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Zora Neale Hurston: Re-Assessing the Black Southern Identity and Stone Mill Creek

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
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**ZORA NEALE HURSTON:
RE-ASSESSING THE BLACK SOUTHERN IDENTITY**

and

STONE MILL CREEK

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is composed of two parts and makes use of two literary genres: the traditional essay, and a literary form called fictocriticism developed by anthropologist Michael Taussig. Both are integrated in an exploration of the rural Black southern aesthetic—from a solely critical approach with the essay *Zora Neale Hurston: Re-assessing the Black Southern Identity*, to the analytical fiction advanced in *Stone Mill Creek*.

Re-assessing the Black Southern Identity traces the origin and history of the aesthetic, arguing a case for its most celebrated advocate—novelist, anthropologist and ethnographer Zora Neale Hurston. She almost single-handedly preserved many of the southern folk idioms we treasure today; her novels and folklore collections are glowing examples of the rich, cultural legacy of the rural south. She would transcend the “cultural sanitizing” imposed by the Harlem Renaissance aristocracy by remaining true to her aesthetic inclination, but would die an “unremarked and controversial” figure in 1960. Due to a move from the “cultural correctness” of the 1920s and 30s to a sort of literary and cultural revival that defined the 60s and 70s, Hurston may have become one of the movement’s largest benefactors. Both her works and clandestine-like lifestyle has become the source of intense scholarly review and has led to her newly appointed canonical status.

The fictocritical work *Stone Mill Creek* combines four years of ethnographic study, historical accounts, local folklore traditions and cultural commentary in nonlinear narratives. The chapters trace the folk-lives of a “once upon a time” group of Black farmers who settled in the Florida panhandle around the 1820s and allows for more than a theoretical glance at the vernaculars, themes, ideals and symbols representative of those Hurston called “farthest down.” The semi-fictive language in *Stone Mill Creek* is a living, breathing cultural artifact and however reductive, is another distinct, self-defined and documented voice of the Black southern identity.

PART ONE: ESSAY

Hurston: Re-Assessing The Black Southern Identity

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of African slavery remains one of the most egregious and incendiary elements of American history. Fueled by a quest for free labor, slavery proponents argued away the African's humanity and assigned them attributes that subjected, exploited and maligned their social and cultural identity. It was a successful yet dehumanizing campaign that left slave descendants with the almost insurmountable burden of undoing centuries of negative stereotyping and cultural devaluing aimed at placating their inferior social, cultural and political status. It is within this extraordinary set of circumstances that the Black southern identity owes its origin, a deliberate and calculated construction that discolored any accurate perceptions of African American life.

Early African American literature played a significant role in reversing the detrimental effects of negative imaging and cultural inferiority. Whether it was written language born out of the need to expose the horrific conditions of slavery as the narratives of Olaudah Equiano served or the inadvertent proof of the slave's literary and artistic competence established in Phillis Wheatley's poetry, Black writers have been at the forefront of the struggle for political and social reform.

The fractured America that lay in the ruins of slavery not only fueled ongoing racial tensions, the dire circumstances set in motion a movement within the African American consciousness that sought economic gain, social progression and racial equality through a means of artistic and cultural expression. The crafters of this "New Negro Movement" (or Harlem Renaissance as it came to be known) concerned themselves with infusing their political agenda with the visual art, drama, literature and music of the era to create a new, progressive and idealistic "cultural image"—one palatable enough to penetrate mainstream culture for the first time in American history.

Since emancipation, many leaders within the community concerned with advancement, have resisted the image of the Black rural southerner: if not for the emotional and psychological reasons associated with it, certainly for political ones. This was certainly the prevailing opinion during the rise of the Harlem Renaissance. The emerging Black identity, in orchestration with such advocates as the NAACP and National Urban League, hoped to lift the agrarian rooted image of the African American to one more closely associated with the cosmopolitanism that permeated the new political, artistic and cultural movement. However, Renaissance heavyweight Zora Neale Hurston would challenge the politics of this identity by showcasing an aesthetic that was not only unpopular, but considered “politically regressive.” The designs of this new cultural identity, which ignored or dismissed much of African American cultural history, was believed to be the most effective agent for social and political advancement.

Most of the archived folk elements, we treasure today, may have been lost had it not been for the efforts of Hurston. Her collections and novels are glowing examples of the rich, cultural legacy of the rural south, a testament to her incredible skills as a preservationist and writer. She would transcend the cultural parameters that corded the Renaissance and endure a barrage of criticism to die in obscurity in 1960. Most important, her newfound significance in literary and anthropological terms is leading a resurgence of the black southern identity. In this essay we explore:

1. The artistic and political movement that dissected the Black cultural identity.
2. How Hurston, through her use of the rural, southern aesthetic, transcended the cultural progressivism often associated with the Harlem Renaissance.
3. Consider evidence of how the southern identity has become an embraced and celebrated idiom due to Hurston’s early counter-revolutionary status.

As historians continue to debate the political ramifications and lasting literary influence of the Harlem Renaissance, there is little question regarding Hurston’s significant contributions to American culture and anthropology. By embracing the rural, southern aesthetic in her literary works, Hurston challenged the parameters of the political identity of the era, ultimately cementing her legacy in American literary history. As new “evaluative criteria” open Hurston and other African American writers up to greater valorization and as a general interest in “past things Black” (Nugent 1) continues, the southern identity is finally enjoying an elevated and celebrated cultural status.

CHAPTER ONE: CULTURAL DISSECTION: A NEW BLACK IDENTITY

“I belong to no race nor time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads.”
—Zora Neale Hurston

If sociologist and Cultural Studies professor, Paul Gilroy’s twenty-first century assessment is correct that “we live in a world where identity matters...both as a concept, theoretically, and as a contested fact of contemporary political life,” then his concept of cultural identity can be no more aptly applied to the extraordinary condition of Black America at the turn of the twentieth century. Black scholars and the political elite ordained themselves with the incredible responsibility of infusing a sanitized version of their cultural identity into mainstream American society. The cohesive and collaborative effort by this intelligential group from the arts and political arenas became a movement of cultural reform. Politically, they set the agenda for social advancement; and artistically, they became gate-keepers, carefully deciding which cultural artifacts would come to represent an identity that would advance the social and political position of African Americans, not only in America, but internationally as well. They came from every direction: educators, writers, painters, musicians, sculptors, and dancers— all mobilized in one philosophical sphere. Educator and scholar Alain Locke was from Philadelphia, Arna Bontemps grew up in California, Wallace Thurman from Salt Lake City, Langston Hughes was born in Missouri, but spent time in Kansas and Ohio. Hurston came to Harlem in 1925 with “the map of Florida on [her] tongue.”

It was during one of the major events in American history that Hurston made her gusty and flamboyant Harlem debut. The post-Reconstruction era set off a wave of western and northern migration that stretched over four decades as hundreds of thousands of southern Blacks, having long-suffered under any number of discriminatory, repressive and sometimes deadly devices (including Black Codes, Jim Crow, sharecropping, lynchings), made their way to the west, Midwest and northern cities, in search of better paying jobs and greater economic opportunities. Harlem in particular, became a magnet for many migrating Blacks as large sections of the city that had been segregated prior to 1920, were now available to families, artists, singers, writers and intellectuals. This exodus, urged on by the hopes of political and

economic advancement, coincided with a burgeoning literary, cultural and artistic uprising. Its early crafters, an alliance spearheaded by Alain Locke, called it “The New Negro Movement.”

Hurston thrived in the flourishing cultural and intellectual community, initially a willing and active participant in the construction of this new public identity. Writers and other intellectuals like Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. Dubois and other artists of the period “got involved with civil rights organizations like the Urban League and the NAACP, both of whom were holding literary contests and encouraging people throughout the United States to write of their experiences as Black people in this country” (Hemenway). What followed was Alain Locke’s definitive anthology *The New Negro* published in 1925, which included Hurston’s first published work, the short-story “Spunk.” It was viewed as the “collective portrait of black America,” a cultural and historical presentation of the Black consciousness constructed through a series of poems, essays, fiction and artwork. Locke ambitiously recruited contributors aimed at improving the situation of Blacks, carefully selecting material concerned with “transforming what [had] been a perennial problem in the progressive phases of contemporary Negro life” (Locke 3).

Ironically, Locke was neither an artist nor book editor, nor had he lived in Harlem. However, he is ascribed by most historians as initiating the shape, tenet and public identity of the movement, creating a black aesthetic “palatable” and influential enough to “dispel the prevailing notion among most Whites of Blacks as not only physically and culturally inferior but without much hope of improvement” (Rampersad xv). Locke, Charles Johnson, W.E. B. Dubois, who claimed the “Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men,” and other black aristocrats, joined in concerted effort to construct and “authenticate the modernist identity of the New Negro.” They also intended to censor any alternate identity, creating a socially progressive cultural aesthetic focused on reversing the devastating trend of widespread economic and social stagnation. However political, the movement would rely on the artistic and literary outpouring by Hurston and her contemporaries as a means of “humanizing” a group of Americans Locke argued had “been more of a formula than a human being—a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be ‘kept down,’ or ‘in his place,’ or ‘helped up,’ to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden” (Locke 3).

Another seminal text that had profound influence on the political designs of the Harlem Renaissance was James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. First published in 1912, it received little attention. Only after the book was re-issued in 1927 by a larger press did the work wield considerable authority over those associated with constructing the ideology of the movement; influence no doubt garnered by Johnson's elevated status as a writer, elder statesman and political clout as executive secretary of the NAACP (1920-1931). The book, his only novel, tells of a fair complexioned boy who after witnessing a lynching decides to pass as white. While brilliantly exposing the horrific and often tumultuous conditions of the South, it proposes, through considerable social and philosophical insight, the importance of cultural heritage and racial pride as the protagonist, after a lifetime of racial masquerading, regrets his decision to deny his mother's African heritage. However, it is Johnson's depiction of sophisticated and educated "Black" that serves as substantive rudiments of Renaissance ideology. The unnamed ex-colored man and many "cultured blacks" or professional class blacks that created his circle, reinforced the themes and ideals of the New Negro movement, revealing how such social progress could "bring glory and honor to the Negro race," also how such professional advancement would "reflect credit on the race" (Johnson 46). Conversely, during his wanderings through the South, the Ex-colored man regards rural, southern blacks as "the Negro in his relatively primitive state" (173). *The Autobiography* clearly marks the distinction within black culture; one defined as progressive, educated and middle-class; the other less educated, rural, "uncultured" and counter-progressive. The latter were to be made invisible. The southern identity was and continues to be a cultural reality; nevertheless, it was an identity Renaissance gatekeepers were determined to shut out.

Despite the Ex-colored man's conflicted identity, he becomes emblematic of the movement, proclaiming even in his earliest remembrances that he was raised to be "a perfect little aristocrat," (7) furthering Johnson's political insights on racial progressivism and cultural conversion. The Ex-colored man provides further evidence of the black culture delineation in his positioning while visiting with "educated and cultured" northern Blacks: "I could not help being struck by the great difference between them and the same class of colored people in the South. The difference was especially noticeable in their speech. There was none of that heavy-tongued enunciation which characterizes even the best-educated colored people in the South. It is remarkable, after all, what an adaptable creature the Negro is" (152-3).

Johnson's *The Autobiography* provides argumentative support and serves as a literary precursor for the movement that exposed the cultural divide many felt was needed to elevate the social and political condition of Blacks in America. The cultural division that was clearly outlined in the work is compelling mainly because it "was the first to deal with Negro life on several levels, from the folk to the sophisticated" (Nordloh 24). *The Autobiography* and *The New Negro* would represent the denouement of the cultural movement, both essentially Renaissance guidebooks on cultural adaptability and the philosophical criterion that governed it. Locke, Johnson and the mostly male elite were ambassadors of a cultural blueprint to transcend the stagnant social and political status that confined Blacks during the early twentieth century.

The emerging cultural identity and political posturing signified a new black aesthetic of versatility, modernism, progressive intellectualism and racial pride. This identity, although open to a myriad of artistic expressions, dismissed the pervasive and loathed stereotypes of the South. Hurston's challenging of this idealized concept of culture quickly put her at odds with many of the Black elite; her authentic literary depictions of the rural south was considered counter-progressive. The accolades that were showered on Hurston all came prior to the publishing of her first book *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, in 1934. Almost ten years earlier in 1925, Hurston had come to New York with only \$1.50 in her pocket, integrated Barnard College that same year and graduated in 1928 with a degree in Anthropology, after having studied with famed anthropologist Franz Boas. She was wholly dedicated to the preservation of the southern Black aesthetic, traveling to some of the most remote places of the southern United States during the early part of the twentieth century to collect and interpret the songs, stories and folklore of rural Blacks—work that was absolutely unheard of at the time for any woman, especially a woman of color. A product of the rural south, she was less interested in keeping with the political agenda of the time and far more concerned with presenting the folklives of the men and women that she grew up listening to and was ultimately inspired by. The Hurston ideology, in almost every way, complicated the paradigm of the new Black cultural identity.

CHAPTER TWO: HURSTON THE CONTRARIAN

“I tried to be natural and not pander to the folks who expect a clown and a villain in every Negro. Neither did I want to pander to those ‘race’ people who see nothing but perfection in all of us.” — Zora Neale Hurston

The call for social, cultural and political reform was loud and clear. It echoed from Renaissance bureaucrats to the halls and campuses of academic institutions around the United States, in meeting rooms of political strategists, at social clubs and in Black neighborhoods. Those charged with the overhaul of the old and the presentation of the new cultural identity had their marching orders; the criteria were clear. The literary, artistic and academic output would be a presentation of the most sanitized and sophisticated cultural artifacts. Any and all elements that are a detriment to the campaign to restore cultural legitimacy would be abandoned.

Zora Neale Hurston, writing and publishing a highly un-sanitized depiction of rural southern Blacks in her books and folklore collections, glamorized the southern identity. She became the symbol of the kind of cultural stagnation Renaissance elders resented. Biographer Carla Kaplan asserts that it was this counter-culture association that attributed to her quickly descending status among her contemporaries, and what set off the campaign by political strong-arms to relegate her to the perimeters of the collective voice of the movement:

“This was a risky move esthetically and it was a risky move politically because it ran a foul of the main aesthetic and political tenet of the Harlem Renaissance. Most of her contemporaries, which is to say also most of her dear friends in the Harlem Renaissance, were absolutely dedicated to the notion that the literary arts were the single most important way that blacks could achieve civil rights and they would do so by showing white America that blacks were really no different. Which meant that the theater and the fiction that was considered most important in the Harlem Renaissance were those cultural representations that showed blacks looking like mainstream ideas of white culture, which is to say Northern, urban, middle class, professional blacks. Hurston wanted to do something altogether different. She wanted to show white and indeed black culture, a group of black Americans they had probably never heard of. So she wanted to go down

into the deep south, into the sub-working class and document the lives of what she called the ‘Negro farthest down.’” (Kaplan)

While reviews in White media outlets like the New York Times praised *Gourd*, calling it the “most vital and original novel about the American Negro that has yet been written by a member of the Negro race,” black critics took a starkly different position. Andrew Burris, reporting for the NAACP magazine *The Crisis* wrote:

As the author of “Spunk,” one of the best short stories in *The New Negro*, Zora Neale Hurston was in the vanguard of the movement, which took its name from that book. Now Miss Hurston has written a book... and this reviewer is compelled to report that *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* is quite disappointing and a failure as a novel. One must judge Miss Hurston’s success by the tasks she has set herself—to write a novel about a backward Negro people, using their peculiar speech and manners to express their lives. What she has done is just the opposite. She has used her characters and the various situations created for them as mere pegs upon which to hang their dialect and their folkways. (Burris 6)

Burris’s stinging critique, acting as the long arm of the NAACP, paused only briefly after a lengthy tirade to “add that there is much about the book that is fine and distinctive, and enjoyable.” The discourse surrounding culture and politics have always been intrinsically linked, a convoluted and highly problematic conjunction that lay at the center of the “New Negro Movement.” No doubt the injection of race and “black inferiority” only further complicated the equation. Rooted in the Eurocentric and antiquated paradigm equating “the civilized” to “culture,” the imperialist post-Reconstruction America, one that had enslaved, dehumanized, oppressed, maligned, mystified and shunned his darker hued cohabitants—influenced, perhaps to a significant degree unfortunately, the framers of this emerging Black identity.

On April 18, 1934, Hurston wrote to Eslanda Robeson (wife of political activist Paul Robeson) in response to criticism directed at her work saying “I tried to be natural and not pander to the folks that expect a clown and a villain in every Negro. Neither did I want to pander to those “race” people who see nothing but perfection in all of us” (Kaplan 299). Hurston’s descending rank among the so-called “race” people came due to her radical independence and embracing of cultural artifacts they sought to abandon. Hurston seemed impervious to the political climate that swirled around her, refusing to respond, at least artistically, to the barrage

of harsh criticism that was directed at her. The novels continued. A year later came the first collection of African American folktales collected and published by an African American—*Mules and Men*, followed two years later by *Tell My Horse*, a groundbreaking study of voodoo from her research in Haiti.

