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Author

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Publication Date

2017

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Flowcastle

THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in English

by

William Hawkins

Thesis Committee:
Professor Michelle Latiolais, Chair
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2017

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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by

William Hawkins

Master of Fine Arts in English

University of California, Irvine, 2017

Professor Michelle Latiolais, Chair

[A short novel about a son's homecoming.]

Flowcastle

1.

The phone call followed him. It must've been on his trail for years, shivering through telephone wires with all the etiquette of a spring flood, knocking aside innocent conversations as it pursued him, highway to highway, state to state, from Bolivar County, Mississippi to the rolled pavements of San Francisco where it finally caught up with him at three in the morning on the eighteenth of an August.

It's quiet inside the bedroom before the phone call. Peaceful. The air swells and contracts, pushed in and out by the breaths of the two shadows in bed. The phone call ruins this, tramples their sleep, and leaves their dreams lying dead in forgotten memories.

Two shadows sit up, tossing an off-white comforter away, disentangling themselves from two hundred thread count sheets, their minds still drunk from dreaming as they reel about, trying to find the source of the sound, its screen lit up blue.

One shadow, a little larger than the other, lifts an arm. The arm finds a lamp, the lamp leads it to the switch, and the switch calls out a light that makes the shadows men. One, his hand still outstretched, is a man with a thick torso and curly black hair on his arms, chest, and face in tangled, primitive clumps, a man with a loose and somewhat distended belly bunched into stacks of fat by his posture. The other man covers his delicate features with a pillow. He is well-toned and tight-chested, with a trench of auburn hair running down his sternum and a matching mop on

his head, black in the dark and reddish gold in the light. Both men, naked, stare at the phone.

Both men wonder who would be calling them, wonder

(Answer it.)

what news comes at three in the morning.

The larger man with the black hair on his body and the bald spot on his head shifts out of bed, exposing himself to the air, the cruel world outside the sheets. His hair is thicker and even more tangled at his bottom. He walks to the phone, a cellular covered in a discarded pile of clothes. His soles slap on a hardwood floor. The other man watches,

(Hello?)

his straight nose and freckled cheeks drawn, squinting at the backside of his lover.

(Yeah, it's me.)

A long quiet. The shoulders clench. The butt clenches.

(Harrison?)

Harrison, he of the hairy bottom and balding head, holds up his left hand and shows his fingers, naked as the rest of him. He speaks into the phone

(I understand. I understand.)

but only repeats himself. He understands. He understands. Again and again he understands. His voice stays calm,

(I'll be there as soon as I can.)

his promises vague. He speaks as a politician would while his penis swings like a flaccid pendulum as he shifts from one foot to the other, balancing the thoughts in his head. He ends the

conversation in quiet murmurs and lets the phone drop back down on the discarded clothing,
finished with it. The man with auburn hair scratches his chest,

(What happened?)

(My dad died.)

staring at his lover's back, looking for the writing on the flesh.

(Oh, John.)

He calls out the first half of his lover's name. Harrison turns his head, scratches the grit
growing into a beard, watches Andrew watching him, his name

(Andrew, Andrew, Andrew)

stepping over his brain, dragging memories behind it. Andrew making dinner in his underwear,
Andrew dancing in strobe light, Andrew lifting his head out his arms, belly on a towel, towel
on the sand, sand on the edge of the earth, ocean calling just beyond. Andrew under him.

Andrew above him, eyes too dark to be any color.

(It was a heart attack.)

(I'm so sorry.)

There's more stepping on his brain, stepping away from Andrew and the bed and the
one-bedroom apartment above the twenty-four hour deli on a hill-shaped street in San Francisco.

Now it steps

(Was it...did he have problems? I mean.)

toward a tall men with stopped shoulders and a round belly and a white cotton shirt, a man with
suspenders

(It was a heart attack.)

and an untrimmed beard, eyes rheumy blue, a man he called Daddy then Dad then him. Dead now.

(I mean, did he have troubles?)

(I don't know.)

(What are you going to do?)

He has trouble imagining the man dead, picturing the jaw not working on its pinch of chewing tobacco, the eyes not fondling the fields, the thumbs not tucked under the suspender. He tries

(I don't know.)

to cross the hands, to put them on the man's chest, but they won't go. He's stubborn even as a figment of his son's imagination.

(I guess I'm going back.)

(To Mississippi?)

Andrew tries not to let his surprise show when he hears the decision. To him, Mississippi is a swear word. Mississippi is a place people come from, not go to, and the idea that Harrison would return, would board an airline flight to the one city Mississippi has to fly to, borders on the realm of the ridiculous, belongs under the pen of a fantasy novelist, and he doesn't enjoy such literature.

(I have to. I have to go to his funeral.)

(OK.)

They don't look at one another. Harrison's eyes stay on the floor, pupils contracted to observe the stars on the opposite end of the globe, observing his father's death skip across the

surface of his memories. Andrew looks at Harrison's ass, thinks about what's on the other side, what he should do, if he

(I need to pack.)

(Yeah. Here, let me help. Let me.)

should fall on his knees and make a Madonna prayer.

(I can pack for you, John. Let me do that. You need to call the airport. John. You need to get a flight out.)

(I've never called the airport. I've only ever gotten tickets online.

How do you do it? Who do you call? Can you)

His head turns back to Andrew, pulled by Andrew's words, the promise of a promise.

Andrew is surprised to suddenly see Harrison's penis, bouncing off the momentum of the turn.

He should

(Can you look it up for me? The number to call.)

comfort him.

(Come here.)

He does. And then he does again. After, as Andrew cleans up in the bathroom, Harrison skims his fingers across the surface of an electric tablet, searching for a number, instructions, guidance dressed as pixels. After he cleans himself, Andrew looks at himself in the bathroom mirror, flexes his shoulders idly, tracks the tremors his muscles make.

(Hello? My Name is John Harrison, I've had a death in the family, I need...yes. Thank you.)

Andrew stops looking at himself in the mirror but stays in front of it. He hefts the year he's spent with Harrison on one lobe, the distance to Mississippi on the other, and the bigotry he'd find there, and the responsibility of being unburdened with grief. That lobe is heavy. Three months living together seems light.

(Jackson, Mississippi. Earliest available, yeah. Whatever you have.)

The fulcrum is the question,

(What does he want from me?)

it's the problem of where their we stops, where us ends. How much of a life do they share?

(Thank you. Yes, that's fine. I'll be there soon. Thank you, Melissa.)

Harrison always thanks them with their names. Secretaries, waitresses and waiters, airline attendants. It's the polite thing. Harrison always does the polite thing. He hangs up his phone and shifts to the edge of the bed to look at Andrew looking at but not seeing his reflection in the mirror,

(Andrew?)

(Yeah? Sorry.)

wondering what the polite thing to do is.

(I better pack.)

(Let me help.)

He helps by getting Harrison's backpack from the top shelf of the closet,

(We should get dressed.)

(Why?)

picking out his suit from the closet, zipping it into a canvas bag

(Just feels like we should.)

while at the dresser on the other side of the bed, Harrison picks out his socks and underwear and clothes to travel in and clothes to go to a bar in and clothes to sleep in

(Fine. Throw me my sweatpants.)

even though he sleeps naked.

(Do you want me to come with you?)

His breath is heavy with the question he must ask,

(Yes. God. Thank you, Andrew. Yes.)

and Harrison's is light with the relief of the answer. Andrew blinks, accept the sweat pants tossed over by Harrison. He's stalled, one leg in, the other out, his penis still out, half covered in pubic bush. Out

(OK. It's just.)

the window, through curtains made of canvas sheets, morning traffic mumbles, roads groan with deliveries and late-night owls, and the lights of the city make an orange and white and yellow abstract. Outside, buildings, some taller, some shorter, keep their balance on an earth floating on a sea of mercury and tin.

(I'll pay. Don't worry. Don't worry about any of it.

I just need, I just need someone with me. You don't have to meet them. You can, you can do anything you want. But I need you. Andrew.)

(John, don't. It's. Come here.)

Downstairs in the deli there is movement, echoing from stud to stud, a conversation, loud and drunk on one end. Mr. Pashtu has company. Andrew walks around the bed and embraces Harrison. They sink to the floor together. Harrison makes sounds, drowns out the muffled drunk and muffled traffic and muffled lights of a muffled world. He presses his head into Andrew's neck, sobbing. They wrap their arms around one another, like they're making love.

(Oh, John.)

Harrison makes noises, noises that might be,

(The last thing my father told me was to leave. Just leave. We'd had an argument about me coming back for the summer. It was my last year of college. I wanted to go to Europe. All three months. I had a job lined up after. Working for a good firm in Biloxi. I had everything lined up to go. I had the money. There was no reason not to. But he knew what he would happen if I went. He knew what I would say when I came back. So he said no. He said no but he was asking me to stay. I yelled at him. He didn't yell back, didn't cry, didn't do anything but tell me to leave. Just leave. We talked after that, but never really said much of

anything. We never spoke to one another again.

Just talked. We just talked.)

but could be anything.

2.

The airport was big and long and painted white at the entrance and grey everywhere else and was filled with people moving in lines, some slow, some fast, that were all one great line from the door to check-in to security to gate to airlines and the airplanes made their lines over the country. There was safe music playing between announcements. There were children screaming and children sleeping and adults wanting to scream and adults wanting to sleep. There were displays of public art, murals of multiethnic children and twisted metal sculptures. People coming, people leaving. The airport Andrew and Harrison left was in San Francisco, the one they came to was in Mississippi, and that was the biggest difference between them.

But outside the airport, in the shaded subterranean driveway, after they'd collected their bag from the carousel and wandered through the sliding doors, outside the air is different. It's heavier. It's wetter. It feels like the air is sweating, like the wind runs a fever. It feels like they're an inch from the earth.

Andrew hates it immediately. He carried on a few hopes that it would be an adventure, an experience, an eye-opener. He thought, maybe, he would return to San Francisco the prophet of the New Austin. But his hopes sweat out his skin on the first step from the airport. He thinks of

(Do you see him?)

his city, his San Francisco, and how quickly the Mississippi air would burn its California fog.

(I don't know what he drives anymore. Let's just
stand over here at the curb.)

They gather at the curb in bunches, never any less than two arm lengths apart, families and couples and single men and women with brisk expressions on their faces. Most everyone holds a cell phone in hand, or at their ear, or prostrated before their mouths, screens lit with frustrated conversations. Only a few watch the one-way lane without a conversation to distract them, peering through the oncoming windshields, passing over makes and models whose shapes and colors don't stick to a memory.

(Did he know the time?)

(Yeah.)

(Well, maybe.)

(He'll be here. Don't worry.)

(I'm not. I'm just not.)

A truck, a hulking thing with a four-door cab and disgruntled pipes, colored a dark olive green, coasts next to the curb like the thousands before it and the thousands after it.

(Used to the heat.)

It's Carl; Harrison can see him through the windshield. He can see the fat cheeks bouncing, the busted nose, the sandy straw hair hanging thin over the eyebrows. He sees his eyes, though they're still too far away to pick out their amber brown color. But he can see the

eyes shifting. He can see his cousin's plump face relax when he catches sight of Harrison, and see it furrow again when he catches sight of Andrew.

(There he is.)

(Where?)

By the time the truck pulls up alongside them and Harrison has opened the back door to throw their luggage in and long before the passenger door opens, Carl's furrows are gone. His face is open, friendly. Smiling and welcoming and something short of the expression on someone shouting surprise at a surprise birthday party. Harrison climbs into the passenger seat, Andrew into back. It smells like leather and mud. They leap into

(Jesus Christ looked who showed up.)

(If Aunt Lynn could hear you.)

(Thank God she's home, then. How's it been, man?)

(Same old. Keeping my nose buried in people's business.)

(Ah, shit.)

(You, man?)

(Keeping my feet dirty.)

a frenzied bout of conversation. Asking how each other is, how Carl's family is doing, how the flight was. How, how, how. Always asking to describe, avoiding the why, why, why.

They go northwest, on interstate and state highways. They carry conversation with them, first banal then nostalgic. They swap details of one another's lives, how they got that way, if Aunt Virginia will show up in time for the funeral. They talk

(The funeral is Friday, quickest we could pull it together.)

schedules, they talk times, they talk

(Your dad wanted to be cremated.)

things to do. Andrew, left in the backseat, watches the world outside the window. He

(No graveside service, either. Just a memorial.)

watches the hill slopes lose their angle, watches the fields

(Bethlehem Funeral Home.)

separate the pine trees. They talk; Andrew watches the fields

(Mr. Lewis wants to see you as soon as you can.)

become.

A few are clear, freshly tilled, clods of loam in the shape of rows. Some host lines of broken stalks, yellow fading to grey. Most have corn with crowns higher than men, their leaves and stalks withered, ripe to be harvested. And many are being harvested. But beyond that, there are the cotton fields.

(What does he need to talk to me about?)

(The will, I guess. The land.)

(Shit. He didn't leave that to you and Uncle Keith?)

()

They are green now. In a few weeks, white will bloom within them. They are deceptively small; Andrew thinks they resemble his mother's chrysanthemums. He doesn't realize that they, too, can stretch above a man's a height. A short man, true, but they can. He doesn't know what it is to walk between them and feel the bolls slapping your knees, your hips, your chest. He's never plucked the boll from the stem and thrown it as his friends, the other poor

fools with hoes over their shoulders. He doesn't understand a boll fight or the laughter pierced by the pain of a lucky strike. Harrison does. But Harrison talks about time and memories and things to do. Harrison keeps his eyes away from the fields.

But he smells them. They all smell them, even flying down a highway at seventy miles an hour. It's everywhere. The smell of things growing. A smell a little like dust becoming mud. A wet and dark and fragile odor. Everything is growing. Everything is pushing itself up through the earth. Everything is becoming.

(Shit. Carl. He gave it all to me, didn't he?)

(I dunno. We think so. I dunno.)

(Jesus Christ. Why would he do that?)

(You're his son. You. You're his son.)

(But none of it to you? None of it to Uncle Keith? He didn't split it at all?)

(Not that we know of. Lewis is waiting on you to tell us what's what.)

(Jesus Christ.)

Andrew has let himself be lulled by the streaks of earth outside. But his ears prick, and he turns his head toward

(I'll split it up, Carl, I swear.)

(Hey. It's yours.)

(Jesus, Carl, what am I going to do with it?)

(Make some money, cuz.)

a new conversation.

(Jesus.)

(Even if you did split it up three ways.)

(Carl.)

(Even if you did, John, that's still a pretty piece for you.)

(Why would he do this?)

(If you sell it or if you lease it, it's a pretty piece. Either way.)

(Yeah. I guess.)

(Maybe you just lease the whole thing to us, maybe get the family all in business together. You get a pretty piece, either way.)

This new conversation seems a little old on one side, the side coming out of Carl's mouth. Andrew notices this, notices the way Carl won't look at his cousin, all his attention on a road without any traffic. Harrison notices it, too, but chooses not to say anything. It's not the polite thing to do. Family and business can be put together but carefully. Carefully. His father taught him this before he left. No one taught Andrew.

Andrew leans forward to join the conversation, his mouth at Harrison's ear. To Carl, it looks like something gay men would do. Everything they do looks like something gay men would do. But it isn't. This isn't. It's

(Harrison. That's amazing.)

just Andrew talking.

(You can pay your rent for years. Hell, you can buy a better place.)

(Andrew.)

(We could travel. Go to Europe.)

(Andrew.)

Harrison doesn't know why Andrew should stop talking. Probably because there's no reason he shouldn't.

(I'm just saying.)

No reason he shouldn't say what's flashing through Harrison's head.

(John, how much do you think.)

(Leave it alone, Andrew.)

Harrison ends it in a soft voice, and Andrew settles back in the seat, leather hissing, like he would be if they were alone in the car. Carl glances in the rearview mirror, sees Andrew's narrow face pinched into a line, hazel eyes breaking like storms. He feels a flash

(Carl. Is Kate Brown still around?)

of pleasure and is embarrassed to feel it.

(Sure.)

Conversation returns to old friends and places. Andrew can't join. He's not a Harrison, a land baron fucking Harrison. He's lived in San Francisco too long; he's forgotten what it feels to be excluded, that feeling of running your stomach into a steady arm, a gut check, a clothesline. He's forgotten what it's like to be nobody important. His nostrils flare, his face pales. No one notices. Their conversation leaves him behind.

They trade the state road for a county one. Conversation descends back down their throats. Harrison looks out his window and now notices the fields and things growing in him, because these are his fields. If Carl is to be believed. These are his fields growing. Harrison has never owned anything bigger than a flat screen television. He's never had anything so big to belong to him as the land he sees.

(Carl, I'll get this straight.)

Andrew laughs and puts enough nasty in it to swamp Harrison's cheeks with crimson. But Carl only nods.

(We're here.)

The county road ends at the levee. It's in sight, a brown-green smudge on the horizon. No one in the truck observes it. They're focused instead on the house, off to the south of the road, a white plantation on a sea of bright green cotton fields. Its driveway seems longer than the levee line. Andrew imagines being raised there, surround by fields of growing things. He can't. The smell of smog and bus exhaust has saturated his imagination.

