so different, as perhaps he always had been. But this place—just as it had been before.

The highway fell into almost medieval disrepair as soon as he crossed the state line from Texas. The other drivers became incompetent. His headphones rang with garbage; the best rock station in Shreveport had yet to get over Van Halen’s first album. And the scenery only depressed—battered shacks, abandoned Stuckey’s, antebellum shopping malls, ridiculous huts selling snow cones, peeling billboards, daiquiri drive-throughs, road kill by the bucket. Even the weather matched his mood. Looming black clouds, like an inverted sea of charcoal briquettes, bobbed on the thin horizon, exactly the kind of weather that always made poor Francine (raised in a trailer in Tornado Alley) press tight against his ribs, her perfume reaching up, stroking...

Dan raised a knuckle from wheel to brow as the Jeep shot over a cat. He watched it spin, end around end, in the rear view mirror.

This was his first trip back since leaving on that
"Fancy Scholarship" and he was coming back to face all the crap which had driven him to leave in the first place. But why was it bothering him? It wasn’t what was on his mind.

Francine was. Francine.

And he didn’t know what he was going to do with himself.

What he was considering was foolish. Certainly a weekend alone would be enough to plan with a clear head, to calm himself and maybe thin out the hormones with boudin and Tabasco. And a little beer, if he was careful to come home after the grandparents were in bed.

The thought pushed him back to his surroundings. Louisiana was named for a guy who never saw it. Once much larger, the state was now whittled down to its true heart. Shape of a torn boot. Lowest state in the union, by altitude. He’d just done a History paper; Dan could see the flag, a dopey pelican on a field of blue, flying beneath the state motto in his Britannica, and Francine’s inevitable smile as he’d turned to her. She straddled the back of the chair beside their little dinette set, eyes wide in mock consternation...

He slammed a new tape into the Walkman, his only travelling companion, and shot off the road, down the frontage, and into the dirty lot of Some-Or-Other-Brand station.

He marched, hands in jacket pockets, to the window,
thrust some cash onto the counter, and watched as the
Walkman unclipped itself and tumbled like a happy pilgrim
down next to the gray bills.

"Oh, is that a radio?" the wrinkled woman behind the
glass asked. She was genuinely charmed. "It's small, yeah?
Cute."

He was back home.

The grandparents were asleep when he pulled into the
oyster shell driveway. Bag over shoulder, he fumbled with
the doorknob, banged his head once, and let himself in.

He closed the door, locked it, wiped his feet, listened
as clawed paws scraped linoleum in the next room and a dark
form padded into the kitchen.

Dan held forth the back of his right hand. His scent
had been recognized the instant he'd set boot in the house,
otherwise the entire neighborhood would have been awake to
the barking by now. He'd be on the floor, mauled. This was
only a formality. He didn't mind. That big black chow kept
his grandparents secure at night, and in this place, this
town, that was a great service. He'd purchased the dog
himself, a year before he'd left.

"Hey, Betail," Dan whispered, grasping a hunk of hair
and shaking it from shoulder to shoulder. "That's a boy.
Good boy. Damn, you gettin' fat." He patted the rump and
the dog padded off down the hall to its bedside post, where
Dan heard it spin slowly, heavily, three times before settling to the floor. "To check for snakes," it would be explained--with enthusiasm--at least a dozen times before he left. They never got tired of watching the dog spin around.

He hefted his duffel and walked through the kitchen to his old bedroom, which would be exactly as he left it.

But it wasn't. The bed was made.

He slept until noon with one interruption. At eleven-thirty--eleven-forty-five by every clock in the house--a mouth set itself a half-foot from his ear and a reverent female voice squeezed free.

"What do you want to eat, hamburger steak and French fry? Or some spaghetties? Which do you want?"

"Francine?"

"What, cher?"

"Uh." He turned over onto his face, realizing where he was. "Shrimp?"

"No. I can't eat that with my diet."

"Oh. French fries, whatever you want." What else?

"Steak."

"Okay, baby. Go back to sleep."

He managed.

They didn't stare at him as they ate. They admired their food. They basked in the essence of the kitchen, that
beautiful room that hadn’t seen change in forty years, with the exception of the annual church calendar. The sense of permanency made him more conscious of the differences he felt in himself.

They did not stare at him, barely looked at him. And he felt like royalty. He didn’t want to feel that way. But it was nice.

The questions came, usually finding him with a mouthful of rice or creamed corn, each simultaneously warm and cold thanks to the minor miracle of microwaving, the only addition to the kitchen. He’d almost forgotten.

"You made the trip well?"

"Pretty much. 'Cept for Alexandria. They’re working on the traffic circles and everything’s screwed up. I spent thirty minutes going down the wrong road."

"What you gone to do today, Dan?" Only his grandmother spoke. The old man was almost deaf.

"Thought I’d visit everybody. I’ve only got the weekend."

"You should visit more, baby." Genuine pain.

"Yeah."

