AN EXPERIMENTAL NOVEL
entitled
PALMS OF VICTORY

INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS CENTER
APPALACHIAN STATE UNIVERSITY
BOONE, NC 28608

A Thesis
by
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Submitted to the Graduate School
Appalachian State University
in partial fulfillment for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

November 1999
Major Department: Appalachian Studies
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Nancy Meador Collins

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ABSTRACT

AN EXPERIMENTAL NOVEL

entitled PALMS OF VICTORY (November 1999)

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This work is a striving to express the voice of one small corner of Appalachia; it is but a portion of a larger quest to define the identity of individuals, families, communities, and ultimately an entire region through literature.

The current depiction of Appalachia is one of peculiarity, isolation, and backwardness, deriving from the publications of nineteenth century "local color" writers who sold this fabricated image of mountain "otherness" to the editors of northern magazines, who in turn sold it to a nation rapidly becoming industrialized and urbanized, in need of a childlike, innocent past. This negative image of the region was still a commodity for mid-America during the 1960's War on Poverty, and continues to the present day; it is summarized by Shapiro (1978) and Batteau (1990) who claim that the region is an ideological, created concept which was invented by outsiders.

With the establishment of Appalachian Studies programs in schools throughout the region during the last quarter of a century, the quest to define a truer image of the region has been reclaimed by insiders who are continuing
the search for cultural identity in a broad range of fields, including history, geography, folklore, political science, religion, anthropology, and literature.

Beginning in 1940 with the publication of James Still's River of Earth, the "Realistic tradition" in Appalachian literature has cleared new ground for a more honest and direct form of narrative rooted in "a sense of place," the predominate element of regional studies. Appalachian authors perceive "place" both in the physical sense, as geographic features, and in the spiritual sense, as a region of the heart and imagination. The recovery of this first, true "voice-place" could be an empowering factor for the region, as together we gain a clearer understanding of our mythology, "the quintessence of our being."

Several models and theories have been proposed to explain Appalachia's lack of power, including the "culture of poverty" or deficiency, the colonialism, and the periphery models. This novel is compatible with the anthropological model of ethnographic fiction, for it contains such elements as the "struggle to understand self and others," narrative flow and strong characters engaged in "a more complete rendering of the human condition," and the recognition that the "underlying humanity" of both ethnographer and subject can best be discovered through the medium of storytelling.

Materials for this work (written records and oral histories) were drawn from the author's childhood home in the coalfields of Wise County, southwest Virginia, where a trinity of places--valley, town, and collieries--contributes to the rich cultural diversity of the area.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I give great thanksgiving for the "confluence" of all who flow toward and beside me, "coming together with intent," and I name these particular branches of that river:

Jerry Williamson. In my first class in Appalachian Studies, you wrote this into my journal: "You are a writer and should be doing it all the time." I thank you for that word.

Pat Beaver. You were willing to scout the trail in this pioneering effort toward writing the first thesis-novel in Appalachian Studies at this university. I thank you for that spirit (and for chairing my thesis committee).

CeCe Conway. You showed me the wonder-filled world of literature created by Appalachian authors and the mysteries of Celtic mythology. I thank you for that connection (and for serving on my thesis committee).

Gregory Reck and Susan Weinberg. You offered different ways of viewing this project and many helpful suggestions along the winding way. I thank you for that perspective (and for serving on my thesis committee).

Dean Williams. You shared your time, talents, and knowledge of the secret of a good education: It's not what you know, it's knowing where to find it. I thank you for that generosity.

The Storytellers. You gave me the invaluable presence of your words. I thank you for that greatest of all gifts.
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my extended family, you who share with me the stories of your lives. You are my very best story, and I thank you.
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FOR
in the beginning was the
WORD

Appalachia is a region in search of identity and center, of definition and truth, of the essence of her meaning and significance, of her reason to be and to remain; ultimately, Appalachia is a region in quest of her voice. This work is an experimental novel, a striving to express the voice of one small corner of Appalachia--the place of my raising and that which I still call home, even though I no longer inhabit it physically. It is part and parcel of a layered quest, beginning first with an individual, extending to a family, then to a community, and eventually to an entire region.

Like everything else under the sun, this search for Appalachian identity is nothing new; it has been in process since the early part of the eighteenth century when the mixing of diverse ethnic groups resulted in the settlement of the southern Appalachian mountains. This identity process intensified in the latter part of the nineteenth century, when the region was discovered by "local color" writers--notably John Fox, Jr. (1903, 1908, 1910, 1917) and Mary Noailles Murfree (1884). In creating fictional characterizations and travel sketches about the southern Appalachian mountains as a commodity for northern magazines, these authors (who were mostly well-to-do, aristocratic
outsiders) fabricated the image of a place and a people who were exotic and peculiar, isolated and backward and strange--in short, the "other" (Shapiro 1978). Roberta Herrin (1995) includes this notion of "otherness" in her comparison of two major American symbols--the Child and Appalachia. She finds that:

1. Both were generated by outsiders.
2. Each is characterized by "otherness" and isolation.
3. Both ideas began as expressions of natural innocence and purity.
4. Individuals were asked to conform to the "reality" of the inventions.
5. Both inventions are now taken as a priori fact.
6. Both represent New as opposed to Old Worlds.
7. Both creations are vehicles for a rebellious, revolutionary impulse.
8. Both continue to be met with ambivalence and tension.
9. Both creations are contingent on a middle class.
10. Once these inventions become "realities," they become commodities.

The perspective which produced this symbolic Appalachia was that of a nation fast becoming industrialized and urbanized, in need of a childlike, innocent, agricultural past--something "other" than the fast-paced, materialistic society that was emerging from the Industrial Revolution in America. Those who most manipulated this image of the region did it for material gain, and the growing middle class of consumers who bought, read and accepted the
fabrication were quite likely just as exploited as the Appalachian people
themselves; they, too, had grief over what was lost. But a scapegoat was
needed, so when Will Harney (1873) spoke of "A Strange Land and Peculiar
People" after touring the Cumberland Mountains in 1869, and William Goodell
Frost (1899) sold "Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains" to
the Atlantic Monthly magazine exactly one century ago, the region became a
product—something to be used up and parceled out as entertainment, as balm
for a conquering consciousness, as the whipping boy for a greedy nation. This
sentiment was virtually the same when Appalachia was re-discovered in the
1960's by a now overwhelmingly industrialized and virtually urbanized
America, as President Johnson declared the region to be the bull's eye of his
"War on Poverty," and Jack Weller (1965) disparagingly pegged the inhabitants
as "yesterday's people"—left behind in a rural, agricultural, isolated, backward,
poverty-stricken past.

According to Henry Shapiro (1978) and Allen Batteau (1990), this region
called Appalachia exists only as something invented by outsiders: "Henry
Shapiro, [in his] seminal work, Appalachia On Our Mind, maintains that App-
alachia is not so much geographical as it is ideological, a created concept . . . "
(Joyner 1993, 714); expanding on this idea, Batteau claims that "Appalachia is
just as much a social construction as is the cowboy or, for that matter, the
Indian" (1990, 16). In the same vein, David Whisnant (1983) focuses on the
schools and institutions (particularly the John C. Campbell Folk School, the
Hindman Settlement School, and the Whitetop Folk Festival) which were the products of missionary-educators from other regions. Despite their "outsider" perspectives, these educators were often instrumental in the collection and preservation of Appalachian folklore (many ballads, for example) which may well have been lost without the efforts of people such as Olive Dame Campbell, who modeled the Brasstown folk school after a Danish movement to preserve "all that is native and fine."

Against this brief glimpse of how the Appalachian region acquired a decidedly negative image in the past, what has been happening in the quest to voice a truer, more self-conscious Appalachian identity in more recent years? Happily, this task has been reclaimed by those native to the region, by insiders who take the name of "Appalachian" by birth, by choice, by experience, or simply in the sharing of a kindred spirit. In the last quarter of a century, since the establishment of Appalachian Studies programs in colleges and universities throughout the region (including Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina in 1979), an outpouring of books and papers and journal articles and films and classes and conferences and seminars have all been concerned with the many aspects of Appalachian culture in such diverse fields as history and musicology, economics and anthropology, political science and sociology, religion and ecology, education and geography, folklore, linguistics, and in a virtual flood of Appalachian literature. The definitive answer to the question "Who, or what is Appalachia?" is still pending, but there has been a dramatic
shift in approach to the issue, exemplified by a change in the wording used to
describe this process. Instead of Shapiro's and Batteau's "inventions, construc-
tions, and created concepts," analysts such as Ergood and Kuhre (1991), Eller
(1980) speak of "developments, growth, and evolving ideas " which are
continuously and continually "in process." This approach could perhaps be
construed as having negative undertones of consumerism, but at least there is
some allowance for change, which is hopefully an improvement over the static
perspectives of the past. Erik Erikson (1968) recognizes the necessity of
including both personal and community growth in "a process 'located' in the
core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture, a
process which establishes, in fact, the identity of these two identities . . . We
cannot separate personal growth and contemporary crises in historical devel-
opment because the two help to define each other and are truly relative to
each other" (22-3). Whisnant (1980) continues Erikson's processing of this idea
by adding, "Of the many possible corollaries to such a statement, one is surely
that identity formed in isolation from one's cultural base is likely to be warped
or truncated. To be denied cultural identity is to lose self, and to recover one is
at the very least a harbinger of the eventual recovery of the other" (45). The
tongue-and-grooving of these two statements concerning the processing of
individual, community, and cultural identity is an apt metaphor for the process
itself; there is a valley that each child of the mountains must walk alone, but
the identity of the region is made manifest in the higher ground of community.

Nowhere is this synthesis of individual and group identities more evident than in the plethora of Appalachian literature and literary criticism which has burst the dam of "local color" stereotyping and come crashing into the sea of American literature, a viable new branch of regional writing. What Nellie McNeil and Joyce Squibb call "the Realistic tradition" (1989, 70) was pioneered by James Still in 1940 with the publication of *River of Earth*; this opened the floodgates for native-born authors such as Harriette Arnow (1954), Wilma Dykeman (1962), and Mildred Haun (1968) to explore their identities as Appalachians in a new, more honest and direct narration that dared to look at both the light and dark sides of themselves as members of a family, of a community, of a culture, and of a specific region. The first anthology of Appalachian regional literature—*Voices from the Hills* edited by Robert Higgs and Ambrose Manning—was published in 1975; its sequel—*Appalachia Inside Out* edited by Higgs, Manning, and Jim Wayne Miller—was published twenty years later, in 1995. This latter-day work required two volumes to accommodate more than four times the amount of material it contained, but the focus is still the same; the writers of the region are yet in process of definition, as noted by the editors in the anthology's introduction:

the main task before us has not been to argue the literary parity or superiority of selections. Rather, we have sought to identify writing that both represents and reveals the culture of the Appalachian region . . . this
issue of region, which major American literature texts fail substantially
to address. It is our belief that, if self-knowledge is the goal of human-
istic learning, then literature should reflect some understanding of the
self, not only in the abstract but also on native or familiar ground. (xvi)

The idea of having "a sense of place" on "native or familiar ground" is the
basis for a relatively new field of scholarship—that of regional studies. In her
essay entitled "Regional Studies in American Folklore Scholarship," which
serves as an introduction to Sense of Place: American Regional Cultures,
folklorist Barbara Allen leads this field when she states that "A sense of place,
a consciousness of one's physical surroundings, is a fundamental human
experience. It seems to be especially strong where people in a neighborhood,
a community, a city, a region, possess a collective awareness of place and
express it in their cultural forms" (1990, 1). Allen is aware that scholars from
different disciplines—geographers, economists, historians, anthropologists,
folklorists—will approach the idea of region in varying ways, but she finds
four elements which are fundamental to any study of regionalism. These are:
1) Place—"the geographical entity"  2) People "who . . . organize their lives
within the context of the environmental conditions and natural resources of
that place"  3) History "of residents' shared experiences in and with that place"
4) Distinctiveness "both from the areas surrounding it and from the whole
(e.g., the nation) . . . in economic and social structure and systems, in historical
development and experiences, in cultural patterns, or in all three [which gives a
region] a sense of identity distinct from the rest of the country" (1990, 2).