He watches the plantation roll towards them, watches the wide verandah come center and the black-tile roof glitter in the summer light. He watches the neat gables fall back as they pass the driveway, as they pass the plantation and continued down to a row of houses a little less than a mile away. Two houses on small postage stamps of green, separated by an aluminum hanger painted red, sharing their backyards with tractor sheds and shining grey gas tanks.

They pull into the driveway of the house closest to the plantation. There is overturned tricycle just off the concrete, and a variety of outdoor toys in garish plastic colors, waffle bats in yellow and a beaten looking fort in grey and green. Carl parks them under a basketball goal, his

garage occupied by a gargantuan SUV and a collection of bikes and boxes. There's another car in the driveway he must park next to, a modest compact car in a color somewhere between blue and grey.

(I guess Mr. Lewis heard you were going to be here.)

(I guess.)

(If you want him to go.)

They open their doors and make the drop to the driveway below. The truck shudders as it's freed of their collective weight. Andrew and Harrison leave their bags and follow Carl inside his home.

(No, it's fine. It's fine.)

The click of claws greets them as Carl opens the door. The dogs follow the sound, both Rottweiler and lab mixes of the same litter, identical in coat and demeanor, equally neutered.

(Millie. T-Bone.)

Harrison offers his open palms to either snout, allows them to collide against him, stands firm. Andrew weakly pushes away, falls back, caught between the dogs and a panel of wall fitted with key hooks. Carl grabs

(Millie! T-Bone!)

their collars and jerks them back, pushing the door open with his hip and releasing them outside.

(T-Bone?)

(Tom named him when he was seven. Lindsey, obviously,
Millie's hers.)

(Carl?)

A woman's voice calls to them from the living room as softly and pervasively as the perfume of scented candles. They follow it one archway over into a living room with leather furniture on a hardwood floor, a flat screen television keeping throne in a cherry wood cabinet. Toys lay scattered here, too, but in neat clusters, swept together by opportune shoves of the foot.

(John!)

The woman to whom the voice belongs is short and plump. Her cheeks make up most of her face; they ripple at the slightest movement of her body, making waves of her expressions. She hurries forward and folds her arms around Harrison's waist; when he looks down, he can see the white of her scalp, her black hair parted across the center, hanging over her ears in tangled combs. He pushes her away, gently, as soon as he can.

(It's so great to see you, John!)

(Hey, Molly. Molly. This is Andrew.)

Andrew extends his hand. Molly smiles before she takes it. This smile makes her cheeks tremble like ice rafts on a northern river.

(Andrews, this is Carl's wife, Molly Harrison.)

(Nice to meet you. Molly.)

They nod to one another, small inclines of the chin, brief exposures of the back of their necks. Molly's cheeks come close to still, but when she turns her head towards Harrison they get back to going nowhere.

(Come in. Come in. Have a seat. The kids are over at
Lynn's. Mr. Keith and Mr. Lewis are in the truck

off looking at something, I can't remember what. Sit
down.)

She urges them to sit on the leather furniture. She frowns only briefly when Andrew and Harrison sit together on the couch. She sits on one of the two recliners; Carl takes the other. The recliners make one end of the domestic rectangle; the TV cabinet the other, with the couch and fireplace finishing the sides. It's all so comfortable, and it makes Andrew's skin itch as if

(How was the flight?)

he's having an allergic reaction.

(Fine. No troubles.)

(Good. Good)

()

(God it's been so long since I've seen you.)

(I know)

(The last time)

(Right.)

(Was Tom's baptism.)

(Right.)

(God, has it been that long?)

(Pretty long.)

(And are you still doing the website thing?)

(Yeah.)

(Oh. Honey. Where are my manners? I'm so sorry to
hear about your father. Of course.)

(Oh. Thanks.)

(How are you feeling?)

(Fine, I guess. I guess it hasn't hit me yet.)

It sounds like a polite conversation. It feels like a hot lamp an inch from his eye.

Harrison squints at Molly, at

(Oh, honey. You just let me know. You promise?

Anything I can do to help.)

something too bright coming out of her mouth.

(I will.)

(Where are we staying?)

Andrew pushes the question with more effort than necessary, but he wants to make sure
it crosses the space between him and Molly. It's Carl who answers, though, maybe because he
sees something in his wife's cheeks, terrible portents of things to come, or maybe just because he
knows

(I didn't know Harrison was bringing anybody, but

there's plenty of room over at the plantation.)

the answer, and he's the kind of man to answer a question he knows.

(You'll be the only ones there, though.)

(Gotcha.)

(We're just waiting here for a bit, because Mr. Lewis wanted to see John so bad.)

(Is it really that big of an emergency?)

(Couldn't tell you, cuz. I don't hear much of what Mr. Lewis has to say, you know? These kinds of things were usually meant for Uncle Cecil's or Daddy's ears.)

(Yeah.)

(He probably just wants to offer his condolences. He was such a good friend of your daddy's.)

(Nah. There's something else going on, Moll. I know that much.)

(I was just saying. Maybe it's the, you know, legal stuff on top of just feeling bad.)

Andrew keeps his ear on their conversation, on the pet theories Carl and Molly Harrison pass back and forth like gossip tokens. His shoulder touches Harrison's; he can feel the tension in them, string instruments being tuned. He lets his eyes do as they will, lets his gaze fondle the ugly ceramic vase and the Audubon reprint that clashes on top of the mantle. His judgment

(I don't know. He's gotten all riled up about something, though.)

satisfies itself like a one-night stand.

(I swear I've caught him sweating over something a couple of times.)

Molly watches Andrew judge her home, sees his and Harrison's shoulders touch, their thighs only an inch apart, witnesses the closeness of them, and it's like having a piece of ash stuck in the back of her throat, like

(Well. He'll be around soon enough.)

a bad allergy.

(Anyone hungry? I can make some ranch dip to tide us over 'til supper.)

She offers food because it's the only thing she has to offer them. Conversation, gossip, even kindness she doesn't have to give, because even if Harrison is family, he's still from California. So she keeps her hands in her lap with

(I'm fine.)

(Me too.)

a smile on her face and

(I'll have some if you're going to make it.)

a tension winding up in the back of her neck.

(Well I don't want to make any if it's just you eatin' it.)

They would have stared at one another, tossing polite conversation back and forth, but small mercies do exist. The kitchen door opens and Keith Harrison walks in with Gerald Lewis close behind.

They step into the living room shoulder to shoulder. They are cousins, with the same square jaws at the end of the same square faces. But that and blood are all they share. Keith Harrison's skin is dyed the color of chew spit and thick, bunched together brow ridges and

gristled black hair that collects itself around a bald spot on his head. His skin hangs on a body thinner than it's used to being. He is an old baseball glove in the shape of a man.

Gerald Lewis still has his hair; it sweeps back in a wave of white and grey over his scalp and down to the base of his neck, kept still by a gel that glitters under the house lights. His skin is patched but his figure trim and well-practiced to looking it. A shadow of a moustache creases up as he smiles.

(John!)

(John.)

(Hey, Uncle Keith. Hey, Mr. Lewis.)

They all stand. Harrison squeezes his way past the furniture to shake their hands. Andrews stays behind to watch him do it.

(How've you been, son?)

The old questions get old answers and leads to new introductions.

(This is Andrew.)

(Andrew. Nice to meet you.)

()

(John. We need to talk.)

(Carl said. I mean, now or.)

Lewis waves away Harrison's concerns with two flicks of his wrist. He affects an air of ease, but there's worry in his eyes to make up for it, worry mixed with a heavier emotion neither Andrew nor Molly can place. They watch with pinprick pupils, their focus complete on the

lawyer. So they don't see the flicker in Keith Harrison's eyes, the quick turn of passion that presses the folds of his neck flat.

(Tomorrow. Tomorrow is fine. Come by my office.

You remember how to get there?)

(Sure. But I don't have a car.)

(Well, you can use your father's truck. If you don't mind.)

(Sure.)

Harrison nods, accepts the appointment and advice, but when his father is mentioned his head gets caught on the downswing.

(Sure. But who can I. I mean, should I. His body. Where.)

(In line to the oven by now. He didn't want us to wait around or anything. Sorry.)

(No. That's. If that's what he wanted.)

(It is.)

(Your daddy, you know how your daddy was.)

(Right.)

(So come to my office tomorrow. Soon as you can.

We have things to talk about.)

(Right.)

The room is hot. Harrison wonders why he didn't notice it before. The heat crawls over his back like a line of ants, working their way inside his clothes, working on his skin, biting to get inside of him. He's trying to remember what his father looked like and can't. He tries to

remember what his father sounded like and can't. All he can do is feel hot. All he can do is sweat.

(Well. Carl. I think I'm ready to head back to
Daddy's house. Me and Andrew are tired.)

He asks to leave even if there isn't a question. It's in the tilt of the words, the seesaw of the sentence. He looks at Andrew and asks with his eyes

(Aren't you tired? Don't you want to leave?)

and Andrew answers

(Yes.)

with a nod of his head and stands up. So does Carl. So does Molly, but she does it slowly and with a frown for company.

(Don't you want to stay? Have supper? I hate for
you to be all by yourself in that big old house.)

Andrew says nothing, but he looks at Molly to make up for it.

(Well, of course. I know that. I just mean.)

(It's fine, Molly, but really, we're fine. I mean,
we're tired. I just want to go rest for a little while.)

Harrison tries to keep the question from his voice as he soothes Molly over, but the heat is under his skin now. He feels nauseous. He's afraid he'll vomit, right there on Molly's living room rug, and he's afraid she would see the glimmer of pleasure in Andrew's eyes after he's done it.

Lewis speaks up

(I'll take you. I'm going that way, anyway.)

offers them a ride back, keeps his brows closed to his eyes. He seems to be doing anything but looking Keith, ignoring the brief expression of warning. He waves them

(C'mon.)

to follow and turns his back on any protests Molly might make.

Harrison can't escape the heat. Not outside, even with the sun balanced on the horizon. Not in Lewis's car, where words and half-warnings keep peppering his ears. Not down the driveway or through the fields. Not even inside the old house. They've kept the A/C on high, to save power, and what little is pumped out slips through invisible cracks in the doors and windows and walls of the refurbished plantation.

Lewis offers to go inside with them, but Harrison shakes him off. He does, though, take Lewis's key, his own absent for seven-odd years. He offers goodbyes and leaves Lewis watching their back through his windshield.

There's no tour, no walkthrough, no looky-loo. Andrew follows Harrison through a tidy but dusty kitchen, through a room that could be a library or study, back down a hallway to a room that must have belonged to Harrison, his old bedroom, because no other room looks as lonely.

They drop their luggage on the floor. They drop themselves on the bed. They use no words, only touch, exploring the familiar terrain of each other's bodies. In minutes mouths open and close as breaths pass between them. In ten minutes, they are naked; in thirty, they are done. The sun puts the horizon over its head and slips under the earth. The cotton rows outside take the color black.

Andrew and Harrison hold one another and between them are thoughts of fields and land and the last words of Uncle Keith spoke to Mr. Lewis as he came through Molly's door.

(through the nose)

3.

The law office of Lewis and Burns is a refurbished shotgun house on the same street as the county courthouse. Inside freshly polished hardwood floors and oak bookcases glisten. Three middle-aged women carry books and folders and phone messages between the offices of Gerald Lewis and George Burns, Jr. The men keep at their desks; sometimes they yell at one another from across the hall. To the women they say things they think are funny, and the women smile at the men who sign their paychecks.

When Andrew and Harrison walk into the front parlor, the secretary, Ms. Epps, a short, broad black woman with manufactured hair greets them warmly, even standing so she can hug Harrison.

(It's been too long!)

She waves Harrison back through, or starts to, but her eye catches Andrew's. She hesitates, elbow cocked and hand near her chin.

(You go on through, honey.)

She releases the hand, but only after a small frown focuses on Andrew. Harrison takes Andrew by the elbow and

(Can you wait for me out here?)

leads him to the other end of the parlor, to a green leather couch and matching chairs.

(Just for a minute. I promise.)

(Sure. Don't worry about me, babe.)

Andrew says the pet name loudly enough for Ms. Epps to hear without straining herself too hard. He's rewarded by a blush from Harrison and a twitch of the ears from Ms. Epps. He reclines at the center of the couch with a self-satisfied smile.

(I'll be just a minute.)

Harrison leaves him behind through frost glass doors. He walks through and down the hallway, pegging a right into Lewis's office and closing the door behind him.

Lewis welcomes him much as Ms. Epps did, replacing the hug with a handshake. Once it's finished he gestures excitedly to a seat across his desk and waits for Harrison to sit until he does the same.

(Thank you for coming so quickly.)

(I'm. You're welcome.)

(How are you doing? Really?)

(Fine. I'm doing fine.)

(This must be hard for you.)

(Not as hard, not as hard as I would have thought. I mean)

(Of course. Your father was sick for so long.)

(I didn't. I suppose.)

It's the old how-are-you, but this time Lewis hurries through it, impatient to get to the next part, his fingers tapping staccato on a short stack of papers in front of him.

(I know. It's hard. With the service tomorrow, it's hard to think about anything else. I know. But the thing is, things are moving quickly.)

(What things?)

(Well, let's do this properly. I'm just going to tell you, and you can take a copy of the will to read over, but I'm just going to tell you, your father left you everything.)

(Everything?)

He's being told that a small kingdom is his. He's being told that all his father worked for, his father's pride, is being given to him in no less than what looks like twenty pages.

(Everything. One of the easiest inheritances I've ever drawn up. Everything straight to you. No splits. No escrow. No riders. No conditions. All of it to you. As of now.)

(Why?)

He can't take it. It's too much. It's even crushing his voice into whispers Lewis has to lean over his desk to hear.

(Why? You're his only son.)

So he shakes his head instead, pushes back against the chair. His face screws up and flushes. Lewis stands and moves around the desk to a small bar, hidden in the corner, and pours Harrison out a shot of bourbon.

(Here.)

Harrison takes it with a hard back toss of his head. His chest heaves a little less. It's a different kind of heat in him, one that washes instead of prickles and gives him back control of himself.

(Thanks.)

(Don't think anything of it. It's a lot to take, I know.)

(A lot to take. A lot. No one else? Not Uncle Keith?)

(No.)

(Does he know?)

(He suspects. I didn't tell him but- and I'm not proud of it- but I imagine he guessed it off my face. My attitude. I'm sorry. It's hard, when you know someone, lived with them.)

(No. I understand. Listen.)

His eyes burn. Not from the bourbon. Lewis has trouble keeping eye contact as he sits back down.

(Listen. Let's give Uncle Keith, something)

(Well, that's up to you, but.)

(Half.)

Lewis holds up his hands as if he's shielding himself from blows. He shakes his head.

(You need to listen. There's more.)

(There's more?)

(Your father drew up this will, let's say, two years back. When he first found out how bad his heart was.)

(OK.)

(But things have changed, John. They found something under the fields. A salt dome. Your daddy and Uncle Keith hired a company to do a little digging. See what was what. It's a salt dome, John, and it's filled with natural gas.)

(Jesus, Lewis.)

(John, this company, this drilling company, they want you to lease the land out to them. They're worried that we'll go telling other people about it. They'll pay)

(Through the nose.)

(That's right.)

Harrison cups his hands, scoops up air to his face and washes himself with it. Lewis watches, his fingers never leaving the papers on his desk.

(There's a lot in there, John. They think so, anyway.)

He keeps licking his lips. His nostrils flare as if he's caught the scent of something.

(They're offering eight hundred thousand to option.)

Harrison laughs, a barking sound that closes up his throat as soon as it escapes. He stands up, quickly enough that Lewis jumps in surprise. He asks permission

(I think I could use another drink.)

and after the nod from Lewis he walks back to the bar in the corner and refills his glass with bourbon.

(Jesus, Lewis.)

(I've done some figuring. The option, the lease, the land value, putting it all together. Conservatively, conservatively mind, it's probably around one and a half million you've got on your hands. All tied up, but still. Tied up in a pretty neat bundle.)

(Why?)

(You keep asking that, and I keep saying, because you're his son.)

Harrison settles back down in the chair. The bourbon helps him do it.

(The last time I was here we fought.)

(That tends to happen between sons and fathers.

Specially when they care about each other.)

(You know what we fought about.)

Lewis sits back in his chair and waves away Harrison's comment.

(I can imagine.)

(We fought about me moving to California. Daddy
wasn't much a fan of California.)

(I can imagine.)

(Listen, Lewis, we have to give Uncle Keith something.)

(That's between you and him now.)

(Why didn't Daddy give him something?)

(I don't know.)

Lewis tells him he doesn't know why Uncle Keith was excluded. Hasn't a clue, the foggiest, a single thought as to why it might be. It's a lie he's kept in him for the past two years, ever since Cecil called him to change the will. But he keeps the lie down. There's no reason for Harrison to know. He already has a million and a half troubles.

(I don't know.)

(I have to give him something.)

(You can. You could just lease it to him. Have him
work it. Him and Carl.)

(Carl said something like that. But he didn't know.