In his essay, *The New Cultural Politics of Difference*, Cornel West, professor of religion and African American studies at Princeton, provides analysis and further justification for the cultural positioning the Renaissance gate-guarders engaged in during the 1920s and 30s. He maintains that such cultural constructions were “courageous yet limited Black efforts to combat racist cultural practices. First, they proceeded in an assimilationist manner that set out to show that Black people were really like White people—thereby eluding differences (in history and culture) between Whites and Blacks. Black specificity and particularity was thus banished in order to gain White acceptance and approval. Second, these Black responses rested upon a homogenizing impulse that assumed that all Black people were really alike—hence obliterating differences” (West 262). The overwhelming pressure to conform may have bashed her mentally and physically, but it never penetrated the psyche of Hurston’s novels, at least in very literal means.

In 1937 came Hurston’s most well-known and celebrated novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, chronicling a semi-autobiographical and self-actualizing protagonist named “Janie,” who like Hurston, embarks on journey in search of self-fulfillment, despite the pressures from opposing forces to conform. Lucille Tompkins, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, called it in a word “beautiful.” However, it was her Black contemporaries again that leveled the harshest criticism. Richard Wright, who had achieved moderate literary success as a protest writer and had grown up the grandson of slaves in Mississippi, could not come to terms with Hurston’s racial ambivalence and pastel portrayals of rustic Blacks existing monotonously. He wrote in his review of the novel in *New Masses*:

“Miss Hurston seems to have no desire whatever to move in the direction of serious fiction. [She] can write; but her prose is cloaked in that facile sensuality that has dogged Negro expression since the days of Phillis Wheatley. Miss Hurston *voluntarily* continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theatre, that is the minstrel technique that makes the “white folks” laugh. Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit

in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears. The sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought. In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy. She exploits the phase of Negro life which is 'quaint,' the phrase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the 'superior' race." (Wright 16)

There was also an attack from Alain Locke, a former teacher and early supporter of Hurston, the editor that had published her first work. It had to cut Hurston particularly deep. Writing in *Opportunity*, he posed to her, "when will the Negro novelist of maturity... come to grips with motive fiction and social document fiction? Progressive southern fiction has already banished the legend of these entertaining pseudo-primitives whom the reading public still loves to laugh with, weep over and envy. Having gotten rid of condescension, let us now get over oversimplification" (Locke 18).

Why would someone like Hurston, obviously a respected and established artist with extraordinary literary talent, gamble with her literary career in such cavalier fashion? Why would she continue to thumb her nose at the most respected and powerful leaders in the African American community? And perhaps, most importantly, why would she deliberately challenge the collective voice, cultural identity and political unity of the "New Negro movement?"

Historians have long speculated that the Black elite and many of Hurston's contemporaries may not have fully considered her unique upbringing. Her counter-culture positioning was probably established long before she first came to New York City. Hurston was born in Notasulga, Alabama in 1891, but grew up in the all-black and historic town of Eatonville, Florida, a place where her father had served as mayor, all town officials and community pillars were Black, and where most importantly, Hurston saw Black people as community and political leaders, a view atypical of the racially charged and segregated South. Eatonville, as she says in her autobiography, was "not the Black backside of a white town." Hurston was not, as most historians believe, indoctrinated in racial inferiority to the degree that most of her contemporaries might have been. Robert Hemenway wrote the first biography on Hurston in 1980. During a recent interview, he attempted to put her position into greater perspective:

"If you're a black woman or a black person of any gender in the United States of America in the first fifty or so years of the twentieth century you're going to encounter segregation, you're going to encounter racism, you're going to encounter what you could

call the ‘race problem.’ But Hurston’s point was that there’s so much more to life as a black person than just the race problem, and that’s the way whites tend to define black people, tend to define black people in terms of what’s their position on the race problem, how are they interacting with the White world. Hurston was less interested in how somebody was interacting with the white world than she was in how people were just plain living their lives. Hurston was writing about the black community from within. She wasn’t writing protests as some black writers of the time were doing. The conflicts that she ran into about her own work tended to be conflicts over why wasn’t she writing a protest novel like Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, or why was she just talking about people having a good time when we’re living in a country where full citizenship rights to black people were being denied... where black people in the south could lose their lives if they impacted on the white community in the wrong way.” (Hemenway)

Hemenway also notes that Hurston was the only major writer who had come directly from the South and had brought an “extra dimension to the Renaissance.” Her ability to, with blatant public insouciance and despite the growing wave of conformity, remain authentic to what she considered representative of her “native culture,” is indeed profound. The complexities of culture, if not controversial, were problematic and were significantly strained within the African American community during the height of the Harlem Renaissance, especially when juxtaposed against the prevailing political agenda. The dichotomy created by this newly idealized concept of culture would not just effect the writers directly associated with it, but all the writers that would be influenced by their works.

The negative reception her books drew from critics such as Locke and Wright, highlight the cultural and gendered politics of folk representation and would strongly influence the process of articulation and canonization of the African American literary tradition in the twentieth century. *The Autobiography* thus proves to be a precursor not only of the themes and concerns of the “New Negro” movement but also of the tensions and omissions that characterized it. The socio-cultural changes that gave rise to the Harlem Renaissance would dramatically alter African American modes of artistic depiction of race (Fabi 15-16).

Hurston wasn’t the only creative artist who struggled against this new agenda. Langston Hughes, who like Hurston drew upon black folk culture for much of his work, was also publicly criticized. Angela Y. Davis compares in her book *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Hurston

and other writers to the many blues singers during the time maintaining that “both artists tended to be shunned by black intellectuals who assumed that the ‘primitive’ ingredients of poor and working class black culture needed to be transcended if ‘great art’ was to be produced by people of African descent” (Davis 123). Historian Darwin Turner agrees that “although Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Wallace Thurman had mimicked the black of Harlem, they had been censured by sensitive African Americans who feared that ridicule would hamper their efforts to be accepted in the dominant culture” (Turner 110). Additionally, when Hurston and some of these same friends joined to produce a rebellious, avant-garde-like magazine they called *Fire!!*, publishing stories and poetry, the more progressive literary outlets had rejected. It only lasted one issue. A similar literary effort called *Harlem* suffered the same fate (Barksdale 472).

There is no denying the tremendous influence Renaissance elders wielded over the producing artists during the era, especially those considered contrarians. Hurston’s use of the southern aesthetic, her notorious political incorrectness and feminist orientation were targets for attack and ridicule. Historians today describe Hurston’s use of black dialect as “authentic” and “poetic.” However, Claudia Pierpont argues in her essay *American Contrarian* that it was Hurston’s use of authentic talk that lay at the root of some of the most searing criticism leveled against her. She says Renaissance framers rejected the use of black dialect “for its association with the shambling, watermelon-eating mockeries of American stage convention.” Pierpont concludes that this easy literary handling of what Hurston considered authentic talk was “dangerous business” during the 1920s and 30s (Pierpont 80).

The literary artists of the Harlem Renaissance were assigned a daunting task. They were expected to capture and present the culture and folklife of African Americans in the United States, but were to tread delicately along the lines of a predetermined cultural identity, pressured even to suppress or deny authentic and often significant elements of African American culture. This concept of “dual consciousness” or fracturing of the private and public identity dealt another blow to the already fragile “black psyche.” The concept of “double consciousness” first coined by W. E. B. Dubois in his *The Strivings of the Negro People* came some two decades prior to the jumpstart of the Harlem Renaissance in the early 1920s. This split personality, or dual consciousness, was exacerbated by white racism and by the prevailing concepts of White culture during the early twentieth century. For Dubois, an elderly statesman and one-time editor of NAACP’s *The Crisis*, the concept operated on three different fronts: “One had to do with

problems of self-definition resulting from living within a society pervaded by stereotypes and negative images that all African Americans had to confront. A second involved the exclusion of African Americans from mainstream American institutions, creating a way of life that was both ‘American and not-American.’ The third focused on internal conflicts in the individual between what was distinctly ‘African,’ which Dubois identified as an innate and powerful spirituality, and what was ‘American’” (Andrews 225).

Alain Locke’s definitive collection, *The New Negro*, sounded the alarm for one of the most ambitious cultural and political movements to come from the African American community. Hurston and many others responded, all coming to New York in 1925 to be part of a team of artisans and intellectuals committed to a campaign to reform the image of African Americans in America and the world, an image that had been skewed and maligned for centuries through the eyeglasses of White dominant culture. The selling of the “New Negro” was an almost unfathomable task, the creation of a unique black aesthetic palatable enough to penetrate the exclusive and ivory marketplace of the American economy deemed impossible. Hurston’s activism was as indistinguishable as the next member in this Black coalition—that is until she realized that significant elements of African American culture, essentially those she identified with, were being squeezed from the public sphere of this emerging Black identity. The tremendous burden of uplifting an entire race of people may have justified such aggressive and desperate measures. However, Hurston argued that there was more than one way to achieve such a goal, a position that Pierpont maintains made her the “most brazenly impious of the Harlem literary avant-garde.” She was on her own, a defunct member of the new political identity who “never fit happily within any political group.”

The indivorcable elements of culture, identity politics, black inferiority and racism all influenced and complicated the development of the African American identity, a public cultural identity that was itself evaluated and scrutinized from within. However myopic, this identity redefined the image of African Americans, not just in America but around the world, opening new opportunities in publishing, greater social access, self-determination and an elevated social consciousness—a new form of political adhesiveness that lay the groundwork for the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 60s and even today.

Using art, music and literature as agents of social and political promotion was experimental and effective with critics on both sides. The prurient effort of Renaissance framers

to try and outrun its agrarian and southern past continues to be the most problematic. What the framers would have readily accepted and regaled as a significant cultural cornerstone in African American culture in their private circle would not be acknowledged or even tolerated in the new cultural identity. Their hierarchizing of African American culture during this period in American history would ripple deep within the legacy of African American literature. Black culture and its White, competitive counterpart coexisted in a sometimes amicable, sometimes volatile American landscape, each new generation witnessing “the reemergence of cultural models for race relations.” The analysis of the convergence of these elements on multi-layered environments “provided the central paradigm for understanding not only African American but other minority literatures within a framework of cultural conflicts and differences” (Andrews 225).

Hurston’s association with black inferiority; however authentic, artistic, lyrical and beautifully represented in her literary endeavors, had a profound effect on her personal and professional life. She left New York in 1950 after false charges of child molestation against her were dropped. She contemplated suicide and quickly moved back to Florida. She wrote controversial essays and found it hard to keep a job, even as a domestic. Her books were out of print, all subsequent manuscripts rejected and she suffered for many years in financial and physical destitution. Her uncelebrated death in 1960 seemed to seal her in permanent obscurity—she was laid to rest in an unmarked grave in Fort Pierce, Florida.

CHAPTER THREE: SOUTHERN REVITALIZATION, LITERARY VALORIZATION

“There are years that ask questions and years that answer.” —Zora Neale Hurston

As the Great Depression took grip of the United States during the 30s, the desolation signed the end of the Renaissance as both interest in, the creation of, and the support for such art dissipated. Most of the writers and artists associated with the movement went back to the classroom, their creative output thwarted. Hurston’s commitment to continue writing was a great sacrifice, in financial and political terms.

Hurston, like most of the other female writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance, was “relegated to the margins of the literary history.” Her artistic endeavors and aesthetic achievements lay in the shadow of her “counter-revolutionary” status. What began with Alice Walker’s pivotal essay *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* appearing in Ms. magazine in 1974, has led to literary resurrection of Zora Neale Hurston. No longer subjected to the biases imposed by the political identity of the 1920s and 30s, contemporary observers and scholars continue to dissect Hurston’s personal and cultural identity through new “evaluative criteria,” opening Hurston and other African American literature up to greater valorization, ultimately expanding the canon of American literature.

N.Y. Nathiri, historian and director of the annual Zora Neale Hurston festival in Eatonville, Florida provides perhaps the perfect explanation for Hurston’s rise from obscurity. She says, “the sad reality about being born ahead of your time is that you have to die and others have to come afterwards to appreciate what you were doing or how you’ve dedicated your life.” This seems fitting commentary considering how maligned, ostracized and unpopular Hurston was just a decade before her death, then considering the frenzy of scholarship surrounding her today. Factor in what bohemian Richard Bruce Nugent called in the preface of the 1982 reprint of *Fire!!* “the newly renewed interest in past things Black” (Nugent 1) and what we witness today is a revival of classical southern culture, from literature and music to art.

Hurston’s great interest in and commitment to highlighting the folkways of black rural Southerners has enriched African American cultural history, which in turn enriched American cultural history. Had it not been for her careful and meticulous documentation and preservation,

this rich material may have been lost forever. Nathiri calls her a pioneer, a preservationist who has “made the world the rural black Southerner known to the hundreds of thousands of people who have read her material.” Nathiri adds that Hurston’s work “plays a seminal role in our understanding of the first 40 years of the twentieth century from a rural Southern black perspective.”

One notable reason Hurston and other African American writers are slowly continuing to expand the canon of American literature may have everything to do with the mere passage of time. Much of the material Hurston created within the artistically constrictive environment of the Harlem Renaissance has transcended the governing rubric that objectified and maligned it. James Weldon Johnson’s political model for dispelling racism and cultural inferiority through the production of literature is far less applicable today as interest in cultural preservation overrides sociopolitical posturing. And although “African American scholars have long been confronted with a white-dominated academic establishment unwilling to recognize the literary value of black literature,” (Fabi 2) valorization and acceptance of African American literature continues to grow.

Spurred on by the critical success of contemporary artists like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Randall Kenan and Edward P. Jones, the repositioning of Hurston’s work “from folk novel to canonic icon, from a lowly place on the hierarchy to a central place at the very top, from popular culture to high culture” (Corse/Griffin 190) leads a resurgence of classical southern literature.

Another startling development concerning southern identity is the way it is being embraced by youths in the hip hop community. On a recent episode of BET’s highly rated teen music video/interview program *106 and Park*, rap star David Banner, who’s socially conscious rap lyrics regale slain civil rights heroes from his “beloved Mississippi” and examine southern racism and politics with optimism and pride, was welcomed with great enthusiasm by young audience members. The teenagers chanted and wore tee shirts paying tribute to Emmitt Till, Medgar Evers and southern inspired lyrics. Southern rappers like Ludacris, Outcast, Arrested Development and Nappy Roots have invigorated the folk music genre, further permeating the musical landscape with their distinctive southern sound. With repetitive chants, back-porch grunts, gospel overtones, and down-home simple lyrics, this music offers striking parallels to the folk songs contained in Hurston’s *Mules and Men*.

According to the 2000 census, the images that were once associated with living in the South seem to be re-imagined as Blacks in record numbers are returning to southern states such as Florida, Georgia and South Carolina. Statistics and data gathered reveal that “Blacks were attracted by the South’s booming economy, low density living, warmer climate, the existence of a growing middle-class, historic roots” and probably most significantly, “an improved racial climate” (Frey 1).

The South has been re-imagined, re-evaluated, and re-defined. Hurston’s efforts to create and support aesthetic diversity within the political mainframe of the Harlem Renaissance has played a significant role in the continuity of the southern identity in American cultural history. It is an image rooted in the horrors of slavery, bolstered by white racist ideology, maligned by early civil rights proponents, and finally an image lifted in racial pride. Hurston is one of the most influential, widely read and celebrated personalities to come out of the Harlem Renaissance. Her work is the subject of ongoing scholarly review; her life and legacy spurring festivals, plays, lectures, biographies, radio and television documentaries, postal stamps and movies. She is recognized as one the most significant collectors and interpreters of African American folklore, a revolutionary artist and champion for America’s southernmost antecedents.

CONCLUSION

The paradigm of the new political identity that grew out of the Harlem Renaissance movement, called for a dissection of Black culture—an aesthetic sacrifice Hurston was not willing to make. Her rebellious, non-compliance became an inescapable component of her personal and literary career, and the source of much dissension among her fellow sophisticates. In the face of stinging criticism and persistent opprobrium, Hurston realized her extraordinary and unprecedented goals of preserving and presenting the elegant and rugged beauty of the rural, southern African American.

Hemenway asserts that, “Hurston was less interested in how somebody was interacting with the white world than she was in how people were just plain living their lives. Hurston was writing about the Black community from within.” Her community was made up of the elements and sensibilities of her beloved and colorful Eatonville, not the idealized and distorted concept to which Renaissance elders had prescribed. Although, Pierpont reminds us that Hurston “never fit happily within any political group,” she remained faithful to her constituency of turpentine storytellers, porchyard liars and blues singers. If she was the “most brazenly impious of the Harlem literary avant-guard,” it has helped to make her one of the most noted, recognized and admired personalities to be associated with it.