These are the same elements Patricia Beaver employs in her study of *Rural Community in the Appalachian South*:

   this discussion considers community itself, a combination of elements linking geographically defined place, the daily lives and relationships of people, historical experiences, and shared values. Drawing from . . . three separate and, of course, unique communities, I have focused my analysis on social patterns and cultural systems common to these three places and to similar southern Appalachian rural communities. (1986, 1)

All of these elements play major roles in *Bloodroot*, a new anthology which illustrates the old quest for definition and identity, descriptively subtitled *Reflections on Place by Appalachian Women Writers* (Dyer 1998). In these essays we see that place may be geographic, or it may be of the imagination and heart, but there is no denying the more-than-obvious geographic feature of the Appalachian region—the mountains themselves. For Maggie Anderson "the mountains can narrow our horizons, lower our ceilings, and hold us in, both literally and metaphorically. But . . . these hills comfort me. Perhaps because of their great age . . . the hills provide a sense of history and, therefore, of implicit continuance" (1998, 33). From her vantage point of exile in southern Illinois, Elaine Fowler Palencia "missed having hills around me, watching over me, sheltering me, cutting the horizon down to a manageable size" (1998, 206).
For Doris Diosia Davenport "that's how it is with these hills, mountains, and valleys. I am so much a part of all this, it is so much a part of me until I can't 'see' it, all I know is the 'is-ness' and when I'm asked what it means . . . my only response is a smile" (1998, 92). These mythical images of mountains which are at the same time limiting and comforting conjure up my own memories of leaving home for a sojourn in the flat-lands, to attend college in eastern North Carolina. At first I felt a certain exhilaration, a freedom of breaking away from the ties which had bound me; but then there was an underlying feeling of unease, of sensing that something was missing, but I didn't know just what it was. Then one morning I stood in the middle of a long causeway which crossed a very flat lake, when a stabbing pain drove me to my knees, and I knew: I was buck-nekkid. There were no mountains to wrap around me like my granny's crocheted shawl, no mountains to give me shelter, no mountains to know my name and call me back home again, to myself.

For home is always the hopeful end of the quest, but defining home is equally as elusive as the naming of Appalachia. For some it is found in the physical manifestations, in the natural elements of earth and water and fire and air, or in man-made structures--houses, cabins, barns, smokehouses--anywhere there is a sense of grounding, of rootedness. Others sense it more as a spiritual place, what George Ella Lyon (1998) calls "Voiceplace":

for if you abandon or ridicule your voiceplace, you forfeit a deep spiritual connection . . . the embrace of language that welcomed us into
this world. It is nurture, humor, memory, vision. It is what we must get
back to in order to know ourselves, the "first voice" that teaches us to
speak . . . I believe you must trust your "first voice"--the one tuned by
the people and place that made you--before you can speak your deepest
truths. (174, 169)

Surely this is the primary element which gives the place called Appalachia
its distinctiveness--not the poverty or ignorance or backwardness attributed to
it by "others," but the primeval belief in the power of the spoken word. The
orality of Appalachian culture is palpably evident in the language (which is
still alive, in spite of the invasion of twentieth century mass media), in the
music (whose offspring "country and western" is the most popular music in
America today), in the stories which are more than entertainment--they are a
hiding and listening in on the grown-ups telling tales, a "mundane" childhood
activity which provided the "solid foundation" of her grown-up writing:

The conversations ranged from the exquisitely juicy to the mundane,
and the older people often told the same stories time after time.
But . . . I sensed necessity in the telling. It was as though certain people
had been assigned the task of making sense of or explaining a particular
past event . . . through verbal repetition. They didn't just talk about a
happening, they re-created it. Like good carpenters, they built a
solid foundation and worked their way up. (161)
For Appalachia, there is necessity in the telling. It is an urgency born of a love for the language, for the names of people and places and things, for the music that sounds through the wind and the rain, in the singing of birds and in the songs of our communal selves as we struggle to find that "first voice" which will speak our deepest truths. And these truths contain our identity and definition, our center and significance, our reason to be and to remain, our "voiceplace," which could also be called our mythology.

In the original Greek, the logos was the word; it was the terminology used and the meaning conveyed in the Biblical gospel of John, when he writes, "In the beginning was the logos, and the logos was with God and the logos was God." This logos forms the root of the word mythology, and it carries the same weight--mythology is God present in the spoken word. Unfortunately, the word mythology has acquired a negative connotation, particularly in its shortened form; when we say that something is a myth, that thing is generally understood to be false. Rollo May (1991) gives us a radically different perspective on this often misapplied word, as he gathers a host of definitions from scholars worldwide and reflects upon these in *The Cry for Myth*, a study of the role of mythology in modern-day society. May himself defines myth as "the quintessence of human experience, the meaning and significance of human life . . . a way of making sense in a senseless world" (26). In *Ancient Myth in Modern Poetry*, Lillian Feder calls myth "a form of expression which reveals man's awareness of and response to the universe, his fellow men, and his
separate being . . . inexpressible in any other way" (qtd. in May 28). Bronislaw Malinowski, in *Magic, Science and Religion* refers to "a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants and moral cravings" (qtd. in May 15). In his seminal work *Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*, Swiss analytical psychologist Carl Jung defines myth as "the psychic life of the tribe, which immediately falls to pieces and decays when it loses its mythological heritage, like a man who loses his soul" (qtd. in May 37).

And Thomas Mann prefaces his tetralogy of novels entitled *Joseph and His Brothers* with this eloquent pronouncement of mythology as "an eternal truth, in contrast to an empirical truth . . . the garment of mystery" (qtd. in May 27).

It seems to me that Appalachia is seeking to have this "eternal truth" which is "the quintessence of human experience" named and appreciated for what it is, but the word *mythology* is not a term that is widely used in conjunction with the name of *Appalachia*. I would question this omission in a region where tales are told as part of the rhythm of daily life--tales ripe with heroes and symbolic characters, with images that cry out to the senses, with motifs that play themselves over and over again until they are deeply entrenched in our Appalachian community consciousness. The names and details change from place to place within the region, but many of the basic mythological themes are the same: everyday, ordinary people making do the best they can, surviving hardships and even triumphing from time to time by using their wits, speaking their minds when need be, and trying to keep a healthy sense
of humor, to boot. These are our heroes and our ideals; why not express them in a new appreciation of a mythology that could truly be called Appalachian? Currently, the image of Appalachia is yet a distorted one. On his sojourn in *Hillbillyland*, Jerry Williamson (1995) discovered that the nation was still enamored of "an appalling ambiguity . . . Our secret dread . . . that the dark, drunken Hillbilly is no Other, but us" (20, 6). This decidedly negative image of the mountaineer as perpetuated by the film industry is no better, and perhaps even somewhat worse, than the *Appalachian Images in Folk and Popular Culture* discovered by W.K McNeil in 1989. Perhaps a clearer understanding of an Appalachian mythology could be the key to empowerment of a regional identity; for once a group of people uncovers who they are from within, there is no limit to what they can accomplish without—including the displacement of an image long since proven to be unworthy of them.

Throughout modern history such self-conscious empowerment has been demonstrated in movements toward civil rights, toward equal rights, toward freedom itself. Martin Luther King symbolically stood on a mountain top and conjured up images of an oppressed people yearning for a Promised Land; his utilization of mythology was a primary factor which ended segregation for African-Americans through the American Civil Rights Movement. Feminists employed the same technique, calling on ancient goddesses and latter-day suffragette saints in their move to bring Equal Rights to all women. But perhaps the most graphic use of mythology for empowerment occurred in the
Irish Literary Renaissance; Richard Fallis (1977) chronicles this movement's potent use of Celtic mythology by such authors as George "AE" Russell, John Milton Synge, Padraic Colum, Lady Gregory, Sean O'Casey and principally William Butler Yeats--Gaelic writers who resurrected the Celtic heroes of old to lead their rejuvenated, well-defined, modern-day descendants (a people also given a negative image) to victory in the heroic Irish Revolution of 1916.

Appalachia's issue with *Power and Powerlessness* has been well documented by John Gaventa (1984, 1990), who notes that Appalachian people lost control of their economic and political destinies in the latter part of the nineteenth century when they turned from a barter-based economy and sold their land, often under coercion and threat. Subsequently, many purchased a whole new set of symbols created by non-native industrialists who were promoting their own ideology: that technology could and would prevail over nature, and those who didn't participate in this New Order were backward and depraved, ignorant and degraded. Many native-Appalachians bought into this ideology, but this was certainly not true in all cases. Lands which were devoted to tourism were much less assaulted, and virtually all mountain communities possessed those "memory keepers" who continued the native arts, each one maintaining a corner of Appalachian culture which is still alive to this day because of their perseverance and steadfastness. But the prevailing image of the region (for outsiders, at least) continues to be that of a land and a people set apart--the backyard of a backcountry colony of some (m)other country.
Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case (1978) presents a spectrum of essays related to the application to Appalachia of the "colonialism model" by Helen Lewis and Edward Knipe (1973); this model considers the exploitation by outside interests who literally turned central Appalachia into an American colony—taking the labor of its people and resources for their own financial benefit and leaving the region with ravaged land and impoverished inhabitants as a result. At the time she was editing this work, Helen Lewis was living in Dungannon, Scott County, Virginia: hearthstone of my mother's family. The coal-bearing area of central Appalachia upon which her research focused encompassed Wise County, Virginia: seedbed of my father's family. Here are connections to my own mythology; this is my corner of Appalachia.

The colonialism model was but one alternative to the popular and prevailing "culture of poverty" model which proposed that Appalachian people were poor because they were culturally inferior, inheriting such inevitable traits as ignorance, passivity, and fatalism which would (and, many thought, should) keep them forever in poverty. This "deficiency" model was, naturally, a favorite among those speculators who were buying Appalachian land, timber, and mineral rights, and exploiting the natives, now proven justifiably inferior; it became the credo of mainstream America when Jack Weller, a man of the (transplanted) cloth channeled it through the Christian churches via his catastrophic (for Appalachia, at least) book *Yesterday's People* (1965). Over in eastern Kentucky Harry Caudill (1962) picked up the
gauntlet, and the "deficient sub-culture" of Appalachia became an American byword.

Even more recently, Rodger Cunningham's *Apples on the Flood* (1987) expounds upon "the economic peripheralization theory of Immanuel Wallerstein, which counters liberal 'development theory' with the thesis that a depressed and exploited 'peripheral zone' plays an essential role in the economic life of a dominant metropolitan core" (xiix). Cunningham's work demonstrates that the issue of Appalachian identity is not a simple matter of socio-economics, or politics, or psychology, or any single factor, but is an on-going synthesis of a cultural process which has affected our Appalachian (often Celtic) ancestors for over five thousand years in the Atlantic Zone of Europe—those on the fringes, or periphery of the British Isles. Thus, "It is not a matter of 'What came down through history?' but of 'What sort of history came down?"' (xxvii). Appalachians do have an historical identity, but the nature of this history is complex, and remains in process of being uncovered and discovered.