"You like the steak, cher?" she asked. His grandfather continued to eat, eyes closed. Tight.

"Oh yeah." Oddly, he found that he did. Everything he’d hated about this food seemed endearing, somehow.

"Dan, it’s so easy. You could fix some. You just put
it in your microwave for thirty minute. Cover it with a paper towel."

"Thanks."

"Your microwave, she works good?"

"Fine. Still."

More eating. The dog waited beside his grandame then gave up and shifted to Dan.

"You have a girlfriend?" She addressed him with the customary nonchalance.

"Well," he answered the cold tablecloth, hopping his way in mental jumps through the maze of honesty, looking for the easiest exit. "Yeah, there is this one girl." A sentence would be enough. It was all they'd need.

"Oooh! Oooh!" his grandmother sirened, each syllable pulled into five, like taffy. But she was happy, and for a moment he was, too.

"What is her name, cher?" She pronounced the English in a careful whisper.

Easy. A mouthful of lima beans: "Francine."

Repeated. Repeated at the ceiling. Repeated at his grandfather, who looked up as if he'd just heard it, as if he'd just waked.

"And you have a pitcher?" Back to the whisper, the one denoting sincerity.

Yes, he had a picture. Several. Best to take things one step at a time. They weren't ready for the truth, if
they ever would be. "Not with me."

"Oh. Well." Obvious disappointment, but with a tinge of I-expected-too-much-I-know. There was food to finish, more food than he'd encountered in one place in months. Buffets included.

He hadn't seen it in the dark. A "DUKE" sticker sat on the lip of the wood and corrugated tin garage. He should have expected as much. What Francine would think.

The punch caught him on the left breast. Hurt.

"Wally! Asshole!"

Wally caught him and shook him for the entire bar to see. "What happen to your hair, man?"

He'd been prepared for that. His grandparents had been kind enough not to comment, but his friends were not accustomed to dealing with anything past the collar. Wally fitted his greasy cap over Dan's brow. "Come have a beer."

Hours of beer. Stories. More stories than he wanted to tell, and everything they wanted to hear, till they'd mellowed, till everything was right again. Till he'd regulated his newly alien appearance and was just another one of the metal-working boys, and the neon above the bar winked like always, and Dwight Yoakam told how it was from the juke's point-of-view, and everything smelled like beer, and moonlight cast itself through the single front window.
like an abused lamp, and thoughts shifted to the task of waking up for Mass in the morning.

They were sprawled in a ditch. Dan was trying to pull a cigarette out of a frog’s mouth. "Wally." All the talking had been done, all the details of his time at school dragged out, gaped at, smoked, whistled, gulped, shrieked, whispered. All but one, the one carefully avoided, reduced to a convenient, winkingly accepted half-truth. But Dan had to take care of it, exorcise the thoughts that plagued him before permanent damage occurred. The others had departed.

"Yeah?" Wally paused over the circular little mouth of a Bud bottle. Wet lips, dry teeth, bewhiskered chin, eyes like a peeled grape. He dropped the bottle.

"How’s this wife I hear about?" Best to broach the subject slowly and avoid suspicions.

Missy was fine, except for when she was in the same house. Marital problems—baby problems, entertainment problems, relative visitation problems, credit problems, cooking problems, timing problems, sheet-pulling problems, heartfelt-belief problems. Dan nodded eagerly, more to make sure it was all soaking in than out of any real understanding.

"But you loved each other before?" Set everything in perspective.

"Oh, yeah. Man, we still in love." Wally fell back
onto the grass and yawned.

This Dan did not expect, but what slipped next from his mouth annoyed him even more. "Where you propose to her?"

Fortunately he'd stuck with the careful use of French question-by-intonation, suggesting lack of importance, some spurious impulse.

Wally smiled as he answered. "On her doorstep."

"Really." Wally a romantic?

"I took her out to Lafayette, right, to the nicest restaurant? And I drank all the champagne by myself. She didn't like it." He smiled and dug around in the dirt for the bottle. It was empty. Story over.

"On the doorstep?"

"What? Oh yeah. I was so drunk," he said, laughing, "I was so drunk, I'd forgot to ask her to marry me. She knew it, too."

"What reminded you?"

"Her father. I heard him yelling through the trailer door. I hated him so much." Laughing, he fell into the ditch water and grabbed Dan by the biceps. "I hated him so much, I didn't want her to have to walk through that door. He's gave us so much shit, and she hates him too, I wanted to tell him to go to hell right there. Instead I just proposed."

"And it worked?"

"No. She went inside and he bitched her out."
Wait. Nothing. "And she stayed?"

"Oh, yeah. No, next day she said 'yeah' and ran off with me."

That much he'd read, via Arkansas postcard. Dan slammed the rest of his beer.

Uncle Phil sat at the other end of the kitchen table. It was Sunday, the day before Dan would leave. He'd wasted Saturday drinking with his buddies, visiting the nominal relatives, renewing his driver's license, and strolling around City Park.