A retrospective glance allows clear sight of Hurston’s extraordinary contributions to American anthropology and folklore, her collections of folk materials, novels and essays a testament to her incredible prolificacy. She challenged the parameters of the Harlem Renaissance and has similarly compromised the impenetrable exterior of the canon of American literature. Since the Alice Walker led revival of the 70s, Hurston’s stock has appreciated to eminent status.

The literary world has finally come to realize the historical, social and cultural significance of Zora Neale Hurston. According to Walker, Hurston was a trailblazer, a black woman who “followed her own road, believed in her own gods, pursued her own dreams and refused to separate herself from ‘common’ people” (Collins 267). She was an artist “ahead of her time,” a trailblazer who was almost supernatural in her ability to “combine effectively the

knowledge she acquired through her lifelong exposure to African American cultural practices with her scholarly work in the discipline of anthropology—a rare and challenging feat, given the traditional Eurocentric biases of her field” (Davis 155-59).

After a lifetime of public and professional scrutiny, her work emerges as some of the most profound and accurate documentation of rural, southern folklore existing today. Hurston’s embracing of the rural agrarian, an aesthetic sought out for elimination by the cultural sphere of the Harlem Renaissance, and despite unrelenting criticism from the most powerful and respected Black elite, her folklore collections, ethnographies, effective use of authentic dialogue and African American cultural traditions has led to her posthumous canonical status.

Her documenting of southern Blacks enjoys a historical significance no different than the early anthropologists that recorded their existence on prehistoric cave walls, providing a glimpse, perhaps in the most antiqued of means, at the events and the surrounding plants and animals that shaped their precarious lives. “Folklore is the arts of the people,” Hurston wrote, “before they find out that there is any such thing as art.” Today she is a literary heroine who continues to expand the canon of American literature, a trailblazer who traveled to some of the most remote places of the United States during the early part of the twentieth century to collect and interpret the songs, stories and folklore of her people. She is an anthropologist and preservationist who stood in defiance and defense of those she loved and respected most—those she called “farthest down.”

PART TWO: FICTOCRITISICM

Stone Mill Creek

PREFACE

This part of my thesis makes use of a literary form called fictocriticism developed by anthropologist Michael Taussig. This genre allowed me the liberty to explore the rural Black southern aesthetic in its broadest spectrum. The fictocritical work *Stone Mill Creek* combines four years of ethnographic study, historical accounts, local folklore traditions and cultural commentary in nonlinear narratives. The chapters trace the folk-lives of a “once upon a time” group of Black farmers who settled in the Florida panhandle around the 1820s and allows for more than a theoretical glance at the vernaculars, themes, ideals and symbols representative of those Hurston called “farthest down.” The semi-fictive language in *Stone Mill Creek* is a living, breathing cultural artifact and however reductive, is another distinct, self-defined and documented voice of the Black southern identity.

CHAPTER ONE: ALICE 1958

She cut across the front yard. Both Champ and Rocksy ran towards her, their tails wagging with excitement. She didn't brake, her right knee hitting Champ in the nose as he yelped and fell to the ground spinning. She started across a freshly cut field, the soft earth no match for her determined feet and legs as she turned toward the creek, and then down the narrow trail beaten clean by years of bare feet. She cut every corner, the bushes slapping and stinging her face. She could hear Champ and Rocksy barking back at the house, and the heavy thud of her heart beating loud in her chest. The dogs knew better than to follow. She pulled the small bag of clothes closer to her side, picking up speed as she heard the dogs barking again. Their barks seemed closer, but they knew better than to follow. Her senses were heightened, as panic took over every stride, her knees lifting like hot, smoking pistons. It was today or never as her heart made its way to her ears, thumping heavy near her brain. She ran past the faint shadows cast by a row of massive pine trees. They stood like guardians at the front of the 280 acres of farmland. She began to smell the dampness of the creekbed, hear the ripples of the tiny, dark currents that carried themselves along with occasional clumps of froth. They were the same currents that hid alligators and bass, the tadpoles she'd played with as a child. She could hear her breath that came like a rushing wind and the contact her feet made with the hard ground as she used the last sunrays of the day to make out a figure on the other side of the creek. She didn't look back until she had dove into the water, still holding the bag of clothes, this time above her head. Her cold, wet body was numb as she vigorously fought the dark creek water, the last obstacle of the evening she ran away from home.

Running was her only option. She couldn't fly away like the guinea fowl had done weeks ago, soaring over the 7-foot high wire fence like eagles. It had been her turn to render the birds flightless when she decided instead to only trim the tips of their strong slate grey and speckled white feathers. It was just the chance they needed. Alice sat by herself on a wooden chop block in the middle of the guinea coop covered in feather tips, the sharp chicken shears still in her hand. She could see the optimism in their eyes as they clucked and strutted around the

coop, their bald necks and heads red with excitement. She looked beyond the wire fence at the approaching dusk, her patience evaporating with the daylight. The deep, orange glow of the setting sun disengaged her senses as time stopped then traveled in reverse. The loud commotion in the coop faded as she began to sift through a life that appeared in dreary shadows of brown and black. She could smell the nauseating fumes of turpentine, buck, slop jars, camphor and outhouses. And then a lifetime of images flashed before her eyes in seconds. When she was finally able to open her eyes, she knew. She took the blunt end of the shears, and scratched A-L-i-C-e on the inside of her forearm. Blood dripped from the shears and ran down her arm, mixing with the unforgiving night and the silence of the roosting guineas.

Just as fate had conspired against her, she now took vengeance on the dark, swirling current. Each one-handed stroke chopped like an axe through the water, the opposing wake no longer an enemy. She didn't stop paddling until her knee hit the sandy bottom on the other side of the creek. Frank smiled as she waddled out of the water, then looked up from the hidden shoal at the parallel planks that outlined Stone Mill Creek bridge. The turpentiners had ended their workday hours ago and were congregated along the top and at both ends. They would linger until the last jug of moonshine was finished, then drift away in sections. Alice barely noticed them as she got in the car. She put the damp bag of clothes on the floorboard, noticing the healing scars that spelled out her name in white, fresh, new skin that would take months to darken. She pulled the wet blouse over her head and grabbed a towel that was folded nicely on the back seat to dry her head, back and breasts. Alice finally untied her bag and pulled out a fresh but damp blouse. She then removed her skirt, leaning her shoulder against the plastic seat to lift herself up. Warm air poured out of the two vents Frank had repositioned for her benefit. Within a few minutes, Alice sat in a dry change of clothes now waiting for her newfound freedom to overwhelm her. Frank started the car. The highlights of the car flashed on and immediately caught the attention of the few turpentiners that still roamed the bridge above. Dust poured from the rear of the Ford Fairlane as Frank sped up the embankment and onto West Creek Road. Alice looked back at the fuming dust that reflected in red from the rear lights, and then at Frank. He smiled then turned his attention back to the steering wheel as the Ford made its way along the dark, narrow, winding road that led to Wewahitchka.

There was no moonlight. The uneasy darkness struggled for balance, waiting for the

glimmer of some reluctant star, the chirp of a wayward cricket or two. But the night held its breath. The old house sat in an uncomfortable silence, putting its remaining, restless occupants in a prolonged daze. Champ and Rocksy twisted underneath. Only the loud tick of Thomas's wind-up alarm clock could be heard above the new complexities of the two-roomed wooden house. Julia lay alone in the bed she had shared a lifetime with her sister. Ruthie had been hurting all day; the pain emanating from the pit of her stomach made her mouth dry and her head ache. She moved as far as she could to the opposite side of the bed she shared with her mother, holding her whimpers behind clinched teeth. The room was black, but did nothing to mask her pain. Her body shook with spasms between flashing visions of her sister. Thomas was in his bed alone, intoxicated and completely oblivious to how drastically his world had changed. No one had said anything, but everybody knew. It was the least of Ruthie's worries as she pulled her knees up to the fetal position and whimpered again. The scream of a newborn finally broke the agonizing silence.

The house on Parker Avenue creaked with newness and space. The smell of fresh paint filled the living room where Alice sat staring out of the large front window. She sat in the lone chair, its only companion a sturdy, wooden coffee table that attempted to fill the middle of the floor. She'd gotten Frank off to work at 7:30, leaving her with nothing but loneliness and boredom to soak up the remainder of the morning. There were no cows to milk, no goats to herd back to the house, no fields to plant or tend to, no wood to chop. She roamed into the kitchen, turned the knob again on the gas stove and it hissed as the fire popped and circled around the element of the burner. It seemed so unnatural, but it was fire. It still amazed her. The menu of the day circled in her mind, but she turned the stove off, it was just 8 a.m. There was a washing machine on the back of the house, along with three small fig trees, two miniature peach trees, a pear tree, a scuppernong arbor, and a small area for a garden.

The house gloated with amenities, but Alice was reluctant to indulge. This was Pearl's property and it paid to be cautious. Horror stories circled about how she would evict tenants for paying rent a week late, if she disapproved of a tenant's guests or if renters showed any lack of respect for the property. Had it not been for the money, she never would have rented the house. Relative or not, it was this fear that made Alice get on Frank any time he disturbed anything. He should have known better anyway and was in no way a stranger to Pearl's vengeance. It was he

and his brother Richard who pulled her off Ms. Charlotte after Pearl jumped at her across a pew. Gossip of some inappropriate behavior between Ms. Charlotte and her husband had circled the church like wildfire and Pearl, armed with a four-inch pocket knife, meant to extinguish it one early Sunday morning. No blood was spilled and service haphazardly moved on once Mother Jones came to after fainting. It was also Ms. Charlotte's last Sunday at New Hope Missionary Baptist Church.

Good thing Miss Cassie was halfway to heaven and wouldn't have to witness with her own eyes the disdain that would develop between her two eldest children. She lay still, looking up at her wood boarded ceiling as a vigil of family members surrounded her small room. Her lips moved in what seemed like endless prayer, even as Ephraim and Mr. Kent lifted her bed and turned it east and west. Pearl hadn't left her side. Thomas and Lewis rotated in shifts as their mother fought in her last days to make peace with the world. As she waged through the last night, her lips stopped. And when she could see the first light of day peeping from either side and top of her bedroom window, without fuss or fight, she allowed herself to slip away. An air of finality bellowed up from under her crisscrossed bed and the weight of her soul pressed on the world no more. What was left was carried out of the house, feet first. Her property was split amicably. Pearl acquired the house, the plot it sat on and everything in it—her clothes, jewelry and kitchen utensils. Thomas and Lewis divided her tools, farming equipment and livestock. But Thomas knew it was just a matter of time before summer would eventually give way to fall and sure enough there was Pearl leaning against his split-rail fence post. He looked up at her as he continued with his pitchfork, distributing hay into an adjacent stable.

“Hey Sister. How you?”

“Gettin' 'long.” She moved slowly, eyeing her mother's old mule Gracie. “Ya know Miss Cassie was shol crazy 'bout that mule. It's a shame she won't be able ta rest the las' of her days.”

“Las' days? That mule still got plenty use in her.”

“Thomas you know that mule too old ta do ya any good.”

“Well, we'll see,” Thomas said, still piling hay.

“I went out ta Miss Cassie barn and noticed them two cast-iron kettles gone.”

“I have 'em.”

“Me and Miss Cassie cooked together wit' them pots my whole life.”

Thomas finally stopped; the pile of hay was just the right thickness. “Sister, she was my momma too.”

Before he could say anything else, Pearl had turned back towards her new acreage, wobbling slightly over her left weak ankle. It wasn’t long before Gracie died and what remained of their already strained relationship lay unraveled with frazzled ends exposed.

Alice stood at her gas stove stirring at a pot that boiled on the back eye, then turned again to the ironing board to finish pressing the bedsheets and pillow cases. Two neat, crisp stacks of linen sat on the countertop. They stood like tall rectangles, one a little smaller than the other. She guided the hot tip of the iron deep into the fabric, paying added attention to the creases and corners. As she repositioned the sheet and put down another thin layer of starch, her mind drifted off to a place that had occupied all space and time for as long as she could remember. The iron hissed and a growl came from its belly as a large cloud of steam rose then quickly dissipated. She hoped her running hadn’t made it worse for her mother and sisters. She couldn’t help thinking that it had. The iron hissed again as water boiled inside. It would be hard for Ruthie to leave with that baby; Julia would have a much better chance. Alice heard a noise that seemed to come from the front of the house. Maybe it was some of the neighborhood kids. She pressed the last corner of a bedsheet and then lifted it to fold. She uprighted the iron and turned the knob to “off.” She returned to the stove, shut it off as well, and moved the simmering pot to the center of the stovetop. Alice went to the front window and looked out at the Ford that sat in the driveway. She didn’t see anyone and went back to the kitchen. She steadied the neat stack of sheets in one arm and then put the smaller square of pillowcases in the other. As she passed the front window, she stared at the Ford until she turned into the bedroom. The linen chest sat with its mouth open at the foot of the bed. She kneeled, putting the fresh stack of linens in the vacant space she’d created earlier, the pillowcase stack she divided and centered on top of the sheets. She went back to the living room and looked out at the neighborhood children playing in and along the street as they waited for the morning schoolbus, then her eyes were back on the Ford. A knock at the front door startled her. It was Pearl who seemed to come from nowhere. Alice opened the door and Pearl pulled open the screen door and walked in. She looked quickly to inspect the interior, then looked back to Alice with approval.

“Jus’ came ta check on ya, see how you was doin’,” she said.

“Doin’ good,” Alice responds.

“Y’all married yet?”

“Not yet,” Alice said back slowly and slightly embarrassed.

“Need ta hurry ‘fore he git too comfortable and you find yaself back on the creek wit’ that crazy daddy of yours.”

Alice was lost in a response that never made it to her lips. Pearl went on. “I felt sorry for ya. That’s why when Frank came and told me what y’all had planned, I told him y’all could rent my house. I hope it was a wise choice on my part. Miss Cassie gave me this house and the one in Port St. Joe and me and Ephraim fixed them up. I always liked you Alice, you even look like Mother, more Cason than Steward. You know I named ya. You was the first girl.” Pearl paused as though she was allowing Alice more time to take it all in. “What you gonna do with yo’self today?”

“I miss Julia and Ruthie already.”

“I don’t know why you miss Ruthie. She never worked hard as you and Julia. Got that baby from Richard; guess she know now babies don’t come from lightered stumps.”

Alice’s face stiffened with discomfort. Pearl paused again, examining the impact of her words, but the pause didn’t last long.

“At least they still alive. Still right out there on the creek,” she said angrily. “Not like my brother Isaac, gone forever.” Pearl’s thin lips tightened and her brow furrowed with the hint of an emotion Alice had never witnessed.

Alice put her head up. “Who’s Isaac?”

“My brother, the one daddy took from us when we was children. He was named after my uncle. You know my daddy died when my brother was six years old, we was all children at the time. Miss Cassie said that when daddy was alive, he would run his walkin’ stick along the outside of the house befo’ comin’ in fa supper. So that mornin’ when Isaac told us that daddy had came ta visit him the night before and wanted him to come with ‘em, Miss Cassie dropped a bowl of grits on Lewis. She had heard that stick against the house that same evening. Lewis almost 45 years old and I don’t think he done had a spoon of grits since. Miss Cassie asked Isaac, ‘What did ya say?’ He said he had ta think on it. Two days later, he was found dead in his bed. Miss Cassie was never the same, but I guess none of us was the same after then. That’s why I got all these houses. Miss Cassie must’ve moved us fo’ times, tryin’ to keep one step

ahead of Daddy. Didn't matter to her. She'd find a old house or get one fa next to nothin' and we be movin'. Miss Cassie could fix up a house in a matter of days—nailin' and sawin' like a man would. Thomas used ta tease Miss Cassie, say she was as irritable as a settin' hen, couldn't sit still fa a minute. But she didn't want him takin' any more of us." Pearl had softened to the point of a little smile that brightened her.

"Daddy ain't never told us about havin' a brother named Isaac," Alice was able to squeeze out. Pearl stiffened.

"Course he didn't, too busy drinkin' everythang but water."

Pearl cut hard and paused again. She looked her niece over and when she made it to her eyes she looked away. She wasn't ready to see the new woman that stood before her. Remnants of girlhood were still twisted into her long, loose braids and lined the angles of her thin hips. With each lash Pearl delivered, Alice was able to compensate and before long, her words would carry no power at all. Before rendering herself totally powerless, she decided to withdraw.

"Well, like I said, I was just comin' to see how you was doin' and let you know how everybody was fairin'. I'll git out yo' way and let ya get back to ya business. That washin' machine out back almost brand new, got a wringer on it too."

"Thank you Auntie," Alice squeezed again.