Against the background of all of these theories and models and complex issues of identity, I have set out to write an experimental novel which would be one small expression of my own "first voice," the narration of an insider attempting to tell a true story of my own native "voiceplace." It appears that this issue of voice is also being raised in anthropology, where new ideas about the writing of ethnographic narrative texts have been developing over the past three decades. Beginning with the pioneering efforts of
Clifford Geertz (1968, 1988) and his colleagues, anthropologists such as Miles Richardson (1990) and Gregory Reck (1983, 1984, 1993) "have embarked on an interpretive approach which recognizes ethnographic subjects as storytellers" (Reck 1993, 67). Reck, in his introduction to the special issue of Anthropology and Humanism Quarterly devoted to the expanding modes of representation which are opening up in the field of "narrative ethnography," broadly defines ethnography as "a struggle to understand ourselves and others in an incomprehensible world" (1984, 3). In this same issue John B. Gatewood gives (an incomplete) listing of ethnographic genres, including the personal narrative, chronicles and logs, ethnographic biography, general, specialized and phenomenal ethnographies, the distribution study, and ethnographic fiction, all of which "hope to achieve a more complete rendering of the human condition" (1984, 5). Both Gatewood and Nancy Schmidt (1984) argue that this last category should be given more credence by the scientific community, which is lately beginning to recognize "the importance of ethnographic fiction both as a literary style and as a significant event in the history of anthropology" (Schmidt 11). It is in the creation of "strong characters and narrative flow," according to Gatewood, that readers become truly interested in the "underlying humanity of the subject matter" (8). This experimental novel falls within the category of "ethnographic fiction," for it contains such elements as the struggle to understand myself and others in an incomprehensible world, narrative flow and (hopefully) strong characters engaged in "a more complete rendering of the
human condition," and the recognition that the "underlying humanity" of both the ethnographer and the ethnographic subjects (including an "insider" attempting to define the people and places of her native "voiceplace") can best be discovered through the medium of storytelling, for:

we humans live, remember and dream through stories. In a very real sense, we domesticate this wild world of ours by narrative . . . Humans are the story-creating animals . . . authentic ethnography should demand that we understand this story-telling animal by being a story-telling animal, in other words, by being fully human . . . understanding the story of the self and other that is our fieldwork, as well as developing the language to authentically represent that story. (Reck 1993; 64, 72)

**Methodology and Sources**

There is no doubt about it: I am a storyteller, and I come from a long line of "story-telling animals." I was raised up in the town of Big Stone Gap, Wise County, in the extreme corner of southwest Virginia, where the hollers cozy up to North Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky, and then fall off the known world into West Virginia. Here my mama's people farmed and kept stores, pulled teeth and pranks, raised strong children and glorious gardens, and most importantly for me, told tall tales of hunting and fishing and rousting about over legendary Sunday dinner tables. Here, too, my father's people preached and fought, mined coal and timber and taught, worked and wallered
through the boom-and-bust of a town that was to have been the "Pittsburgh of the South," and left behind a coal museum and an Alcoholics Anonymous chapter as a lasting legacy. It is from this family, from this community, from this place that I have drawn the stories, characters, events, and images in this novel, a single facet of a "true" story of the Appalachian region as a whole.

What makes my home such a fertile region for writing is the complexity of the social structures here; like much of Appalachia, it is not just one place, but a trinity of places, each of which nurtures a distinct culture. The richness and variety of these myriad cultures reverses yet another Appalachian stereotype—the notion that the region is homogeneous with respect to the land and the kinds of people who live on it. In my corner of Appalachia, there are at least three different kinds of land and peoples; these are bound by a common body of history, values, traditions, and knowledge of local legends and tales, but are distinctive in the individual expression of these elements, and in the ways in which members of these communities earn their livings.

The first part of the trinity is the valley, domain of farm land where there is no coal. People in the valley still live primarily off of the land, farming like many generations before them and passing the land along to children who continue to retain it. Some of these valley people commute daily across state lines, into Tennessee and Kentucky to work, but return to their farm-homes each evening. They cannot imagine living anywhere else.

Secondly, there is the town of Big Stone Gap, Virginia—a place literally
created by foreign (from the north, as well as other countries) investors to be the center of a great industrial empire which never materialized. These speculators stayed through "the boom," and disappeared with the inevitable "bust," leaving behind great stone edifices, black lung, and a hunger for the world beyond; "ordinary" townspeople worked in banks and stores, taught in local schools, and mined coal. The town has gone through several transformations with the retreat of "the Company," but it still survives, making a living the best it can from tourism and a new federal prison which has landed like a spaceship on top of Wallen's Ridge, where once cows grazed and children played.

Thirdly, there are the collieries: the self-contained communities called "coal camps" where everything and everybody was owned by the one big coal company which provided houses and schools and doctors and preachers and entertainment, in a system of paternalism which is long-past, but which left an indelible mark upon the whole region. Some of these camps no longer exist, but they are revived periodically in annual reunions by former residents who eternally think of them as home. Other camps are still alive, to a degree. The houses have been sold to the people who lived in them, and renovation of their homes is the process by which these communities are being salvaged.

These, then, are the people and the places that live in the heart of this experimental novel. I am connected to all these places, to all these cultures; all my life I have been "learning the language" from them by listening to their
stories and writing them on my heart. The process of creating this narrative text has been going on since time-out-of-mind, for, as Marilou Awiakta said, "writers continually sound--measure the depths of their childhood and youth" (1998, 47); my mountain childhood lies very deep within this native ground, to the depths of the coal mines which were the domain of my father's people six generations back in the Welsh "old country." When at last it came time to commit that sound to paper, I continued my lifelong research as a native participant-observer and borrowed the basic methodology of Stephen Foster who viewed "history as a local construct" in The Past Is Another Country (1988), an ethnographic narrative of Ashe County, North Carolina. Foster's methodology is simple: he first studied the written records of the area, and then generated oral histories from people native to this place, producing an engaging study of an Appalachian community not far from my present home in Avery County, North Carolina. Following Foster's model, I began with:

**Written Records**

1) Novels and other works of fiction

My hometown of Big Stone Gap was the very place John Fox, Jr. moved (from the bluegrass of Kentucky) in the late 1800's to seek his fortune--first by investing in land, then by writing his famous "local color" novels. The Trail of the Lonesome Pine was required reading in high school; in 1964 at the age of eleven, I appeared in the first cast of the outdoor dramatization of his story about an ignorant but beautiful and talented mountain girl who falls in love.
with a sophisticated urban engineer, come to these hills to seek his fortune!

Darlene Wilson (1995) presents a much less romantic view of "The Felicitous Convergence of Mythmaking and Capital Accumulation: John Fox Jr. and the Formation of An(other) Almost-white American Underclass." When I read Fox for the first time, it never occurred to me that his "savage, primitive beasts" were my own mountain ancestors; I now rejoice in the irony of my hometown creating an entire tourist industry centered around this author. Where once he mined those "savage mountain beasts" for his fortune, the town is now mining his life and works for their own "capital accumulation."

of "true" Appalachian literature—James Still's *River of Earth* (1940). These works are all excellent examples of ethnographic fiction—the creations of "insiders" struggling toward an understanding of the "underlying humanity" of their own "voiceplaces," often through the medium of storytelling.

2) Local Histories

This area of "extreme southwest Virginia," sometimes called "the Bear Grass," does not conform to the Appalachian stereotype of isolation; to the contrary, there was a great deal of movement through the region, situated as it is on a gap-route. The Big Moccasin Gap in Scott County was a passage for settlers from the Yadkin Valley in North Carolina; the Cumberland Gap down from Middleboro, Kentucky was a passage for EVERYbody heading west, including (naturally) Daniel Boone who carved on his share of trees in the Bear Grass. Much transpired here, and fortunately there were and are a goodly number of interested historians, both amateur and professional, who have written it all down. I drew from accounts by Luther F. Addington (1965, 1966, 1981) and Fred Andrews (1988); James Eby (1924) and Lawrence J. Fleenor, Jr. (1991, 1998); Charles F. Hagan (1943) and James Mooney (1890); Crandall Shifflett (1991) and Roy L. Sturgill (1970, 1991); Lewis Summers (1903) and Margaret Wolfe (1979). I also used genealogies which have been compiled by cousins (several times removed) on my mother's side of the family. From Cousin Dale Honeycutt (1983) I learned of my Osborne kin who settled in Osborne's Ford, now Dungannon, Virginia sometime in the 1770's; Cousin
John Martin (1980) shared with me the story of the McConnell family, through whom I am related to Mother Maybelle Carter and a number of other colorful characters. (Rumor has it that there was once a McConnell shot in a Baptist pulpit, but that's another story . . . ) These genealogies were invaluable sources of information and of many of the names used in *Palms of Victory*.

3) Specialized Histories and Analyses

In the course of my research, I began to repeatedly encounter certain topics which, while not exclusive to this particular area, certainly contribute a great deal to making it a distinctive place. Three of these topics play major roles in *Palms of Victory*, the first (and perhaps most obvious) being the presence of coal mining. While much has been written in this field, those sources which applied directly to this one specific location included James B. Goode's historical account of *Ancient Sunshine: The Story of Coal* (1997), and Crandall Shifflett's (1991) study of coal towns, which provided much useful information about the collieries of the Stonega Coke and Coal Company (locally known as "the Company"). Also helpful were Carol Giesen's (1995) look at the lives of coal miners' wives, and Marat Moore's (1991) firsthand account of the experiences of a female coal miner, a work which inspired me to "go underground" in the course of writing this novel. Particularly illuminating were the stories and information in *The Stonegazette* (1951-52), an early newsletter-type publication of the Stonega Coke and Coal Company (the early name of "the Company" in this novel).
One of the first songs I learned to play on the guitar was "Roll On, Buddy," a Merle Travis classic; I was understandably thrilled to find all the lyrics to this and other songs I had learned through the oral tradition in Archie Green's comprehensive study of coal-mining songs, *Only a Miner* (1972).

"Old-school" or "hard-shell" Baptists (generic categories applied by local people who do not belong to these denominations of primarily Primitive and Old Regular Baptist churches) are a second distinctive element in this novel. I had the opportunity to do intensive fieldwork in the Oak Grove Primitive Baptist Church in Keokee, Virginia (a coal camp) in 1993 through 1994; the leader of the church at that time, Elder Roy Flanary, was gracious to grant me interviews (1993, 1994) and allow me to tape his sermons, which I have transcribed, as well as a sermon by Elder Harold Wilmouth (1994) from the Saddle Mountain Old Regular Baptist Church in Eunice, North Carolina. I found background on the old-school Baptists in works by Howard Dorgan (1987, 1989, 1993), Emory Hamilton (n.d.), Loyal Jones (1977), Beverly Patterson (1995), Daniel Patterson (1988), James Peacock and Ruel Tyson, Jr. (1989), and Brett Sutton (1982), whose recordings of Primitive Baptist lined hymns buzz around inside my head like the bees around my neighbor's hives.

I hesitated to include the third distinctive element, because it has become such a controversial topic due to the efforts of Wise County native Brent Kennedy (1994); but it is also very much a part of my own mythology because I married a Melungeon, so that's that. I had read the earlier works of
Bonnie Ball (1977) and Jean Bible (1975) on this subject; I was also privileged to interview Mrs. Ball in the spring of 1993. Jesse Stuart's novel about a Melungeon girl who falls in love with a boy from town appealed to my pre-adolescent romanticism (Daughter of the Legend, 1965); Darlene Wilson and Patricia Beaver's article on "The Ubiquitous Native Grandmother" (1999) shed a more contemporary and realistic light on this subject, and also supplied an especially helpful bibliography on the subject of Melungeons.