"You eat enough, Dan?" Yes, I haven't fallen out of practice. "You made some friends?" Believe it or not. "You have enough money?" Sure, but don't forget me at Christmas. "Your girlfriend is nice?" She is to me....

A knock came at the door. Betail exploded from beneath the table, slammed into the screen door with all his weight, and roared, the frame shaking. It was the boy from the drugstore delivering his grandfather's medicine, but still the dog hated him. They were safe from even good things.

"That's okay, little bebe," his grandmother reassured the growling chow as she counted her roll of bills and set it back in her purse. "That was a good nigger."

Dan said nothing. He chewed.

He followed Uncle Phil out to his place in the country to see Phil's new used boat. Phil started back to work on
it as soon as he walked under the carport. Coors in hand, he happily tore all the old plywood steps off the boat trailer, sawed appropriate shapes from a fresh sheet of wood sitting on homemade sawhorses, and stapled scraps of worn carpet around the new steps. He chatted in a loud voice, telling Dan all there was to know about the fiberglass tub. Dan understood that it was a boat, it floated, and you could fish from it. The rest was lost on him, but it was nice to hear Phil’s voice.

Philippe was his the last son of Dan’s grandparents. Dan’s folks were gone, six years buried. Uncle Gaston had moved to Oregon twelve years ago, no calls. Phil visited his parents every day, looked after their needs. Dan was glad of it.

Two hours later, Phil finally seemed to have talked himself out. He paused, wiped sweat from his forehead with his crumpled shirt, and regarded Dan seriously. "You passed a good time, Dan?"

"Yeah. Sorry I have to get back for my classes. I just wanted to say 'hi.'"

"You can make the trip back no problem?"

"Yeah. Maybe I’ll just skip Alexandria."

Phil nodded, his gaze lost in sawdust. He was a huge man. He brushed at an ancient tattoo on his right arm.

"You know, we proud of you, Dan. You the first one ever been to university. Me, I never went past three weeks
in the fifth grade. . . ."

Dan nodded.

"Well," Phil concluded. He chewed absently at a strand of his thick beard. "It's good what you done, Dan. I don't blame you if maybe you like it better there. You do what you have to do." Phil took another big draw from his beer and stared across the endless fields of sugar cane stretching all the way to the sun.

Dan inhaled. "Hey, Phil. How's Marilyn?"

Phil looked comfortably toward the house, at its wooden slat siding. "Oh, she's good."

How to break the topic? "Y'all got married with Dad there?"

Phil's attention was suddenly focused, though his body remained still. "Yeah. Your daddy was an altar boy then."

The voice was controlled.

A story Dan had heard before. He waited in mental safety, knowing that he had not invoked the image for destructive reasons. Dan often got the impression that perhaps he was the only person who'd ever gotten over his parents' deaths. He wondered why, or even if this was true. He thought of his parents, together, as they always had been. Phil was speaking of a time before they'd even met, when his father was a boy. Alone. Dan could not picture this.

The story wound down carefully.
"You should have seen it. Marilyn was really beautiful."

"I can believe it. Y'all waited a long time to get married?"

"No, not really." He disagreed eagerly. "It was about six month, I think. About right."

Six months. No problem. Dan had that one covered. "Where you proposed to her?"

"Oh yeah!" Phil answered with a helpless smile. He pulled two beers out of an ice chest in the boat and handed one to Dan. They were warm.

"We was in the livin' room," Phil said. "Your daddy told you about this?"

"No."

"Oh." Slowly, Phil continued. "Well, one night she come over, after work, see. She was workin' at the Chilly Dog then."

"Over on the highway?" Dan indicated direction, sloshing a little beer.

"Yeah, that's the only one. She used to work late, too. That's why she came over that night--it was already too late. We wanted to go to the show, see, but it was too late. The cinema was closed. So she came over. She had her mama's car. Her mama never went nowhere. Marilyn used to get everything for the family. She was like the mother when she was young. So she came over that night. It was
too late to catch the show, so we were just watching TV. On one of the shows--I can’t remember who it was--they had a show and someone was talkin’ about getting married."

"Right."

"And Marilyn--she was sitting next to me--she said, just barely so I could hear, ‘I wonder what that’s like?’"

"That’s it?"

"A month later, we was married."

Francine never watched television.

Phil tossed his empty beer can into the back of the boat. "I’m tired and I’m goin’ nap. You wanna come in?"

"That’s okay. I better get back. I’ve got to study before dinner. Let me just say ‘bye to Marilyn."

Phil yelled Marilyn’s name at the house.

Dan was walking to the bathroom from his room when he noticed the TV. He hadn’t heard it already--though the music was blasting--because he’d had headphones on, listening to some of Francine’s noise.

This was Cajun "chank-a-chank," a waltz. Accordion, fiddle, guitar. Dan walked into the kitchen. His grandfather was seated at the far end in the rocker, smiling. Dan sat, wondering absently if he could to dance a waltz. If pressed.