We didn't know I'd get. Jesus.)

(Carl's a good guy. You should, maybe, maybe you
and him can come up with something. You know,
Keith's getting older himself. Carl's got that
family. You know, maybe you should.)

(Yeah. Maybe.)

(How are you feeling?)

Harrison finishes his glass in a long sip and doesn't get up for another. Instead he nods, just nods. Outside the door the hallway floorboards creak as one of the paralegals passes. There's the buzz of conversation coming through the walls, the quiet flicks of paper behind it, behind everything, paper being pushed from desk to desk, never tiring, always moving, like

(Better.)

a flock of lost geese.

(Can I give you some advice?)

When he offers advice Harrison laughs, an image coming to his mind of a starving man being offered a thick, sizzling steak.

(Please.)

(I would quit my job. If I were you. I'm sure it's a nice job.)

(Quit?)

(But it's not like you need the money anymore. No matter what you do.)

(Jesus.)

(At least burn through your vacation days. Your sick days. At least do that. Don't go home after the funeral. That's all I'm saying.)

(I'll think about it.)

Harrison stands; Lewis copies him. It's time to leave, but it's hard for Harrison to go. Because when he leaves, he'll take his newfound wealth with him. He wonders how a few lines of ink can be so heavy. Lewis, seeing his hesitation, walks around his desk and

(We'll talk more after the funeral. We'll get in to the details then.

Right now it's time for you to go back home. Think about it. Call your office. Stay here. And think about it.)

takes Andrew by the elbow and leads him out as he would a grieved man. Together they walk to the front parlor where the sounds are lively. Where laughter rattles the wood grain in the walls.

Andrew no longer sits on the green leather sofa. He's perched at the edge of Ms. Epps's desk, at the tail end of a joke

(This is a bathroom?)

where the punch line is a shout. They laugh, Me. Epps and Mrs. Phyllis Grey and Ginger Tanner, the secretary and the paralegals, they laugh and laugh like it's the first joke they've ever heard. They laugh, and a boy laughs, too, a slight black boy with the same eyes as Ms. Epps.

Harrison never understood how he could do it. In San Francisco, homeless men in Goodwill denim called out to him on the street in friendly voices that seemed alien to their worn faces. Everyone knew Andrew, everyone wanted to talk to him, wanted to hear what he'd say back. But that had been in San Francisco.

(Well, looks like we're missing a show.)

This is Mississippi. He hadn't thought he could do it here, too.

(Now, isn't there something y'all should be doing?)

When Lewis asks the ladies what else they have to do, he really asks, ignorant of the answer. His office staff moves in orbits around him, bound to his work but somehow detached from his command. They move away back to their office, the paralegals, laughing as they go; Ms. Epps stays at her post with a newfound smile. The boy, the boy who look so familiar but Harrison can't place, the boy stays.

(John, you remember my nephew, Liam.)

(Liam? I can't believe it.)

(Didn't he get big? Didn't he?)

He did get big. And handsome. Handsome enough that he gets glances from Andrew.

And from Harrison.

(You ready?)

Harrison wants to leave. He walks toward the door to prove it, but Andrew

(Halle says you used to work here. Like Liam does now.)

doesn't budge, almost as if in defiance, but of what Harrison isn't clear.

(Halle?)

He's never heard Ms. Epps's Christian name; for Andrew to just say it, speak it without any effort, it's just one more thing in an already full head.

(We should go. Lewis, let me know, just let me know what)

(I'll see you at the service. We can talk then, if you

want, or you can call me, anytime.)

(Thanks. Thank you. Lewis.)

He takes Andres's elbow in his hand, but this time it doesn't follow him. This time it jerks back to the body on desk of the law office of Lewis and Burns

Andrew smiles thinly. It's a little like being smiled at by a vulture, just before it dips its bald neck down into the gore.

(Aw. But I'm having fun.)

(I'm not.)

(Uh oh.)

Andrew turns toward Ms. Epps and Liam with a pout on his face. Her smile fades away; he pouts all the more.

(He's mad at me.)

(Andrew, please.)

One of the paralegals drifts back into the room, a folder full of paper for Mr. Lewis in hand. She observes Andrew's pout and Harrison's hand and a peculiar expression fixes up her face, the same screwing Lewis's and twisting Ms. Epps's lips. They're watching two men fight like lovers while they try to pretend they're not. And Liam? Liam watches with a different smile.

Harrison lets go of Andrew's elbow and turns away.

(Lewis, let me know if anything else comes up.)

He says his goodbye, opens the door, and doesn't look at Andrew as he walks out.

(Will do.)

Andrew has to trot to catch up with Harrison outside. Ms. Epps watches them from the window, thinking thoughts she pretends not to.

4.

Bethlehem Funeral Home lies on the edge of a town made of two streets. It covers its shame in dark brown bricks that look like wet shit after it rains. It has a steep, gabled roof and the overall look of something squatting.

There are already a few cars and trucks in the side parking lot. Harrison, though, drives his dad's truck through semicircle of concrete that loops past the front door. He parks behind a familiar, massive SUV, leaving just enough room so other cars can still swing by.

(Bereaved parking.)

It's evening, when the summer's dark and just as hot, and under his suit Andrew's sweating, dripping. Harrison is, too, but he doesn't look like he is. He just looks calm, so he looks cool, so he looks a little removed from the world.

They walk inside together. Harrison holds the door open for Andrew, and Andrew realizes that it's always Harrison holding the door open. Harrison earns more money, Harrison always has the final say on where they vacation, Harrison is always the big spoon. And the worst part is that none of this occurred to Andrew before he came to Bolivar County, Mississippi. It's so hot. Andrew walks inside, sweat beads on his brow, and Harrison follows close behind, his own face clear, the expression blank.

A small crowd is already gathered. They turn as one and give well-practiced nods of sympathy. Carl and Molly each with a hand on their children. Mr. Lewis and his law partner, Mr. George Burns, Jr., quietly conferring with one another in a corner. Uncle Keith off to himself,

Aunt Lynn, a slight woman with poorly-dyed red hair, talking to a tall man in a cheap suit who must be the funeral director, because no else could look so embalmed and still be alive.

Harrison and Andrew join them in the viewing parlor where five rows of black, plastic chairs stand empty before an altar made of green felt and overeager flower arrangements. It all frames an urn, blacker than any suit or dress in the room.

It's beautiful, which surprises Harrison. He's been to the Bethlehem Funeral Home many times in his life. There are only two funeral homes in the town, and only one handles the white business. So he's been inside enough to know that the urn wasn't provided by Bethlehem. His father must've ordered it elsewhere. His father must've picked it himself. Must have had it special ordered.

He wants to touch it. Not just touch it. He wants to slide both of his hands over its curves. He wants to feel the gloss, wants to catch a dim reflection of himself in its sheen. It shocks him, the power of the urge, the almost metallic taste it leaves in his mouth. A taste like disappointment.

Andrew sees the urn and that's all. Most of his focus is on the others. On their suits, on Molly's dress, on the children's outfit. His suit is much too nice. Much nicer, much more expensive than theirs. One more thing for him to judge them for. He's getting tired of it. The judging.

They move over to the crowd. Condolences to Harrison, nothing to Andrew. Hands extended in sympathies. Except Uncle Keith's. His hands stay next to him, and he stays next to the chairs and watches with an expression

(How're you feeling, John?)

Andrew doesn't have a name for.

(I'm fine. Really. I'm fine.)

He says it, he said it before, but after sleeping under his father's roof and driving his father's truck he's starting to feel not fine. He's starting to feel shitty. It's a little like inhaling the air near a landfill, a little like the first step into a backed up bathroom. It must show on his face because Molly clucks, a shotgun sound at the end of her tongue. To prevent her from making more he bends down and greets the children with

(Hey, guys.)

a hug for Lindsey and a gentle handshake for Tom. When he's finished with them

(Aunt Lynn.)

he embraces his aunt. She gives as good as she gets, but her eyes stay open over his shoulders.

(Oh, we've missed you.)

Lewis and Burns and the funeral director, Mr. Vandeven, hang back at the edge of the family circle. Uncle Keith stays by the chairs. Andrew, not burdened by family greetings, detects a slight sway to the old man's posture. He's pleased to find

(Do you need a minute? With. With your father?)

he's not the only one sick of being sober.

(I'm fine.)

(Mr. Harrison, I'm Charlie Vandeven. I don't believe we've ever met.)

(No. We haven't.)

(I moved here after you left.)

While the funeral director steps forward and gives Harrison soft words about his father's ashes, Andrew skirts the crowd and steps next to Uncle Keith, primping a smile.

(I'm a little surprised Mr. Harrison wanted to be cremated.)

Harrison watches over a dime-suit shoulder

(Harrison's mother was buried, wasn't she?)

scared of what Andrew might say.

(She wasn't cremated, was she?)

afraid of what his uncle might say back.

(No.)

When his uncle finally does say something, it's a monosyllabic word that takes too much effort to say. The sway becomes pronounced, and because Harrison is watching they're all watching, even the children. Aunt Lynn sucks in a breath through her front teeth.

She might have said something. They might have done something, but the front doors open, and through them the people come in pairs and groups. White faces, some sunburned, some not, wearing shades of bereavement, dressed in black suits and black dresses. They come to shake Harrison's hand, Carl's hand, Uncle Keith's hand. For the women are hugs, embraces, gentle nods from the passing men. The family stands in a line to receive them. They are offered murmured condolences with sad smiles. A few words of polite conversation pass, and the bereaved move down the line.

The older ones take their seats on the black, plastic chairs, women always first. The younger ones stand. The air conditioning is on full blast; it's the background music. Harrison can

hear it if he bothers to, yet it's still warm inside his suit. Hot as the town presses in on him, a mass of people

(How are you doing?)

(He was a good man.)

(I'll miss him.)

(How are the kids?)

(How are you?)

(Who did the flowers? They're so lovely.)

(How's the corn coming in?)

(He was a good man.)

(Did you end up buying the lake house?)

(Such a shame.)

(I'll miss him.)

alive.

Andrew retreats to a corner, but eventually the crowd squeezes him out. Harrison doesn't notice when he passes back out into the foyer, doesn't notice him sneak towards the back, past the small kitchen and out the door. Harrison doesn't see Andrew nearly trip over Liam Epps, who sits on concrete steps smoking a cigarette.

(Shit!)

(Shit! Sorry. Liam! Sorry, man, you all right?)

(Just lost my cigarette, that's all. I got plenty more.

You want one?)

He doesn't see them share a light, doesn't hear the twin exhale of their breaths as they blast cigarette smoke towards a night sky in which

(Thanks, man.)

not a star shines.

Away from them, Andrew feels calm again. Himself again. He doesn't like Bolivar County. The air here rubs his skin like the flat of a file. It's exposing nerves, makes him flinch and twitch at things that never came within an arm's reach before. When he was in San Francisco. In San Francisco there are cool breezes and fogbanks and people talk about the world because the world passes through every day. There are parties and after parties and streets to walk on after those, streetlights to lean against, men to love for a night. No, he doesn't like Bolivar County. You can't do these things in Bolivar County. You can't be that person. There are no streets to walk in, only fields, and it's dark out there. So he pretends the cigarette smoke he blows is fog and the light above the back door is a neon sign.

(You like living here, Liam?)

(Not really. I'm moving to Jackson next year.

Going to Hinds Community College.)

(Nice.)

Liam's suits hang on him, limp, but his face, the one Andrew studies, is drawn tight. The low cheekbones and the flat nose and the wide eyes take the overhead light and give nothing back.

(What are you going to study?)

(Don't know yet. You go to school?)

(I just got out. I'm in marketing. Well. That's what
I studied. I'm between jobs.)

(Where do you live?)

(San Francisco. With Harrison.)

(I knew with Harrison. I just didn't know where
with Harrison. Nobody says where.)

It's something in the hips. That's what he watches for. The way the body moves between
them. And the shoulders. And the way the eyes follow him. Hard to see the eyes, though, in the
dark. Hard to tell

(People talk about us, huh?)

where they're going.

(They talk about Harrison. Yeah.)

(Harrison and me, we've been dating for a while.)

So he pokes. So he lets out words and watches to see how they fall on the ears. Watches
Liam's unblemished face bob and weave.

(We've been living together for a few months. Big step.)

(Yeah.)

(He's different here.)

(Maybe he's different there.)

(You're pretty clever for a kid going to community college.)

(How old are you?)

(Twenty-two.)

(Well I'm nineteen. So I don't think I'm a kid. To you, anyway.)

(Three or four years makes a difference. Trust me.)

(So, then, if Harrison called you a kid, I guess
you'd be cool with it.)

(Clever. Again.)

(Just cause I'm black and from Mississippi don't make me stupid.)

(I don't think that.)

(You do. You expect it. Man, I can tell. You don't
like it here. I bet you hate it here. No harm in that,
though. It is what it is. But you don't like us. I can
tell that, too.)

(Is it us? Or is it them?)

(Shit. It's us. I know where I'm at.)

It's been weeks and weeks since he'd had a cigarette. He'd decided to quit and then all this. The nicotine settles on an empty stomach, gives him a high, a little too high of one, because it's hard to see Liam's face, hard to make out the smile, to grasp its shade. He doesn't know what Liam is smiling at. Who he's smiling at.

(Soon you'll be in Jackson.)

(It's not that far.)

(Do you mind?)

He doesn't give Liam much of a chance to protest as he sits down beside him.

(Nah.)

There isn't much space for the two of them on the steps, but they fit. Just. The edges of their hips

(Thanks.)

touch. They finish their cigarettes slowly.

(You're right. I don't like it here. People probably don't like me being here that much either. But pretty soon, pretty soon I'll be gone. Harrison, too.)

(I don't know. I hear he might be staying for a while.)

(Where did you hear that?)

(Around.)

Andrew puts his elbow on the steps behind him and leans back so Liam can't see he surprise and the hurt and the face he makes as he recovers from them. His elbow pokes into Liam's back by accident, but Liam makes no movement. So

(Well, shit.)

Andrew keeps the touch on, waits to see what comes of it.

(He got a lot from his dad. That's what Aunt Halle says.)

But now he can't see Liam's face. Only the bald back of his neck. He thinks about the way Liam walked, about the way their elbows and hips touched, and he thinks of when here they are and what's behind him and the cigarette between his fingers that needs to be flicked to the ground. He reaches up

(I better get used to being here, then.)

and touches the base of Liam's skull with the back of his left finger.

Liam swings his arm up hard, knocking Andrew's back, banging it against the edge of the concrete step. Andrew hisses at the jagged flash of pain it sends up his shoulder. Liam stands, spinning off the steps, suddenly very tall, very large, and, though Andrew refuses to acknowledge noticing, very black.

(The fuck!)

So Andrew grips the concrete behind him with his free hand and tries to back up to nowhere. The cigarette falls from his fingers and smolders out on a step below.

(The fuck!)

(Sorry.)

(What the fuck?)

(I'm sorry.)

Liam gets louder; Andrew gets softer. He feels exposed, vulnerable. He wants Harrison, he thinks of Harrison. But Harrison is inside, talking to Mr. Lewis and Mr. Burns, learning about the company that wants to lease their land. Harrison doesn't wonder where his lover has disappeared to. It's just Andrew facing Liam alone, it's just

(I'm sorry. I'm sorry.)

Andrew whispering an apology over and over.

Liam breathes loudly. Andrew's surprised no one inside hears it, pokes their head out to see what the noise is. It's louder than the streetcars outside his old bedroom window.

Liam walks forward. Andrew flinches, curls away from the approach. Liam ignores him, just walks up the concrete steps and through the back door, making his way back to the funeral parlor.

There are ants in Andrew's brain. They're on fire, they're running across his lobes, falling into the cracks, biting into the grey, wrinkled pulp with burning pincers. Thousands of them, thousands on thousands. He runs his fingers through his styled hair and tries his best to ignore them. He tries his best to ignore the questions. What will Liam say? Who will Liam tell? What will he say? Should he just deny it? Should he say he's innocent?

(It wasn't me it wasn't me it wasn't me)

Who will they believe? What trumps what? A gay white man or a straight black man?

(Jesus.)

He says the word as a nonbeliever does. A word. Something found in the dictionary. Inside, near the urn, near the powder that was once Cecil Harrison, Jr., some pray. They pray in whispers; others pray silently, eyes squeezed shut. A few pray with open eyes, looking at the urn as they do. They pray. Andrew thinks he does, too, but he's wrong. Andrew has never prayed in his life. He just says the word Jesus. Or sometimes, the word God. He says the words and waits for himself to feel better.

(Fuck.)

He stands and steps back inside. In the small kitchen he pauses. There are more people now. The sound of them talking is too great for any words to escape, but the tone is clear. It's gentle, smooth, never quite rising to anything that might be gaiety. No surprise. No shock. No low whispers of a new scandal. He walks forward. They're in the foyer, spilled out of the viewing room, gathered in loose amoebas of conversation that split and drift and reform by whims. He passes these, attracts the eyes of a few vigilant souls, gathers whispers

(That's Harrison's you-know)

(That's Harrison's boyfriend)

(The gay)

(Andrew Something)

behind him, presses forward until he's beside Harrison who sees him and blinks. He introduces him

(Hey. Andrew. This is Ms. Tina Hayworth. She was my third grade teacher.)