She locked both doors behind Pearl and returned to the lone chair that sat in the living room. Pearl had left much for her to ponder and since she had the time, she made good use of it. Frank mentioned getting married after they'd left the farm and she wondered when he would propose. She wondered if he ever would and what she would do if he didn't. Going back was no longer an option, the one thing she knew for sure. She was soon overwhelmed by a mire of questions that stacked and overlapped in her head as she made her way back to the front window. She stood motionless as memory tugged at her, pulling first her body and soul. A school bus roared by the house like a train and finally her mind reluctantly followed.

Julia pumped the water as quickly as she could. Alice threw the last bale of hay over the fence to the cows and then went into the barn for the chicken feed, untwisting the croaker sack with one flick of her wrist. The two tin gallon-sized cans clinked together as she ran to the grassless clearing just adjacent to the hen house. The chickens came running towards the sound. She quickly scattered both cans then ran to put them back, twisting the croaker sack down upon

itself. Julia had filled a five gallon bucket by the time she'd returned.

"Alice help me wit' this," she said.

Each grabbed hold to one side of the handle and made their way into the cow stable, the old crickety wooden latch close behind them. They leaned the bucket against the top of the wooden trough and tilted it up until water gushed near the top lip. A school bus horn blew, ricocheting off the tops of the tall pines. Julia threw the pail back near the pump as both girls took off down the trail just in front of the house, running toward West Creek Road. The latch of the stable door clicked hard shut behind them as Ruthie bursted through the front screen door to join the race to catch the bus.

"Y'all wait!" she yelled ahead.

They all ran faster as the dust trail from the bus was high enough over the pine trees to see. The bus driver put on the brakes as he began to make them out between the trees. The bus roared to a stop, the dust still rolling from underneath. Ruthie was able to join her sisters as they waited for the bus door to open. Julia stepped up first.

"You run like a deer," the busdriver said to her. She smiled back.

"You run like a rabbit," he said to Alice as she made it to the second step and started down the middle aisle.

"And you run like a squirrel." Ruthie was still breathing hard as she followed Alice and Julia, holding the ends of her short, little feedsack dress.

The bus door unfolded to close and the pressure of the brakes hissed as it pulled off. They sat together eating their fried potatoes and biscuits as the bus weaved through the woods. It didn't stop again for several miles. The bus was full of chatter and dusty students by the time it turned onto Highway 71 to begin the five mile trek to Carver High School in Wewahitchka. They passed through surrounding subdivisions with painted houses, yards with grass and manicured shrubs, and street signs with neat lettering that teased and taunted as the sisters gazed out on a foreign world. They huddled together just like always, compensating, cushioning and loving one another.

When Alice was able to refocus her eyes, she was staring again at the red and white Ford Fairlane that sat in the driveway. Had it not been for the fact that she had never driven a car before, she would have been behind the wheel, cruising as those who lived in town called it,

driving up, down and around for no apparent reason other than to burn gasoline. It was just what she needed, no horse to hitch to a wagon, no hard, wooden uncomfortable seats. She went to the kitchen and grabbed the keys, determined to drive or die trying.

The sun was just beginning to warm the day as she started out on her morning drive across town to Iola, a long forgotten community that sat on the western bank of the Apalachicola River and a few miles north of Wewahitchka. She could drive with one hand now, loosely letting the wheel slide back and forth between her fingers. She turned off Second Street and onto Lake Grove Road. The sharp left curve was no longer a test of her maneuverability as she easily stayed in her lane, this time at almost 35 miles an hour. The vegetation gradually became thicker as she drove along her weekly path. This was the first time she'd noticed the massive weavings of vine and cypress trees that kept out almost all of the morning light from the innermost dense vegetation that covered the swamp floor. Water filled the ditches on both sides of the road, backup from the river's floodplain that spread many miles and in all directions. The gullies along this seasonal flood zone were sprinkled with the occasional angler, cane poles bobbing up and down for bream, shell cracker and crappie.

The bridge was just ahead, Iola Landing to the other side. The rotting shell that was once the general mercantile stood almost fifty feet off the main road. In the 1930s, it would have been swollen with shipping crates, pulleys, rope, box repair equipment, nails, brackets, and braces; the hub of activity for both Gulf and Calhoun counties. On an early morning like this, the store would have been crowded with business—loaders and shippers tending steamboats that lined up like marauding ants to have their contents unloaded onto mule-drawn wagons on their way to Wewahitchka, passing wagons headed in the opposite direction towards steamships loaded with turpentine, oranges, molasses, cotton and tupelo honey. Like many of the other small communities that sprang up along the main water thoroughfares during the time when cotton reigned king of the South, Iola had died a slow death as connectors to the ports of the eastern seaboard and the international ports of Great Britain were rerouted. Back to back freezes would follow, driving orange production farther south as apiary rose to become a prominent industry. The tupelo trees bloomed endlessly during the early spring months, their white blossoms hypnotizing the greedy bees to submission. The light amber honey which never granulated or became rancid, was the base ingredient in the best medicinal concoctions.

Alice pulled off the main road into one of the coveys to turn the car around, a patch of cypress trees stood tall and proud on her left side. The road was wet and muddy, the wheels slipping to catch traction. She made a u-turn in the dirt then rolled straight forward. The lucky group of cypress trees with Spanish moss hanging from their arms like long grey tears were all that were left. Most of the timber had been cleared many years ago, cut and floated down the Apalachicola River to saw mills, alongside the steamboats that shipped thousands of barrels of turpentine and resin. Industry had gotten caught in a wrinkle of time, lost in rotting boards and lumber and old metal signs that had been overcome by rust. A historic marker with green and metal etchings that regaled the era, was planted at the far end of the bridge. It reminded the old folks of the area's more prominent times and added to the further despair of the youths who also suffered from the economic destitution.

There was, however, one small remnant of industry and it filled an old flooded cypress swamp called Dead Lake, aptly named for the still water and lifeless stumps that twisted up from its shallows. Fish hunters traveled miles from all directions to this haven for one of two things, supper or sport—something for the record books. They came in droves, dotting the lake edges with boats, cars, tackle boxes, reel and rods, fish coolers, lounge chairs and endless cane poles.

Alice looked in her rear view mirror at the small group of cypress trees as she headed back over the bridge to leave Iola. Hugh Johnson had abandoned his poles and waved to stop her. She pulled off the road and put the window down as the warm morning air rushed in.

“Gu’l what you doin’ way out hea?”

“Just drivin’,” her smile filled with pride.

“I knowed I seen Frank’s car pass by hea a few minutes ago and I knowed he was at work.”

“Yea, since George got that job at the mill, him and Frank take turns drivin’ so that leave me with the car a few days a week,” she explained.

“How’s Thomas and ya maw?”

“Everybody fine.”

“I been meanin’ ta git out there myself, got some business ta tend ta, I’m sho’ you heard.” He leaned down and into the window of the car. The smell of fish, bait and alcohol mixed with his breath as Alice studied his coal-grey skin and ashen lips. “Alice, I ain’t tryin’ to start no trouble wit’ you and yo’ folks. I wants you ta know that from the start.”

She nodded as he continued. The smell of snuff had mixed with the liquor at his lips.

“I been knowin’ ya folks since we was all churin’. I know ya’ll tryin’ to protect Lillian, but ever’body got the right ta know who they folks is.”

“Mr. Hugh who you talkin’ ‘bout?”

“Gu’l ain’t nobody ever told you ‘bout a chil’ I had with yo’ aunt Lillian that she give ‘way?”

“No sir,” she said in astonishment. “When?”

“She should be ‘bout the same age as you is.”

“Mr. Hugh I don’t know nothin’ ‘bout this!”

“Well, whether she still out there in the wurl still or not, I feel like somebody oughta told me somethin’!”

“I think you right Mr. Hugh, but momma and daddy ain’t gonna do nothin’ ta git in the way of it. You entitled ta know if its concernin’ you.”

“Now Alice, I been knownin’ you since you was a baby and I know you know somethin’ and you ain’t sayin’ nothin’, now that just ain’t right.”

“Mr. Hugh, like you said, I was jus’ in the world myself when all of this was goin’ on and ain’t nobody told me nothin’ either.”

“Well, I can’t do nothin’ but ask,” he said with despair, wetness forming in his eyes. Alice didn’t know if it was the liquor, his emotions, or some weird combination of the two. “I kept you long ‘nough. Tell Frank I’ll try ta get by and see ya’ll as soon as I can. Ya’ll over at Pearl’s place?”

“Yes sir,” Alice said winding up the window. “Take care now.”

“You do the same,” he said as Alice checked for cars and pulled back onto the road.

She took a deep breath, imagining the face of a cousin she’d never seen and then how she would tell Frank she could drive. Maybe she would slip it in when she told him Julia and Ruthie had left Stone Mill Creek as well. She would tell him how her daddy had come home from town while Julia was out in the pasture tending Mrs. Henrietta’s cows. As he pulled up to the front yard, Julia looked up to see Mrs. Henrietta step out of the cab of the truck while their mother had to climb down from the back of the pickup. Julia had worked the fields her whole life, but the scorching hot of the sun would never compare to the heat that swelled up in her that day. It singed her neck and back and burned red in her eyes. She picked up a stick and threw it at one of

the cows. The cow jumped with fright as the herd scattered. Julia walked all the way to Highway 71 before catching Burwell Scott to Blountstown. The cows would graze new territory in the same direction before one was hit by an ice cream truck. Burwell was glad to save her and the rest of the cows because she had threatened to kill them all.

She'd tell him how Julia returned to the little house a few months later to pack what little she had with her fiancé Grady Border. The air was thick and few words were uttered. "Can you feed her?" was the only question Thomas asked as Julia packed the last of her things in a small chest. With such a propensity to argue, that was all he said. Maybe it was because he had never seen that level of disgust in his daughter's eyes, or maybe he was still thinking about all the beef that was lost on the road the day Julia left. Sadie said nothing. Then Alice could tell him how Ruthie left a few months later, telling her one-year old to play hide and seek as he giggled and crouched down in the backseat of John and Letty Simmon's car. The dusk hid the trail of dust that rose up from the back of the car as they escaped the grey woods. However, Alice decided she would tell him, and it would have to be tonight. For good measure, she figured she was far along enough to let her husband know that he would be a father by the end of the year.

They put her off right at the corner of Ol' Man Larson's 350 acre cornfield that lay between Wewahitchka and Brownbottom. Letty waved out of the passenger window as John pulled away and when she looked back, Ruthie had disappeared within the high corn stalks. Ruthie walked with short but competent steps, constantly looking over her shoulder at corn that reached in every direction. The tall water-tower that stood at the center of the compound was her compass. She hoisted Calvin higher on her hips after every glance back. He held on. Occasionally, she shifted him to the opposite side to give the hand that held her carrybag a chance to restock fresh blood. Ahead she could see the long row of shotgun shacks that lined the outermost perimeter of the field, and a few of the residents who had stopped whatever they were doing when they noticed her. Jim Crow had whipped the life out of her new neighbors, leaving them completely down and out. Not because they were sharecroppers and turpentiners and not because their wives were maids in the houses of the few well to do white families in Wewahitchka. It was because hope hadn't settled down to the depths of the hole that had been dug for them long ago. She was one of them for now. Their hollow, cautious eyes followed her as she made her way up the rickety steps, across the deteriorating porch to the loose doorknob

and finally into her new home.

She attempted to settle herself in the small shack, unrolling the hard mattress that sat atop the wire box spring. She pulled a sheet from her bag and with one hand, the other still holding on to Calvin, she stretched it across the mattress. She could then put him down, reaching again into her bag for a fresh cloth diaper. There was a fireplace that was too large for the small one-room shack. It had a firepot and poker and soot spread out to each side and up, tapering off just below the mantle. A kerosene lamp sat on top alongside a large box of waterproof matches. Ruthie looked over the walls that had been patched with old newspapers, making out headlines of events she had no knowledge of. Her eyes made their way down the ragged walls to the wood boarded floor that was so worn, large cracks shone all the way through to the ground below. Ruthie would tend to them later. Her work in the fields would pay her room and board, but she knew she'd need more than that to escape the same fate that befell her new neighbors. As Calvin suckled at his mother's breast, she allowed her feet to reoperate for the trek back across the cornfield to search for additional work. Within the next hour, and with Calvin resting in the cloth tote that wrapped around her shoulders and back, Ruthie quickly made amends with the corn and was on her way into town.

Wewahitchka sat at the point where Highways 22 and 71 intersected to form a T. The small town square was essentially a courthouse and sheriff office with a jailhouse. The post office was a 30 x 10 foot box that sat between the two. Small shops and businesses spread out in all three directions from the intersection. Ruthie started out at Pear Street and planned to make her way up to Main, although she hoped to find work long before then. There were fewer prominent houses to the other side and even fewer chances of finding work. But by the time she'd made it to Third Street, despair pulled across her shoulders. The weight on her back didn't help. Most didn't trust Blacks in their houses or already had help. Her mind began to search out other employment opportunities; however she knew that she was exhausting her only real chance for work. The lack of a husband or just not having a man for that matter had lessened her already limited choices. She turned onto Second Street and stopped on the corner to wipe the sweat from her brow. She looked back at Calvin who was still sound asleep. There was a dressmaker's shop on the corner. The door opened and two patrons exited, quickly noticing the girlish looking mother. Both women paused with a stare filled with disdain before they were able to continue on. Ruthie collected herself and with her eyes straight forward, she pressed on,

up one side of the street and down the other. Her pace had slowed to a mope as she neared a big white house with windows trimmed in teal green. A screened porch stretched across the front with four whitewashed rocking chairs. She had been careful of dogs and often waited for the alarm of barks before proceeding onto any residential property. In the absence of any alarm, she proceeded down the narrow rock walkway that curved up to the front steps. Two big sycamores with their white shedding bark provided shade to the right of the house. To the left were two flower beds with an array of the most colorful flowers she'd ever seen. When she looked back to the porch, she noticed a middle-aged woman with wisps of grey and brown hair sitting in the rocking chair that sat closest to the front door. She had been watching the whole time and met Ruthie at the screen door.

“Ma’am I’m lookin’ fo’ work and can do jus’ about anythin’ you might need me ta do.”

She didn’t answer at first, tilting her head to get a better look at the sleeping baby that rocked on her back. “What you got there?”

“That’s my boy Calvin, he a year old now.”

She stared a bit more then spoke again. “Come on the porch hea and let me git you a chair.”

When she returned with a wooden fold chair, Ruthie was still standing on the porch just in front of the screen door. “Have a seat hea and rest yourself for a bit. That’s quite a load you carryin’.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“Who your folks?”

“The Casons from out ta Stone Mill Creek.”

“Can’t say I know them,” the woman said, now eyeing the baby. “Who is his daddy?”
Ruthie answered.

“I guess I don’t know him either. Who his folks?”

Ruthie answered again.

“Now I know Simon Jennings and Mrs. Willie Mae Jennings. Them his people?” she asked as if checking references.

“Yes Ma’am.”

“Can’t pay you much ya know, but it seems you need the help.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“Well can you start on Saturday? We can start with the linens and I aim to put up some

vegetables. Be here bright and early.”

“Yes Ma’am,” Ruthie said in a labored exhale as she turned towards the screen door. She made her way back across the rock walkway and then the long journey home.

The next morning, Ruthie was at Mrs. Capps’s front porch before sunup. She had washed all the linens and had the clothesline flapping with big sheets of white when Mrs. Capps got back from town. Ruthie moved on to the kitchen and within an hour of acclimating herself, a big pot of green beans were blanching on the stove. The glass mason jars were sterilizing in another, loosely and individually wrapped in old fabric to prevent them from cracking together in the rapid boiling water.

“Girl, how you work with that baby on your back like that? You move jus’ like he ain’t there.”

“Jus’ use to it I guess.”

“Take him off and let me see him. You need a break anyhow. Go and git that wood chair from the pantry and bring it here.” Mrs. Capps sat at the table.

Ruthie untied her makeshift sling and handed the baby to her new boss. She did as instructed, came back with the sturdy chair from the day before and sat across from Mrs. Capps who was making play with the baby while rubbing in his black, curly hair.

“Fine boy you got here. Where’s his daddy?”

“Here in Wewa, over on Methodist hill.”

“You’ve taken up down there in Brownbottom. Guess you lookin’ ta git tied up with Ole Man Larson.”

“No Ma’am. Don’t plan to be there past this season. I done worked in the fields long ‘nough already,” Ruthie said reaching back for her baby.

“Well, it’s a good walk over hea from Brownbottom, so I’ll drive over and meet ya at the corner on the weekends.”

“Yes Ma’am.” Ruthie paused. “Do you know where Parker Avenue is?”

“Yes, it’s over there right off Highway 22. That’s a good walk as well. You got business over there?”

“I mean ta git over and see my sister. It’s been a while since I see’d her and I need ta let her know where I landed.”

“I understand. Family is sometimes all we got, course ya know Brownbottom ain’t no

place for a child ta be brought up.”