A tap on his shoulder and he turned. His grandmother. "I got this for you to give to your friend, the girl."
He took it. A holy card. He smiled.

"She is Catholic?"

"No, I don’t think so."

"Oh, well that’s all right. She can change if she wants. Francine."

The name chilled him. Not the name but the way it was spoken. He said nothing. He’d upset the pair enough by not going to Mass with them that morning.

Dan tried to picture Francine sitting there with them. It would all be alien to her, he knew. The Cajuns had a word for people not born and raised among them: ‘Mericans.

And they had other words.

Dan could not picture Francine sitting at this table.

"Dan, come talk." He could see his grandmother through the door of her bedroom. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, night cap on her head, changing socks. The black chow lay inert at her feet like a bear rug. "You had a good time, cher?"

"Yeah."

"You should come more often. You bring a friend if you want. We can fit." The spare room: Dan looked back over his shoulder at the other end of the house.

He thought about making the announcement. He felt he’d come to a decision, despite himself.

Dan looked over at his grandfather and froze,
momentarily impressed how corpse-like the old man looked, lying there with the covers yanked to his chin, mouth open, eyes open but motionless, dark and glassy.

"You leavin' tomorrow, baby. You be careful." She sat back in the bed, pulled at the blankets. "You be careful while you drivin', Dan. You watch the road good, yeah."

"I will."

"And Dan," his grandfather said, startling him. "If you get tired while you driving, you just pull over and rest."

"Even if it's just for ten minute, baby," his grandmother inserted.

Dan smiled. The place loved him. Why had he been away for so long?

"I remember one time," the old man said, his gaze on the flat ceiling. "We were driving back from Crowley. Your mama had some family up there. Anyway, we was coming back, driving back through the fields, that's all there was back then, some roads goin' through fields, you see. And I got tired I think, and I don't know, the car, she went off the road and through the ditch where they were working on it, the work crew."

Dan straightened against the door frame. "Did you hit someone?"

His grandmother: "Just a nigger."

"Huh? Was he hurt?"
"Broke his leg," the old man said.

She waved her hand.

Dan said nothing. He felt his face becoming unattractive. He tried not to laugh too hard. "So what did you do?"

"Took off through the field," his grandfather answered.

"Were they upset?"

"They ran after the car."

Dan said his good-nights and went to bed. He would never tell this story. He wished there was beer in the house. He would make no announcement, after all.

He’d gotten an early start, so early that even Wally hadn’t left his trailer yet. Dan beat him to the Waffle Hut. He waited at the front door, standing, nerves prepared for eight hours of road. Some joker had wedged a menu into the corner of the felt-and-plastic-letter sign at the entrance, partially covering the words so that the message now read: "HOSTESS WILL EAT YOU." Dan smiled, waited, and followed the woman to a booth. He looked up cautiously but she swirled and marched off. Dan sighed, found himself slightly relieved, and rubbed his forehead. His hands smelled like the dog.

"Hey, Dan!" Wally danced in front of the table and sucker-punched him.

"Thanks. Here’s your hat."
"You drivin’ back today, huh?"

"Yeah, I need to be back tomorrow."

The waitress returned and they ordered. Wally got a stack of pancakes with sausage. Dan ordered eggs and bacon and grits; he hated sticky syrup in the morning.

"When you comin’ back?" Wally asked quietly.

"I’m not sure," Dan answered. "I’m pretty busy."

"I don’t blame you." Wally dropped a piece of sausage on the floor, picked it up, and set it on his place mat.

"It’s not a good place, Dan. At least not now. Economy is crap. They keep complainin’ but nothing gets fixed. Everyone’s moving. Even you."

Dan started to speak, but caught himself, decided he had nothing to add.

"You gonna finish them grits?" Wally asked.

"No. Take ‘em." Dan had no appetite.

Wally accepted the bowl. "You make a good trip, Dan. Drive safe and don’t be afraid to pull over and rest if you get tired."

Dan laughed. His friends were getting old. "You kiss that wife for me."

"I will. Next time you meet her yourself. And don’t be afraid to bring somebody down with you. If y’all can’t fit with your family, stay with us."

"I’ll think about it." Dan finished his milk.

"Arkansas honeymoon, huh?"
"Yep. Went to them mountains."

Dan nodded. Wally paid the tab.

They traded punches in the cold gravel lot. Dan left, trunk stuffed with cans and bed linen and books and a cooler full of boudin. He felt uneasy, as if he were choosing the lesser of two evils, though he'd actually done nothing. But he felt something would happen. Soon. He resigned himself to rough roads and slipped on the headphones. If he was a fool, at least he wouldn't be alone.
Tara says she will heal me.