(Pleasure.)

to the overweight woman with an eighties hairstyle who smiles politely back before moving away.

(How much longer, do you think?)

(I don't know. I have to stay till everybody leaves, I think.)

(Jesus.)

(Well. I'm sorry.)

(No. No, I'm sorry, I'm just. Just)

(Are you OK?)

(I'm fine.)

(You sure?)

(Yes.)

(You don't look it.)

A space is created around them. No one is looking at them, which means everyone is watching them. The ants that fell on his brain are marching down his spine now. He doesn't go anywhere, but his legs won't stop moving.

(Maybe I just need some air. Maybe I can take the truck, go somewhere and come right back?)

Harrison is aware of the space, aware of the eyes watching without looking, aware of the way Andrew shakes, his movements uncontrolled, his face naked with desperation. Harrison is aware and embarrassed. He's embarrassed that he brought Andrew to the memorial service. To Bolivar County. He feels found out, like a teenaged boy who finds the dirty magazine under his mattress missing. Ashamed. He feels ashamed. And he's ashamed that he feels ashamed.

(Fine.)

He gives Andrew the truck keys. The jingling sound they make skips over the conversations like a flat stone on a flatter lake. Andrew takes them, pockets them, nods, and leaves. He never sees Liam. He almost doesn't notice. He climbs into the truck and barrels out the driveway to unfamiliar roads.

And inside the crowd presses back against Harrison, welcomes him back into its conversations about old friends and old schemes and old days only getting older. And he smiles and shakes their hands and says quiet things about his father.

5.

Andrew finds a bar attached to a truck stop. Inside there are stalls for video poker and a few tables to play cards on and a bar to drink on. He hurries to that. The only other person inside is the bartender, who welcomes Andrew with a nod of his greasy head, his attention focused on a small portable television at the bar's corner where a fuzzy game of baseball is being played.

(What ya want?)

(What beer do you have?)

(The Buds and the Millers.)

(What whiskey?)

(Eh. Jack Daniels and, I think. Yeah. Some Maker's Mark.)

(The Maker's Mark. No need to spoil it with anything.)

(Sure thing.)

As the bartender makes his order, Andrews reads the bumper stickers that line the back shelves and wall. Most say things about Hillary Clinton, a few about Barack Obama. A few are stenciled with thoughts on family.

(My other family lives in Wichita, Kansas)

(Calling my wife a bitch is an insult to my dog)

They provide the only color in the bar, the only things besides dark wood and darker air.

But the glass the bartender fills is clean, and the whiskey he fills it with is strong and clear. Andrew takes slow sips while they watch the baseball game even if

(Who's playing?)

the screen is too fuzzy to separate the two team colors.

(Sox and Giants.)

(Bicoastal Battle.)

(I suppose.)

(I'm from San Francisco, actually.)

(You lost or something?)

(I came with. A friend. My friend's father passed away.)

(Oh, Cecil Harrison?)

(That's right.)

(Guess that's why you're all dressed up.)

(That's right.)

(So I guess you're rooting for)

The crack of a hit. The roar of the crowd. The screen has a small fit, unable to hold the excitement down.

(Where are they playing?)

(Fenway? Maybe?)

(Ah.)

(You rooting for the Giants, I take it?)

(I don't know. They've been losing a lot lately.)

(Now that ain't right.)

(What's that?)

(You root for the home team. I mean, it's in the damn song. You root for the home team. San Fran's your home, you root for the Giants.)

He doesn't normally drink whiskey. When he's home, his home, his drink of choice is a vodka stinger. A silly drink, not even one he enjoys that much, but it's always fun to scream for another vodka stinger in a gay bar. Otherwise he wraps his hand around a local beer, the more micro the brewery the better. He enjoys comparing them, debating over them, switching allegiances as he hops from bar to bar. He doesn't drink whiskey in San Francisco. He can't understand why he ordered one here.

(Who do you root for then?)

(Eh. Mississippi doesn't have a team. Of any kind.

We're too poor for that shit.)

Andrew takes a careful sip. It burns, but not as cleanly as vodka does. It's a dirty burn, a sweltering burn, a burn that tastes just like the air in this God-forsaken state.

(So who are you rooting for?)

(Nobody. I'm just watchin'. Not rootin'.)

Another play by the Sox. The crowd sounds like it's on its feet. Blurs of red run about the bases. Homerun.

(See? What did I tell you?)

(I stick with what I said. Just ain't right. You gotta root for the home team. It's in the damn song.)

Harrison was drinking whiskey when they met. Andrew might have made fun of him for it. He can't remember. He was drunk, and Harrison got drunk. They spent the night together. They went somewhere to eat breakfast the next morning. He can't remember where.

(So how you liking Mississippi?)

It might have been Tony's.

(All right so far.)

Or Giselle's.

(Different from California, huh?)

He can't remember. He only remembers walking back to Harrison's apartment. They didn't have sex right away. It was nice. It was always nice.

(Hotter.)

(Yeah. I bet.)

He drains his glass. His throat burns. The crowd roars.

(One more time.)

6.

Andrew doesn't come back. In a little less than two hours, only the family remains in the funeral home. Even Mr. Lewis and Mr. Burns have left them. A weary Mr. Vandeven pops in to wish them good night before retreating to whatever bottle gets him through his sleep, the urn secure in his arms.

Harrison doesn't want to mention that Andrew has taken his daddy's truck, doesn't want to call attention to his abandonment. Carl and Molly and Lynn wake the children who've fall asleep in a corner of the viewing room while Uncle Keith puts his suit back on. Keys jingle, they move, and soon they'll walk outside leaving Harrison behind. He clutches the cell phone in his

pocket and thinks about leaving a third voicemail on Andrew's phone and thinks of Andrew dancing in a club in a distant city.

(C'mon, John. I'll give you a ride back.)

His uncle's words smell like liquor, but who's Harrison to squander a ride home? He nods and follows Uncle Keith outside, holding the door open for Aunt Lynn and the rest of the Harrison brood. He notices Aunt Lynn give a troubled glance at her husband's back, but she says nothing. Only turns to go home with her son and daughter-in-law.

His uncle's pickup is much like his daddy's. No doubt they bought it at the same dealership, probably even bought them together. He can see them, hands in their jean pockets, shoulders stooped, walking through the rows of pickups, inspecting sticker prices and mumbling things only the other could understand.

(Do you want me to drive?)

It's a pretty little picture in his head. He hates to ruin it by asking his uncle if he's too drunk to drive, after being drunk at his brother's funeral. But he has to ask because his uncle walks like he has skis on his feet.

(I'm fine.)

He has to ask. He supposes his uncle has to wave his offer away. He supposes there's nothing to do but climb into the passenger seat and buckle his seat belt.

The drive starts well enough. They make it out of the funeral driveway and turn in the right direction. But then he turns in his seat

(I'm glad that Andrew took off.)

and speaks to his nephew.

(I've been meaning to have a word. With you.)

(Just keep an eye on the road, Uncle Keith.)

(Boy, I've been driving these roads since I was
sitting on my daddy's lap.)

(OK.)

(Don't worry your pretty head none.)

(OK.)

(I just need to talk to you is all. And something like
this, I prefer to look you in the eye, even if I have
to do it every other word.)

(OK, Uncle Keith.)

(Your father left you most everything. If not
everything. Don't say nothin'. I know. Your father
and me were in the middle of a fight when he.
When he departed. A fight like we've always had.
Kind everyone used to make fun of us for. Course,
they won't be making fun of us anymore will they?
Hell.)

There aren't too many streetlights in town, and what little there are fall quickly behind.
The headlights on Molly's SUV are the only source of illumination. They reflect off the rearview
mirror and make it easy to see how drunk his uncle is, how his tongue perches on his lower lip,
how his eyebrows droop. He glances at the road then at Harrison, at the road then at Harrison.

It's hypnotizing, so regular a motion. His words he pulls from the bottom of his throat, and they drip.

(I know he left you most everything. I know you've been to see Lewis. I know you know about the salt domes, the gas. I know it. What I don't know is what you're going to do. So I want to.)

(Uncle Tommy.)

(Just listen! I don't know what you're going to do, but I'm asking you. I'm asking you. Don't sell it. The land. I mean, the land not. Don't sell it. The farmland. The good land. I don't care about the salt domes. I'm asking you. Please. No. No, I ain't asking you. I guess I'm begging you. Pleading with you. I might not sound it, but I'm an old man and it comes to me hard. But I am, I am begging. Please, son, don't sell it. Your father would've given me a fair share if we hadn't been fighting. I believe that. I really do. So I'm asking you. Henry, please. Don't sell it. Let me work it.)

It's a moist little speech. Wet words. Wet eyes. The truck drifts toward the double-yellow line as he makes it. Harrison doesn't notice. He's busy looking at a lion

(Uncle Keith.)

whimper.

(He left me everything. All of it.)

Harrison tells him he has nothing. Uncle Keith glances back toward the road and snaps them back in to their lane with a quick twist of his wrists. Harrison's seatbelt grinds against his shoulder. The headlights behind flicker in concern.

(All of it.)

(All of it.)

(I thought. Maybe. But then I thought. Maybe, even if we were fighting, we were brothers. You know?)

(I know.)

(Shit. All of it.)

(Uncle Keith. I'm not going to sell it. At least)

(At least what?)

(At least, not now. I mean. I want to listen to you and Carl, see what you want, see what Mr. Lewis thinks, just figure things out.)

(Lewis doesn't give a shit what you do. He gets paid no matter what.)

(Uncle Keith, I don't think)

(He doesn't like me, anyhow. I don't like him neither. Coming to our business these past few years, coming and. Well. It doesn't matter. I get the

chance to change your mind. That what you
saying?)

Uncle Keith gets mad, beats the heel of his right hand into the steering wheel to egg himself on. The truck's weaving now, in its own lane, sure, but still weaving. Harrison's cell phone buzzes in his pocket. The headlights in the rearview mirror get closer, burn hotter.

(Goddamn. Goddamn you and goddamn your daddy and goddamn the

Good Lord for putting the goddamn gas underneath our fields. All I wanted, all I ever wanted, was to work those goddamn fields. Our daddy was a good farmer, but he didn't love it. He didn't wake up happy every morning, happy to be up, happy to be goddamn awake. I love it, John. I wake up every morning, happy to be awake. I'm been waking up earlier and earlier," he says, a little laugh slipping out, "been waking up with a few more aches, sure, but I love it. Your father didn't. You don't even know it. You don't even know it."

There are tears in his eyes now. All the memorial service, the prayers and impromptu childhood stories, and now he's crying. They drive straight, though. Carl's headlights fall back behind, letting the night get a little closer to the windows.

"You don't even know it. What are you going to do with it?"

"Uncle Keith," he starts.

The cell phone buzzes incessantly against his thigh. He pulls it out, checks the screen

(Baby)

brings it to his ear with a grimace.

(Andrew?)

(Baby I don't know where I am.)

(Are you in a bar?)

(Yeah?)

(Off Highway 4?)

(I don't)

(Is it in a truck stop?)

(Yeah!)

(Sit tight. I'll be there soon. I'll call you back in just a minute. OK?)

(OK. I love you.)

(All right.)

He hangs up the phone and replaces it in his pocket. His uncle says nothing more aloud.

He doesn't swerve the truck the rest of the ride home. Nothing but smooth sailing over old pavement.

7.

Andrews wakes up on a cloth couch that smells a little like dog piss. He rolls over and nearly falls off. He observes the coffee table, the fireplace, the flat screen over it. He tries to put everything he sees in order, as ancient sailors might have done with the stars. He needs a guide, directions. He needs to remember how he got there.

There are sounds, the kind that belong to a kitchen. He can't see the kitchen though. When he turns his head, all he sees is a wide archway that leads to handsome foyer. Beyond that there is only a dining room, as large as the room he's woken in. He's woken up in a mansion. A mansion with a couch that smells a little like dog piss.

He drank too much. He doesn't remember how much, or where, but from the way he feels he figures it was a lot, nowhere good. He eases himself into a sitting position. The world shakes like it's laughing at him, but once he's up it settles back down. The sounds come from the kitchen in bursts. It's Harrison. That much is logical. And if that's Harrison, then this strange place must be his father's house. Harrison's house now. Because Harrison's father died. There was a memorial service to prove it.

The memories come quickly after that. He rubs his face in his hands, takes what he hopes are cleansing breaths, and works himself up to a standing position. Slowly, as slowly as he's able, he walks to the kitchen.

By the time he reaches the linoleum he's able to move a little faster than his dead grandmother. He checks his clothes before he enters, an old instinct, but there's nothing to do for it by try to press some of the wrinkles out with his hand and ignore the smell his shirt has picked up.

Harrison's at the table, fork hovering over a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon and buttered wheat toast. He looks up and offers Andrew a faint smile.

"You're up," he says.

(What are you doing?)

"Eating breakfast. Do you want me to make you a plate?"

The thought of that golden slop inching down his throat nearly gags him. He rests his hands on his stomach

(Please. Don't joke.)

waiting for the nausea to pass.

“Sorry.”

(What's with you?)

“I've been thinking. All night. Come here.” He pats the empty chair next to him. “We need to talk.”

He's too focused on getting there to think about why he should. By the time he's sitting, it's too late.

(What is it?)

“The graveside service is today. I know we planned on going back after, but I'm not. I'm staying.”

(How long?)

It's a stupid question. He's angry at Harrison for making him ask it. For putting him in this chair in this house in this corner of the state of Mississippi. His hair fell flat sometime in the night. Without its normal gel sustenance it hangs over his eyes. He brushes at with his fingers. Harrison moves to do it for him, and Andrew lets him and grows a little angrier.

(You're just going to stay here?)

“I don't know how long,” Harrison says. He goes back to eating his breakfast, careful forkfulls of egg with the occasional nibble of bacon or toast. “A long time,” he continues, “long enough that I'm quitting my job. Moving out of the apartment. Moving out of San Francisco. I

think...I think I might buy a condo or something Jackson. Or maybe down in Biloxi. Come up here as I'm needed. Stay here, when I want. Or maybe Carl can move in here, and I can take his house."

(Have you lost your mind?)

"No, I think they'd be more comfortable in a bigger home. And if they had another kid, you know-"

(You won't be happy here.)

"I think I can be. Look, Andrew, I know this is sudden."

(You might have money. You might be rich. But
you're still a fag. And they'll never forget that.)

"Neither will you."

He says it softly; Andrew hisses, prelude to a torrent, but nothing follows. His mouth has gone dry. Harrison puts his fork down. For a while, the only sound is of them breathing.

"You couldn't wait."

(What do you mean?)

"You know what I mean. You couldn't wait. You couldn't wait for me to sell everything off, to a buy a little single-family in Presidio, take you to every five-star in the fucking Bay Area."

(Fuck you.)

"Fuck you. That's what you want. You don't love me, Andrew."

He doesn't shout it. He's angry, but he doesn't shout it because it's too close to being a question. He's asking. There were two people in a room in San Francisco with canvas sheets for curtains through which the city light shone like an abstract. There were two people, but they left.

(No. I don't love you. But we had a lot of fun together, didn't we? It was nice, wasn't it?)

"And that's it?"

Andrew takes the piece of toast Harrison hasn't bitten into yet. Chews a bit of crust off. It doesn't make him sick. Just makes him feel tired. He's so tired.

(No.)

"Do you want to stay for the graveside service?"

(No. I want to go home.)

Harrison nods. "You can take Daddy's truck. Park in one of the overnight garages. I've checked flights, earlier this morning. The plane takes off at one. It's just a little up in the price from the flight we...were going to take." He pauses. "But I'll cover that. I got it."

Andrew can say

(OK.)

no. He can say he'll pay for it. He can say he has his pride. He can call Harrison an asshole for mentioning it, for the pretentious way he just throws it in the conversation. Or he could say no, I'm staying, I promised I'd be here for you. I'm good on my word. I'm good on that much.

"OK. Do you want me to fix you some breakfast?"

(Yeah. OK.)

"OK."

He makes another plate of scrambled eggs and bacon and toast. After breakfast is finished he washes Andrew's clothes while Andrew washes himself in the shower. He packs Andrew's suitcase with care. Andrew takes a long time in the bathroom, almost as long as the clothes in the laundry room, but when he comes out with a towel wrapped around his waist he's clean and groomed and beautiful.

They fuck one last time next to a packed suitcase. They don't make much noise. There are only slight gasps of exertion, the squeak of the mattress, and it's finished. They clean themselves and dress. It's only ten, but Andrews leaves. The pickup truck makes a long line of dust as it blows down the driveway. Harrison watches it go. The fields around him do nothing but grow.

They grow as Andrew leaves Bolivar County, long after he's in the sky, after he steps back into a city by the sea. They grow as Harrison dresses, as he stands next to an open pit while a black urn is lowered inside. They grow as he returns home after the service.

They grow up. They grow apart. They grow until it is time to be cut down so they might grow again. They grow in the dreams of the men who love them. And the men who hate them. They grow to die so seeds might follow.