“Yes Ma’am,” she responded, abruptly ending her break. She reassembled her sling and was soon back at the stove determined to make the best of her first day. She worked almost to sunset, and when all of the laundry was done and folded and 20 sparkling jars of warm greenbeans lined the countertop to cool, she set off. The top rim of the orange setting sun was just above the front rows of cornstalks when she parted the long slender leaves for passage. Once their greens and light browns stretched out in all directions around her, she took out the crisp twenty, rubbed it between her fingers and then pushed it back into her bra.

Nathan pulled up in the front yard and reached across the seat at the neatly cut half-inch thick leveling boards. The children were playing with a rubber ball that the older neighborhood kids had abandoned the day before. They paused for a moment to see if they would benefit from what he held in his hands, but after discerning that it wasn’t candy they resumed their play, bouncing the color-patched ball back and forth between them. Just as Nathan got to the front door of the house, he looked back and pulled two lollipops from his shirt pocket. Both children immediately lost interest in the ball and ran for the treats.

“You know daddy couldn’t forget ‘bout his two babies,” he said as he handed them the candy. “Now ya’ll go on back and play while I finish up in the kitchen.”

They quickly obeyed as Nathan continued inside. Caroline was sitting on the couch in the living room. “How ya doin’, lady?” Nathan asks reaching again in his pocket at the last lollipop.

“What ya got?” she asked sitting up slightly and leaning on one of the two sofa pillows.

“That stove off a little, so I got these hea ta keep it from rockin’.” Nathan lifts up the sticks.

“Can’t believe you done went and got that black stove,” she said smiling just enough to hide her discontent.

“You know you’dn want one of them old fancy white ones. You ain’t payin’ for nothin’ but the paint.”

“It look jus’ like the one I slaved over growin’ up, and now you done went and got one for me ta slave over in hea.” She smiled a bit more.

“That’s right an’ as soon as I git it hooked up, you gon git in there and git cookin’ on it,”

Nathan says jokingly.

Caroline pulled the pillow that had supported her back and hurled it at her husband. He ducked for the kitchen as she heard his hearty laugh bounce off the hard walls. She slumped back down on the couch. It was safe again to return to her sulking, dancing between the light and dark shadows of her current situation. She pulled the long pillow from the opposite side of the couch and leaned back. She could hear Nathan fumbling with the stove, talking to himself intermittently. She found reassurance in her ability to mask her own darkness in a pretentious air of comfort for the benefit of those around her. But the coast was clear and she allowed her insides to retain their twisted form. She tried to force herself into happiness, even keeping a mental list of things she considered blessings: her husband, children and parents who she knew had been on loan from God. And then there was that man at the store. Because of him, their whole life had changed. But inevitably, the excruciating sense of emptiness sprung up over and over again like an old weed. She returned to her list: this new place was much bigger than the last and now the children had more room to play and other children to play with, Nathan's new job meant good, steady work. When she was done running through the list of those things she should have been grateful for, there at the end was that weed again, mocking both her and her hoe. She leaned back and lay lopsided on the couch.

She could hear Nathan again, tussling with the stove. She looked over to the coffee-table at the month-old homemade birthday card her four-year old daughter had drafted with grey-lined paper from her writing tablet. Nathan had helped her draw the big five-petaled daisy with yellow crayon and the orange smiling face in the center. The leaves to each side reached out to the small flowers that were red and purple. Inside, she had inscribed "Happy Birthday Momma" with childlike precision. Warm sounds were coming from the kitchen, and she knew before long she would be at the new stove, humming along as she prepared the first meal in the new house while continuing to curse everything black, from her shiny new stove that sat up sturdy and straight to her delicate, nonforgiving skin.

* * *

The yellow of the morning sun mixed with the lingering light grey of the night before, each playing equal part in the melancholy that soaked the indifferent dawn. There was little color as Nature waited on the approaching sunrays before revealing the full splendor of her spectrum. Only then would she gloat, her endowments fully exposed.

Alice put down the window; the cool, brisk spring air engulfed the car in currents that swirled from the front seat to the back where James played with his books and a plastic duck that “quacked” when turned upside-down then right side-up.

When Frank turned off West Creek Road onto the narrow main road that divided the Cason farm, she realized that absolutely nothing had changed. The little wooden house still sat in that old familiar stance, sullen and unpretentious. And as the sunrays joined in greater numbers, Nature was finally able to disrobe. Alice’s eyes moved across the familiar landscape at every shade of green God ever created, from those that were so soft and subtle that they were almost yellow to ones as dark as black. And then there were browns, big dark masses of it that made up the freshly turned fields. Slender pieces formed tree trunks and limbs, and then there were smaller, lighter brown ones that twisted up into thicket bushes, leaves and foliage. There were browns that were almost white, sun faded, weathered and worn ones that crisscrossed the farm as fence posts. The colors moved within the other in a seamless palette. Glowing above it all was a sky so blue it smiled with swirls and wisps of white. The brilliant prism ricocheted off her eyes and rung her soul in a familiar tone. Her eyes and ears confirmed it as home and she indulged as long as she could before her insecurities could reactivate themselves. Just beyond a few yards of the old house, and as she had anticipated, anxiety slowly took hold of her joints. Frank said nothing as he continued up the road that passed the front of the house. Alice breathed hard, hoping that the fresh air would rush in and liberate her muscles and tendons and soothe the heart that beat hard in her chest. Champ and Rocky darted from under the house, barking as they headed towards the approaching car. Alice exhaled and found that she could move her arms again. Rocky’s grey-brown muzzle was stiff while Champ’s square jowls expressed a smile as close as any dingy white bulldog could muster. Alice repositioned her leg, shifted in her seat and prepared her eyes for faces she hadn’t seen in years.

Thomas was sitting on the porch in his denim overalls, a green plaid long-sleeved shirt and work boots. Alice looked down at the small wedding band on her finger, then rubbed her stomach that was swollen tight with life. Frank pulled off the narrow road and parked the Ford under the oak tree in the front yard. Thomas chuckled when Alice stepped out of the car. His husky, cynical laugh served as a prelude to his greeting.

“Hey Alice!” he called out to her.

“How ya doin’?” She asked back, smiling while holding her stomach.

“Makin’ it,” he answered.

Sadie came to the door, onto the porch, then down the front steps into the front yard. She smiled as she gently hugged her daughter, turning slightly to the side to avoid her bulge. James stood beside her, still holding on to his plastic duck and books. Sadie bent down, “An’ who is this?” James chuckled.

His mother assisted with his response, “Say James Jennings.” Both Frank and Thomas laughed while shaking hands.

Thomas looked down at his grandchild and grabbed at the top of his head. “You come ‘bout to a duck’s tail!”

“Look!” James said pointing at the chickens that wandered around the house. “Chicken.”

Thomas walked over to a makeshift table that sat under the oak tree. He untwisted a bag of chicken feed. “You want ta feed ‘em? Let momma hold ya stuff fa ya.”

Chickens came running from all directions as Thomas filled his small palm with the crushed corn. James was not afraid at all, standing and smiling at his observers.

“Throw it to ‘em,” Thomas instructed.

James flicked his handful of feed just as his grandfather did then opened his hands for more as chickens of all shapes, sizes and colors begin pecking at the ground. He giggled out loud.

“Alright, that’s enough for now,” Thomas said still grinning. “We’ll give ‘em some mo’ after while.”

Sadie spoke up, “I got somethin’ sweet fo’ ya. Come on in the house with ya momma and we gonna have some teacakes. Ya’ll want some breakfast?”

“No ma’am, we ate already,” Alice answered for her family.

PeeWee recognized Alice and came up to the fence just to the other side of the narrow road. He brayed, his brown and white calico coat glistening in the early morning sunlight.

“PeeWee!” She yelled from the steps of the front porch.

His dark brown nostrils flailed as he sniffed deep and exhaled, his lips vibrating to the escaping air. He brayed again and took off, galloping across the pasture, his tail erect with excitement.

“That crazy horse!” Alice said, everybody laughing in agreement.

“Alice, I got a couple of pigs fa you an’ two apiece fa Julia and Ruthie. They can come an’ settle up when they want.”

“O.K.” was all she could say.

“They ready ta be cut this mornin’, Ephraim over at the pen right now. Frank you can help us if ya want.”

Frank motioned as Alice looked on with approval and just like that, without discussion or debate, past indiscretions were swallowed up by subtle reconciliation. They were father and daughter once more.

Thomas got up and Frank followed him down the two dirt ruts of the trail that led to the pigpen. It sat almost 15 yards catty-corner to the house, boxed in with horizontal fence boards that pointed at the sky like jagged teeth. Sadie, Alice and little James sat inside. The two women talked in generalities until they made their way back to the way things were before. But it would be different: both were women now. Alice desperately wanted to ask about Hugh’s revelation, but she knew those were questions she could not ask. Not now. Instead she asked about other family members whom she hadn’t seen for some time, and when the persimmons would be ripe. She had missed them most of all.

James was at the window and had a clear view to the pigpen. He could hear all 18 of the young pigs that scampered about the pen squealing and grunting like it was feeding time. They had been weaned many months ago; their hair was course and thick, their rumps broad and plump. Their testicles had begun to protrude like two figs as their wiry tails swished back and forth. Frank and Ephraim joined Thomas at the gate on the side of the pen closest to the house. Ephraim was sharpening his six-inch buck-knife with a whetstone while Thomas measured turpentine and benzene.

Sadie joined her grandson at the window as his mother reacquainted herself in the kitchen. The three-year old was a great beginner reader and had brought along his animal picture books. *Down at the Farm* and *The Three Little Pigs* were his favorites and he carried them everywhere, their covers worn and stained. He would flip through them, the edges of the pages folded and bent, making the animal sounds that accompanied the large text and bold bright pictures. He would “quack” with the picture of the duck and “moo” with the cow. The little bray he made imitating a horse brought Sadie to laughter every time she heard it. She admired his love and fascination with the animals on the farm. Alice had brought the “C-Ch” World

Book encyclopedia to have him match the various breeds of chickens. From the window, he was able to identify, with very little prodding, the black and white barrings of the Dominiques and the rust brick magenta of the Rhode Island Reds. James especially liked the Bantam roosters whose red, gold and green plumes glowed in the sunlight. Before his grandfather left for the pigpen, he had chased them around the yard, sprinkling small portions of crushed corn and millet about the yard. The small chickens avoided him, coming close only when food was the incentive. But for now he had to stay inside; grandfather was busy this morning. James looked out the window at the portable worktable that sat a few feet from the gate of the pigpen. Alice and Sadie were in the kitchen when the first bloodcurdling squeal echoed off the tops of the pine trees and across the fields. James had not remembered that sound from any of the pigs in his books. He pulled the curtains back further to see Ephraim slice open the skin just under the tail and pull two dark-red globes from the back of a pig. Then one by one, Thomas straddled the little pigs, his knees constricting their bellies and holding the tail and rump in his hands. James did not move until the last of the young pigs were barrowed. Only then did he reach down, flip open his Three Little Pigs book and look between the legs of all the little pigs in his book. He realized that they must have had a grandfather as well.

CHAPTER TWO: PEARL 1953

Only one of the mourning doves had stayed, its soulful, plaintive call echoing in the coolness of the morning mist. The other doves had decided that enough was enough and left all the remaining sadness to play itself out on the ones who had caused it; those unnamed culprits who dared not show their faces, especially at this hour. Those who conceal their true identities until only the darkest of times can hide their distinct features, the inflection of their voices caught in a vacuum of soundlessness. They would come like an ache in the body, tension at the temples, like heaviness bearing down on a weak heart. It was no wonder Pearl had failed to move this morning. The light in her eyes had grown dimmer yet again and many began to wonder if there would be any light left. Elizabeth lay in the bassinet, motionless and cold. She would be buried this morning, joining all five of her long-cold brothers and sisters who had come into this world with little or nothing on which to survive—desire alone was not enough.

Miss Cassie rubbed Pearl's hand, while Sadie dressed little Elizabeth in the only dress she would ever wear. Ephraim sat in the living room with his head in his hands as warm sunrays began to pour in through the large front window. Alice and Julia sat across from him on the couch. From the living room, they could hear the women humming a hymn only the two of them seemed to know, the somber notes picking up where the last dove had left off. Sadie came through the door and sat next to her brother.

"Y'all might as well go on home," he whispered. "Ain't nothing left ta do but lay her ta rest." His shoes were still caked with dirt from the freshly dug grave.

Miss Cassie came to the door of the living room, "Ephraim."

He was able to rise with the help of his sister and all four made their way into Pearl's room. She was lying on her side when they entered, her face ashen and hollow. Her eyes were barely open, drained and low. Ephraim kneeled near the bed. He was eye-level with his wife who looked more dead than alive. Caked dirt fell all around his shoes. Julia turned her attention from the baby to the dirt in the middle of the floor then back to the baby. Julia gazed at her little yellow hands and fingers and thought she looked like the most beautiful doll she had ever seen.

Miss Cassie and Sadie stood to either side with comforting hands about Ephraim's shoulder and back.

"I know how ya feel Pearl," Ephraim says in a voice barely audible.

Pearl's lips moved, but nothing came out. Everyone in the room make believe they understand as her lips continue.

Ephraim rubbed her fine, straight black hair. "We'll take care of everythang. Just think 'bout getting' yo'self back on ya feet."

"Rest Pearl," Miss Cassie said softly. "We done all we could. Lord knows best."

Pearl was silent as tears rolled from the far corners of her eyes. Snifflings circled the room as all its occupants left Miss Cassie to try and piece her fragile daughter back together.

Not since Samuel, the first child, did Pearl have the strength to attend the burials. She couldn't stand to see another small, brown, emotionless box that cut at her insides, or another dark, gaping hole that had swallowed up her every attempt at creating life. She could hear Samuel crying from inside and had to be led back to the house before the short graveside funeral was complete. She wouldn't have to stare with estranged eyes at the dark rich earth piled high to one side of the chasm, the same earth that had never failed her, season after season of harvest.

Miss Cassie would stay with her daughter while the others were witness to the unthinkable. She remained bedside, hoping Pearl would again make peace with this last one. Elizabeth had taunted and teased her so. She seemed so strong as she moved and kicked inside. But when it mattered most, they had all abandoned her—and always just before daybreak. Even the sun had forsaken her and with all of the little might she had left, Pearl turned her back to the soft glow forming at the window.

They left the house, humming the same unfamiliar melody that began in the livingroom. Walking single file, Alice and Julia lingered in the back, Ephraim in front, carrying his little girl to her final resting place. The family plot sat to the southeastern corner of the Cason land, a good ways from Ephraim and Pearl's house. The 40'x40' patch of land, set off with wooden post fencing and horse rope, looked more like a small clearing amid a thicket of trees and bush with a few stray slabs of cement than a cemetery. The stones were barely marked; most were worn soft and round by weather and time. The cemetery wasn't disturbed often, but when its services were called on, it received old friends with the warmest of greetings.

Sadie was humming again, this time something familiar, as Ephraim, Alice and Julia

joined in. The melody rose in the early morning air, the dew still glistening as they made their way around the gaping hole that seem to stare back at them with great sorrow. Ephraim had tears now, his black cheeks glistening and wet. Sadie cried as well; Alice and Julia were blank. Like the humming, this severity of loss had yet to wrap itself in their understanding; however, they followed along. Alice moved in and along the cement slabs that were scattered haphazardly. "MARTIN CASON 1874-1917" was well worn but still legible, so was "BRIGG STEWARD 1876-1938." Next to his was "Granddaddy Sam -- age 106." Then there was a small, square slab that was beveled on all four edges with "Charlotte 1951" crudely etched into the surface. It seemed to be the freshest grave; the potted plants still blooming and the lace of the bows that wrapped around the wreaths just beginning to fade. In the farthest corner and to the right, there was one particular grave that seemed to be the oldest, renovations with tin and wood attempting to preserve its integrity. The rust had claimed all but the outlines of the wings and tail that dipped to the lowermost edge of the tin to make out what looked like a dragonfly. Alice realized she was squinting and didn't want to distract from the procession. She shifted back into line as the hymn ended and Ephraim laid the box onto the straps that would later lower Elizabeth to her final resting place. As he began to pray, tears and mucus in his throat caused his voice to tremble and pause between phrases. When he was done, there were a few moments of silence as each of the mourners absorbed a portion of the grief that still hung on the witnessing trees and bushes. Then all but Ephraim, who would later descend the remains, turned and slowly made their way back to the house to attend to the one to which misfortune had taken a special liking.

News spread fast, primarily because there was nothing else to talk about. The farmers heard about it out in the fields and went home to tell their wives; the wives told their friends and relatives. But this time, no one outside of the immediate family came to pay their respects to the bereaved. There were no cakes and pies, no heaping casserole dishes or endless condolences. The conversation would have been delicate enough considering the terrible circumstances, but with this loss, the sixth one, sympathy had turned to speculation. And although miles separated the Cason farms from any other, the surrounding womenfolk went to burning persimmon tree branches in their backyards for fear some virulent spirit might drift in their direction.