I'm in full traction, motionless in this corner of the hospital warehouse, fed through tubes, woozy from medication. I would like very much to be healed. Tara lifts a tremendous box, balances it with her sturdy, chocolate-colored arm, and winks at me. She turns and treads in black boots toward the loading dock. The chicken-leg voodoo pendant is bouncing between her breasts. I would like to be healed. I do not think the hospital staff is going to let Tara work magic on me.

I lie in my bed of pain and breathe, think, watch the other emergency workers pick up cardboard cubes with grunts of satisfied effort. My eyes follow them as far as the view will allow. A wall of stacked pinewood pallets sits four feet from the right side of my bed and the sweaty men are soon obscured from my scrutiny. I want to crane my head forward, but I have been told not to attempt movement. Delicate tissue is knitting, calcium replenishing bone.

I want to see what lies a foot more beyond my view. I want to see which direction their bodies swivel on the course toward the great, open wilderness of the hospital.
proper.

Nurse Port is back. She is bearing a tray supporting clear bags of fluid. The tray is balanced on her left hand like a waiter carrying a dinner check. She reproves me with a frozen glance, through lashes the color of snow. I do not understand. I follow the trail of waving, platinum hair down past her soft arm; my stare settles on her hip.

To my left is a tremendous stone wall. It is a flat gray in the dim light of the airy warehouse. It shoots up from the squat floor far higher than I can discern. I can see nothing of the roof, though I hear echoes return from above. The wall looks cold, very chill. I imagine my fingers touching it, pressing hard against a single, unyielding spot. I imagine the pads of my fingers flattened, the phalange bones straining against the stone, magnet-like. I cannot touch the wall, or reach even the edge of my dingy bed. I can move only two voluntary muscles in my entire crushed body.

I was skiing. That is my last memory. I am in a warehouse attached to a hospital. I cannot move. I cannot speak. I have been here only a day. No, two. There was yesterday, also.

The doctor came. Not the surgeon. The surgeon who stopped by on the first day stood for a single minute. He
said nothing. He stroked his beard, supported his elbow with the other hand, tilted a few degrees to the left, back, several degrees to the right, back, cast his gaze all across my body, and nodded once. He nodded once. I could not read it as either a positive or a hopeless gesture. I could not read it. He turned and strutted past the pallets. Nurse Port fell into dutiful position behind him, raising her silver brows intently at me as she pursed her lips and slid her thin chin back over her right shoulder. She clacked away, hips metronoming.

Today the friendly rounds doctor stopped by. He has bright, bright teeth, even in the hesitant circle of illumination from the single lamp spared for my corner. He explained my situation.

What is a voodoo priestess doing in the middle of Colorado? Tana comes over to my bed on her breaks, though all the volunteers have been issued commands not to disturb me.

She has the look, I admit. Natty hair pulled back into a simple red bandanna. Knife-thin nose giving a wicked effect hinting at some inner diabolicism. Perhaps physical warning must be made, in good sportsmanship. And red, veined eyes. Does she sleep enough? Or does she irritate them, with smoke perhaps? What is she smoking?

She has the Haitian accent. "I’m gong to hill’ you."
I'm gong to hill you up, mon."

She has placed a charm inside the thick sheath of gauze armoring my chest. I can not see what the charm is in the faulty light. Something with sharp contours, but something very light. It rests over my heart.

I want out of here. They know this, though I cannot communicate the desire in words.

But the avalanche was the largest in recorded history. "Unprecedented." The doctor pronounced every syllable, tip of his tongue popping off the front of the palate behind the gorgeous teeth, face rolling from side to side.

Every ward of the hospital is filled with the wounded. Even the maternity ward. Dangerously expecting mothers have been advised to take up temporary residence in other cities.

I am her little boy, Tana informs me. She smiles at me when the other workers are focusing their attention on the rows of emergency supplies and tools laid out on the low, long tables. The tables run off into the dimness of the warehouse. I cannot see the far wall, the end of any table.

When the others take their breaks and head out of my view past the splintered barrier with cigarette packs in hand, Tana comes over. I can feel the stiff cool air shooting in from outside as some door is shoved open, then replaces itself, inaudibly. Tana is covered in
perspiration. She is the only woman in the work crew. They men do not mention her, do not speak to her. They do not acknowledge her. She frightens me as well.

She wipes a sweating can of cola across her smooth forehead in an exaggerated motion. She is wearing a tank top and I can see that she does not shave under her arms. Her teeth are yellowish and thick. Her red eyes are delighted.

I am her little boy, she says. She will heal me. I must trust her.

Why am I alone in the warehouse? How many people were injured by the smashing ice? A park full of people. A whole mountainside. The hospital is stuffed to overcapacity.

Was I the last one to arrive, by copter? Is there truly no room within the hospital for a single additional gurney? A linen closet, a break room, behind the desk of a nurses' station, however hectic that must be? Who decreed the overflowing halls were too full? What doctor, or surgeon, consigned me to the nether reaches of attention?