So it goes.

1.

When Harrison left, he left behind seeing the morning through the glass window of an older age. He left behind the taste of dust in every breath, the levee on the horizon and the tilled earth underfoot. He left behind the way the seclusion found you under the live oak limbs. When

Harrison left, he left behind his home.

But the phone call followed him. It must've been on his trail for years, shivering through telephone wires with all the etiquette of a spring flood, knocking aside innocent conversations as it pursued him, highway to highway, state to state, from Bolivar County, Mississippi to the rolled pavements of San Francisco where it finally caught up with him at three in the morning on the eighteenth of an August.

It's quiet inside the bedroom before the phone call. Peaceful. The air swells and contracts, pushed in and out by the breaths of the two shadows in bed. The phone call ruins this, tramples their sleep, and leaves their dreams lying dead in forgotten memories.

Two shadows sit up, tossing an off-white comforter away, disentangling themselves from two hundred thread count sheets, their minds still drunk from dreaming as they reel about, trying to find the source of the sound, its screen lit up blue.

One shadow, a little larger than the other, lifts an arm. The arm finds a lamp, the lamp leads it to the switch, and the switch calls out a light that makes the shadows men. One, his hand still outstretched, is a man with a thick torso and curly black hair on his arms, chest, and face in tangled, primitive clumps, a man with a loose and somewhat distended belly bunched into stacks of fat by his posture. The other man covers his delicate features with a pillow. He is well-toned and tight-chested, with a trench of auburn hair running down his sternum and a matching mop on his head, black in the dark and reddish gold in the light. Both men, naked, stare at the phone.

Both men wonder who would be calling them, wonder

(Answer it.)

what news comes at three in the morning.

The larger man with the black hair on his body and the bald spot on his head shifts out of bed, exposing himself to the air, the cruel world outside the sheets. His hair is thicker and even more tangled at his bottom. He walks to the phone, a cellular covered in a discarded pile of clothes. His soles slap on a hardwood floor. The other man watches,

(Hello?)

his straight nose and freckled cheeks drawn, squinting at the backside of his lover.

(Yeah, it's me.)

A long quiet. The shoulders clench. The butt clenches.

(Harrison?)

Harrison, he of the hairy bottom and balding head, holds up his left hand and shows his fingers, naked as the rest of him. He speaks into the phone

(I understand. I understand.)

but only repeats himself. He understands. He understands. Again and again he understands. His voice stays calm,

(I'll be there as soon as I can.)

his promises vague. He speaks as a politician would while his penis swings like a flaccid pendulum as he shifts from one foot to the other, balancing the thoughts in his head. He ends the conversation in quiet murmurs and lets the phone drop back down on the discarded clothing, finished with it. The man with auburn hair scratches his chest,

(What happened?)

(My dad died.)

staring at his lover's back, looking for the writing on the flesh.

(Oh, John.)

He calls out the first half of his lover's name. Harrison turns his head, scratches the grit growing into a beard, watches Andrew watching him, his name

(Andrew, Andrew, Andrew)

stepping over his brain, dragging memories behind it. Andrew making dinner in his underwear, Andrew dancing in strobe light, Andrew lifting his head of out his arms, belly on a towel, towel on the sand, sand on the edge of the earth, ocean calling just beyond. Andrew under him. Andrew above him, eyes too dark to be any color.

(It was a heart attack.)

(I'm so sorry.)

There's more stepping on his brain, stepping away from Andrew and the bed and the one-bedroom apartment above the twenty-four hour deli on a hill-shaped street in San Francisco. Now it steps

(Was it...did he have problems? I mean.)

toward a tall men with stopped shoulders and a round belly and a white cotton shirt, a man with suspenders

(It was a heart attack.)

and an untrimmed beard, eyes rheumy blue, a man he called Daddy then Dad then him. Dead now.

(I mean, did he have troubles?)

(I don't know.)

(What are you going to do?)

He has trouble imagining the man dead, picturing the jaw not working on its pinch of chewing tobacco, the eyes not fondling the fields, the thumbs not tucked under the suspender. He tries

(I don't know.)

to cross the hands, to put them on the man's chest, but they won't go. He's stubborn even as a figment of his son's imagination.

(I guess I'm going back.)

(To Mississippi?)

Andrew tries not to let his surprise show when he hears the decision. To him, Mississippi is a swear word. Mississippi is a place people come from, not go to, and the idea that Harrison would return, would board an airline flight to the one city Mississippi has to fly to, borders on the realm of the ridiculous, belongs under the pen of a fantasy novelist, and he doesn't enjoy such literature.

(I have to. I have to go to his funeral.)

(OK.)

They don't look at one another. Harrison's eyes stay on the floor, pupils contracted to observe the stars on the opposite end of the globe, observing his father's death skip across the surface of his memories. Andrew looks at Harrison's ass, thinks about what's on the other side, what he should do, if he

(I need to pack.)

(Yeah. Here, let me help. Let me.)

should fall on his knees and make a Madonna prayer.

(I can pack for you, John. Let me do that. You need to call the airport. John. You need to get a flight out.)

(I've never called the airport. I've only ever gotten tickets online. How do you do it? Who do you call? Can you)

His head turns back to Andrew, pulled by Andrew's words, the promise of a promise. Andrew is surprised to suddenly see Harrison's penis, bouncing off the momentum of the turn. He should

(Can you look it up for me? The number to call.)

comfort him.

(Come here.)

He does. And then he does again. After, as Andrew cleans up in the bathroom, Harrison skims his fingers across the surface of an electric tablet, searching for a number, instructions, guidance dressed as pixels. After he cleans himself, Andrew looks at himself in the bathroom mirror, flexes his shoulders idly, tracks the tremors his muscles make.

(Hello? My Name is John Harrison, I've had a death in the family, I need...yes. Thank you.)

Andrew stops looking at himself in the mirror but stays in front of it. He hefts the year he's spent with Harrison on one lobe, the distance to Mississippi on the other, and the bigotry he'd find there, and the responsibility of being unburdened with grief. That lobe is heavy. Three months living together seems light.

(Jackson, Mississippi. Earliest available, yeah. Whatever you have.)

The fulcrum is the question,

(What does he want from me?)

it's the problem of where their we stops, where us ends. How much of a life do they share?

(Thank you. Yes, that's fine. I'll be there soon. Thank you, Melissa.)

Harrison always thanks them with their names. Secretaries, waitresses and waiters, airline attendants. It's the polite thing. Harrison always does the polite thing. He hangs up his phone and shifts to the edge of the bed to look at Andrew looking at but not seeing his reflection in the mirror,

(Andrew?)

(Yeah? Sorry.)

wondering what the polite thing to do is.

(I better pack.)

(Let me help.)

He helps by getting Harrison's backpack from the top shelf of the closet,

(We should get dressed.)

(Why?)

picking out his suit from the closet, zipping it into a canvas bag

(Just feels like we should.)

while at the dresser on the other side of the bed, Harrison picks out his socks and underwear and clothes to travel in and clothes to go to a bar in and clothes to sleep in

(Fine. Throw me my sweatpants.)

even though he sleeps naked.

(Do you want me to come with you?)

His breath is heavy with the question he must ask,

(Yes. God. Thank you, Andrew. Yes.)

and Harrison's is light with the relief of the answer. Andrew blinks, accept the sweat pants tossed over by Harrison. He's stalled, one leg in, the other out, his penis still out, half covered in pubic bush. Out

(OK. It's just.)

the window, through curtains made of canvas sheets, morning traffic mumbles, roads groan with deliveries and late-night owls, and the lights of the city make an orange and white and yellow abstract. Outside, buildings, some taller, some shorter, keep their balance on an earth floating on a sea of mercury and tin.

(I'll pay. Don't worry. Don't worry about any of it. I just need, I just need someone with me. You don't have to meet them. You can, you can do anything you want. But I need you. Andrew.)

(John, don't. It's. Come here.)

Downstairs in the deli there is movement, echoing from stud to stud, a conversation, loud and drunk on one end. Mr. Pashtu has company. Andrew walks around the bed and embraces Harrison. They sink to the floor together. Harrison makes sounds, drowns out the muffled drunk and muffled traffic and muffled lights of a muffled world. He presses his head into Andrew's neck, sobbing. They wrap their arms around one another, like they're making love.

(Oh, John.)

Harrison makes noises, noises that might be,
(The last thing my father told me was to leave. Just leave. We'd had an argument about me coming back for the summer. It was my last year of college. I wanted to go to Europe. All three

months. I had a job lined up after. Working for a good firm in Biloxi. I had everything lined up to go. I had the money. There was no reason not to. But he knew what he would happen if I went. He knew what I would say when I came back. So he said no. He said no but he was asking me to stay. I yelled at him. He didn't yell back, didn't cry, didn't do anything but tell me to leave. Just leave. We talked after that, but never really said much of anything. We never spoke to one another again. Just talked. We just talked.)

but could be anything.

2.

The airport was big and long and painted white at the entrance and grey everywhere else and was filled with people moving in lines, some slow, some fast, that were all one great line from the door to check-in to security to gate to airlines and the airplanes made their lines over the country. There was safe music playing between announcements. There were children screaming and children sleeping and adults wanting to scream and adults wanting to sleep. There were displays of public art, murals of multiethnic children and twisted metal sculptures. People coming, people leaving. The airport Andrew and Harrison left was in San Francisco, the one they came to was in Mississippi, and that was the biggest difference between them.

But outside the airport, in the shaded subterranean driveway, after they'd collected their bag from the carousel and wandered through the sliding doors, outside the air is different. It's heavier. It's wetter. It feels like the air is sweating, like the wind runs a fever. It feels like they're an inch from the earth.

Andrew hates it immediately. He carried on a few hopes that it would be an adventure, an experience, an eye-opener. He thought, maybe, he would return to San Francisco the prophet of the New Austin. But his hopes sweat out his skin on the first step from the airport. He thinks of

(Do you see him?)

his city, his San Francisco, and how quickly the Mississippi air would burn its California fog.

(I don't know what he drives anymore. Let's just stand over here at the curb.)

They gather at the curb in bunches, never any less than two arm lengths apart, families and couples and single men and women with brisk expressions on their faces. Most everyone holds a cell phone in hand, or at their ear, or prostrated before their mouths, screens lit with frustrated conversations. Only a few watch the one-way lane without a conversation to distract them, peering through the oncoming windshields, passing over makes and models whose shapes and colors don't stick to a memory.

(Did he know the time?)

(Yeah.)

(Well, maybe.)

(He'll be here. Don't worry.)

(I'm not. I'm just not.)

A truck, a hulking thing with a four-door cab and disgruntled pipes, colored a dark olive green, coasts next to the curb like the thousands before it and the thousands after it.

(Used to the heat.)

It's Carl; Harrison can see him through the windshield. He can see the fat cheeks

bouncing, the busted nose, the sandy straw hair hanging thin over the eyebrows. He sees his eyes, though they're still too far away to pick out their amber brown color. But he can see the eyes shifting. He can see his cousin's plump face relax when he catches sight of Harrison, and see it furrow again when he catches sight of Andrew.

(There he is.)

(Where?)

By the time the truck pulls up alongside them and Harrison has opened the back door to throw their luggage in and long before the passenger door opens, Carl's furrows are gone. His face is open, friendly. Smiling and welcoming and something short of the expression on someone shouting surprise at a surprise birthday party. Harrison climbs into the passenger seat, Andrew into back. It smells like leather and mud. They leap into

(Jesus Christ looked who showed up.)

(If Aunt Lynn could hear you.)

(Thank God she's home, then. How's it been, man?)

(Same old. Keeping my nose buried in people's business.)

(Ah, shit.)

(You, man?)

(Keeping my feet dirty.)

a frenzied bout of conversation. Asking how each other is, how Carl's family is doing, how the flight was. How, how, how. Always asking to describe, avoiding the why, why, why.

They go northwest, on interstate and state highways. They carry conversation with them, first banal then nostalgic. They swap details of one another's lives, how they got that way,

if Aunt Virginia will show up in time for the funeral. They talk

(The funeral is Friday, quickest we could pull it together.)

schedules, they talk times, they talk

(Your dad wanted to be cremated.)

things to do. Andrew, left in the backseat, watches the world outside the window. He

(No graveside service, either. Just a memorial.)

watches the hill slopes lose their angle, watches the fields

(Bethlehem Funeral Home.)

separate the pine trees. They talk; Andrew watches the fields

(Mr. Lewis wants to see you as soon as you can.)

become.

A few are clear, freshly tilled, clods of loam in the shape of rows. Some host lines of broken stalks, yellow fading to grey. Most have corn with crowns higher than men, their leaves and stalks withered, ripe to be harvested. And many are being harvested. But beyond that, there are the cotton fields.

(What does he need to talk to me about?)

(The will, I guess. The land.)

(Shit. He didn't leave that to you and Uncle Keith?)

()

They are green now. In a few weeks, white will bloom within them. They are deceptively small; Andrew thinks they resemble his mother's chrysanthemums. He doesn't realize that they, too, can stretch above a man's a height. A short man, true, but they can. He

doesn't know what it is to walk between them and feel the bolls slapping your knees, your hips, your chest. He's never plucked the boll from the stem and thrown it as his friends, the other poor fools with hoes over their shoulders. He doesn't understand a boll fight or the laughter pierced by the pain of a lucky strike. Harrison does. But Harrison talks about time and memories and things to do. Harrison keeps his eyes away from the fields.

But he smells them. They all smell them, even flying down a highway at seventy miles an hour. It's everywhere. The smell of things growing. A smell a little like dust becoming mud. A wet and dark and fragile odor. Everything is growing. Everything is pushing itself up through the earth. Everything is becoming.

(Shit. Carl. He gave it all to me, didn't he?)

(I dunno. We think so. I dunno.)

(Jesus Christ. Why would he do that?)

(You're his son. You. You're his son.)

(But none of it to you? None of it to Uncle Keith? He didn't split it at all?)

(Not that we know of. Lewis is waiting on you to tell us what's what.)

(Jesus Christ.)

Andrew has let himself be lulled by the streaks of earth outside. But his ears prick, and he turns his head toward

(I'll split it up, Carl, I swear.)

(Hey. It's yours.)

(Jesus, Carl, what am I going to do with it?)

(Make some money, cuz.)

a new conversation.

(Jesus.)

(Even if you did split it up three ways.)

(Carl.)

(Even if you did, John, that's still a pretty piece for you.)

(Why would he do this?)

(If you sell it or if you lease it, it's a pretty piece. Either way.)

(Yeah. I guess.)

(Maybe you just lease the whole thing to us, maybe get the family all in business together. You get a pretty piece, either way.)

This new conversation seems a little odd on one side, the side coming out of Carl's mouth.

Andrew notices this, notices the way Carl won't look at his cousin, all his attention on a road without any traffic. Harrison notices it, too, but chooses not to say anything. It's not the polite thing to do. Family and business can be put together but carefully. Carefully. His father taught him this before he left. No one taught Andrew.

Andrew leans forward to join the conversation, his mouth at Harrison's ear. To Carl, it looks like something gay men would do. Everything they do looks like something gay men would do. But it isn't. This isn't. It's

(Harrison. That's amazing.)

just Andrew talking.

(You can pay your rent for years. Hell, you can buy a better place.)

(Andrew.)

(We could travel. Go to Europe.)

(Andrew.)

Harrison doesn't know why Andrew should stop talking. Probably because there's no reason he shouldn't.

(I'm just saying.)

No reason he shouldn't say what's flashing through Harrison's head.

(John, how much do you think.)

(Leave it alone, Andrew.)

Harrison ends it in a soft voice, and Andrew settles back in the seat, leather hissing, like he would be if they were alone in the car. Carl glances in the rearview mirror, sees Andrew's narrow face pinched into a line, hazel eyes breaking like storms. He feels a flash

(Carl. Is Kate Brown still around?)

of pleasure and is embarrassed to feel it.

(Sure.)

Conversation returns to old friends and places. Andrew can't join. He's not a Harrison, a land baron fucking Harrison. He's lived in San Francisco too long; he's forgotten what it feels to be excluded, that feeling of running your stomach into a steady arm, a gut check, a clothesline. He's forgotten what it's like to be nobody important. His nostrils flare, his face pales. No one notices. Their conversation leaves him behind.

They trade the state road for a county one. Conversation descends back down their throats. Harrison looks out his window and now notices the fields and things growing in him, because these are his fields. If Carl is to be believed. These are his fields growing. Harrison has

never owned anything bigger than a flat screen television. He's never had anything so big to belong to him as the land he sees.

(Carl, I'll get this straight.)

Andrew laughs and puts enough nasty in it to swamp Harrison's cheeks with crimson. But Carl only nods.

(We're here.)

The county road ends at the levee. It's in sight, a brown-green smudge on the horizon. No one in the truck observes it. They're focused instead on the house, off to the south of the road, a white plantation on a sea of bright green cotton fields. Its driveway seems longer than the levee line. Andrew imagines being raised there, surround by fields of growing things. He can't. The smell of smog and bus exhaust has saturated his imagination.