Miss Cassie didn't leave her daughter's side, hovering over Pearl just like she'd done most of her childhood. As she waited for her daughter's womb to close, she cooked and cleaned,

and once every evening for a full week, massaged her daughter's sore breast nipples with petroleum jelly and camphor to absorb the remaining, useless milk. She moved like a protective hen over a brood of eggs, ruffling her feathers at anything that might pose harm. She remembered her daughter's tiny, premature body, too weak even to cry, the one who learned to walk late and only after her father fastened wooden splints to her 14-month old wobbly legs. But what Pearl lacked in physical strength, she made up in spirit and even before she was a teenager, she ran the household in her mother's absence, keeping her younger but much bigger brothers in line. It was that indomitable spirit Miss Cassie now searched for in her daughter's tired eyes, wishing it would return, praying it would be soon.

The Casons and the Stewards lived the kind of life that didn't account for sickness. But no matter how much of a burden Pearl's illness had caused, the one thing you could always count on was family. It was like some inaudible summons had gone out and one by one they trickled in. Some of Pearl's sisters-in-law came first. There was Ella, Beatrice, Ruby and her mother-in-law Francis from Blountstown. Filling in the cracks were her nieces Alice and Julia; Ruthie was too young. Their uncoordinated visits sometimes resulted in little family gatherings, a time when food and womenfolk met with mutual appreciation. The men and children observed from the perimeter as the women's voices rose and fell in laughter and dialogue. They moved between the kitchen and bedroom, eating and talking in fellowship, as if nothing but goodness existed in the whole world. Gloria was the last to join them. She and her husband Henry Cason had a trailer on their property at Stone Mill Creek. They made good use of it on weekends or when Henry was off-work. Gloria was heavy-set, a pretty woman with glistening cocoa brown skin and a wide, bright smile. She walked into Pearl's room with a presence that didn't need welcome or warning. She wore a grin that oozed out to her high cheekbones and bright eyes. Pearl's lips turned up a bit as Gloria walked in, then returned to a straight line.

"Hey up in hea," she said, her voice booming through her smile. "Came ta see how my cousin was gettin' 'long. And how you doin' Miss Sadie?" Gloria said looking away from Pearl for just a second then back.

Pearl spoke soft and slow, "Yea, I been down. This ole red hen may not be what she used ta, but she ain't done livin'." The room glowed warm with Pearl's response.

"Good ta see you Gloria. How's Henry? Hear ya'll done had ta leave First Baptist," Sadie teased, her lips preparing for laughter.

“Fine chil’, we over at Macedonia now, right over on Avenue D,” Gloria answered quickly, her tone changing with aspirations that chopped up her phrases. “Chil’ we had ta git from over there at First Baptist, too many hussies over there in them pews.” Most the women giggled, Ella cackled. Pearl’s lips turned up to a full smile.

“Gal, you sho is crazy,” said Sadie.

“Miss Sadie, I tell ya. I loves Henry to death but sometimes I don’t know if it’s worth the fight wit’ some of these women. Some of ‘em over there at First Baptist didn’t even wear no stockings. Come ta church just as bare-legged as a chicken.”

The women laughed hard again as Francis walked back into the crowded room from the kitchen, “Well, Pearl we gon’ git on back ta Blountstown. We’ll see ya again the weeken’.”

“Thank y’all fa comin’ ta see ‘bout me,” Pearl said softly, but with some of the new energy that circled her room.

Ella passed the foot of the bed, reaching to squeeze Pearl’s leg. “Take care Sis’.”

“You do the same,” Pearl mustered up.

Gloria stayed a while longer and was there when Miss Cassie came back for the last checkup of the evening. Before long the house was dark and silent again, the only light coming from the last embers that sparkled and snapped in the front fireplace, casting eerie shadows that danced along the walls and floorboards. They burned all night and into the early morning, much longer than anyone had ever expected. And as the last sparkle fizzled out, the shadows faded. And with nothing left to rekindle, cold set in and lasted for a very long time.

The tiny house slowly came to life, the bed springs creaking and squeaking as reluctant bodies turned and twisted in the black of early morning. Although the sun was hours away, the kerosene lamps would make due as each body made its way to the breakfast table. None of the women dared look into Thomas’s ambiguous countenance as uneasiness invaded the food and silverware that lay before them. And when his husky voice finally cut through the calm, the target of his angst came as no surprise.

“How Sis’ doing?” came out and fell on more silence.

Alice attempted to soothe the advancing disparagement. “She gettin’ around much better. Should be back ta herself in a few mo’ weeks.” She spoke at her plate, stirring beef gravy into her grits.

“I sho’ hope so. Gettin’ behind on y’alls work and Sis’ gonna have ta do for herself befo’ long. Lawd knows she done los’ ‘nough children ta haint her fa the rest of her life,” Thomas said, his eyes widening to refocus. He reached for his coffee and took two big gulps. “She still orderin’ Ephraim around the way a showman treat a monkey? She done had him add her name ta Miss Cassie’s back lot. Guess she tryin’ ta get her name on evera deed out hea.”

Tension bellowed up to the rafters then settled back to the sounds of eating and discomfort. At least it was out, finally.

There wasn’t much more to be done by the time Alice got there, so her mother wouldn’t have to put a kerosene lamp on the fence post to help guide her way back home. Such visits were winding to a close and both knew it. She would miss more than the extra washing, ironing, cooking, jarring and soaping that consumed the majority of the unsupervised time she’d spent with her aunt. Alice would miss what it felt like to live without all the burdens of womanhood.

Pearl’s kitchen opened up to the back porch. Four hampers full of purple-hulled peas lined the short stretch of the left wall. Ephraim hadn’t made it home from work, but supper was ready. She would have to occasionally stir the warm grits to keep them from sticking. Pearl had already blanched a large pot of peas and butterbeans and was starting to fill the jars, carefully ladling the vegetables without one drop falling outside of the pot or along the sides of the jars. Alice was shelling peas, but stopped when a buzzing at the kitchen window distracted her.

“How’d that git in hea?” Pearl said, pausing to look up from her jars for a minute.

“I don’ know.” Alice set her shelling bowl aside to wrestle with the wasp. She eventually got the best of it with an old paper church fan that had a black and white woodcut image of Jesus’s praying hands. She used the plain white side to squish the wasp against the bottom of the windowsill and the hard screen. She then used the fan to scoop it up and throw it out the back door. When she returned, Pearl had paused to stir the pot of grits.

“You too young ta know, but they used ta make grits jus’ like these right down there on this side of the creek, a old grit-mill. Daddy use ta, well not my real daddy, he died when I was a little girl, but my step-daddy Sam would sit me right next to him on his wagon and take me down there. Wasn’t suppose to be no womenfolk down there, but he didn’t care. He even took me inside one day ta show me how them two big stone wheels would grind the corn down ta grits and even fine meal. The men would then bag it, then cart it off ta Wewa and all over these parts,

even ta Georgia and Alabama.”

Alice said nothing as Pearl continued her story, still ladling.

“Your daddy and ya uncle Lewis was up in Mazeville workin’, but when they came back, Ephraim come down wit’ him. We had lived there a while and I already knew him and his family.” Pearl grinned a bit while adjusting her jars, then went on.

“You know the Stewards all come from up there in Mazeville. They all real dark folks jus’ like your momma. I remember when we first got there in Mazeville, they think us white folks,” Pearl said grinning again. “I told Ephraim I’m the same color as you! Never did like no bright men ya know. Soon after me and Ephraim married, his sister married your daddy. So, that make me your auntie twice. It’s been the Casons and the Stewards since then, workin’ and tendin’ this land.”

Alice had listened intently the whole time but kept a steady pace on shelling peas. Pearl looked back at Alice as she raked through the peas with her fingers, seining for debris and any spoiled brown ones.

“You done already?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Wanna thank you girls fa lookin’ after me. Go look in that chifforobe there in that second room and git that coat and hats outa there.”

Alice left the kitchen and was soon pulling out a store-bought black and white checkered coat and two pairs of matching winter hats and gloves. She twisted the clothing into a bundle and put it under her arm. When she got back to the kitchen, Pearl was unrolling a burlap bag.

“Hea, put them in hea. You and Ruthie can each have a pair of gloves and hat. That coat oughta fit Julia just right.”

Alice took the bulging bag and walked towards the front room. At the door, she looked back. “Thanks Auntie.” Ephraim was pulling up in the yard as Alice walked along the winding fence posts that led home.

* * *

The fig trees were the first witness that autumn had set-in. They waved goodbye with brown, curling leaves as pine seeds fell like swirling raindrops, riding stray breezes that twisted in from all directions. The leaves of the big sycamores and oaks dotted the brown sleep grass and dirt roads, covering over high bushes and low shrubs. The horses, cows, guineas, goats and

chickens were back to receiving their full attention and all the storehouses on Stone Mill Creek were full with peach and blackberry jellies, pear and fig preserves, peas and butterbeans, tomatoes, okra and corn. Nearby, slabs of cured ham and beef hung from the ceilings.

Ephraim's Chevy pulled up in the front yard. He had unexpectedly come home early, greeting Pearl who refocused on the repair of an old quilt. Pre-cut patches of bright colors, patterns and sizes covered the table in the front room. Pearl selected and drew her threads and begins double-stitching over the worn and weathered spots. Ephraim was sitting at the kitchen table, eating a porkchop sandwich and leftover potato salad. Pearl came into the kitchen. She looked over at her cooling peach tarts she'd prepared for supper and noticed that one had been disturbed. WHAK!

Ephraim jerked at the noise and sting the wooden spoon made to his upper back, the broken handle still in Pearl's hand. Ephraim rose with heat and backhanded her. Pearl spun into the stove. "Woman, what's wrong wit' you?" A red bruise was forming on her yellow cheek.

The commotion that rose up beyond the rafters of the kitchen and drifted along the winding dirt roads connected the lives and souls of those within earshot. Long before Sadie made it to the house and into the kitchen, the damage was done. Ephraim and Pearl were different people. Sadie found her brother in the bedroom, sitting in the chair off from the bed, staring into the nothingness that covered the bleak colored walls. She could hear Pearl trying to make peace of the kitchen between snuffles and the soft remnants of screams. Sadie made her way back to the kitchen. She reached for a dishtowel and began wiping the peach preserves from the walls. Pearl was on her knees, using a towel to push the last of the peaches and broken glass into a dustpan. Both women worked in silence until the kitchen could again pretend nothing had happened.

Miss Cassie pulled her work dress down over her head, then straight over her hips, first at the hems, then midway. She stepped into her leather shoes then bent down to tie them. While she was still bending, she reached under the bed to grab a basket. She walked out, grabbing her walking stick that was leaning against the house. She crossed the dirt road that connected the yard and walked slowly through the low grasses, gently tapping to scare away any snakes. It was cool and most had settled in for the fall. But there were always a few stragglers. Just the sight of one would have sent her running a mile in the opposite direction. She separated the thick bushes

with her strong hands and arms, carefully watching where she placed her feet. Briars and wild vines resisted her every step, while her determined legs were on a mission. She could have had the girls come along to help beat the bushes the way they did when they went down to the creek to fish. She would reward them with squash bread, each girl smiling between smacks. Today was different. So she worked her stick alone, slinging with enough force to snap through most of the dry undergrowth. The limber green tops gave little with one chop. A second or third was often needed. Cockleburs found residence on her exposed wool socks, affixing themselves randomly as she walked past. She wouldn't stop now to pick them off.

The deep, deep woods were an eerie grey. Miss Cassie looked all around her as sounds came from all directions, the pops and cracks of bushes struggling to right themselves just behind her. She kept going; only the bark of a particular cedar tree would work. The bright midday sun was now able to cut through the tall treetops like daggers. She studied each cedar tree she came upon, inspecting the thin, curled bark with careful and discerning eyes. Only when she was certain she had selected the right tree, she took her knife and peeled back the dry, outer shell to expose the soft lining underneath. She carefully cut three two-inch sized squares, wrapping them in paper. She rolled some of the outer bark into a thick cylinder and tied it with string. She put it in her basket, whispering prayers and chants before starting back.

Miss Cassie was not familiar with this part of the swamp that lay between the Cason farms and the ninety-degree angle of the creek. She decided to follow the creek back until she came to the bridge. She avoided the thickest patches of swamp, keeping to the spaces that offered the clearest sight to her feet. The low-lying marsh squashed under her shoes as she ducked beneath old, low dangling branches. She moved on, coming closer and closer to the sound of running water. Miss Cassie looked far ahead to see a small mound that swelled almost three feet from the swamp floor. She would have walked right passed it had it not been for the unnatural woodcarvings that semi-circled it. Decayed poles and wooden planks lay nearby. Miss Cassie moved closer to inspect the grave that had gone undisturbed for many, many years. She had heard about it. And now it was no longer a myth that had traveled the full lineage of her family. He was real. The rush of swift currents pierced her senses and she looked up, filled with the spirits that ran rich in her blood. She circled the burial mound once more, tears rushing with the water at her ears. She picked at the mud with her walking stick, then hesitantly headed for the creek.

The bush along this stretch of the basin didn't run over into the water for fear its strong, forceful currents would grab hold with dark, brown arms and carry them downstream. Miss Cassie stood, staring at the currents, one rolling on top of the other. She paused, captivated by the activity at the surface, realizing it was just a glimpse of the power that welled beneath. She moved on, heading downstream with her heavy basket, and on her way home.

* * *

She'd known him all her life. They both went to the same Negro school that would have been the best looking structure in their neighborhood had it not been for the two charred black senior-high classrooms. And, it would have been condemned if the school kids had any other place to go. Some of the men in the community that claimed themselves carpenters had made efforts to amend the eyesore. They tore away the most badly damaged boards and scraped down the others. Then came replacement pieces that stood crisp and light brown against the black ones. That was the outside. The corridor that joined the two senior-high classrooms to the two junior-high ones was closed off. The tiny lunchroom that sat in the center of the building was inoperable. Black soot still covered all the walls and ceilings. It was this room that had probably saved the remainder of the building. The double doors had shielded the interior from the brunt of the fire and heat; however, the pungent odor of smoke had lingered for months now. The displaced senior-high students had to share their last two years with their younger schoolmates. Principal Jacobs had extra desks brought in, and his four teachers readjusted their curriculum to include both levels in reading, math, and writing.

Jacobs was a tall, lean man with graying sideburns and wore wingtipped shoes and matching ties and handkerchiefs. He was a smart man and had come down from Baltimore at the request of the Guildcrest Schoolboard to jump start one of two new schools that were being built in the large north Florida district. Principal Jacobs was an old man not to be married, but the women of eligible age in Guildcrest, and quite a few who were over it, hadn't given up. He never went hungry on Sunday afternoons and unlike all his kids, he didn't have to come to school with a packed lunch. His all-female teaching staff, two married, two awaiting, always seemed to have a bit more than they could consume themselves.

He had fought hard for every penny that had gone into this new school and on the night of the fire, had done everything in his power to save it. Carrying bucket after bucket of water, most of them weighing about as much as himself, had left him soaking wet, covered in soot and

passed out. The firetruck had to come all the way from the white side of town and by the time the fireman arrived, most of those in the community, running with anything that could hold water, had almost managed to extinguish the blaze themselves. By nightfall, only small wisps of smoke curled up from the black, disheveled boards and before even the last yellow embers were dead, speculation shone as clear as the full moon that lit this unforgivable night. Principal Jacobs's efforts at raising funds and his connections in the North may have worked against him and his school, which was far better than the white one on the other side of town. There was no way of ever getting at the truth, and Jacobs knew that if the classrooms were ever rebuilt, he would have an extra room added for an on-site schoolmaster.

The students didn't mind their newly cramped quarters too much and neither did the four teachers who could now, because of shared class space, alternate lectures. Principal Jacobs was as vigilant as ever, staying way late in the evenings and each night leaving the light on in a different room.

Caroline had loved Ms. Clara's class the best and when she and all of her classmates had been forced to move, she, probably more than anyone else, felt the discomfort of displacement. Ms. Clara was a short, dark woman with a thick southern drawl. She had grown up in nearby Gretna and went off to school, vowing never to return. Her communal guilt would eventually get the best of her and here she was, back in the town she'd cursed all her growing up. Caroline no longer sat right in front. Now in Mrs. Gywnn's classroom, she had to settle for the ninth row back and with Ms. Clara's attention divided by some two dozen more students.