There is a complete set-up for me here: metal stand for the intravenous bags and lines; beeping machine showing a thoughtful little study, mountain peaks sketched in the faintest argon green; big stiff gurney, back and head propped at a faint angle; scratched bedpan wedged somewhere
under me.

There is also a draft. There is a wretched heater placed behind and beneath my right shoulder. I cannot see it, but I hear its continuous straining hum and an occasional rattle. Will it expire, or will the overloaded hospital blow a breaker first, leaving the entire mangled lot of us to wither in the middle of miles, great plains of snow and ice?

I did my damndest to convalesce all day long. My best efforts were reserved for Nurse Port's infrequent visits. There were six of them total, all the length of this day. She changes the bedpan, which I suppose I keep filling. She checks my monitors. She must lean over, leaning toward the head of the bed, to read the neon display. My eyes never leave her.

She told me not to worry. She told me that I was doing well. That I am alive in the first place is miraculous, as they found me under a tangle of timber and ice. Broken skis. She says I must have a miracle on my team. Her blue eyes meet mine kindly. Then she looks away, and a sweep of glowing hair falls in the way, and I did not see her eyes again that visit.

Her metal pen made very slow, deliberate marks in columns across the face of the wooden clipboard. The paper received the record without a ruffle. I could not tell if
the numerals recorded were very positive deliberate marks or if hope is wavering, if the miracle is no longer for my side.

I do not sleep. I do not dream.

In the morning there is a flurry of activity. I observe its stages, every increment of progress, chiefly by ear.

The anticipated Red Cross relief shipment is rumored to arrive in hours, the night nurse says. The dock workers must show up, to wait for the precise moment to begin unloading. The men arrive. They fill the warehouse, scratching muscles and ribbing each other in nervous weariness. They do not look my way, come nowhere near my bed or my wobbly partition. I wonder how bad the bandages look. I do not see Tana. I do not hear her.

The shipment makes it through the blizzard and the men throw themselves into the labor with more vigor than the day before. There is a constant stream of boxes and bundles to the sorting tables and all of the dock doors are open. I can see the far wall, far, far down the aisles. It is grey. I shiver.

It's Tana, she says, in a high voice, pronouncing the syllables nasally. Tah-nah. She has been carting around
supplies inside the halls but she came to see me at midday, as soon as she could. The place looks bad, she says. Every possible injury has been visited upon these people. But she cannot lie. I am by far the most damaged.

Smiling again, promising she will take care of me, she produces a white bullet shape from her blue jean pocket. She stretches over me, begins to etch on the stone wall. She spends a good deal of time with the chalk. Her attention is fixed on the cold surface, on the deliberate design. Her chest sways a foot above my face. I am in terrible pain.

I am not recovering; I am wasting. I know this. Twice during the day, Nurse Port's inspection of the instrumentation is clearly doubtful. Her smile is stiff. Her eyes look less than blue, almost powder grey.

Does she not notice the chalk lines, whatever form is described over my head? She sees nothing during the first visit --it lies in strong shadow--and then the second time she stops in mid-marking. She looks at the wall for a long moment. She continues taking down figures. When the notes are complete, she leans toward the wall. She steps closer. I can smell her perfume. It does not smell like any perfume I know, or any flower or fruit or spice.

Has this been here the whole time? she asks. How
strange, she says. She turns and leaves, forgetting to smile.

The men unload all morning, then they tear open the thousand boxes and sort the items over lunch. They have sandwiches and pickles and hot coffee. I have plasma, and something which is ocher yellow in a shiny bag. The men carry the supplies to the others patients late into the evening. Tana joins them. She never looks my way.

How bad does it look? I wonder. I am awash in bandages and pain. My eyes cannot focus on most of my body, only the feet. They are immaculately white. No trace of blood. I am immaculately mummified, here in the corner of the warehouse. Alone.

What are my exact injuries? No one has ever mentioned them.

If my condition is so serious—as Tana attests and the glances of the workers hint—why am I not in the I.C.U.? If my injuries are the worst, why was I not the first person placed there?

Night hits with another cold wave. The wind is slapping the exterior of the warehouse. It is smaller than I first perceived. It will not collapse, but the howl of the wind terrifies me. I look at the wall to my left for several long hours. I no longer look toward the pallets;
they depress and infuriate me. I do not know what lies on
the other side of them. I do not want to know. This is
only a warehouse. The whole of it is dull as walls.

In the quavering light of my little bulb, I watch for
Tana. The workers left a good two hours ago. I cannot see
a clock to reckon time, but I can feel every second as it
passes through me. Midnight approaches. Tana left but she
will be back. She smiled at me as the group of sweaty
laborers massed out, arms around each other. Tana walked
alone through their midst. She cocked her head toward me.
Her eyes made a promise. She was humming something,
something just audible beneath the groans and laughs of the
others. Something steady and rhythmic, with a Caribbean
beat. No, not so festive. African. Deeply jungle-like,
and haunted.