He watches the plantation roll towards them, watches the wide verandah come center and the black-tile roof glitter in the summer light. He watches the neat gables fall back as they pass the driveway, as they pass the plantation and continued down to a row of houses a little less than a mile away. Two houses on small postage stamps of green, separated by an aluminum hanger painted red, sharing their backyards with tractor sheds and shining grey gas tanks.

They pull into the driveway of the house closest to the plantation. There is overturned tricycle just off the concrete, and a variety of outdoor toys in garish plastic colors, waffle bats in yellow and a beaten looking fort in grey and green. Carl parks them under a basketball goal, his garage occupied by a gargantuan SUV and a collection of bikes and boxes. There's another car in the driveway he must park next to, a modest compact car in a color somewhere between blue and grey.

(I guess Mr. Lewis heard you were going to be here.)

(I guess.)

(If you want him to go.)

They open their doors and make the drop to the driveway below. The truck shudders as it's freed of their collective weight. Andrew and Harrison leave their bags and follow Carl inside his home.

(No, it's fine. It's fine.)

The click of claws greets them as Carl opens the door. The dogs follow the sound, both Rottweiler and lab mixes of the same litter, identical in coat and demeanor, equally neutered.

(Millie. T-Bone.)

Harrison offers his open palms to either snout, allows them to collide against him, stands firm. Andrew weakly pushes away, falls back, caught between the dogs and a panel of wall fitted with key hooks. Carl grabs

(Millie! T-Bone!)

their collars and jerks them back, pushing the door open with his hip and releasing them outside.

(T-Bone?)

(Tom named him when he was seven. Lindsey, obviously, Millie's hers.)

(Carl?)

A woman's voice calls to them from the living room as softly and pervasively as the perfume of scented candles. They follow it one archway over into a living room with leather furniture on a hardwood floor, a flat screen television keeping throne in a cherry wood cabinet. Toys lay scattered here, too, but in neat clusters, swept together by opportune shoves of the foot.

(John!)

The woman to whom the voice belongs is short and plump. Her cheeks make up most of her face; they ripple at the slightest movement of her body, making waves of her expressions. She hurries forward and folds her arms around Harrison's waist; when he looks down, he can see the white of her scalp, her black hair parted across the center, hanging over her ears in tangled combs. He pushes her away, gently, as soon as he can.

(It's so great to see you, John!)

(Hey, Molly. Molly. This is Andrew.)

Andrew extends his hand. Molly smiles before she takes it. This smile makes her cheeks tremble like ice rafts on a northern river.

(Andrews, this is Carl's wife, Molly Harrison.)

(Nice to meet you. Molly.)

They nod to one another, small inclines of the chin, brief exposures of the back of their necks. Molly's cheeks come close to still, but when she turns her head towards Harrison they get back to going nowhere.

(Come in. Come in. Have a seat. The kids are over at Lynn's. Mr. Keith and Mr. Lewis are in the truck off looking at something, I can't remember what. Sit down.)

She urges them to sit on the leather furniture. She frowns only briefly when Andrew and Harrison sit together on the couch. She sits on one of the two recliners; Carl takes the other. The recliners make one end of the domestic rectangle; the TV cabinet the other, with the couch and fireplace finishing the sides. It's all so comfortable, and it makes Andrew's skin itch as if

(How was the flight?)

he's having an allergic reaction.

(Fine. No troubles.)

(Good. Good)

()

(God it's been so long since I've seen you.)

(I know)

(The last time)

(Right.)

(Was Tom's baptism.)

(Right.)

(God, has it been that long?)

(Pretty long.)

(And are you still doing the website thing?)

(Yeah.)

(Oh. Honey. Where are my manners? I'm so sorry to hear about your father. Of course.)

(Oh. Thanks.)

(How are you feeling?)

(Fine, I guess. I guess it hasn't hit me yet.)

It sounds like a polite conversation. It feels like a hot lamp an inch from his eye.

Harrisons squints at Molly, at

(Oh, honey. You just let me know. You promise? Anything I can do to help.)

something too bright coming out of her mouth.

(I will.)

(Where are we staying?)

Andrew pushes the question with more effort than necessary, but he wants to make sure it crosses the space between him and Molly. It's Carl who answers, though, maybe because he sees something in his wife's cheeks, terrible portents of things to come, or maybe just because he knows

(I didn't know Harrison was bringing anybody, but there's plenty of room over at the plantation.)
the answer, and he's the kind of man to answer a question he knows.

(You'll be the only ones there, though.)

(Gotcha.)

(We're just waiting here for a bit, because Mr. Lewis wanted to see John so bad.)

(Is it really that big of an emergency?)

(Couldn't tell you, cuz. I don't hear much of what Mr. Lewis has to say, you know? These kinds of things were usually meant for Uncle Cecil's or Daddy's ears.)

(Yeah.)

(He probably just wants to offer his condolences. He was such a good friend of your daddy's.)

(Nah. There's something else going on, Moll. I know that much.)

(I was just saying. Maybe it's the, you know, legal stuff on top of just feeling bad.)

Andrew keeps his ear on their conversation, on the pet theories Carl and Molly Harrison pass back and forth like gossip tokens. His shoulder touches Harrison's; he can feel the tension in them, string instruments being tuned. He lets his eyes do as they will, lets his gaze fondle the

ugly ceramic vase and the Audubon reprint that clashes on top of the mantle. His judgment
(I don't know. He's gotten all riled up about something, though.)

satisfies itself like a one-night stand.

(I swear I've caught him sweating over something a couple of times.)

Molly watches Andrew judge her home, sees his and Harrison's shoulders touch, their
thighs only an inch apart, witnesses the closeness of them, and it's like having a piece of ash
stuck in the back of her throat, like

(Well. He'll be around soon enough.)

a bad allergy.

(Anyone hungry? I can make some ranch dip to tide us over 'til supper.)

She offers food because it's the only thing she has to offer them. Conversation, gossip,
even kindness she doesn't have to give, because even if Harrison is family, he's still from
California. So she keeps her hands in her lap with

(I'm fine.)

(Me too.)

a smile on her face and

(I'll have some if you're going to make it.)

a tension winding up in the back of her neck.

(Well I don't want to make any if it's just you eatin' it.)

They would have stared at one another, tossing polite conversation back and forth, but
small mercies do exist. The kitchen door opens and Keith Harrison walks in with Gerald Lewis
close behind.

They step into the living room shoulder to shoulder. They are cousins, with the same square jaws at the end of the same square faces. But that and blood are all they share. Keith Harrison's skin is dyed the color of chew spit and thick, bunched together brow ridges and gristled black hair that collects itself around a bald spot on his head. His skin hangs on a body thinner than it's used to being. He is an old baseball glove in the shape of a man.

Gerald Lewis still has his hair; it sweeps back in a wave of white and grey over his scalp and down to the base of his neck, kept still by a gel that glitters under the house lights. His skin is patched but his figure trim and well-practiced to looking it. A shadow of a moustache creases up as he smiles.

(John!)

(John.)

(Hey, Uncle Keith. Hey, Mr. Lewis.)

They all stand. Harrison squeezes his way past the furniture to shake their hands. Andrews stays behind to watch him do it.

(How've you been, son?)

The old questions get old answers and leads to new introductions.

(This is Andrew.)

(Andrew. Nice to meet you.)

()

(John. We need to talk.)

(Carl said. I mean, now or.)

Lewis waves away Harrison's concerns with two flicks of his wrist. He affects an air of

ease, but there's worry in his eyes to make up for it, worry mixed with a heavier emotion neither Andrew nor Molly can place. They watch with pinprick pupils, their focus complete on the lawyer. So they don't see the flicker in Keith Harrison's eyes, the quick turn of passion that presses the folds of his neck flat.

(Tomorrow. Tomorrow is fine. Come by my office. You remember how to get there?)

(Sure. But I don't have a car.)

(Well, you can use your father's truck. If you don't mind.)

(Sure.)

Harrison nods, accepts the appointment and advice, but when his father is mentioned his head gets caught on the downswing.

(Sure. But who can I. I mean, should I. His body. Where.)

(In line to the oven by now. He didn't want us to wait around or anything. Sorry.)

(No. That's. If that's what he wanted.)

(It is.)

(Your daddy, you know how your daddy was.)

(Right.)

(So come to my office tomorrow. Soon as you can. We have things to talk about.)

(Right.)

The room is hot. Harrison wonders why he didn't notice it before. The heat crawls over his back like a line of ants, working their way inside his clothes, working on his skin, biting to get inside of him. He's trying to remember what his father looked like and can't. He tries to remember what his father sounded like and can't. All he can do is feel hot. All he can do is

sweat.

(Well. Carl. I think I'm ready to head back to Daddy's house. Me and Andrew are tired.)

He asks to leave even if there isn't a question. It's in the tilt of the words, the seesaw of the sentence. He looks at Andrew and asks with his eyes

(Aren't you tired? Don't you want to leave?)

and Andrew answers

(Yes.)

with a nod of his head and stands up. So does Carl. So does Molly, but she does it slowly and with a frown for company.

(Don't you want to stay? Have supper? I hate for you to be all by yourself in that big old house.)

Andrew says nothing, but he looks at Molly to make up for it.

(Well, of course. I know that. I just mean.)

(It's fine, Molly, but really, we're fine. I mean, we're tired. I just want to go rest for a little while.)

Harrison tries to keep the question from his voice as he soothes Molly over, but the heat is under his skin now. He feels nauseous. He's afraid he'll vomit, right there on Molly's living room rug, and he's afraid she would see the glimmer of pleasure in Andrew's eyes after he's done it.

Lewis speaks up

(I'll take you. I'm going that way, anyway.)

offers them a ride back, keeps his brows closed to his eyes. He seems to be doing anything but looking Keith, ignoring the brief expression of warning. He waves them

(C'mon.)

to follow and turns his back on any protests Molly might make.

Harrison can't escape the heat. Not outside, even with the sun balanced on the horizon. Not in Lewis's car, where words and half-warnings keep peppering his ears. Not down the driveway or through the fields. Not even inside the old house. They've kept the A/C on high, to save power, and what little is pumped out slips through invisible cracks in the doors and windows and walls of the refurbished plantation.

Lewis offers to go inside with them, but Harrison shakes him off. He does, though, take Lewis's key, his own absent for seven-odd years. He offers goodbyes and leaves Lewis watching their back through his windshield.

There's no tour, no walkthrough, no looky-loo. Andrew follows Harrison through a tidy but dusty kitchen, through a room that could be a library or study, back down a hallway to a room that must have belonged to Harrison, his old bedroom, because no other room looks as lonely.

They drop their luggage on the floor. They drop themselves on the bed. They use no words, only touch, exploring the familiar terrain of each other's bodies. In minutes mouths open and close as breaths pass between them. In ten minutes, they are naked; in thirty, they are done. The sun puts the horizon over its head and slips under the earth. The cotton rows outside take the color black.

Andrew and Harrison hold one another and between them are thoughts of fields and land and the last words of Uncle Keith spoke to Mr. Lewis as he came through Molly's door.

(through the nose)

3.

The law office of Lewis and Burns is a refurbished shotgun house on the same street as the county courthouse. Inside freshly polished hardwood floors and oak bookcases glisten. Three middle-aged women carry books and folders and phone messages between the offices of Gerald Lewis and George Burns, Jr. The men keep at their desks; sometimes they yell at one another from across the hall. To the women they say things they think are funny, and the women smile at the men who sign their paychecks.

When Andrew and Harrison walk into the front parlor, the secretary, Ms. Epps, a short, broad black woman with manufactured hair greets them warmly, even standing so she can hug Harrison.

(It's been too long!)

She waves Harrison back through, or starts to, but her eye catches Andrew's. She hesitates, elbow cocked and hand near her chin.

(You go on through, honey.)

She releases the hand, but only after a small frown focuses on Andrew. Harrison takes Andrew by the elbow and

(Can you wait for me out here?)

leads him to the other end of the parlor, to a green leather couch and matching chairs.

(Just for a minute. I promise.)

(Sure. Don't worry about me, babe.)

Andrew says the pet name loudly enough for Ms. Epps to hear without straining herself too hard. He's rewarded by a blush from Harrison and a twitch of the ears from Ms. Epps. He reclines at the center of the couch with a self-satisfied smile.

(I'll be just a minute.)

Harrison leaves him behind through frost glass doors. He walks through and down the hallway, pegging a right into Lewis's office and closing the door behind him.

Lewis welcomes him much as Ms. Epps did, replacing the hug with a handshake. Once it's finished he gestures excitedly to a seat across his desk and waits for Harrison to sit until he does the same.

(Thank you for coming so quickly.)

(I'm. You're welcome.)

(How are you doing? Really?)

(Fine. I'm doing fine.)

(This must be hard for you.)

(Not as hard, not as hard as I would have thought. I mean)

(Of course. Your father was sick for so long.)

(I didn't. I suppose.)

It's the old how-are-you, but this time Lewis hurries through it, impatient to get to the next part, his fingers tapping staccato on a short stack of papers in front of him.

(I know. It's hard. With the service tomorrow, it's hard to think about anything else. I know. But the thing is, things are moving quickly.)

(What things?)

(Well, let's do this properly. I'm just going to tell you, and you can take a copy of the will to read over, but I'm just going to tell you, your father left you everything.)

(Everything?)

He's being a told that a small kingdom is his. He's being told that all his father worked for, his father's pride, is being given to him in no less than what looks like twenty pages.

(Everything. One of the easiest inheritances I've ever drawn up. Everything straight to you. No splits. No escrow. No riders. No conditions. All of it to you. As of now.)

(Why?)

He can't take it. It's too much. It's even crushing his voice into whispers Lewis has to lean over his desk to hear.

(Why? You're his only son.)

So he shakes his head instead, pushes back against the chair. His face screws up and flushes. Lewis stands and moves around the desk to a small bar, hidden in the corner, and pours Harrison out a shot of bourbon.

(Here.)

Harrison takes it with a hard back toss of his head. His chest heaves a little less. It's a different kind of heat in him, one that washes instead of prickles and gives him back control of himself.

(Thanks.)

(Don't think anything of it. It's a lot to take, I know.)

(A lot to take. A lot. No one else? Not Uncle Keith?)

(No.)

(Does he know?)

(He suspects. I didn't tell him but- and I'm not proud of it- but I imagine he guessed it off my face. My attitude. I'm sorry. It's hard, when you know someone, lived with them.)

(No. I understand. Listen.)

His eyes burn. Not from the bourbon. Lewis has trouble keeping eye contact as he sits back down.

(Listen. Let's give Uncle Keith, something)

(Well, that's up to you, but.)

(Half.)

Lewis holds up his hands as if he's shielding himself from blows. He shakes his head.

(You need to listen. There's more.)

(There's more?)

(Your father drew up this will, let's say, two years back. When he first found out how bad his heart was.)

(OK.)

(But things have changed, John. They found something under the fields. A salt dome. Your daddy and Uncle Keith hired a company to do a little digging. See what was what. It's a salt dome, John, and it's filled with natural gas.)

(Jesus, Lewis.)

(John, this company, this drilling company, they want you to lease the land out to them. They're worried that we'll go telling other people about it. They'll pay)

(Through the nose.)

(That's right.)

Harrison cups his hands, scoops up air to his face and washes himself with it. Lewis watches, his fingers never leaving the papers on his desk.

(There's a lot in there, John. They think so, anyway.)

He keeps licking his lips. His nostrils flare as if he's caught the scent of something.

(They're offering eight hundred thousand to option.)

Harrison laughs, a barking sound that closes up his throat as soon as it escapes. He stands up, quickly enough that Lewis jumps in surprise. He asks permission

(I think I could use another drink.)

and after the nod from Lewis he walks back to the bar in the corner and refills his glass with bourbon.

(Jesus, Lewis.)

(I've done some figuring. The option, the lease, the land value, putting it all together.

Conservatively, conservatively mind, it's probably around one and a half million you've got on your hands. All tied up, but still. Tied up in a pretty neat bundle.)

(Why?)

(You keep asking that, and I keep saying, because you're his son.)

Harrison settles back down in the chair. The bourbon helps him do it.

(The last time I was here we fought.)

(That tends to happen between sons and fathers. Specially when they care about each other.)

(You know what we fought about.)

Lewis sits back in his chair and waves away Harrison's comment.

(I can imagine.)

(We fought about me moving to California. Daddy wasn't much a fan of California.)

(I can imagine.)

(Listen, Lewis, we have to give Uncle Keith something.)

(That's between you and him now.)

(Why didn't Daddy give him something?)

(I don't know.)

Lewis tells him he doesn't know why Uncle Keith was excluded. Hasn't a clue, the foggiest, a single thought as to why it might be. It's a lie he's kept in him for the past two years, ever since Cecil called him to change the will. But he keeps the lie down. There's no reason for Harrison to know. He already has a million and a half troubles.

(I don't know.)

(I have to give him something.)

(You can. You could just lease it to him. Have him work it. Him and Carl.)

(Carl said something like that. But he didn't know. We didn't know I'd get Jesus.)