4) Collections of Local Legends and Family Stories

Like the histories, these stories have been recorded by both amateurs and professionals. The most helpful author in the first category was Charles Edwin Price, who has now published four volumes of local legends (1992a, 1992b, 1993, 1994), a veritable canon of stories about which everybody (in the Bear Grass, anyhow) knows some version. Price devotes one entire book to the story of Murdering Mary (1992), the elephant who was hanged from a railroad trestle in Erwin, Tennessee for killing her trainer; it is a story I remember well from childhood. Other local legends and family stories are told by James Taylor Adams (1993), Thomas Barden (1991), Cousin Wayne McConnell (1996), E.D. "Sock" Mullins (1992), Nancy Roberts (1978), Herbert Sutherland (1988), and Roy V. Wolfe, Sr. (1968). The story of Swift's Silver Mine is from Bill Edwards (1980) and Michael Steely (1995), and from my own childhood memories.
5) Newspaper Articles

I have cited two in particular—Jenay Tate's article on coal camps (1999), and Leigh Ann Kennedy's (1998) tribute to Naomi Wells on the occasion of her retirement from writing for the paper (for over fifty years) and the publication of her first collection of poems. These are representative of hundreds of articles I have clipped through the years, mostly "insignificant" writings of day-to-day events in a small town. From these I have maintained close contact with the people, places, and events of my home, and drawn much of the background for this novel. Two special editions of The Post were invaluable: an account of "The Flood: April 1977" (n.d.) and "A Mirror to the Past . . . A Promise for the Future" (1990)—a centennial supplement covering one hundred years of Big Stone Gap and "Bear Grass" history.

6) Memoirs

If anything of value is left to be mined in them-thar-hills, it is these self-written, self-published accounts of individual lives. This was my very best source of written information. I was greatly inspired by the writings of William Ewing Baker (1979), Bonnie Ball (1979), Nick and Rosa Herron (1987), Emma Jane James (1993), the local game warden in the early part of the century (who wrote the story of Squirrel-Head Cindy) Dave O'Neill (1971), Dulcie Cunningham Ruff (1992), Betsy Sholl (1998), Mabel Short (1989), and Naomi Wells (1993, 1998)—Cracker's Neck correspondent to The Post for over half a century.
Oral Sources

In the course of writing this novel, I conducted several "official" interviews; some of these I have on tape, some I have in notes, some I have kept in my heart. Other interviews were much less "official," which means that I sat and listened to "a whole mess" of stories for "a passel" of years. I did manage to tape-record (in 1994) my oldest friend (we lived next-door to each other almost fifty years ago; she now lives two doors down from my mother) Diane Roat Gilley Abbott telling the most perfectly ordinarily wonderful stories you will ever want to hear. When I am feeling "a mite puny," I turn on this tape and her voice "peartens me right up"; she is the best storyteller I know, and she doesn't even know it. Diane teaches exceptional children, of whom I am one. I also interviewed my mother, Virginia Belle Honeycutt Meador in the fall of 1999; she told me stories of "the boom years" after the war. When she was elected to the Wise County Board of Supervisors in 1979, she was the only female and the only Republican; I would admire this woman's spunk even if she were not my mother. Bonnie Ball (1993) and Elder Roy Flanary (1993, 1994) gave me valuable information on Melungeons and Primitive Baptists; Rosa Herron (1993) shared the story of her home for over sixty years, the coal camp of Imboden, Virginia; and "Bear" Barnette and "Short Dog" Holmes allowed me to "waller in my roots," on a memorable Sunday morning's (17 October 1999) descent into the coal mine my brother leased when "The Company" retreated. The stories they shared, sitting at the foot of a coal
face which only a few people have ever seen, are etched into my brain with a dark black lead pencil, forever.

The most intensive interview I conducted was with my husband of twenty-two years, Toby Pence Collins, whom I met one windy day in the spring of 1963, at the tender age of ten (and-a-half) years old; this interview has been in process for the ensuing thirty-six (and-a-half) years. Toby has become my moon roof—to borrow an image from Palms of Victory. When he "tells back" the stories that I have known all my life, I see them from a different perspective: reflected, like the light of the moon. The two of us quite literally grew up together in the same place, yet in different worlds. Toby was born in the back bedroom of a house in the valley; the brothers who came before him were born in coal camps. His first job was surveying in the coal mines, while he was yet in high school. My family lived in town, but we spent a great deal of time on my Grandaddy Honeycutt's farm in Cracker's Neck, and at his cabin on "Chandler's Mountain," places which still call me home. The synthesis of these two worlds gave birth to Jubal, a child of the mountains who dreams the dream of so many children native to this area of southwest Virginia: to run away to Nashville and become a country music star. When Jubal returns to the mountains, it is to find his true voice; at the end of the novel, he has moved closer to his goal, but he is still in process. The important thing for Jubal, for myself as his "midwife," for the families and the communities of "the Bear Grass," and for the identity-seeking Appalachian
region as a whole, is to know that we are constantly "in process"--of finding our definition, our center, our truth, our reason to be and to remain; hopefully, of finding our first, our true "voiceplace."

_We shall not cease from exploration_  
_And the end of all our exploring_  
_Will be to arrive where we started_  
_And know the place for the first time._  

(T.S. Eliot, _Four Quartets_ 29)
PRO-LOGOS

A Celtalachian Myth: The Birthing of a Bard
(A re-telling of the Welsh myth "Taliesin" from the Mabinogion)

I am the first word that leaps from every mother's mouth,
When first she holds her new-birthed babe to her breast.

I am the last word an old crone-woman sighs,
Ferrying across the Jerdan to another shore.

I am the first white blossom on the service tree in spring's day-dawn;
I am the last bronzed leaf that falls from the oak in autumn's day-down.

I am a long hard summer's rain, quenching the dry parched ground;
I am the silence of a winter's snow, purifying the froze-up, waiting land.

I am that tale which my own name tells:
I am a dweller in the holler, a pool below a waterfall.

There are some what take me for a goddess,
But others what 'low I am surely a witch.

Some folks make me out to be a priestess,
A prophetess, a conjure woman;
Others say I am just an old granny woman,
A-birthing babies, a-healing the sick, a-laying out the dead
The best and only ways I know how.

I am none of these things, and all of these things.

I am a Wellspring of Words,
Heartplace of Healing,
Caretaker of Creativity,
Infarer of Inspiration,
All-seer of Abundance,
Midwife of Birthing and Rebirthing.

I am Coreylynn: Keeper of the Cauldron of Change.
H'it seemed I was years a-birthing those young'uns. H'it seemed like the waves of pain that rolled over and all about me for untold minutes into hours, months into years, would tear me apart limb from limb and drown me in a sea of forgetfulness, so that none would ever recall my name or remember my passing. H'it seemed I should have birthed a whole passel of young'uns, but no. When h'it was done and they finally lay in my arms, there were but the two: one girl-child, and one boy-child, and that was all. The girl looked me plime-blank in the eyeball and I could see nothing a-tall, so bright and fair she was, she shone like the very sun-ball h'its ownself.

"I shall name you Ellanora, for you are the bringer of light, the first light of all creation, and all who look upon you will be struck stone cold blind."

And then the boy looked at me, but not like his sister. No, not like his sister a-tall. He turned his head to the side and merely glanced at my face for a trifling, and then turned away again and spat upon the ground. But in that look I saw fearsome things: seas boiling hot and the ground split wide open throwing up great clods of earth, and armies of men coming together in the white-hot flame of ancient hatred, and rivers turning to blood and the sun-ball kivvered up with clouds of smoke from the funeral pyres that choked the land, until all light was swallowed up by darkness.

"Then I shall name you Douglas, for you are a dark stream flowing into a river of despair, and all who look upon you will be struck to the heart with terror for what they cannot name."
By now 'it was coming on daylight, so I walked on down the holler to the neighbor's place. I recalled they had 'em a boy just about the right age--name of Gilbert, so's I knowed he could be trusted. I went and fotched him right outten his bed where he still lay a-sleeping and carried him on back to the house.

"Now looka-here, boy. This here kettle's got to be stirred day and night, for one whole entire year and a day. Iffen you do that for me, I'll pay you what you're worth. But iffen you fail, hit'll be the worst for you. Now here's the paddle; go on and set to 'it."

And sure enough he set to stirring that kettle right then and there, as iffen his very life depended on it. I went on back inside the house, walked right over to that cradle and picked up that boy-child. He was just kindly snuffling now, but I could tell he'd been a-crying all the live-long night. "Well now, Douglas, you can just stop that snuffling right here and now, 'cause I'm a-making something for you. 'It might be that you're dark and 'it might be that you're strange and 'its for sure and certain that you're ugly. But I'm brewing you up a potion what'll give you the gift of tongues, so's that you can see ever-lasting thing and make 'it into the words of a song what'll cause ever-lasting-one to forget about how ugly you are. That song'll just melt ever-heart to where they'll not want to know airy other thing in this world."

And so 'it went: for one whole year that neighbor-boy stirred that kettle day and night, and night and day, 'til 'it just lacked that one last day.
Then I went and stood beside him and said, "Looka-here, boy, you've done a fine job. Come tomorrow morning, you can go on back home with your pockets weighed down. You just make sure this kettle gets stirred good one more day." He didn't say anything at all, but just kindly smiled when I said that--h'it was told hereabouts that the boy wadn't quite right--and then he give that sassyfras paddle a extra big push. And when he did that three drops of the brew flew right outten that kettle and landed smackdab on his thumb. H'it must a-burnt him, 'cause he stuck that thumb straightways into his mouth. Then he looked at me with eyes like the wind, and I could tell that he knowed ever-thing they was to know. He'd gotten those first three drops, the very best of that pot-liquor, what should have gone to my dark-child Douglas.

I screamed and my voice come back to me, whipping about my head and the kettle and that cursed child like a cyclone. I pushed the kettle over. H'it doused the fire and then run down into the creek, turning h'it blacker than a crow's wing dipped in India ink. That boy looked at me one last time, and then he commenced to run. Faster than the wind he run, getting shed of his clothes behind him 'til he was a long-legged jackrabbit making for the brier patch where he knowed I wouldn't folle. But I turned myself into a blue-tick hound and commenced to chase after him. He could hear me a-baying right in behind him, when he come to the river and jumped straight-aways into the water, a-turning hisself into a trout-fish and swimming off with all the colors of the rainbow trailing out behind him. Well, I knowed just what to do: I
turned myself into a water-dog, a-swooping and a-diving and a-turning
somersets right in behind him. I was just up on him, had his tail in my mouth
I did, when he rose up and outten the water, rose right up into the air and flew
off, looking for all the world like a snow-white dove. So's I turned myself into
a hawk and caught the warm air, spiraling up and up and up far above him.
Now down I swooped, my red tail the shaft of an arrow headed straight for his
heart. But he turned hisself into the teensiest hay seed, and fell. Down and
down into a haystack, where he was sure and certain I could never find him.
So's I just turned myself into a banty hen--and I swallered him up.

I went on back home to my young'uns a-thinking that was the end
of h'it. But h'it wadn't. In no time a-tall my stomach commenced to growing,
bigger and bigger h'it got 'til three-quarters of a year had passed and the birth-
pains come on me again. So's I took my case knife and put h'it in and under the
shuck-tick to cut the pains. And when that baby come, I pulled the knife out
and drawed h'it back--but then I looked into his face. He was my son. And
he was beautiful. How could I kill what I had birthed?