Nurse Port came by a final time to see me. She did not
take my readings. She was on her way home. She came to
wish me well. She was more fatigued than even the dock
workers, than any person I have ever seen. Her bangs hung
about her curved cheeks, shining. She slipped. She asked
me my religion, then a spark of panic showed in her eyes.
She covered it quickly, apologizing, saying she had
forgotten I cannot answer. I look so well. So capable.
She made a smile and ducked out quickly. I did not hear the
door, as always.

I am no longer in pain. I feel nothing. I cannot feel
my toes. I cannot feel the charm which I know is still upon my chest. No one has taken it from me, and I have not slept since my arrival.

I wait patiently, alone with the cold walls, the beep of the electronics, the hum of the heater, and the tiny circle of light. The heater is doing just fine.

I am alone and I am scared for a long time.

There is a brush against the wooden reef to my right. A feather drifts into view, outlined feathery faint against the background of crude, not-so-straight tables, rent cardboard containers, piles of junk.

Tana is here.
Am I now a great master? So I am informed. I am old and I have told many stories. This I know.

You ask me for a story. I will not give you this. But I will tell you of a story I was once asked to tell, and the story I received in return.

You know of me, therefore you know of the master before me. He was a great man. He taught me what he knew and I learned it well. He was a great man and an instructor to me. I lived with him for some years, even during the War.

You do not remember this war, though you have heard stories. There have been wars since, and many tales. I lived with my master (may he rest well in our memories) throughout the time before this Great and Terrible War, and through it, and for a good time after. He died alone.

My master never abandoned the duties which he had taken upon himself, even in the face of great peril. When one is learning as I did, there is always great peril. We lived in a shrine.

Hiding from both armies during this war, we lived underground in two rooms under two mounds which stand beside each other in a wide field. You know of the shrine of which
I speak. It is a famous burial place, the tombs of two great warrior kings.

Troops do not move at night; they rest. During the day they move and fight. The night was our time, the time of the master and his student. For the several years that the conflict was upon the land, my master and I would meet each night in the space between the two mounds, a small circle of flat dirt between the two grassy hills. We would each emerge from the passage leading into our tomb and talk all night by the light of a single torch.

"So tell me a story," he said. There had been fierce fighting the day before he said this. The fields around us were still wreathed in smoke as morning approached. Even the cool of the autumn night had not dispersed the smoke.

Dogs were barking in the distance. I had made some remark about this when my master requested a story. He could see I was tired and he knew I would learn no more that night from his instruction, intricate though it was. We had been talking together for many hours.

"What story do you wish me to tell?" I asked with caution.

"A new story. Tell me an epic, a new epic. I can see you are distracted by the soldiers. Tell me an epic story of an epic hero. You know the kind of story of which I speak?"

I knew.
We left and went into our separate hiding places. I was to write a new story during the day and present it to him the next evening. I waited at the mouth of the tunnel to my tomb as he walked from sight. The hem of his robe scratched across the dirt. I watched as the light of the torch faded. "Fourteen," his voice called to me. His door closed and was locked.

I retired to the tomb in which I slept, lit a candle, and waited for the morning. The tomb was damp and the walls crumbled. Bits of stone fell into piles of mildew. Slugs left silver trails on the dirt floor. This place is a national landmark now and well looked after. I slept on the sarcophagus within the tomb, but never did I open it.

"You will appreciate parameters, I think," my master had said to me. I thought he was mocking. "They are these: Fourteen episodes. It is an arbitrary number. Give me an epic of fourteen episodes. Very simple. Keep them very simple. You understand what I mean."

I understood.

"Three lines depicting each episode are sufficient," he said as he stood. "Perhaps you will have a wonderful dream during the day and expand your story with terrific elaboration." He smiled, then turned. I lost sight of his face. "Finish the story. I want the fourteen episodes which tell the story." And he walked into the corridor.

I slept little that day. The fighting was worse than
the day before. I was in awe of the heavy bootsteps atop my burial mound.

Why fourteen? "It is a good number," my indifferent master said. "A fortnight. Or a year and two months." I did not understand the explanation. He said other things into his beard, as he often did, and these things I did not hear.

I possessed a tablet for the writing of stories. I stared at it for one hour, listening to the voices of the men and boys passing in the battlefield outside. I stared at the light of my candle until a black spot, and then several black spots, appeared everywhere I looked—across all the stone walls of the dank tomb. The dark spots hovered on the ceiling. I stared at the ceiling. Men were waiting to die on the opposite side. Often I heard their voices, their words indistinct but the tone always clear. Grey spots danced across the dirty ceiling, beyond my scrutiny.

I had desired to do nothing that day but sleep. Now I had this task. I had wanted to do nothing during the day but sleep, and when the battle did not permit me to sleep, to think of pleasant things, whatever pleasant things I could call from memory.