(Carl's a good guy. You should, maybe, maybe you and him can come up with something. You know, Keith's getting older himself. Carl's got that family. You know, maybe you should.)

(Yeah. Maybe.)

(How are you feeling?)

Harrison finishes his glass in a long sip and doesn't get up for another. Instead he nods, just nods. Outside the door the hallway floorboards creak as one of the paralegals passes. There's

the buzz of conversation coming through the walls, the quiet flicks of paper behind it, behind everything, paper being pushed from desk to desk, never tiring, always moving, like

(Better.)

a flock of lost geese.

(Can I give you some advice?)

When he offers advice Harrison laughs, an image coming to his mind of a starving man being offered a thick, sizzling steak.

(Please.)

(I would quit my job. If I were you. I'm sure it's a nice job.)

(Quit?)

(But it's not like you need the money anymore. No matter what you do.)

(Jesus.)

(At least burn through your vacation days. Your sick days. At least do that. Don't go home after the funeral. That's all I'm saying.)

(I'll think about it.)

Harrison stands; Lewis copies him. It's time to leave, but it's hard for Harrison to go. Because when he leaves, he'll take his newfound wealth with him. He wonders how a few lines of ink can be so heavy. Lewis, seeing his hesitation, walks around his desk and

(We'll talk more after the funeral. We'll get in to the details then. Right now it's time for you to go back home. Think about it. Call your office. Stay here. And think about it.)

takes Andrew by the elbow and leads him out as he would a grieved man. Together they walk to the front parlor where the sounds are lively. Where laughter rattles the wood grain in the walls.

Andrew no longer sits on the green leather sofa. He's perched at the edge of Ms. Epps's desk, at the tail end of a joke

(This is a bathroom?)

where the punch line is a shout. They laugh, Me. Epps and Mrs. Phyllis Grey and Ginger Tanner, the secretary and the paralegals, they laugh and laugh like it's the first joke they've ever heard. They laugh, and a boy laughs, too, a slight black boy with the same eyes as Ms. Epps.

Harrison never understood how he could do it. In San Francisco, homeless men in Goodwill denim called out to him on the street in friendly voices that seemed alien to their worn faces. Everyone knew Andrew, everyone wanted to talk to him, wanted to hear what he'd say back. But that had been in San Francisco.

(Well, looks like we're missing a show.)

This is Mississippi. He hadn't thought he could do it here, too.

(Now, isn't there something y'all should be doing?)

When Lewis asks the ladies what else they have to do, he really asks, ignorant of the answer. His office staff moves in orbits around him, bound to his work but somehow detached from his command. They move away back to their office, the paralegals, laughing as they go; Ms. Epps stays at her post with a newfound smile. The boy, the boy who look so familiar but Harrison can't place, the boy stays.

(John, you remember my nephew, Liam.)

(Liam? I can't believe it.)

(Didn't he get big? Didn't he?)

He did get big. And handsome. Handsome enough that he gets glances from Andrew.

And from Harrison.

(You ready?)

Harrison wants to leave. He walks toward the door to prove it, but Andrew

(Halle says you used to work here. Like Liam does now.)

doesn't budge, almost as if in defiance, but of what Harrison isn't clear.

(Halle?)

He's never heard Ms. Epps's Christian name; for Andrew to just say it, speak it without any effort, it's just one more thing in an already full head.

(We should go. Lewis, let me know, just let me know what)

(I'll see you at the service. We can talk then, if you want, or you can call me, anytime.)

(Thanks. Thank you. Lewis.)

He takes Andres's elbow in his hand, but this time it doesn't follow him. This time it jerks back to the body on desk of the law office of Lewis and Burns

Andrew smiles thinly. It's a little like being smiled at by a vulture, just before it dips its bald neck down into the gore.

(Aw. But I'm having fun.)

(I'm not.)

(Uh oh.)

Andrew turns toward Ms. Epps and Liam with a pout on his face. Her smile fades away; he pouts all the more.

(He's mad at me.)

(Andrew, please.)

One of the paralegals drifts back into the room, a folder full of paper for Mr. Lewis in hand. She observes Andrew's pout and Harrison's hand and a peculiar expression fixes up her face, the same screwing Lewis's and twisting Ms. Epps's lips. They're watching two men fight like lovers while they try to pretend they're not. And Liam? Liam watches with a different smile.

Harrison lets go of Andrew's elbow and turns away.

(Lewis, let me know if anything else comes up.)

He says his goodbye, opens the door, and doesn't look at Andrew as he walks out.

(Will do.)

Andrew has to trot to catch up with Harrison outside. Ms. Epps watches them from the window, thinking thoughts she pretends not to.

4.

Bethlehem Funeral Home lies on the edge of a town made of two streets. It covers its shame in dark brown bricks that look like wet shit after it rains. It has a steep, gabled roof and the overall look of something squatting.

There are already a few cars and trucks in the side parking lot. Harrison, though, drives his dad's truck through semicircle of concrete that loops past the front door. He parks behind a familiar, massive SUV, leaving just enough room so other cars can still swing by.

(Bereaved parking.)

It's evening, when the summer's dark and just as hot, and under his suit Andrew's sweating, dripping. Harrison is, too, but he doesn't look like he is. He just looks calm, so he

looks cool, so he looks a little removed from the world.

They walk inside together. Harrison holds the door open for Andrew, and Andrew realizes that it's always Harrison holding the door open. Harrison earns more money, Harrison always has the final say on where they vacation, Harrison is always the big spoon. And the worst part is that none of this occurred to Andrew before he came to Bolivar County, Mississippi. It's so hot. Andrew walks inside, sweat beads on his brow, and Harrison follows close behind, his own face clear, the expression blank.

A small crowd is already gathered. They turn as one and give well-practiced nods of sympathy. Carl and Molly each with a hand on their children. Mr. Lewis and his law partner, Mr. George Burns, Jr., quietly conferring with one another in a corner. Uncle Keith off to himself, Aunt Lynn, a slight woman with poorly-dyed red hair, talking to a tall man in a cheap suit who must be the funeral director, because no else could look so embalmed and still be alive.

Harrison and Andrew join them in the viewing parlor where five rows of black, plastic chairs stand empty before an altar made of green felt and overeager flower arrangements. It all frames an urn, blacker than any suit or dress in the room.

It's beautiful, which surprises Harrison. He's been to the Bethlehem Funeral Home many times in his life. There are only two funeral homes in the town, and only one handles the white business. So he's been inside enough to know that the urn wasn't provided by Bethlehem. His father must've ordered it elsewhere. His father must've picked it himself. Must have had it special ordered.

He wants to touch it. Not just touch it. He wants to slide both of his hands over its curves. He wants to feel the gloss, wants to catch a dim reflection of himself in its sheen. It

shocks him, the power of the urge, the almost metallic taste it leaves in his mouth. A taste like disappointment.

Andrew sees the urn and that's all. Most of his focus is on the others. On their suits, on Molly's dress, on the children's outfit. His suit is much too nice. Much nicer, much more expensive than theirs. One more thing for him to judge them for. He's getting tired of it. The judging.

They move over to the crowd. Condolences to Harrison, nothing to Andrew. Hands extended in sympathies. Except Uncle Keith's. His hands stay next to him, and he stays next to the chairs and watches with an expression

(How're you feeling, John?)

Andrew doesn't have a name for.

(I'm fine. Really. I'm fine.)

He says it, he said it before, but after sleeping under his father's roof and driving his father's truck he's starting to feel not fine. He's starting to feel shitty. It's a little like inhaling the air near a landfill, a little like the first step into a backed up bathroom. It must show on his face because Molly clucks, a shotgun sound at the end of her tongue. To prevent her from making more he bends down and greets the children with

(Hey, guys.)

a hug for Lindsey and a gentle handshake for Tom. When he's finished with them

(Aunt Lynn.)

he embraces his aunt. She gives as good as she gets, but her eyes stay open over his shoulders.

(Oh, we've missed you.)

Lewis and Burns and the funeral director, Mr. Vandeven, hang back at the edge of the family circle. Uncle Keith stays by the chairs. Andrew, not burdened by family greetings, detects a slight sway to the old man's posture. He's pleased to find

(Do you need a minute? With. With your father?)

he's not the only one sick of being sober.

(I'm fine.)

(Mr. Harrison, I'm Charlie Vandeven. I don't believe we've ever met.)

(No. We haven't.)

(I moved here after you left.)

While the funeral director steps forward and gives Harrison soft words about his father's ashes, Andrew skirts the crowd and steps next to Uncle Keith, primping a smile.

(I'm a little surprised Mr. Harrison wanted to be cremated.)

Harrison watches over a dime-suit shoulder

(Harrison's mother was buried, wasn't she?)

scared of what Andrew might say.

(She wasn't cremated, was she?)

afraid of what his uncle might say back.

(No.)

When his uncle finally does say something, it's a monosyllabic word that takes too much effort to say. The sway becomes pronounced, and because Harrison is watching they're all watching, even the children. Aunt Lynn sucks in a breath through her front teeth.

She might have said something. They might have done something, but the front doors

open, and through them the people come in pairs and groups. White faces, some sunburned, some not, wearing shades of bereavement, dressed in black suits and black dresses. They come to shake Harrison's hand, Carl's hand, Uncle Keith's hand. For the women are hugs, embraces, gentle nods from the passing men. The family stands in a line to receive them. They are offered murmured condolences with sad smiles. A few words of polite conversation pass, and the bereaved move down the line.

The older ones take their seats on the black, plastic chairs, women always first. The younger ones stand. The air conditioning is on full blast; it's the background music. Harrison can hear it if he bothers to, yet it's still warm inside his suit. Hot as the town presses in on him, a mass of people

(How are you doing?)

(He was a good man.)

(I'll miss him.)

(How are the kids?)

(How are you?)

(Who did the flowers? They're so lovely.)

(How's the corn coming in?)

(He was a good man.)

(Did you end up buying the lake house?)

(Such a shame.)

(I'll miss him.)

alive.

Andrew retreats to a corner, but eventually the crowd squeezes him out. Harrison doesn't notice when he passes back out into the foyer, doesn't notice him sneak towards the back, past the small kitchen and out the door. Harrison doesn't see Andrew nearly trip over Liam Epps, who sits on concrete steps smoking a cigarette.

(Shit!)

(Shit! Sorry. Liam! Sorry, man, you all right?)

(Just lost my cigarette, that's all. I got plenty more. You want one?)

He doesn't see them share a light, doesn't hear the twin exhale of their breaths as they blast cigarette smoke towards a night sky in which

(Thanks, man.)

not a star shines.

Away from them, Andrew feels calm again. Himself again. He doesn't like Bolivar County. The air here rubs his skin like the flat of a file. It's exposing nerves, makes him flinch and twitch at things that never came within an arm's reach before. When he was in San Francisco. In San Francisco there are cool breezes and fogbanks and people talk about the world because the world passes through every day. There are parties and after parties and streets to walk on after those, streetlights to lean against, men to love for a night. No, he doesn't like Bolivar County. You can't do these things in Bolivar County. You can't be that person. There are no streets to walk in, only fields, and it's dark out there. So he pretends the cigarette smoke he blows is fog and the light above the back door is a neon sign.

(You like living here, Liam?)

(Not really. I'm moving to Jackson next year. Going to Hinds Community College.)

(Nice.)

Liam's suits hang on him, limp, but his face, the one Andrew studies, is drawn tight.

The low cheekbones and the flat nose and the wide eyes take the overhead light and give nothing back.

(What are you going to study?)

(Don't know yet. You go to school?)

(I just got out. I'm in marketing. Well. That's what I studied. I'm between jobs.)

(Where do you live?)

(San Francisco. With Harrison.)

(I knew with Harrison. I just didn't know where with Harrison. Nobody says where.)

It's something in the hips. That's what he watches for. The way the body moves between them.

And the shoulders. And the way the eyes follow him. Hard to see the eyes, though, in the dark.

Hard to tell

(People talk about us, huh?)

where they're going.

(They talk about Harrison. Yeah.)

(Harrison and me, we've been dating for a while.)

So he pokes. So he lets out words and watches to see how they fall on the ears. Watches

Liam's unblemished face bob and weave.

(We've been living together for a few months. Big step.)

(Yeah.)

(He's different here.)

(Maybe he's different there.)

(You're pretty clever for a kid going to community college.)

(How old are you?)

(Twenty-two.)

(Well I'm nineteen. So I don't think I'm a kid. To you, anyway.)

(Three or four years makes a difference. Trust me.)

(So, then, if Harrison called you a kid, I guess you'd be cool with it.)

(Clever. Again.)

(Just cause I'm black and from Mississippi don't make me stupid.)

(I don't think that.)

(You do. You expect it. Man, I can tell. You don't like it here. I bet you hate it here. No harm in that, though. It is what it is. But you don't like us. I can tell that, too.)

(Is it us? Or is it them?)

(Shit. It's us. I know where I'm at.)

It's been weeks and weeks since he'd had a cigarette. He'd decided to quit and then all this. The nicotine settles on an empty stomach, gives him a high, a little too high of one, because it's hard to see Liam's face, hard to make out the smile, to grasp its shade. He doesn't know what Liam is smiling at. Who he's smiling at.

(Soon you'll be in Jackson.)

(It's not that far.)

(Do you mind?)

He doesn't give Liam much of a chance to protest as he sits down beside him.

(Nah.)

There isn't much space for the two of them on the steps, but they fit. Just. The edges of their hips

(Thanks.)

touch. They finish their cigarettes slowly.

(You're right. I don't like it here. People probably don't like me being here that much either. But pretty soon, pretty soon I'll be gone. Harrison, too.)

(I don't know. I hear he might be staying for a while.)

(Where did you hear that?)

(Around.)

Andrew puts his elbow on the steps behind him and leans back so Liam can't see he surprise and the hurt and the face he makes as he recovers from them. His elbow pokes into Liam's back by accident, but Liam makes no movement. So

(Well, shit.)

Andrew keeps the touch on, waits to see what comes of it.

(He got a lot from his dad. That's what Aunt Halle says.)

But now he can't see Liam's face. Only the bald back of his neck. He thinks about the way Liam walked, about the way their elbows and hips touched, and he thinks of when here they are and what's behind him and the cigarette between his fingers that needs to be flicked to the ground. He reaches up

(I better get used to being here, then.)

and touches the base of Liam's skull with the back of his left finger.

Liam swings his arm up hard, knocking Andrew's back, banging it against the edge of the concrete step. Andrew hisses at the jagged flash of pain it sends up his shoulder. Liam stands, spinning off the steps, suddenly very tall, very large, and, though Andrew refuses to acknowledge noticing, very black.

(The fuck!)

So Andrew grips the concrete behind him with his free hand and tries to back up to nowhere. The cigarette falls from his fingers and smolders out on a step below.

(The fuck!)

(Sorry.)

(What the fuck?)

(I'm sorry.)

Liam gets louder; Andrew gets softer. He feels exposed, vulnerable. He wants Harrison, he thinks of Harrison. But Harrison is inside, talking to Mr. Lewis and Mr. Burns, learning about the company that wants to lease their land. Harrison doesn't wonder where his lover has disappeared to. It's just Andrew facing Liam alone, it's just

(I'm sorry. I'm sorry.)

Andrew whispering an apology over and over.

Liam breathes loudly. Andrew's surprised no one inside hears it, pokes their head out to see what the noise is. It's louder than the streetcars outside his old bedroom window.

Liam walks forward. Andrew flinches, curls away from the approach. Liam ignores him, just walks up the concrete steps and through the back door, making his way back to the funeral parlor.

There are ants in Andrew's brain. They're on fire, they're running across his lobes, falling into the cracks, biting into the grey, wrinkled pulp with burning pincers. Thousands of them, thousands on thousands. He runs his fingers through his styled hair and tries his best to ignore them. He tries his best to ignore the questions. What will Liam say? Who will Liam tell? What will he say? Should he just deny it? Should he say he's innocent?

(It wasn't me it wasn't me it wasn't me)

Who will they believe? What trumps what? A gay white man or a straight black man?

(Jesus.)

He says the word as a nonbeliever does. A word. Something found in the dictionary. Inside, near the urn, near the powder that was once Cecil Harrison, Jr., some pray. They pray in whispers; others pray silently, eyes squeezed shut. A few pray with open eyes, looking at the urn as they do. They pray. Andrew thinks he does, too, but he's wrong. Andrew has never prayed in his life. He just says the word Jesus. Or sometimes, the word God. He says the words and waits for himself to feel better.

(Fuck.)

He stands and steps back inside. In the small kitchen he pauses. There are more people now. The sound of them talking is too great for any words to escape, but the tone is clear. It's gentle, smooth, never quite rising to anything that might be gaiety. No surprise. No shock. No low whispers of a new scandal. He walks forward. They're in the foyer, spilled out of the viewing room, gathered in loose amoebas of conversation that split and drift and reform by whims. He passes these, attracts the eyes of a few vigilant souls, gathers whispers

(That's Harrison's you-know)

(That's Harrison's boyfriend)

(The gay)

(Andrew Something)

behind him, presses forward until he's beside Harrison who sees him and blinks. He introduces him

(Hey. Andrew. This is Ms. Tina Hayworth. She was my third grade teacher.)