I wropped the child up in a wether skin and carried him down to
the river, where I made him a little boat outten the bear grass that grewed
right 'longside the water there. Then I kissed that child on the forehead,
put him into the boat, and waded out into the river with h'it, 'til I come to the
waterfall. Then I let him go. And that was the last I seed of that child.
Now there are those what 'low my son is alive to this day. They say he floated on down that river 'til he come to a town. H'it was the first day of May and they was a man there, a-fishing on the river bank. He pulled that little boat up and out of the water; then he retched in and pulled back the wether skin. And when he seed that child, he was so beautiful and his forehead was just a-shining where I'd kissed him, and that man said, "Tallas!" which means "He of the radiant brow." And some say he come to be a poet and a singer, that he walks about from town to town a-telling his stories and a-singing his songs. And everybody what hears him forgets ever-thing else--his songs are so beautiful--and they never want airy other thing in this world.

And now, maybe h'it's so and maybe h'its not. I can't attest to the truth of h'it, so I'll not get into that.

I am the shaft of an arrow as it wings through the air;
I am the arrow's piercing head, embedded deep in the heart of a deer.

I am the sharp edge of a knife, honed by the tempering whetstone;
I am the dull edge of a froe, unfit to cleave the shingles and staves.

I am the curved blade of the scythe,
Singing to the blades of grass as they fall beneath my swooping arc.

I am the tongue of the bull-tongue plow, furrowing ancient soil;
I am that tongue broken against a stone more ancient yet,
Hidden deep in the heart of the ground.

I am all of these things, and none of these things.

I am Tallas, Keeper of the Tales.
OCTOBER

_I saw a way-worn traveler_

The road swings wide into a roller coaster curve, straightens itself out for the long haul down the backstretch, and finally comes to an abrupt halt at:

"A stop light! Now what-in-the . . . is a stop light doing way out here in the middle of godforsaken Duffield?" Jubal is amazed. He is thinking that if somebody were flying overhead, if indeed he could fly away on the wings of a snow-white dove, like the old gospel tune makes him think he can, then he would look back down on the road below and it would look like nothing in the world so much as a giant question mark.

"And so it is." Jubal eases through the gears of his midnight black Porsche 911 Carrera 2 Coupe so as not to startle the 3.6-liter boxer six cylinder rear-mounted engine, what some might call a "flat-six." She is brand new for 1994, but he's had his order in for months, and she just came to him last week, like an adopted baby some childless couple had waited for all these years. And she is indeed his own baby, the car of his dreams, maybe the only love he will ever hold, so he must be extra careful with her.

_What'll she run, Jubal? . . . Well, son. Let me just tell you, now. She's got one-eighty on the dash, but I've barely had her up to one-and-a-quarter. I surely do love letting her run wide open on those narrow twisting roads that_
wind their way around my mountain top out in Davidson County, but she can only go so fast on those blacktops. A hundred, maybe one-ten, that's pretty much her limit. I hear she'll do close to one-sixty-eight on the track, but around Nashville, you can just forget about it. That little country town is about to get above its raising. Hell, there's over a million people in town, too much coming and going to get up any speed. But now, this Porsche was born and bred in the mountains—it was the mountains of Germany, but it's all the same thing. She may ride like a log wagon, but let'er loose and she'll run like a scared dog.

Jubal reaches over to turn on the radio, speaking aloud at the selfsame time: "Lord, I'm getting more like Aunt Ozzy every day, talking to myself, or worse—talking to my car. It's just a car, that's all, it's nothing that can talk back to me." But then he hits some mysterious pad on the all-digital dash and a familiar announcer's voice jumps out of the radio, runs through his fingertips, travels up his right arm, over his shoulder, across his chest, and lodges itself somewhere close to the vicinity of his heart:

"And now, live from Nashville, Tennessee—the one and only Original Music City U.S.A.—it's the twenty-seventh annual Country Music Association Awards . . . the night all the stars come out and shine!"

Again, Jubal is amazed. To think that he would turn on his radio just at the exact moment that the awards would be starting, and that his radio would be tuned to the only possible station that would be airing the live CBS television broadcast, and that he would hear this more-than-familiar Nashville
voice just dropping down out of the Blue Ridge Mountain sky, dribbling through the moon roof of his Porsche--well. It was all pretty amazing.

*But then again, it may not be such a coincidence after all,* he ponders to himself and is glad to notice that at least he's not speaking it out loud. *Maybe I really did know just exactly what time the show would come on--nine o'clock Nashville time, which would make it eight o'clock backhome time, which would make it just about . . . now. And maybe I really do want to hear this. If I didn't, I could just simply reach over and change the station, or turn the durn thing off, right about . . . now.*

But he lets the voice wash over him, as the car rolls along on a tide of blacktop almost as dark as herself. She passes the turn that would carry them down through the Lovelady Gap and on over into Kentucky's famed gap of the Cumberlands and the river valleys that lie beyond, and still the voice pursues him:

". . . for the six FarmAid concerts he organized to help America's struggling farmers, for hit after hit after hit--*Blue Eyes Cryin' in the Rain, On the Road Again*--we'd all be Crazy not to have him 'Always on Our Minds' . . . Ladies and gentlemen, the CMA is proud to announce this year's newest inductee into the Country Music Hall of Fame: Mr. Willie Nelson!"

"Yeah, boy. Me and Willie . . . on the road again, my friend."

Now the Porsche is running along beside the Stone Mountain, as dark as the very shadow of that mountain. Its rough ridges hump up like the spine
of a dinosaur, or some ancient sea monster that arose out of the primeval ocean billions of years before the earth's plates shifted, grinding over one another and pushing these Appalachian mountains up and out of the muck. Jubal has always wondered what that fearsome upheaval must have sounded like; he thinks of it as a cosmic rug buckling up in protest to being pushed aside against its will. Many's the time he can remember finding seashells on top of these ridges, but it always comes as a surprise: to think that these mountains, the oldest standing range in the world, were at one time completely covered by water. His heart races along with the engine, but it can't outrun the voice:

"...so stay tuned. We have Alan Jackson, Lorrie Morgan, and the old Outlaw himself--Waylon Jennings. All still to come as the twenty-seventh annual Country Music Association Awards continues...right after this word from our sponsor, Gas-X."

Jubal laughs out loud; the sound is instantly pulled through the moon roof and sucked up into the emptiness of the night. *Gas-X is just the perfect thing. Old Ralph Emery's favorites: Gas-X and Itch-X. It's hard to say which one sums up the whole music business better. Close to a draw, I'd say.*

The Porsche glides through a long, almost sensuous curve that Jubal knows well. This is the one they all called the Dead Man's Curve. After he got grown and gone from here, he discovered that everyplace has a Dead Man's Curve, and each one tells the same tale of teenage drivers killed in the fever of their glory days; only the specific names and dates differed. This local
version's most famous victim was Wentz Maxwell--star of field, court and backseat. And now immortal as the golden boy who had crashed his burgundy red 1967 Corvette Sting Ray into the Interstate Railway underpass, killing himself, his Queen-of-the-1969 Powell's Valley High School prom date, and the dreams of his last-chance-for-offspring parents, all in one scripted "Stairway to Heaven" moment. Jubal had been only six years old at the time, but he can still recall the earthquake that rumbled through the town for endless days turned all catywampus. First the shock-waves of news that rolled through the gap and crashed into the mountains, like a bowling ball run amuck, saying *Hear this, all you would-be immortals!* while the bowling-pin-people answered back *But it can't be true.* . . .? Then the funeral overflowing with teenage might-have-been's, the whole high school turned loose for the day to witness and wonder at the after-shocks, mewly-mouths gaping *Maybe it could be true, after all?* Then worst of all, the little house built over the grave by parents beyond grief, a miniature mausoleum fixed up to look like nothing in this world so much as a teenage boy's bedroom: posters on the wall, basketball trophies and pictures of the smiling athlete in all-star splendor on the desk, a lock of golden baby hair forever preserved in a weather-proof shadowbox beside the bed. At first the shrine was terrifying in its poignancy, but as years passed inexorably by, it became nothing more than an outing for curiosity gidders, a shrine for Halloween hain't-seekers. Later, as a reminder, somebody had taken bright red spray paint and sanctified the now famous spot of impact with the words:
Only one life, it soon shall pass; Only what's done for Christ will last.

Jubal can quote this verse in his sleep. He thought it was an actual Bible verse, and then was Well, I'll be'd to find out that it was merely somebody's poetic musings. There are quite a few things that Jubal has discovered about life since leaving home, but he still doesn't know squat about living.

The car passes through the underpass, oblivious to the words, as well as to the one who didn't quite make it through. Jubal loves to drive along this winding road back into the mountains. After the crass anonymity of Interstates 40 and 81 and Tennessee Highway 181, suddenly there is character and spunk and familiarity in the signs along U.S. Highway 23: For God So Loved the World He Didn't Send a Committee . . . CHCH: What's Missing? UR! . . . The wages of sin is death, Prepare yourself to meet Jesus--Half-runners $.49 a pound . . . Thank you, Jesus, for my salvation--12x24 storage unit for rent . . . Coming soon: Jesus--Nice ripe bananas $.33 lb. And the one that is always guaranteed to make him stop and ponder--Eternity: smoking or nonsmoking?

Then there are the crosses, the omnipresent stone crosses alongside the road with the words carved right into the granite: Get Right on the shaft, With God on the crosspiece. There are any number of stories to explain where it was these crosses had come from. Some would say it was a very rich man who had lost a wife, maybe, or the sacrifice was a child that all his money could do nothing to save. And so he had set out on a journey of redemption, digging the stones from the rich, dark earth and carving them with his very
own hands, then leaving them in places where he knew people would need
to see them most.

Others would say it was a man lacking a leg, or an arm, or with a claw
for a hand that had been blown off in a war, or snatched away in a car wreck,
or just lost to some foolish childhood prank. And this man wanted to atone for
his own or someone else's sins, and so he carved the crosses with something
man-made and false to remind the world of the Only Truth.

Jubal himself is sure they must have been left by that crazed scalawag,
half-Cherokee, half-Shawnee, half-white wildman the old folks still spoke of,
the one they called Chief Benge. It was told in these parts that his mama was
Indian, and she married a white man who sired Bob Benge. But then his father
went to live with the Indians, and his mama stayed in the white settlement
which was more than the half-breed's mixed-up blood could stand: it just made
him madder than sin at everybody. So from time to time he'd commence on a
binge and come rushing and roaring through this part of southwest Virginia
like the cyclone that blew down the schoolhouse over in Rye Cove. What he
actually did leave behind were early settlers missing one or more body parts,
and sometimes their very lives; yet Jubal likes the idea of Benge memorializing
the sites of his massacres with these symbols, like funeral wreaths laid on
graves made by crashing automobiles and pickup trucks and motorcycles
speeding their way to immortality. But, of course, he knows Benge was dead
long before these crosses appeared; besides, he would hardly have been
Christian—much less of the Holiness persuasion.