He sat right behind her, too big for his desk and at least four years older than any of his junior high classmates. They had always been there to help out when and wherever they could. Martha would assist him with mathematics, and Abigail, his first cousin, went back and forth through his reader and writing tablets. No matter how few of the reading words Nathan held on to, or how often-mathematical equations paused at the perimeter of his understanding, Martha, Abigail and the rest of his classmates consistently and delicately encouraged him. Today, his support group was scattered about the crowded room. Nathan had sweat forming just above his lips and at the corners of his cowlicks that glistened at the edges of the thick black wool that covered his head. Mrs. Gywnn was going through the reader, randomly calling on students to respond. So when she called on Nathan, everyone in his support group froze. Nathan was lost. When it probably would have been better just to remain quiet, he tried to answer. Abigail had

closed her eyes; Martha turned her head in the opposite direction, wishing she could drift away through the open window like the flies would sometimes do. All were quiet except for a few of the senior-high boys, who were snickering with either hands over their mouths or laughing with their heads bowed over so far their chins bounced against their chests.

Thomas held back as hard as he could before his laughter escaped his lips and just before Ms. Gywnn whacked him across the shoulder with her thick yardstick.

“Thomas, come to yo’ senses boy!” she scowled. “Right now!”

The class was so quiet, students could hear the folks at market almost four blocks down the street. Martha still starred at the open window.

Caroline said nothing. Nathan just sat there, looking straight ahead, his lips slightly trembling, his face straining to hold back the emotion that was dammed at his eyes. The remaining class-time was spent in disturbing silence. Thomas never disrupted another class meeting and Nathan never came back.

* * *

Pearl still had on her apron when Julia walked to the back door. Julia stood on the opposite side of the screen porch, holding a croaker sack.

“Momma sent me at the sweet potatoes.”

“Just a minute, let me check on my stove. Be right back.”

Julia turned and began walking towards the potato house that sat beyond the work shed. Julia heard the screen door creak as Pearl came outside and followed her. The early evening warmth stymied as a small swarming of gnats ascended with the heat. This was the worst type of heat, the kind that sticks to you no matter what efforts are made to elude it. Pearl had put on her straw hat and taken off her apron.

“Tell your ma I’ll have plenty pears come fall. Ain’t nobody but me, Ephraim and the birds to eat ‘em.”

“Yes ma’am.”

The sweet potato house was built on high, dry ground and looked like a long doghouse with a door. It sat on a cement block foundation with a dirt floor that sank a foot or so into the earth. Pearl unhooked the latch and the door swung open. The entire space above the layers of sweet potatoes was covered with dry pine straw that Pearl, kneeling down, pushed back and to the side. Soon a small mound of potatoes appeared. Julia handed the sack to her aunt who began

filling it, inspecting each potato for size and quality. Pearl rested the bag against one of the cement blocks as she continued handling the produce.

“That should be ‘nough fa ya ta carry,” Pearl finally said, leaning back to adjust her hat.

“Plenty ‘nough,” Julia responded, twisting the top of the sack. The bag was heavy, but Julia lifted it without much strain.

Pearl repacked the straw, then closed the door and latched it.

“Thank you Auntie.”

“You welcome,” Pearl said, putting her hand on the roof of the house to help her stand. “Sho is hot today.”

“Yes ma’am. How Uncle Ephraim?”

“He fine. Should be home soon. He—”

The roar of a jet engine cut hard through the air just above the house and yard. The steep angle descent of the one-seater B29 couldn’t have been intentional and in a matter of seconds, the plane smashed hard into the ground at the far end of Pearl’s property. Bright flames of red, yellow and orange rose and billowed from the deep crater of fire. Neither one of them had seen the pilot eject himself and start the parachute to the ground. The front tip of the grey-white parachute caught one of the oak tree limbs and the pilot snagged midair and dangled from the tree. In seconds, three huge dark-green helicopters appeared out of nowhere and landed in Pearl’s backyard. One of them had “Tyndal Air Force Base” painted on the side in white, thick letters. Servicemen jumped from the belly of the aircrafts and began exhausting the huge fire. Others began gathering any wreckage that was not engulfed in flames while three additional servicemen cut the dangling pilot from the tree and disentangled the parachute. They strapped the pilot in a stretcher and loaded him into the third helicopter. It immediately returned to the air, leaving the remaining two aircrafts to gather the remaining debris. Julia stared at the three machines, one now drifting across the sky. She couldn’t help noticing how the twisting top and tail blades looked just like falling pine seeds.

CHAPTER THREE: RUTHIE 1955

She circled then stood still, not sure what her body would do next. Her eyes bulged with excitement as the nerves along her spine tingled with heat. She stood as long as she could then laid down. The dark early morning was calm as a subtle breeze gently bent the silhouette of tall grasses back and forth just beyond the wooden fence of the corral and stable. The chickens were still roosting in nearby trees as the last rustlings of grazing deer scattered with the coming sun. Daisy had reclined to the far left corner of the stable. She folded her front legs and whipped her tail frantically. She extended her hind legs and kicked as contractions gripped her abdomen. She wasn't as scared this time, the tension at her vagina rang familiar and a sense of security permeated from every hay filled corner of the stable. She put her head down on the soft grass to catch her breath before the gripping returned. She felt a warm wetness at her tail which was now erect with excitement. Daisy lifted her head. Her eyelids extended to fully expose the whites of her eyes as the last contraction overwhelmed her wide nostrils and thrust her offspring against the old boards at the rear of the stable. Daisy brayed and then quickly rolled to her knees to stand up. The chestnut brown and cream colt was wet and wobbled in the loose hay. Daisy turned her attention to the rear of the stable and bent her neck down to begin cleaning the newborn. Mucus and afterbirth still lingered at the swollen opening of her vagina as her wet tail swished and her long tongue worked over the new colt.

* * *

Sadie stood at the wood stove cooking out the last of the lard from the hog that was slaughtered the day before. Ruthie joined her to lift and remove the heavy cast iron boiler. They both spooned the crisp fat squares into fabric bags to wring out the last of the stubborn golden brown liquid. Sadie opened the twisted bags and dumped the withered pork rinds into a pan on the other side of the stove, carefully selecting those pieces of bacon she would add to the mix to make crackling cornbread. She folded in the cracklings, poured the yellow, lumpy batter into a

greased bread pan then slipped it into the oven.

Ruthie removed the top of the bubbling pot on the back eye of the stove and stirred the steaming turnips, their white roots glowing against the green. She turned back to three freshly killed and plucked chickens that lay in the sink, their six legs sticking out of the pink water. She lifted one of the three and began to scrape a semi-sharp knife across the pitted skin of the chicken to remove any remnants of feathers, paying close inspection to the skinny rump. The head was still in the sink, the eyes rolled back and cloudy. She moved her inspection to the feet, dipping them into a small pot of boiling hot water. She grabbed near the chicken's ankle with her thumb and forefinger and pulled the top layer of skin off leaving a crisp clean yellow leg with smaller, white toenails. She repeated the process on the other leg and moved on to the remaining chickens.

Sadie was cutting sweet potatoes into quarters in a large jadeite bowl. She reached under the worktable for another pot, filling it half full with fresh pump water ladled from the water pail. She filled the pot with the potatoes, salt, cups of white and brown sugar, molasses, cinnamon, and other spices, then covered the remaining eye on the stove. Ruthie gutted and cut the chickens into quarters, the u-shaped necks, gizzards, and livers resting to the side of the white meat. Ruthie cleaned the dishpan before moving to prepare a mesh of squash to stew.

Sadie transported the six large, warm jars of lard to the cupboard before returning to the smoky black, wood stove. She lifted the top to the turnips, stirred again, then dragged the pot to the middle of the stove. They will finish cooking on low heat. A cast iron fryer with a thin wire handle was heating with oil. Ruthie seasoned the chicken, floured the first pieces to fry and stood staring at the rolling hot oil. She flicked her floury right hand at the oil and the particles fizzed and rolled. She slowly dropped the large pieces of chicken into the hot grease as Sadie transferred the sweet potatoes to a heavy glass casserole dish. Sadie took the browned pan of cornbread from the oven and placed it on a wooden cooler on the counter. The sweet potatoes then went into the oven, the door clinked as the two metals met. Ruthie was tending the chicken and the squash still stewing on the front eye. Neither of the women spoke a word, moving between the stove, dishpan, worktable and cupboard like two knives that sharpened each other over and over again.

Lillian hadn't moved much since she arrived this morning. She had walked a good ways from the Greyhound depot in Iola near Wewahitchka before Thomas picked her up on his wagon.

Sadie had put her tired sister to bed right after breakfast, pushing her travel bag and shoes to the front of the closet. She circled up in the summer blanket and had slept soundly for hours. It didn't take long for the aroma from the kitchen to summon her and now she stood peering from the bedroom doorway.

"How'm I suppose ta sleep wit' the smell of candy yams comin' from the oven?"

"Back from the dead I see," Sadie says through a smile.

"That fried chicken ah wake Lazarus!" she says back as all three women laugh.

"Well, it be ready in a few minutes."

"Ya'll need any help?" She asks stepping into the kitchen area.

"No gal, jus' be in me and Ruthie's way."

Ruthie smiles as she takes the last two pieces of chicken from the frying pan.

"Ruthie you sho ain't no little girl no more," Lillian says pulling at her long black ponytail.

"No ma'am."

"Chil'ren, you look over ya shoulder and they big as you," Sadie adds.

"Where Alice and Julia?"

"They be in soon. They been out hoein' since this mornin'. Daisy had her colt jus' 'fore daylight so Thomas been out there wit' her since before you got hea this mornin'."

"I sho don't miss gettin' up befo' the sun even start thinkin' 'bout it."

"You know you miss gatherin' wood, milkin' goats, harvestin', jarrin' and all this good eatin'."

"You coulda started wit' eatin' and left it at that!"

Both sisters laugh again as Ruthie begins to set the table. She said nothing, allowing the two to reconnect in a kind of nostalgia that sparkled in the nuances of their unique exchange. Thomas had come in and was washing up in the facepan that sat atop a counter in a small area off from the kitchen. Ruthie was done setting the table when her sisters walked in. Alice and Julia had washed at the pump, rolled up their pant legs and still wore their straw hats. They took them off and hung them on the long nails just to the right of the front door.

"Hey girls!" Lillian beams.

"Hey auntie," they say back almost in unison.

Thomas was at the table now, reared back in his chair with a glass of Brandy; the golden

brown liquid shimmied in the old mason jar. He stared into the heavy milk-grey plate that sat in front of him, took a sip from his jar, twisted his lips, then exhaled hard. The five women formed a line as they left the kitchen area and moved toward the table that sat almost center of the large living space. He didn't look up.

"How's Daisy doin'?" ask Julia.

"Her an' PeeWee fine. Pretty little ole thang," Thomas say slowly spinning the liquid in his jar. He was unusually quiet. He still stared into his plate as the women sat in a circle with him.

"We'll go an' see her and the colt after we done eatin'," Sadie says to Lillian before beginning grace. Lillian reached for the turnips as all the heads came up. She dipped a spoonful then reached for a piece of crackling bread. After the serving dishes circled the table, Thomas's plate was still empty. Just as the others ignored it, she did the same.

"Sadie, I coulda come hea in total dark an' still found my way 'round," Lillian says between bites but still chewing. "Ain't a thang changed in over fifteen years."

The girls giggle a little as Thomas exposes his Adam's apple, to empty his jar. He scoots his chair back from the table and stands up. The women continue to eat and return to small talk as Thomas removes his hat from one of the nails to the right of the door and walks out. The conversation between the two women continued, joining with the clinks and clanks the forks and spoons made against the heavy plates; much needed noise that finally overwhelmed the agonizing discomfort.

The early afternoon orange and hazy hot enveloped Sadie and Lillian as they made their way along trail that lead to the stable, their cool dresses flapping with each gait. Alice and Julia watched them carry on like little girls as they steered clear of the stinging needles of the Tread Softlys that lined their path. The briars were loaded with green, pink and a few black berries. Sadie made mental note of the bushes so she would know where to return when those same bushes bulged with ripe fruit. Alice put her head back down and continued with her hoe. Julia lingered a while longer and then did the same.

The weathered dirt trails spoke of their long existence as Lillian inhaled the aroma of a past life. There was the honeysuckle, blossoming peach trees and drying grass. Then came the strong stench of the animals. The subtle essence of the horses, cows, hogs, guineas and chickens

all co-mingled at her nose. Her ears made out singing bluejays, the shrill of the bobwhite, the percussion of the cicadas; the hum of home rang a comforting familiarity near the center of her brain. Her eyes pierced through the air at the tall oaks and pines that tickled the bright blue sky, briar patches and varying greens of huckleberry and palmetto, peach and pear trees, smoke houses with curls of white that headed north, large grey patches of earth, sturdy wooden houses, painted butterflies that fluttered haphazardly, green and red glittered hummingbirds that sled by.

All of her senses had confirmed that she was back. Her brain left no choice but for her soul to believe it. Sadie grabbed at her hand as they continued along the woodpost fence. They could see Daisy's corral and stable with dried grasses and hay piled into small stacks. She had not left the colt's side all day, but when she saw Sadie, she brayed.

"Hey Gal!" Sadie yelled high in the opposing breeze. Daisy pranced out with her matted tail and soiled abdomen.

"Where's that colt of yours?" Sadie asked, leaning over the fence to massage her head, mane and neck.

Daisy brayed again as Sadie and Lillian bent under the highest wooden beam of the fence and onto the sandy corral. Daisy was still excited as she followed them to the stable. The colt stood tall in the hay batting the longest eyelashes Lillian had ever seen.

"Sholl got some big eyes" was all she could say as PeeWee stared at his mother. Lillian looked around the stable at the rusty plows that hung high on the weathered wood walls, alongside metal plow chains and pulleys.

Lillian tentatively allowed her eyes to scan the north field and how the horizon made angles with the tall oaks and the descending lines that touched the duck pond. She then stretched her eyes to try and make out the last few items that hung along the broadside of the stable, the exposed rafters covered with spider webs and then back down to the hay that was caked with dirt and dried mucus. She saw the dried afterbirth still hanging on the lowest beam and no longer felt her legs. Sadie saw a flash of fabric and then her sister's distorted face. No more were the agrarian landscapes old features to reminisce, but now impudent reminders of one past, grave sin. She wore a look of suffocation at the hands of a memory, sunshine lost in overcast gloom, like being caught out in the rain and cold with insufficient clothing.

"Gal what you trip on?"

"Los' my balance I guess," Lillian say reaching up her arm for assistance.

“You alright?”

“All this fresh air ‘bout ta git the best of me.”

“Let me git ya back to the house.”

“I told ya this farm livin’ ain’t fa me no mo’,” Lillian murmurs as she attempts to stand, holding on to Sadie’s shoulder.

“Come on. Let me git ya home ‘fore a ‘skeeter bite ya and we have ta git ya to the hospital,” Sadie say while laughing and grabbing for Lillian’s hand then putting her arm around her shoulder.

Both women laugh as they make their way in waning light to the little wooden house. The girls were undoing their plaits as Lillian and then Sadie stepped into the large front room.

“Soon as I git Lillian to bed, I’ll be back ta finish up y’alls heads.”

“What’s wrong Auntie?” Alice asks.

“Ain’t nothin’ wrong wit’ me!” Lillian interjects. “And it’s too early fa me ta go ta bed. This my first night back an’ I ain’t gonna waste it sleepin’.”

“You sho’?” Sadie says still wrestling with hair.

“Girls, I’ll do yall’s hair. I’ll do it like they do them fancy styles up north.”

Sadie is teasing again, “You barely made it through today, ya thank you can handle three heads of hair?”

“You much older than me!”

“Go ahead then,” Sadie says finally giving up.

Lillian started on Alice’s head, massaging her scalp deep and hard with soap. Then she moved to Julia’s head, telling Alice to continue working her roots. She would end with Ruthie’s ponytail. Alice and Julia stood bent over the silver dish as Lillian poured heated water over their bushy, soaped afros. The dirt came out with a deluge of water and then with the drips. Lillian inadvertently released her hand from Alice’s eyes before all of the soap was out and the runoff shot fire into her eyes. Just seconds later, Julia suffered the same fate. As they dried their hair with fresh, clean towels, their red eyes burned with tears. Ruthie looked at them and her eyes watered as well.

“Auntie, my hair ain’t that dirty. I can wait ‘til the end of the week,” Ruthie says hesitantly.

“Well, I’ll jus’ style yours then.”

“O.K.” Ruthie says as Alice and Julia continue to flush the soap from their eyes with endless tears.

Lucinda had already hugged her twice and didn't want to give the impression that Caroline deserved or needed more. Her sister, wishing she would have anyway, made up for it as she headed for the door. She grabbed Caroline tight and whispered something in her ear that made her lips tremble more and overwhelmed her eyelids. The rushing tears rolled down her dark cheeks and dripped onto her best white dress. Nathan was outside on the porch with Reverend Freeman, her father and brother Ishmael. When they were all together on the porch, Reverend Freeman prayed. His baritone voice rose and fell as he spoke of God's gifts, the strength of family and how far they'd all come but for the grace of God. Nathan held out as long as he could, but before the reverend could close with his portentous “Amen,” he too allowed his emotions full range. The two that had come together in want and need left the porch as newlyweds. After a few minutes more of hugs and tears, Nathan hoisted his new bride onto the back of his flatbed wagon and into the rest of their precarious life together. Caroline smirked an expression of semi-resolution, curiosity and fear. Nathan didn't have much at all and somehow she knew that whatever needs they lacked, God would provide. Her smirk curved into a smile of faith as she looked back and waved goodbye to the only family she'd ever known.