(Pleasure.)

to the overweight woman with an eighties hairstyle who smiles politely back before moving away.

(How much longer, do you think?)

(I don't know. I have to stay till everybody leaves, I think.)

(Jesus.)

(Well. I'm sorry.)

(No. No, I'm sorry, I'm just. Just)

(Are you OK?)

(I'm fine.)

(You sure?)

(Yes.)

(You don't look it.)

A space is created around them. No one is looking at them, which means everyone is watching them. The ants that fell on his brain are marching down his spine now. He doesn't go anywhere, but his legs won't stop moving.

(Maybe I just need some air. Maybe I can take the truck, go somewhere and come right back?)

Harrison is aware of the space, aware of the eyes watching without looking, aware of the way Andrew shakes, his movements uncontrolled, his face naked with desperation. Harrison is aware and embarrassed. He's embarrassed that he brought Andrew to the memorial service. To Bolivar County. He feels found out, like a teenaged boy who finds the dirty magazine under his mattress missing. Ashamed. He feels ashamed. And he's ashamed that he feels ashamed.

(Fine.)

He gives Andrew the truck keys. The jingling sound they make skips over the conversations like a flat stone on a flatter lake. Andrew takes them, pockets them, nods, and leaves. He never sees Liam. He almost doesn't notice. He climbs into the truck and barrels out the driveway to unfamiliar roads.

And inside the crowd presses back against Harrison, welcomes him back into its conversations about old friends and old schemes and old days only getting older. And he smiles and shakes their hands and says quiet things about his father.

5.

Andrew finds a bar attached to a truck stop. Inside there are stalls for video poker and a few tables to play cards on and a bar to drink on. He hurries to that. The only other person inside is the bartender, who welcomes Andrew with a nod of his greasy head, his attention focused on a small portable television at the bar's corner where a fuzzy game of baseball is being played.

(What ya want?)

(What beer do you have?)

(The Buds and the Millers.)

(What whiskey?)

(Eh. Jack Daniels and, I think. Yeah. Some Maker's Mark.)

(The Maker's Mark. No need to spoil it with anything.)

(Sure thing.)

As the bartender makes his order, Andrews reads the bumper stickers that line the back shelves and wall. Most say things about Hillary Clinton, a few about Barack Obama. A few are stenciled with thoughts on family.

(My other family lives in Wichita, Kansas)

(Calling my wife a bitch is an insult to my dog)

They provide the only color in the bar, the only things besides dark wood and darker air.

But the glass the bartender fills is clean, and the whiskey he fills it with is strong and clear. Andrew takes slow sips while they watch the baseball game even if

(Who's playing?)

the screen is too fuzzy to separate the two team colors.

(Sox and Giants.)

(Bicoastal Battle.)

(I suppose.)

(I'm from San Francisco, actually.)

(You lost or something?)

(I came with. A friend. My friend's father passed away.)

(Oh, Cecil Harrison?)

(That's right.)

(Guess that's why you're all dressed up.)

(That's right.)

(So I guess you're rooting for)

The crack of a hit. The roar of the crowd. The screen has a small fit, unable to hold the excitement down.

(Where are they playing?)

(Fenway? Maybe?)

(Ah.)

(You rooting for the Giants, I take it?)

(I don't know. They've been losing a lot lately.)

(Now that ain't right.)

(What's that?)

(You root for the home team. I mean, it's in the damn song. You root for the home team. San Fran's your home, you root for the Giants.)

He doesn't normally drink whiskey. When he's home, his home, his drink of choice is a vodka stinger. A silly drink, not even one he enjoys that much, but it's always fun to scream for another vodka stinger in a gay bar. Otherwise he wraps his hand around a local beer, the more micro the brewery the better. He enjoys comparing them, debating over them, switching allegiances as he hops from bar to bar. He doesn't drink whiskey in San Francisco. He can't understand why he ordered one here.

(Who do you root for then?)

(Eh. Mississippi doesn't have a team. Of any kind. We're too poor for that shit.)

Andrew takes a careful sip. It burns, but not as cleanly as vodka does. It's a dirty burn, a sweltering burn, a burn that tastes just like the air in this God-forsaken state.

(So who are you rooting for?)

(Nobody. I'm just watchin'. Not rootin'.)

Another play by the Sox. The crowd sounds like it's on its feet. Blurs of red run about the bases. Homerun.

(See? What did I tell you?)

(I stick with what I said. Just ain't right. You gotta root for the home team. It's in the damn song.)

Harrison was drinking whiskey when they met. Andrew might have made fun of him for it. He can't remember. He was drunk, and Harrison got drunk. They spent the night together. They went somewhere to eat breakfast the next morning. He can't remember where.

(So how you liking Mississippi?)

It might have been Tony's.

(All right so far.)

Or Giselle's.

(Different from California, huh?)

He can't remember. He only remembers walking back to Harrison's apartment. They didn't have sex right away. It was nice. It was always nice.

(Hotter.)

(Yeah. I bet.)

He drains his glass. His throat burns. The crowd roars.

(One more time.)

6.

Andrew doesn't come back. In a little less than two hours, only the family remains in the funeral home. Even Mr. Lewis and Mr. Burns have left them. A weary Mr. Vandeven pops in to wish them good night before retreating to whatever bottle gets him through his sleep, the urn secure in his arms.

Harrison doesn't want to mention that Andrew has taken his daddy's truck, doesn't want to call attention to his abandonment. Carl and Molly and Lynn wake the children who've fall asleep in a corner of the viewing room while Uncle Keith puts his suit back on. Keys jingle, they move, and soon they'll walk outside leaving Harrison behind. He clutches the cell phone in his pocket and thinks about leaving a third voicemail on Andrew's phone and thinks of Andrew dancing in a club in a distant city.

(C'mon, John. I'll give you a ride back.)

His uncle's words smell like liquor, but who's Harrison to squander a ride home? He nods and follows Uncle Keith outside, holding the door open for Aunt Lynn and the rest of the Harrison brood. He notices Aunt Lynn give a troubled glance at her husband's back, but she says nothing. Only turns to go home with her son and daughter-in-law.

His uncle's pickup is much like his daddy's. No doubt they bought it at the same dealership, probably even bought them together. He can see them, hands in their jean pockets, shoulders stooped, walking through the rows of pickups, inspecting sticker prices and mumbling things only the other could understand.

(Do you want me to drive?)

It's a pretty little picture in his head. He hates to ruin it by asking his uncle if he's too drunk to drive, after being drunk at his brother's funeral. But he has to ask because his uncle walks like he has skis on his feet.

(I'm fine.)

He has to ask. He supposes his uncle has to wave his offer away. He supposes there's nothing to do but climb into the passenger seat and buckle his seat belt.

The drive starts well enough. They make it out of the funeral driveway and turn in the right direction. But then he turns in his seat

(I'm glad that Andrew took off.)

and speaks to his nephew.

(I've been meaning to have a word. With you.)

(Just keep an eye on the road, Uncle Keith.)

(Boy, I've been driving these roads since I was sitting on my daddy's lap.)

(OK.)

(Don't worry your pretty head none.)

(OK.)

(I just need to talk to you is all. And something like this, I prefer to look you in the eye, even if I

have to do it every other word.)

(OK, Uncle Keith.)

(Your father left you most everything. If not everything. Don't say nothin'. I know. Your father and me were in the middle of a fight when he. When he departed. A fight like we've always had. Kind everyone used to make fun of us for. Course, they won't be making fun of us anymore will they? Hell.)

There aren't too many streetlights in town, and what little there are fall quickly behind. The headlights on Molly's SUV are the only source of illumination. They reflect off the rearview mirror and make it easy to see how drunk his uncle is, how his tongue perches on his lower lip, how his eyebrows droop. He glances at the road then at Harrison, at the road then at Harrison. It's hypnotizing, so regular a motion. His words he pulls from the bottom of his throat, and they drip.

(I know he left you most everything. I know you've been to see Lewis. I know you know about the salt domes, the gas. I know it. What I don't know is what you're going to do. So I want to.)

(Uncle Tommy.)

(Just listen! I don't know what you're going to do, but I'm asking you. I'm asking you. Don't sell it. The land. I mean, the land not. Don't sell it. The farmland. The good land. I don't care about the salt domes. I'm asking you. Please. No. No, I ain't asking you. I guess I'm begging you. Pleading with you. I might not sound it, but I'm an old man and it comes to me hard. But I am, I am begging. Please, son, don't sell it. Your father would've given me a fair share if we hadn't been fighting. I believe that. I really do. So I'm asking you. Henry, please. Don't sell it. Let me work it.)

It's a moist little speech. Wet words. Wet eyes. The truck drifts toward the double-yellow line as he makes it. Harrison doesn't notice. He's busy looking at a lion

(Uncle Keith.)

whimper.

(He left me everything. All of it.)

Harrison tells him he has nothing. Uncle Keith glances back toward the road and snaps them back in to their lane with a quick twist of his wrists. Harrison's seatbelt grinds against his shoulder. The headlights behind flicker in concern.

(All of it.)

(All of it.)

(I thought. Maybe. But then I thought. Maybe, even if we were fighting, we were brothers. You know?)

(I know.)

(Shit. All of it.)

(Uncle Keith. I'm not going to sell it. At least)

(At least what?)

(At least, not now. I mean. I want to listen to you and Carl, see what you want, see what Mr. Lewis thinks, just figure things out.)

(Lewis doesn't give a shit what you do. He gets paid no matter what.)

(Uncle Keith, I don't think)

(He doesn't like me, anyhow. I don't like him neither. Coming to our business these past few years, coming and. Well. It doesn't matter. I get the chance to change your mind. That what you

saying?)

Uncle Keith gets mad, beats the heel of his right hand into the steering wheel to egg himself on. The truck's weaving now, in its own lane, sure, but still weaving. Harrison's cell phone buzzes in his pocket. The headlights in the rearview mirror get closer, burn hotter.

(Goddamn. Goddamn you and goddamn your daddy and goddamn the Good Lord for putting the goddamn gas underneath our fields. All I wanted, all I ever wanted, was to work those goddamn fields. Our daddy was a good farmer, but he didn't love it. He didn't wake up happy every morning, happy to be up, happy to be goddamn awake. I love it, John. I wake up every morning, happy to be awake. I'm been waking up earlier and earlier," he says, a little laugh slipping out, "been waking up with a few more aches, sure, but I love it. Your father didn't. You don't even know it. You don't even know it.")

There are tears in his eyes now. All the memorial service, the prayers and impromptu childhood stories, and now he's crying. They drive straight, though. Carl's headlights fall back behind, letting the night get a little closer to the windows.

"You don't even know it. What are you going to do with it?"

"Uncle Keith," he starts.

The cell phone buzzes incessantly against his thigh. He pulls it out, checks the screen

(Baby)

brings it to his ear with a grimace.

(Andrew?)

(Baby I don't know where I am.)

(Are you in a bar?)

(Yeah?)

(Off Highway 4?)

(I don't)

(Is it in a truck stop?)

(Yeah!)

(Sit tight. I'll be there soon. I'll call you back in just a minute. OK?)

(OK. I love you.)

(All right.)

He hangs up the phone and replaces it in his pocket. His uncle says nothing more aloud.

He doesn't swerve the truck the rest of the ride home. Nothing but smooth sailing over old pavement.

7.

Andrews wakes up on a cloth couch that smells a little like dog piss. He rolls over and nearly falls off. He observes the coffee table, the fireplace, the flat screen over it. He tries to put everything he sees in order, as ancient sailors might have done with the stars. He needs a guide, directions. He needs to remember how he got there.

There are sounds, the kind that belong to a kitchen. He can't see the kitchen though. When he turns his head, all he sees is a wide archway that leads to handsome foyer. Beyond that there is only a dining room, as large as the room he's woken in. He's woken up in a mansion. A

mansion with a couch that smells a little like dog piss.

He drank too much. He doesn't remember how much, or where, but from the way he feels he figures it was a lot, nowhere good. He eases himself into a sitting position. The world shakes like it's laughing at him, but once he's up it settles back down. The sounds come from the kitchen in bursts. It's Harrison. That much is logical. And if that's Harrison, then this strange place must be his father's house. Harrison's house now. Because Harrison's father died. There was a memorial service to prove it.

The memories come quickly after that. He rubs his face in his hands, takes what he hopes are cleansing breaths, and works himself up to a standing position. Slowly, as slowly as he's able, he walks to the kitchen.

By the time he reaches the linoleum he's able to move a little faster than his dead grandmother. He checks his clothes before he enters, an old instinct, but there's nothing to do for it by try to press some of the wrinkles out with his hand and ignore the smell his shirt has picked up.

Harrison's at the table, fork hovering over a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon and buttered wheat toast. He looks up and offers Andrew a faint smile.

"You're up," he says.

(What are you doing?)

"Eating breakfast. Do you want me to make you a plate?"

The thought of that golden slop inching down his throat nearly gags him. He rests his hands on his stomach

(Please. Don't joke.)

waiting for the nausea to pass.

“Sorry.”

(What’s with you?)

“I’ve been thinking. All night. Come here.” He pats the empty chair next to him. “We need to talk.”

He’s too focused on getting there to think about why he should. By the time he’s sitting, it’s too late.

(What is it?)

“The graveside service is today. I know we planned on going back after, but I’m not. I’m staying.”

(How long?)

It’s a stupid question. He’s angry at Harrison for making him ask it. For putting him in this chair in this house in this corner of the state of Mississippi. His hair fell flat sometime in the night. Without its normal gel sustenance it hangs over his eyes. He brushes at with his fingers. Harrison moves to do it for him, and Andrew lets him and grows a little angrier.

(You’re just going to stay here?)

“I don’t know how long,” Harrison says. He goes back to eating his breakfast, careful forkfuls of egg with the occasional nibble of bacon or toast. “A long time,” he continues, “long enough that I’m quitting my job. Moving out of the apartment. Moving out of San Francisco. I think...I think I might buy a condo or something Jackson. Or maybe down in Biloxi. Come up here as I’m needed. Stay here, when I want. Or maybe Carl can move in here, and I can take his house.”

(Have you lost your mind?)

“No, I think they’d be more comfortable in a bigger home. And if they had another kid, you know-”

(You won’t be happy here.)

“I think I can be. Look, Andrew, I know this is sudden.”

(You might have money. You might be rich. But you’re still a fag. And they’ll never forget that.)

“Neither will you.”

He says it softly; Andrew hisses, prelude to a torrent, but nothing follows. His mouth has gone dry. Harrison puts his fork down. For a while, the only sound is of them breathing.

“You couldn’t wait.”

(What do you mean?)

“You know what I mean. You couldn’t wait. You couldn’t wait for me to sell everything off, to buy a little single-family in Presidio, take you to every five-star in the fucking Bay Area.”

(Fuck you.)

“Fuck you. That’s what you want. You don’t love me, Andrew.”

He doesn’t shout it. He’s angry, but he doesn’t shout it because it’s too close to being a question. He’s asking. There were two people in a room in San Francisco with canvas sheets for curtains through which the city light shone like an abstract. There were two people, but they left.

(No. I don’t love you. But we had a lot of fun together, didn’t we? It was nice, wasn’t it?)

“And that’s it?”

Andrew takes the piece of toast Harrison hasn’t bitten into yet. Chews a bit of crust off.

It doesn't make him sick. Just makes him feel tired. He's so tired.

(No.)

“Do you want to stay for the graveside service?”

(No. I want to go home.)

Harrison nods. “You can take Daddy's truck. Park in one of the overnight garages. I've checked flights, earlier this morning. The plane takes off at one. It's just a little up in the price from the flight we...were going to take.” He pauses. “But I'll cover that. I got it.”

Andrew can say

(OK.)

no. He can say he'll pay for it. He can say he has his pride. He can call Harrison an asshole for mentioning it, for the pretentious way he just throws it in the conversation. Or he could say no, I'm staying, I promised I'd be here for you. I'm good on my word. I'm good on that much.

“OK. Do you want me to fix you some breakfast?”

(Yeah. OK.)

“OK.”

He makes another plate of scrambled eggs and bacon and toast. After breakfast is finished he washes Andrew's clothes while Andrew washes himself in the shower. He packs Andrew's suitcase with care. Andrew takes a long time in the bathroom, almost as long as the clothes in the laundry room, but when he comes out with a towel wrapped around his waist he's clean and groomed and beautiful.

They fuck one last time next to a packed suitcase. They don't make much noise. There are only slight gasps of exertion, the squeak of the mattress, and it's finished. They clean

themselves and dress. It's only ten, but Andrews leaves. The pickup truck makes a long line of dust as it blows down the driveway. Harrison watches it go. The fields around him do nothing but grow.

They grow as Andrew leaves Bolivar County, long after he's in the sky, after he steps back into a city by the sea. They grow as Harrison dresses, as he stands next to an open pit while a black urn is lowered inside. They grow as he returns home after the service.

They grow up. They grow apart. They grow until it is time to be cut down so they might grow again. They grow in the dreams of the men who love them. And the men who hate them. They grow to die so seeds might follow.

So it goes.