The car downshifts itself, or so it seems, as the road hiccups into a hairpin curve, and then swooshes into a long straightaway, passing beside the Clinch river and the railroad trestle that Jubal's daddy would always say was the one where they hung the elephant, Murdering Mary. Jubal always hated that story, but Pebble would tell it every time they passed this way, going to Kingsport to buy groceries at The Oakwood Market, or for their annual Christmas shopping expedition downtown. He would go on and on, fleshing out the details about the wicked trainer that Mary finally trampled to death; and even though it wasn't her fault, they condemned her to die. And so they hoisted her up with a crane onto the trestle (only after bullets and electric shock had failed) and hung her. Jubal puts his hands over his ears to shut out the story, just as if he were still that child, even though he is now safe in the knowledge that this wasn't the trestle at all—it was over in Erwin, Tennessee.

And now the car is passing the exit ramp that would take him into the town of Big Stone Gap and on out into Cracker's Neck where Comfort most likely sits in her mother's rocking chair, beside her grandmother's coal-fed Warm Morning stove, which sits upon the hearth rocks carried from her great-grandmother's log house, which stood-long beside the Clinch River in Dungannon, before the whole durn thing finally burnt to the ground. He can imagine his momma's face lighted faintly by the glow of the coals, or perhaps from within by the glow of her own passion for the words she is reading, and
he would like nothing more than to be in that very place; and yet there is another place he has to go before he can allow himself the luxury of her home.

But where is that road? Nothing looks the same since they put this highway up the mountain. Surely they couldn't have done away with the road itself . . . there must be a way to get to that overlook. I'd know it in a heartbeat if I could only find some sign . . .

But his only answer comes from the voice:

". . . and when we return, ladies and gentlemen, we'll have the Song of the Year, followed by the dance-hall-dandy: the Country Music Association's Entertainer of the Year, so don't go away."

"We'll just see about that," says Jubal to the voice, or to himself, or to the night, and just then he spots it—the smallest of signs almost completely hidden by the kudzu that is beginning to die in October's annual clean-up, and the sign reads "Old Rim Rock Road." He pulls the steering wheel suddenly to the right, and the car responds with a slight sigh of protest at the alleged abuse, but obeys his command, carrying him down the old road that quickly turns into gravel and then abruptly stops altogether at an overlook, at the overlook. Jubal reaches over and pushes a button. The moon roof slides back with a sound like the ultra-quiet vacuum cleaners in the hallways of high-class hotels he has slept in from time to time. He pulls himself up through the opening, sucking in the shock of the chill autumn night air, and is instantly entwined in unexpected light. He has forgotten
how close the stars appear on top of this mountain, as if he could reach right out and pluck a pair from the sky, hanging it from his rearview mirror instead of a pair of dice.

The valley stretches before and below, just as it always has, only now the overlook is blocked by a tangle of unruly shrubs that are obviously not a high priority for the highway department. But in his top-Porsche-perch Jubal is high enough to see over the brush, to follow the string of lights along the roadway gleaming like a rhinestone necklace, skirting the lake which was known simply as The Valley Lake. He strains his eyes to catch a glimpse of light from the old skating rink where a large share of his youth was spent, or perhaps misspent, but all he can make out are fields of corn and sorghum and tobacco, and cows—dairy and beef cattle. There are a few scattered lights from the houses of those willing to make-do with less just to continue living here. Toward the upper end the lights become brighter, pooled in "developments" where latter-day settlers have landed: those from beyond these ranges who came seeking solitude, and found it in subdivisions. The lights gradually fade out as the mountain reclaims its rightful darkness. Only one last burst of light from the new prison on the farthest ridge reminds the watcher that this old mountain-mama must still feed her children, somehow.

Jubal sinks back down into his genuine leather bucket seat. He glances at the clock on the all-digital dash, then turns the volume of the radio down until the voice becomes a mere whisper:
"... and the nineteen ninety-three Country Music Association's song of the year is ... Montana Moon! Written by Kendal Bartram and sung by last year's Horizon Award winner, Jubal Lee Nations! ... Accepting this award for Mr. Nations who is unable to be with us this evening is ..."

Jubal lightly flicks the power pad on the radio, and the voice becomes silence, like the night. He carefully lowers his seat back until he can see only the stars through his moon roof. Like a space telescope, the pilgrim scans the sky until his sights lock in on his own constellation: the scales of Libra which balance the light against the darkness, the valley against the mountains, Jubal's own wanna-bees against what-is. Then pulling that sky down and over and around himself like a down-filled sleeping bag, Jubal Lee Goins "Nations," winner of the nineteen ninety-three Country Music Association's "Song of the Year," is fast asleep.

It is almost eight-thirty when Jubal pulls up to the store, but the sun has just barely cleared Chandler's Ridge; morning always comes late to the gap. He parks the Porsche around to the side, hoping not to attract too much attention, to just slip into the store and grab a cup of coffee before heading for home, but there's not much chance of that. They're all here—the boys. Sitting on benches and in straight-back chairs and squatting beneath the weathered sign that reads Rucker Egan's General Store, and then in smaller letters beneath—Dry Goods, Feed and Seed, Hardware, Sundries, Notions, and
What-Have-You. The entire male population of this end of the valley, called Cracker's Neck because it looks like a neck narrowing into the head of the holler, is gathered here for their usual morning exercise. If they were asked where the cracker in the name came from, each would offer his expert opinion: how it was the name of a family that first lived here, or how that particular family was known to be a blustery, boasting, bragging bunch, or how it had to do with a general fondness for eating crackers with sardines, a standard lunch (and sometimes even breakfast) in these parts. The truth of the matter is, nobody knows for sure. It's a mystery.

Jubal's wide-angle lens takes in Snake Swinney carefully peeling back the lid of a sardine tin, delicately pulling out one oily specimen to lay atop a saltine which is then sandwiched by another saltine, all of which disappears down Snake's long throat (possibly the inspiration for his nickname) in two quick gulps. Panning to the right, he picks up Dogfood Galloway cutting off a plug of Red Man tobacco, while Powder Poff is already well into the long established routine of chawing, then pondering, then making a pronouncement of a word or two—which sounds like a Holiness preacher speaking in tongues—then spitting ambeer into a large tin Maxwell House coffee can, strategically located just to the right of his foot. In his left-hand view, Homebrew Light and Moonshine Sluss are flavoring their morning coffees with something poured from a pint bottle inside a paper poke, something which Jubal guesses to be closely associated with their nicknames. He stops, turns, and takes in a
long drink of fresh air before turning back to face this welcoming committee.

He is feeling a bit hung-over and disoriented from having slept with his face in the moonlight, and being here isn't exactly improving upon the situation.

"Hey, Jubal, you ol' sum-bitch, where you been?"

This is about the best that he can hope for. Maybe they don't know about him not showing up for the awards. Maybe they don't even know that he is an almost-famous country music singer. Maybe all in this world they know is this one store, in this one neck of this one valley, in this one gap, in this one mountain range, in this one tiny corner of the universe, and that is all.

"Hey, Jubal, we watched you on TV last night, or we tried to watch you, anyhow. Where in the hell were you?"

Jubal is comforted; so much for maybe-ing. "Well, I'll just tell you, boys: I had to go see a man about a dog."

It's the old punch line to an old joke that none of them actually remembers, but they all laugh, anyhow—it's just the thing to do. And besides, they like Jubal. Most of them have known him from the time he was just a shirttail young'un, tagging along with his daddy Pebble to the store where he first learned to bet on tiddly-winks and marbles, and later on poker and pool. They don't even hold it against him that he left to become something bigger than what he could ever be here; they just think it's a bit foolish to go running off after something that probably won't make him happy, anyhow.

"Hey, Jubal, reckon you're glad to be back here in God's country."
Powder actually pronounces this one whole and entire sentence before spitting.

"Yeah, God made it and then God forgot it." It's Jeep Powers who finishes off another old standard line.

Again, Jubal is comforted. In his world of cars rushing about from here to there to yonder, carrying people who don't know where they're going, but know they have to get there fast, so they can push and pull and poke and prod and produce Just One More Hit and land The All-Time Greatest Contract and win The Very Biggest Award Ever, it's just good to know that this place, these people, these names will remain the same. They should be engraved on a plague, seems like, and hung up on the wall of this store to commemorate their passing through this place, like the names of servicemen:

- Possum Chandler
- Worm Skeen
- Moose Snodgrass
- Cracker Durham
- Coot Gibson
- Homebrew Light
- Hoppy Blanken
- Froggy Begley
- Shorty Clendenon
- Bood Goins
- Pebble Goins
- Snake Swinney
- Hubcap Hicks
- Stubb Shupe
- Stumpy Mabe
- Powder Poff
- Dink Crabtree
- Curly Wade
- Humpy Rollins
- Clumb Delph
- Nookie Moore
- Dirt Estep
- Dib Flanary
- Loner Vanhook
- Jigger Mahan
- Jeep Powers
- Moonshine Sluss
- Do-Do Slagle
- Doodle Dickens
- Dogfood Galloway
- Fortnight Hobbs
- Junebug Kilgore
- Chainsaw Caudill
- Pig Bledsoe
- Fuzzy Maggard
- Hollywood Zirkle
- Calf-Head Ely
- Ratchet-Jaw Tate
- Punkin' Man McNutt

These nicknames are so much a part of them that they are passed down from father to son, insuring an eternal inquiry concerning the nature of a head ("Because it looks like a calf's . . ."), a jaw ("Because it's hinged, like a ratchet, and is never-ever still . . ."), a Halloween fixture ("Because . . . well, I reckon
just because he's always been called that . . ."). They are so much a part of them that the local paper will report these nicknames as an official addendum to their obituary names, when at last they cross the Jordan.

Jubal has always felt that his own name pales in comparison to the monikers these men have earned for themselves--by the work they've done, or the tricks they've pulled, or the wars they've fought, or just by being their own ornery selves. Comfort had gleaned Jubal's name right out of the Bible. From the first time she felt him move, from his quickening in her womb, she knew that this child would make music. And so she named him after the world's first musician, leastwise according to the book of Genesis: And his name was Jubal; he was the father of all who play the lyre and pipe. Pebble had indulged her poetic fancies, but insisted on adding the "Lee" as a tribute to the lost Rebel cause, never even thinking that the two names together would make their own kind of music. This first grandchild had been born on his grandmother Goins fiftieth birthday; it was a true day of Jubilee for sure and certain. When Jubal realized that his one and only dream was to be a country music singer, he was mostly glad for a name that destined him to be a star. All he had to do was drop the Goins, and take up something that would make him belong to the entire country music world--and so he finally became "Jubal Lee Nations." Sometimes he ponders if changing his name was such a good idea; it makes him wonder which one is the real Jubal. More often, these days, he finds himself pondering what his own obituary will have to say about his life.
"Well, pull yourself up a chair, boy . . . Hollywood was just telling us some kind of a tale about Bear Bolling. Would you say he got hisself into a 'tight spot,' Hollywood?"

Laughter makes a wave down the line of chairs and benches, then loops itself back and stops at Jubal's feet. Obviously this is something of an inside joke. He tries to slip quietly into an old cane-bottomed rocker, but the creak of too many years of being slipped-into-quietly gives him away.

"Well, what about it, Hollywood? I came all the way here from Nashville, Tennessee just to hear your sorry old self tell about the town police's most upstanding patrolman . . . that and for an orange Nehi. Seems they're fresh out of Nehi's in Nashville; can you believe that?"

Rucker reaches over to where the deep cooler box, like a refrigerator turned on its side, is humming with the vital task of keeping all those Nehi's and Lonesome Pine Colas cool. He pulls a Big Orange from the frosty cavern and deposits the lid in the opener on the side, then hands it to Jubal in one smooth, well-rehearsed and obviously done-it-before move. Hollywood jumps back into the story without bothering to fill Jubal in on what has already transpired. It's an unwritten law of the store that if you come in late, you just have to do the best you can catching up.