I did this often in that tomb. I could not walk for exercise during the entire war, so I walked about in my memory. This was all I desired.
I was not happy with the task my master had set for us. He, too, was performing the task, writing out the fourteen episodes. He had told me. I wondered for a long while what he might be writing in his tomb. I had never seen its interior. I wondered what he looked like when he wrote. Thinking of his story aggravated me even more than the strains of death outside and I began writing without realizing I was doing so.

The greatest of our heroes was reduced to the size of a child. This trapped him in the past. The present which existed around him was a labyrinth and at its exit he would be returned to his proper stature as a great hero.

How did the hero know this? I did not care. I had fulfilled the terms for one episode. I decided not to hinder my pursuit of the goal. This was the trap, the true task set before me. The master was testing my mettle. I would certainly fail the challenge if I had no story to show come nightfall. I pushed ahead, searching for the next three sentences.

He crossed the border into his country of origin. He would be seen here as a stranger. He had to find his way through the land to rid himself of the curse.

That was two. I was walking in my memory now. I was in the town of my youth. I learned later that it was
destroyed during that war, as I knew it might be.

The hero passed a brilliant lighthouse.

Evening after evening alone in the cell had sharpened my memory to details. I remembered a small house I would pass by when I walked alone at night. I remembered my route through the little town.

The hero passed a brilliant lighthouse.

He turned and followed a high road. He turned at another road, and followed a side road under a bluff, and he pushed through a bush.

This was very specific, I felt, but I had yet to set down even the fourth of my fourteen chapters. I felt vibrations atop the mound. The heavy boots of the soldiers were quick.

He avoided the soldiers of the land. He avoided all traffic on the road. The hero traveled a whole night and was very cold.

The night which I saw was crisp and blue. The grass was wet. The path was made of broken stones.

Strange music harkened the hero toward its source; he found not a thing. The source was always beyond his sight. He pushed on without direction and soon came upon civilization. He was not armed.

I added the final sentence to draw suspense.
I thought of the crowded marketplace of my home. I liked my story. I wished to avoid the monsters and gods of the classical epics, to keep only suspense and no violence. I liked my hero safe. You know the epics of which I speak. I know them much better now than I did at this time.

The hero saw a great city far ahead.

Brigands mistook him for a fool and let him pass. He avoided other pitfalls.

I stood for a long while as men maneuvered around my hill. I knew a surveillance post had been established only feet above my head. I wondered if my master heard the sounds.

Of course he did.

I pictured the enemies of those soldiers headquartered across the way, atop the hiding place of my master. The image was ludicrous. I was pleased with the mockery it made of logic.

In the marketplace, the man had no money.

A proper map of the land could be purchased but he had no money. He saw many shapes and strange sights.

This was still consistent with prescribed parameters.

I thought of the epics.

A woman took pity on the man, seeing that he was lost, and took him aside and comforted him. She did not speak. She indicated
to him the proper path out of the city.

I did not feel the need to break with every tradition. I appreciated certain aspects of the classics. I was no longer a very young boy at the time of this war. My master was the only person I saw.

I had been working on the tale for some hours. I slept for a short while when the troops were silent. I woke to sounds of renewed conflict and quickly wrote down my thoughts.

The man passed many faces he remembered but spoke to no one. He avoided soldiers. He passed the cottage of a magician and it was dark.

I saw the cottage. I saw my ceiling also. It was the color of wet clay.

The wanderer passed the home where he once had lived. There was light inside and the windows were shuttered. He continued. Walking down the road, he noticed a figure behind him.

I liked this. I had only four episodes left. I had several hours before the night.

The road curved down a great hill. At the bottom, the hero turned and saw no one behind him. He turned into a very dark road flanked by black trees.
I recalled the streets of my own town and realized I did not know what that certain street looked like. I turned down it. It was an odd turn. I liked it.

The man was lost. He wandered, then found himself approaching a temple. He passed a long row of homes. Some were lit from within, some not.

I knew where the road led. I'd suddenly realized. The geography of my town was as brief as my own memory.

It was too simple. I was now back at the exact quarter from which I had started. I had walked a circle in my mind. There was one more landmark in my walk.

He saw a form in the light before the temple. It was standing still. As the hero drew closer, he lost sight of the temple through trees. When he arrived, he found that the figure had entered the temple.

I did not want to endanger the man and possibly hurt him when he was so close to the end of his epic journey. There was one chapter remaining.

Our greatest hero turned and found himself at the border of the country. He crossed. He stopped and wept.

Well, he was very happy.

There was no sound from above and I slept, shivering in my dank tomb as I always did.
I read the tablet to my master the next evening. I held it ready before he even emerged from his hiding place. He listened to me as I spoke the story. He smiled and his brows rose in the bright moonlight.

"You have written an epic," was what he said. Also, "The fifth of the episodes contains a perfect haiku."

He did not tell me his story of fourteen episodes. He was my master, and I knew he had written it and that it was great. He was a great man. You have heard of him.

You ask me for a story. I cannot tell you the story. To this day, I have not heard it. It was never told to me.
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