“Geehaw” Nathan yelped and the horse jerked forward. The wagon shook and stumbled onto the two long and narrow ruts that stretched out ahead of them. Caroline looked down the road as far as she could see. The road that stretched out ahead of her came to a sharp point, unrelenting and unknown. She sat on the floor of the flat bed wagon, her best dress bunched up over her knees and legs. The heels of her good shoes protruded just beyond the lace hem. She looked ahead again, first at Nathan standing with the reins twisted in his big hands, then at the horizon ahead. She still held tight to her bouquet, an arrangement of wildflowers, yellow buttercups and white, sweet gardenias. The mockingbirds engaged in wing dances as a spinning mass of gnats drifted up in a continuous cloud. Their journey spread over many hours and as the sun began its daily descent, they came to the small town of Clarksville. Nathan had a little place just outside of town, a one-room lean-to that was in current repair. He guided the wagon to the mercantile and yelped “whoa” to the horse. He looked back at Caroline.

“Go on in there and git what ya need.”

Caroline demounted from the back of the wagon and proceeded into the store. The attendant said nothing as she circled, gathering up a month's supply of essentials. There were few customers in the store, mostly Black. They had the amiable nod for each other and continued on their individual way. The weaving brought her face-to-face with a middle-aged gentleman who had a cane that he didn't seem to need it. He nodded then smiled at her but didn't continue on as the other store shoppers had done. He just stared and continued smiling.

"Goodday ma'am."

"Sir," Caroline nod.

"New in town?"

"Just married. Nathan Edmonds."

"Welcome to Clarksville."

"Thank ya." Caroline says and turned to finish gathering her goods. Before she could work her way up to the clerk, he was in front of her again. This time he had a leather packet and extended it out to her.

"A lil' somethin' fa you and ya husband to git started on."

Caroline didn't know him but courtesy prevented her from refusing it. She pushed it into one of the folds of her dress and quickly made her way to the register. Nathan was in the store and talked with the attendant who took a book from a shelf behind the front desk and wrote something down in it. Before long, the couple was on their way home. Caroline sat with her eyes still turned towards the man who stood on the steps of the mercantile, the man who was still looking at her with a strange mix of adoration and melancholy. His bright eyes did more than shine, they had a glint of God.

The Saturday morning sun rose in a haze of mist and dew. They walked single file with Ruthie tagging along in the rear, her cane pole dragging far behind her. She didn't mind lagging, her sisters caught most of the cold dew that wet their shoes and pant legs. Alice had a stick and knocked at the wet bushes that rained with each tap. Julia carried the bait can that clinked against the buttons on her overalls. They said nothing for fear the vibrations of their voices would travel along the sandy creek bed and sink below the surface of the water to scare the fish away. The hard trail spoke back softly to their steps as they approached the familiar trail that led down to the creek. In a few hours they would have a good number of brim and shellcracker, just

in time for an early lunch. From the spillway, Alice could see the earliest anglers already poised and engaged. In this hidden-away spot, they wouldn't have to compete with them and they quietly laid their supplies on the ground.

These early mornings were supernatural. The hum of a new dawn called forth all of the creatures who had slept the night, awakening them from a soundless sleep like magic. Yellow rays of golden sunlight cut through the thick canopy that reached over the edge of the creek, weeping willows draped like curtains all the way down to the currents. Black waterbugs danced at the shallow edges, spinning incoherently in tiny orbits that intertwined with each other. Each time they broke the surface, their disturbance caused little ripples that circled out, then vanished. Farther out from the edge, minnows played with alert eyes and tails. The flora that decorated the swamp edges moved in unison with the currents that set the motion. The water hyacinths bobbed as the weeds that had fallen too close were held captive in the black currents, ovulating in smooth, sweeping motions. As the girls approached, there were a few splashes; maybe a startled bullfrog or some large fish that broke the surface to swallow an insect. They moved in closer, pushing away the last few bushes that stood in the way of a small clearing that opened up to the creek.

"Right hea fine," Julia whisper, putting the bucket down and prepping her cane pole for bait. She disturbed a few bushes that twisted down to the damp soil right next to the wet creek bed. She noticed a dragonfly resting near the top of a low, skinny branch, timidly waiting for her new wings to dry. She had emerged from her watery womb and would soon fly off. But for right now, she held tight with little black legs as Julia continued with her pole.

"Julia, hand me the bucket," Alice says quietly. Julia reached down and grabbed the bucket, startling the bush again. This time the dragonfly took flight with wings that absorbed and transformed the subtle light that cut through the morning mist. With each flit of her new wings, she rose higher and higher until the early sunrays reflected off her body and glowed with a magic that sprinkled down to the creekbed below. She would not return until it was time to lay her own eggs and then die, her body carried away by the same currents that she'd emerged from.

Alice moved into her favorite spot and began twisting her pole to free the line with sinkers, cork and hook. Julia and Ruthie did the same. Before long, the holding-line grouped four good-sized fish that moved with the smooth currents of the creek.

The snapping and cracking of footsteps from across the creek alerted them, each trying to

make out the two men that had happened upon their secret fishing spot. The cracking didn't stop until they twisted through the thick bushes and pressed stubborn shrubs to make a small entrance to the creekbed.

"Uh-huh," says the first man, still lifting his huge brogans to crush the undergrowth that spilled over the crest and into the creek. "Don found somebody's spot!"

The tension on Alice's line tightened and her pole arched hard at the force below the rich, dark brown water.

"Got another one," says the second, finally able to stand balanced under the compressed bushes. "Sho is a good spot. How long ya'll been out hea?"

"Ah hour or so," Alice responds, pulling the large stumpknocker out of the water and into her left hand, her right securing the pole. The fish convulsed in the air then in her hand. She dropped the pole and got a better grip with her right hand. She then worked the hook loose with her fingers. The fish still jerked and erected its fins.

"Stumpknocker?" the first man asks.

"Yea," Alice says while pulling in the holding line to add the fifth fish.

One by one the informal companions pulled lunch and enough leftover for supper from the dark, curling water. The occasional swapping of words from across the chasm redefined the borders that had separated one world from another and quelled long-held fears. As the threesome started back for home, exposed and full of optimism, Alice high-stepped through the grass allowing the heavy string of fish to dangle freely, Julia fumbled with the tackle and as always, Ruthie lagged behind.

It was an occasion that called for a hog-killing and one that stretched over two large oak trees. They had gathered to send her off, and with the hopes that she would not allow years to pass before her next visit. They came in small groups, some by car and some wagon, even fewer by foot. Brothers made fellowship with sisters, cousins with in-laws and family joined with friends. There was Bo'weevil who came up singing. His sugar cane fields sat on a slight incline just adjacent to the Cason land. His feet kept time with the melody, his strong tenor voice rising high in great greeting long before anyone could make out the features of his face. Archie and Miss Doot rode up in an old Chevrolet with snuff-laced spit covering the driver's side door panel. There was no off chance that he would be sober and Thomas had plenty of moonshine to

maintain his status. Mrs. Grace, Lillian's childhood friend, couldn't resist the opportunity to see her again even if it meant driving some 90 miles from Marianna. Thomas was carting out the Victrola as she pulled up and parked near one of the oak trees. When the needle made contact with the vinyl, some of those in the crowd began to move like Sunday was more than two weeks away.

After the main courses were over and generous gluttony was expanded to include dessert, the younger folks went out exploring. Alice, Ruthie and Julia were anxious to have so much company, outside a funeral, and took full advantage of the opportunity to engage their cousins in such pastoral excursions. They chased after guineas, caught large, bright red fire ants in cups, made pop-guns with plastic tubing, using chinaberries as ammunition, and picked fruit, even if still green, right off the trees.

"Better leave them persimmons along. They ain't ripe yet an' they'll lock your jaws," Julia warn.

"They ain't gone lock my jaws," says Alton, a big overgrown cousin from Blountstown, boasting as he picked one of the large orange fruit from the heavy hanging branches.

"O.K. then. You bite it an' see fo yoself."

Alton hesitated, studying the fruit for the most suitable surface to plug. With his big teeth exposed, he incised a large portion of flesh from the fruit and instantly began to twist his lips and jaws in discomfort. Julia and all the others laugh as Alton continued to work loose his lips, his eyes stretching with both shock and embarrassment.

"I told ya! I told ya them persimmons was't ripe," Julia say still grinning.

"Y'all git away from them trees," Thomas yells from one of the large oak trees. "Them persimmons ain't ripe yet!"

"Yes sir," Alice answers back as Alton who had now regurgitated most of his stomach's content, walked in small steps and hunched over in discomfort.

All had gathered back amongst the trees when the first vehicles began to depart. Endless partings like "Take care" and "Good to see you" ricocheted against the bright orange of the coming dusk. Mrs. Grace sat idling her Oldsmobile and waiting for Lillian to receive her last goodbyes. She would drop her off at the bus station and head back to Marianna. Lillian sat on the passenger side and looked back as Mrs. Grace slowly pulled off. The old homestead and the good upturned fields that surrounded it was a place where time had moved at its own pace; in

spite of even the most insignificant wishes of a guilt-ridden heart.

* * *

Nathan had left early for work in town. He always had more ice than the time needed to deliver it all and that kept him in the permanent shadow of ever getting ahead. On occasion, he would bring some home and with his hand-crank churn make ice cream. And on a hot day like this, Caroline would welcome it. She was in the fields, tending what crops she could between nursing her newborn, Francis, who was sleeping inside and her toddler, who played in the grass with the dog. She had stumbled through a crop of dandelions, unleashing a cloud of white that quickly scattered into the light blue of day. Caroline looked up at the white of the floating seeds that became lost within the first bellow of grey smoke that poured out of her kitchen window.

“Run down the road Emily. Run!” The small child just stared back and said something.

Smoke had free reign of the house by now as bright flickers of red and yellow signified the source of it all. The soot black stove had ruptured, still spewing red hot ashes all over the kitchen floor. The harsh grey smoke stung her throat with the first gulp. It wasn't until she fell to her knees did her eyes detect a clearer strata of air moving near the floor. She crawled into her room and snatched the sleeping baby from the bed. Darker air curled up near the top of the headboard as Caroline fell back to the floor, pressing her cheek on the cool wood and gulping another mouthful of air. With the baby in her arm, she scurried for the backdoor and in seconds was back in the daylight.

Caroline ran a piece down the road, lifting Emily as the dog ran behind.

“Stay hea,” she shouted expecting the children and dog to understand.

Caroline snagged a bucket on her way to the pump. She stutter stepped to hold the heavy bucket that sloshed water with each hurried gait. By the time Caroline emptied her load of water, the fire was out, but was popping and spitting mad. By the time Nathan got home, Caroline already had the curtains washed and hanging on the line drying. There was ice, but there would be no ice cream today.

* * *

She hadn't felt right for months. It was like some noxious spirit had invaded her body and left what it no longer needed or desired on the doorsteps of her soul. She knew of no words that she could use to describe her infirmity so she had remained silent, moping through chores and attempting to shield her new complexion. It was a myriad of unknowns that swirled all

around her, a haphazard collection of fears, and an unmeasured number of steps that led her across Miss Cassie's dirt yard. Once there, she stopped at the edge of the porch steps and waited for her legs to finish the journey it began on its own. She couldn't turn back now even if she wanted.

"Ruthie that you?"

"Yes'm"

"Come on in."

Ruthie opened the screen door and walked in. She went to the couch and sat, looking down at her disobedient feet then at anything other than her grandmother.

"You done went an' got yo'self in a whole heap of trouble aint ya?"

Ruthie would have answered if she'd had one to offer, wondering how Miss Cassie could peer through her and at the baby that grew inside.

"Life ain't gone slow up fa ya. Might as well try an' keep pace wit' it, otherwise it run you down. Best not say nothin' to Thomas yet. He cuss from now to eternity."

Ruthie said nothing hoping her words would miraculously exorcise away her demons.

"I thank I know whose it is too. Don't you eva let that boy put his whole hand down on ya. Good Lawd, got his thumb down already."

"Yes ma'am.

"Git on home 'fore it git too late."

"Yes ma'am," Ruthie says getting up and now with more control over her own legs. She never spoke about her visit and over the next few months heard Thomas yell words she'd never heard before.

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ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

ALICE

- 22 Turpentiners were most often African-American men who commonly took jobs in rural, southern workcamps from the 20s to the 50s, extracting the yellow or brown sap of pine and fir trees for distillation.
- 24 “east and west”: If a person dies with much distress it is a bad sign that she/he will haunt the survivors. The bed should never be placed “crossways of the world” (north and south), but east and west with the head towards the west. Newbell Niles Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, p. 81 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926)
- 26 “lightered stumps”: Based on an old wives tale. Babies were said to come from lightered wood stumps. Lightered wood is dried pine wood. The dried rosin are very combustible and are used to start wood stoves and fireplaces.
- 28 “feedsack dresses”: Many in the rural, southern communities used the burlap bags that animal feed came in to make dresses. Not only was this economically feasible, the bags came in alternate and intricate patterns.
- 40 Cut is the southern term used to describe the act of castrating a male hog before sexual maturity (borrowed hog).

PEARL

- 42 “mourning doves”: Of the many Southern folklegends surrounding the appearance of this bird (also known as turtle dove), the most common is if this dove mourns or calls around your house, it signifies death or impending death.
- 47 “grit-mill”: Customers brought corn to gristmills to be ground to cornmeal. Merchants kept a portion of the meal as a fee for their service. Gristmills sat alongside streams or creeks, the water turning the millstones.
- 50 “bark of cedar tree”: Tea steeped from cedar bark was a folk medicine that relieved menstrual cramps and promoted fertility. Faith Eidse, *Voices of the Apalachicola*, (University Press of Florida, 2006)
- 51 “Guildcrest School Board”: Southern school districts granted additional resources in significant measure to black schools during the decade prior to the 1954 Brown decision because they recognized that gross inequalities between black and white schools left them vulnerable to legal attacks, providing compelling arguments for segregation. Davison M. Douglas, *Teaching Equality: Black Schools in the Age of Jim Crow* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001)

VERNACULAR GUIDE

Verbs ending with “ing” are abbreviated to reflect the unvoiced “g.” (ie. cookin’ / choppin’ / singin’) Some words ending with hard “d” and “t” are unvoiced. (ie. Jus’)

OTHER WORD MODIFICATIONS:

About	‘bout
Can’t	kain’t
Every	evera
For	fa
Get	git
Here	hea
Just	jus’
More	mo’
Must	mus’
That	dat
Thing	thang
To	ta
Yesterday	yistiddy*
You	ya
Your	ya
Will	ah
With	wit’

* “Unique Expressions and Peculiar Pronunciations” (Zora Neale Hurston), Stetson Kennedy Florida Folklife Collection, Florida State Archives, Department of State, Series 1585, Carton 1, File Folder 15.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Over the past 15 years, Aron Myers has navigated the worlds of both broadcasting and literature—researching, writing and producing award-winning radio, television and other multimedia projects for NPR, PBS, Universal and Warner Bros. Studios. In 2004, he launched the internationally syndicated radio drama series *Stories in the Air*, featuring fairytales and legends with all original music, SFXs, songs and dramatic underscoring. The all-star cast included Angela Lansbury, Blair Underwood, Dixie Carter, Dean Cain, Lisa Ling, Jeff Corwin and Phyllis Diller and to date has been heard by over 5 million public radio listeners.

The following fall, he launched *Historic Florida!*, a series of radio segments highlighting the state's diverse cultural and artistic heritage with segments hosted by well-known Floridians including HBO's *Curb Your Enthusiasm* co-star Cheryl Hines, former U.S. attorney general Janet Reno and Miss America 2004 Ericka Dunlap. *Historic Florida!* was awarded two World Gold Medals at the 2005 New York Festivals, the 24th annual International Radio Programming Awards in the categories "Best History Program" and "Best Narration." Myers is currently producing a national radio documentary for Public Radio International entitled *Southern Exposure: The Life and Legacy of Zora Neale Hurston*. The documentary and soundtrack explores the life and works of the Florida folklorist and celebrated writer of the Harlem Renaissance. The production features Hurston biographers and celebrity guests, as well as dramatic readings and music from the era. It is hosted by actress/vocalist Vanessa Williams.

In addition to compiling a collection of shortstories, Myers is putting the finishing touch on an ashecan for his graphic novel *The Guardians*.

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- M.A. in English, Florida State University, 2006