"Well sirs, it must have been twelve-thirty or one o'clock, early Saturday morning . . . Univea Bloomer had the late shift down at the 9-1-1 office, that's how I know. She's Onecia's baby sister, and she and Onecia tell each other just
about everything, you know. So Univea says that everything is real quiet-like, says she's just about to doze off, a-setting there reading the *Inquirer* she's picked up down at Cas Walker's Market on her way in to work. Then just about that time her radio starts making some kind of awful racket, says she can't quite make out what it is . . . sounds like somebody a-giggling and somebody else a-grunting and they's music a-playing real loud in the background. And ever now and again she can hear this man's voice that she's just about sure she recognizes kindly talking along with the music, and he's a-going 'Come on now, Tighten Up . . . Let's do the Tighten Up.' I reckon that's one of them songs the kids like to play at their sock hops.

"And then Univea says she can hear some more giggling, and she's just about for sure and certain now who it is. Then after a bit she says she starts hearing these squawking sounds, and she knows that one: somebody's hitting the carrier on their cruiser radio, and she figures that whoever's doing that is trying to warn whoever it is that's doing the 'Tighten Up' that he's done got his mike keyed up--must be a-setting on the dum thing. And whatever it is that's going on in that squad car's being broadcast all over hell-and-half-of-Kentucky.

"Well sirs, it's no time a-tall before Univea says she can hear the whole durned police force a-talking to each other: 'Is that you, Bull?' 'Naw, is that you Corky?' 'Naw, is that you, Chief?' She says it's the chief what finally figures it out, by process of elimination--it's got to be Bear, he's the only one what's not saying anything. So they all take off looking for him, pushing their
carrier buttons the whole time so's to block out whatever's going on in 'The Bear Den' from anybody who might be listening who might not need to hear it, which would be the entire police departments of Appalachia, Norton, Wise, Coeburn, St. Paul, Pennington, Jonesville--pretty much this whole dadgum end of the state."

Hollywood pauses to take a drink, Powder arches one particularly long stream of amber into a coffee can two chairs away, and the boys clear their throats, collectively. Jubal takes his cue; he's the only one who hasn't heard this story at least a dozen times before.

"So what happened, Hollywood? Did they catch up with him in time?"

"Naw, it was way too late. The 9-1-1 machine had been recording it all the whole time. When somebody finally found him--and I ain't a-saying where he was or who he was with--he throwed that cruiser into L for Leap and took off like a bat out of hell. Just lit out for that 9-1-1 office like a busload of televangelists leaving town. Univea says she could see sparks a-flying when he hit that speed bump coming into the parking lot, says it looked like the Fourth of July, New Year's and Veterans' Day all rolled into one. Univea says it's about the funniest thing she's ever seed, him just a-standing there in the doorway with his hand held out, like she's gonna give him that tape. Now, don't that just beat all?"

Jubal is taking all this in. It's been a good while since he's heard this kind of tale-telling. People in Nashville are too busy playing at being some-
body to spend any time talking with anybody. "I wouldn't mind having
a listen to that tape, myself—could be a hit country song in there, somewheres.
Whatever happened to it, anyhow?"

"Nobody knows for sure. Some 'low The Chief hisself is holding it,
just in case Bear should ever take a notion to go after his job. Personally I'm
figuring that Univea's got it, or at least she knows where it's at. But she's not
saying and Onecia can't even get it out of her. That Univea Bloomer is one
tight-lipped woman."

Jubal is thinking that if this is a tight-lipped woman, he'd hate to see
one with loose lips, but there's not much chance for pondering on it; Coot
Gibson has already picked up the ball and is running with it.

"... and that puts me in mind of one my girl Revonda was telling a
girlfriend of hers on the phone the other night . . ."

"And how was it that you came to be hearing this, Coot?"

"Well now, her room is just down the hall, and the walls are a bit thin.
And besides, you never can be too careful with young girls these days, so I
had an extension put in the bedroom just so's I can kindly keep tabs on her.
You know—what boys are calling and trying to get her to go out and all."

"So, you're listening in, you old coot!"

"Naw, now I wouldn't put it like that, it's more like taking 'security
measures' . . . but anyhow, she's talking about her friend Sharon Franklin who
married up Newman Stallard's oldest boy Edmund—that's the one everybody
calls Eddie. Well, anyhow, they're living over there in Beamon Town, and they've got 'em a baby-boy, and her not hardly out of high school. But she did graduate, I do believe—those Franklins are all real smart, right Fleet? Say, is that any kin to you?"

"She's my oldest brother Creed's oldest girl."

"Yeah, I recall that now. Well, anyhow, Revonda was always real good friends with Sharon in high school, and they've kept up with each other, even with her being married and having a baby-boy. They used to run around together a lot and all. So she's over there at Sharon and Eddie's trailer last Saturday night when Jimmie Joyce calls Sharon to come and help her go get Newman. Seems he'd been missing-in-action for a day or two, and somebody had called her from the V.F.W. and said he was down there. So Sharon and Revonda go to pick up Jimmie Joyce in that old '68 woody station wagon, and they drive in the back—'cause you don't go in the front door of the V.F.W.—which is back there where my girl Revonda used to go to kindergarten. Well, they pull in. And you know they're real careful about who they let in, and so Jimmie Joyce and Sharon get out, but Revonda thinks she'd best just stay in the station wagon. And Jimmie Joyce is banging on that door, now . . . I mean she is just BANGING on that back door, and she's saying 'I know Newman is in there and I've come to get him out.' So finally they let her in, and she goes over to where Newman is sitting at one of those little tables and Bunadean Arwood is with him—she's the one they call Bunny, you know. Well, Newman is just
drunker'n-a-skunk, falling in his plate there where he's gotten him something to eat. You know they're serving food at the V.F.W. now?"

"Naw, I didn't know that. When did they start serving food?" Baby Egan generally keeps up with all the eating establishments within gas tank range, and he's offended that Coot knows of a new one before he does.

"When the ABC boys almost shut 'er down for being nothing but a bar, so now they have hotdogs and popcorn, stuff like that, just so's they can stay open. So, anyhow, Jimmie Joyce just waltzes right over there and grabs up Bunadean and is throwing her out the back door. Well, about that time my girl Revonda starts sitting up in the station wagon, she's paying attention now back there in that station wagon. And Jimmie Joyce has Bunadean like you'd have a child, you know, has her by the back of the shirt and the seat of the pants, and she's throwing her out the door and kicking her in the ass at the same time. So Bunadean falls down on the ground, but she's moving pretty fast, and my girl Revonda says she never does break a finger nail or get a hair out of place. And she has that collar--you know how Bunadean wears that collar turned up?--and Jimmie Joyce is running along behind her in the alley now, kicking her in the ass, and just screaming and carrying on, and Bunadean is crawling just as fast as she can go, and Jimmie Joyce is running along behind her just kicking the shit out of her all the way. And all this time my girl Revonda is rolling in that woody station wagon, just laughing her rear off."

"So did Newman ever know any of this was going on, or was he passed
out, or what?" Doodle's real big on getting the details straight.

"He's all-but passed out when my girl Revonda gets out of the car and goes into the V.F.W. to help Sharon get Newman out of there, and he's just so drunk and out of it that he doesn't have the faintest idea what's going on. But they finally get him into the car, and by this time Bunadean has got to her feet and Revonda says that girl should have been on the track team, she can flat do some running. And she's about out of the county before Jimmie Joyce can get in the car, which is lucky for Bunadean, 'cause most likely Jimmie Joyce would've run her down if she'd had the chance.

"So they get him back to the house, and my girl Revonda and Sharon--they're both real good girls, but of course they come from good families, both of 'em--they help drag Newman inside, and then they figure they'd best get out of there, 'cause a major knock-down-drag-out of a fight commences to break out in that house. So they go on back to Eddie and Sharon's trailer over in Beamon Town, and it is not an hour before Jimmie Joyce calls over there for Eddie to come and take Newman to the emergency room, because she has taken boiling water and dumped it on him. Says he might've caught something and she's gonna take care of that, says she's gonna clean him up: SANITIZE him. And Eddie has to go over there and get his poor old scalded dad and take him to the emergency room. I'd say that pretty much made him feel like a 'new man,' wouldn't you fellers?"

The boys have been sitting mostly straight-faced, taking in Coot's
story like it was a Baptist sermon—which it pretty much is, having to do with sin and scourge and cleansing and being once-lost-but-now-found. There are no real outbursts of laughter, only an occasional grunted acknowledgment of similar circumstances, and sympathy for the sanitized part.

"So, what about Bunadean?" This is important information for Clumb.

"Oh, yeah. My girl Revonda says she felt kindly sorry for her, 'cause she had to redo her nail polish."

Jubal groans, and rises: "I guess I'll go on that one. Come on over to the house, Comfort's always got something cooking, you know."

Rucker seizes the opportunity and appoints himself spokesman for the group; nobody wants to ask the question, but they all want to know the answer. "Say, Jubal, speaking of Comfort--she hasn't heard anything from Pebble, I don't reckon?"

"Can't say, Rucker, I've not really had the chance to talk with her. I'll be sure to let you know if I hear anything, though."

Jubal unleashes the flat-six engine which feeds only on premium quality fuel; he sits for just a moment listening to the smooth humming of her innards that sounds more like a jet airplane than an automobile, then quietly slips her into reverse and eases away from the store.

And now the Porsche carries him past corn and tobacco fields that look like old men rummaging about in thrift stores, trying on cast-off overcoats and slouchy hats and weathered gloves with frayed fingertips. Seems like Jubal
can remember these fields from even before he was born. They are the canvas for his portrait-in-process, the changing background for the snapshots of his life. He thinks of the time that Comfort took him to the Five-and-Dime store in town to have his picture taken. There had been a real honest to goodness photographer there, traveling through from who-knows-where and stopping in the gap to pick up some gas and lunch money by setting up temporary shop in between Mr. Ben Franklin's cosmetics and candy counters. Comfort had set Jubal's two, maybe three-year-old body up on a little stool with black material draped around it, and the photographer had reached up behind him and pulled down a screen painted to look just like these fields--golden shocks of corn fodder and outrageously orange pumpkins against a robin-egg sky.

"Now then, Miz-riz Goins, you just tell me which one you like the best."

And he had proceeded to cover the field with scene after scene, a parade of changing seasons: an apple tree pregnant with the snow-blossom promise of fruit springing eternal, an ocean wave crashing into a summer-filled shore, the autumn field dying yet again in a final burst of falling glory, a mountain top white against the winter sky, waiting for the snow-blossom promise of spring. Comfort never could decide which one to choose. Jubal smells the blackness of the earth recycling itself, and remembers, and wonders why in this world he ever left this place. And then he wonders why it is that he can't seem to stay... The Porsche downshifts past the fields and again Jubal hears the sound of humming, but he realizes it is not coming from the engine alone. There it is,
echoing in the sound of the voices which he thought he had left behind:

"... now, wasn't that your boy out driving with his girlfriend over in Gate City, when they got buck-nekkid and picked up that newspaper boy ... put him right in the middle of 'em, and took him for a ride? Liked to've scared that young'un half to death. Says 'Mister, I'se gets off right up here.' And they hadn't even gone a whole and entire city block. 'Course Gate City ain't perzackly no booming metropolis ..."

"... well, leastwise he don't go sneaking off to the drive-in movie and get his clothes taken away and his keys taken away by somebody's mother, and then have to sit through the rest of the movie all by hiself buck-nekkid, when everybody knows that drive-in don't show movies worth sitting through with your clothes onnnnnnnnnn ..."

Jubal pulls up to his momma's garden gate. Comfort is in the garden, just like he knew she would be; she always tends to her flowers in the morning, but never too early. Sometimes she likes to lie in her bed and just think about the flowers blooming down below her, a moat around this farmhouse fortress. She could get up and out of the bed and go over to the window to take a look at them, if she took a notion. Or she could just lie in bed and imagine what new blooms had sprung up overnight, what new smells might waft their way up to her second-story window, if she were to just get up and open the window and let them come in.
There is no doubt about it: Comfort is a peculiar creature. Not quite all the way to "quare," like folks say about Aunt Ozzy, but at least a bit quirky. There's no telling how many different things she's done to earn a living, how many jobs she's had in her life, most of which never got mentioned to the I.R.S. Jubal was relatively sure he had her figured out at one point in his life, and then she did the strangest thing--she went and had herself two twin boys when she was just a year shy of forty, and Pebble was just a year on the backside of the same. If she hadn't been doing this sort of thing all her life it might have been somewhat embarrassing; but folks who knew her just nodded their heads and said "Yup, that's Comfort, all right," and went on about their business.

Comfort raises her head now, to greet her prodigal son. Her face is framed by the flaming petals of golden mums and marigolds, crimson cosmos and zinnias, dahlias big-as-dinner-plates now yellow, now orange, now scarlet: all the colors which have flamed in her own hair, at one time or another. Jubal thinks she must have been some kind of flower in another life--a sunflower, maybe, or a Venus fly-trap. "Hey, mom. Nice hat."

She pushes back the brim of her purple straw gardening hat and peers curiously at her first-born, standing beside his car which is blacker than the bottom of a coal mine. He is looking just slightly shy and confused, as usual. Addlepated and bumfusticated, her granny would have called it. What is it about this boy, that he can't quite seem to know what he wants, even (and especially) when he gets it? No matter: he is her son, whatever he may be.
"Hey, Jubal. I've been wondering when you'd show up. When did you get into town?"

"Last night. Or maybe it was this morning, I'm not sure. I spent the night up at the old valley overlook. Did you know you can still get there, even from the new highway? It's not too well marked, but it's there."

"Well, good. I'm glad to know that. If I ever need to look over the valley, I'll have you take me there. Have you had breakfast, yet?"

"Just a Nehi and a pack of nabs at the store. You got anything to eat?"

Jubal knows that this is roughly akin to asking Imelda Marcos if she has any shoes.

"I think I can dig something up . . . come on in the house."

Jubal looks up at the farmhouse. Squinting hard he tries to see it as it must have looked in its childhood, back three-quarters of a century ago when his great-grandfather had built it, in 1918. All his life Jubal has heard the story: about how Esau Goodloe had returned the January before "World's-War-One" ended, wounded more in spirit than in body; how he had found himself at a house party over in Scott County, in hopes of finding balm in Dungannon; how there he had met Comfort Susannah Osborne, a woman famous for her beautiful form and her best feature—the eloquent voice of an angel; how a sudden blizzard had held them captive long enough to know that they would spend the rest of their lives together; and how that was exactly what they did. Before the end of that year Esau had raised up a house out of chestnut oak
boards which he had rescued from their fate as firewood, after being stripped of bark for the tannery. The boards were yet unpainted when he carried his eloquent bride, now speechless, over the threshold the next spring. And so the house remained--sparse as a hardshelled Baptist church pew--while they raised children and cattle and corn and tobacco and Comfort Goodloe's glorious garden-flowers. But they had all they needed, and they were happy.

Jubal opens his eyes just a slit now, and sees the house as an adolescent when his grandmother Lucinda Belle Goodloe was born there, in 1923--the middle child and only girl in a family of seven. The house was painted white then and shutters were added--green shutters with pine trees cut into them, as verdant as the forest which wrapped itself around the shoulders of the farm-house, like the shawl of a teenage girl preening and powdering up for a dance.

Then quicker than a cat can wink an eye, the house is all grown up, with porches running its full length and giant oak trees forming a living corridor up to them. Lucinda Belle has grown up as well, and chosen a husband for herself: Hale Hamner, a man who lives in town. Esau was just sure and certain that the two of them would want to come live here, in the bosom of Goodloe land, and so he began to raise up another house, just to the right-hand side of his own. But Lucinda gave up the valley for a sojourn in town, and the bridal house-to-be stood long and lonesome, nothing more than a bare bones skeleton, with just the walls and floors and a stairway leading to a loft with wide open window-eyes. Jubal remembers sitting in that loft when he was not much more
than a lap-baby himself, looking out through those windows-eyes at the entire
length of the valley and wondering what life was like for his grandmother,
growing up in this little neck of the universe almost a half-century before him.

And now Jubal's own eyes are wide open, and he sees the house in its
somewhat eccentric later years, in the last three decades since Comfort has
adopted (or possessed) it for her own. It was just out of high school she was
when both Goodloes had crossed over the Jordan. First Esau, and then merely
days later his eloquent Comfort, having nothing left to say and fast tiring of
standing on the shore by herself. The grandchild Comfort could have gone off
to college, or moved to some big city and done just about anything her heart
might have desired, but she wanted nothing more than to marry her childhood
sweetheart Pebble Goins and live in her grandparents' farmhouse in Cracker's
Neck. So that's just perzackly what she did. Comfort always did know her
own mind, and even more so her own heart; and her heart was in this place, in
this valley, in this house. Pebble loved the house, too, but in the way of a man
who likes the feel of good strong wood yielding to the shaping of his hands.
He had planed and scraped and sanded away the old make-up from the aging
face, while Comfort had embraced the house as a canvas for her finger-painted
creations--adding slices of gingerbread and window-boxed balconies and a
gazebo-enclosed hot tub, which had begun its life as her granny's claw-footed
porcelain bathtub. This was her way, to mix the old with the new--a G.E.
microwave oven perched over a wood-burning cookstove--until the whole
house began to resemble some kaleidoscope conundrum in an *I Spy* children's picture book. It is, like Comfort her ownself, a bit quirky. But it is the place of Jubal's birth and raising, the only home he has ever known. And so it is the place to which he has returned, although he's not just real sure to what end.

"Watch that top step, Jubal... the board is loose, and I haven't gotten around to fixing it. Maybe you can help me get at it while you're here."

Jubal walks into the front room and is almost knocked backwards by the palpable presence of his father. He is everywhere--sitting in the big chair, the high-backed, over-stuffed chair that his own father Bood had sat in, his hair oil stains still on the antimacassar so carefully crocheted by Charmie. And now he is kneeling by the hi-fi to change the LP from Hank Williams' *I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry* to Tennessee Ernie Ford's *Sixteen Tons*. Jubal can see him sitting in the shadows, in the dusky-dark of an evening with his cigarette winking in the gathering darkness as one by one the stars wink back. And he can hear the rumble of Pebble's bass voice, almost as deep as Tennesse Ernie's, as together they owe their single-soul to the company store.

Pebble knew all about that company store, as well as company houses and schools and churches and everything else The Company owned. He'd been raised up in the colliery named Derby, what some would call a coal camp. He knew what it meant to live from one paycheck to the next, and the outright joy of running to the company store on payday, a good leap or two ahead of his daddy Bood who would come ambling along, both hands full of scrip to
buy another week's worth of groceries and chewing tobacco and liquor in pint bottles—so if he fell down while drinking it, not so much would be lost. Jubal shakes his head to rid himself of this ghostly presence, but it is no use. Pebble is squatting in the far corner, beneath the stuffed head of the very first and last deer he ever did kill, just shy of his tenth birthday. Jubal can see his father's long, fine fingers moving as he takes apart the very shotgun he used to kill that deer: a twelve-gauge double barrel Fox that had been passed down from his grandfather to his father to him, and which will be passed on to Jubal when Pebble passes on.

And yet: he isn't there at all. He is mostly only a faint scent, something Jubal can't quite name, like something that has been cooked several days before, and he knows it is something very definite like boiled cabbage or greasy beans, but he just can't quite seem to call it.

"Mom, where is Dad? I mean, where is he... really?"

Comfort moves easily through the room into the kitchen, dancing over and around micro-machines and remote-controlled vehicles and video games in an everyday ballet. Her voice is coming through in waves from the inner regions of the farmhouse. Like a CB radio it bounces off the twelve-foot ceiling of the dining room, zig-zagging in and amongst the pink roses on her granny's china dishes, skating around the etched rims of the crystal glasses, and finally sliding to a stop just shy of Jubal's inner ear. He can hear what she's saying, but he's not real sure he understands.
"I told you on the phone, Jubal--it's just like I said. He went out for a loaf of bread and just never came back. I figure he's gone to Florida, to pick oranges, just like he always said. It was a family tradition--Bood used to do the selfsame thing. Your dad, he'd look me plime-blank in the eye and say, 'One of these days, Comfort, one of these days I'm just going to up and leave this place. I'm going to Florida to pick oranges and you can't stop me, so don't try. One of these days, just wait and see.' He got to sounding like some kind of bad take-off on Jackie Gleason in The Honeymooners. Well, I reckon he's made good on his promise, and I reckon he's happy doing it. I surely do hope he is, anyhow."

It just aggravates the fool out of Jubal how Comfort can slip back into that old mountain-talk so effortlessly, without ever missing a beat. She even mixes it up with the slang of her own generation, and Jubal's generation, and now the twins' generation, so that the most ridiculous phrases come spilling over her lips like pearls from a toad's mouth in one of her favorite fairy tales. She'll say something like, "Hand me down that-there way-funky poke, right quick-like, booger butt," without blinking an eye or seeming to be the least bit embarrassed about massacring five-or-so-hundred years of the King's English. The odd thing is that she wasn't raised that way at all. Lucinda made sure she learned to talk proper, and Comfort hardly ever had the chance to hear the old mountain dialect, but she listened for it everywhere. She loved the rhythm in it, the old expressions that sounded like poetry, the cadence of the mountain
slang which was often more sound than speech, more feeling than sound.

And Jubal loves his momma, truly. She is the one steady thing in his life, but sometimes she just embarrasses the hell out of him. Sometimes he just wishes that she would keep her mouth shut, especially when she's around his important friends in the music business. He has come to dread the awards ceremonies, because he knows that he should ask her to come, and he knows how much it means to her to see him do well, but he just would rather she stay away from Nashville, altogether. The wonder is that she seems to know this, instinctively, and she always comes up with some excuse why she can't be there. Comfort knows a lot of things, instinctively; it is her gift.

"No, really, Mom. Where IS he? I can't believe that you really don't know where he's gone. Surely he's tried to call, or write, or contact you in some way. Lord, you've been married for . . . how long have you been married?"

"Boy, don't take the name of the Lord in vain. You may be just a hair taller than me, but I can still knock you into the middle of next week, if-and-when I catch you on your blind side. And you know good and well how long we've been married: thirty years. The exact same number of years that you are old. We got married on New Year's Day of nineteen-and-sixty-three, and you were born October the eleventh of the very same year, exactly ten months and ten days later. Which reminds me: you've got a birthday coming, a biggie. Thirty years old . . . Lord, how did that happen? I'll have to bake a cake. What kind would you want, if I can manage to work you into my very busy
schedule, in between hair and nail appointments?"

"Chocolate. You know I want chocolate. With chocolate icing and chocolate syrup over the whole damn thing. And anyhow, you could have at least had the decency to wait a couple of months so that I wouldn't have been born the same year you got married."

"Didn't need to wait . . . and I already told you once to quit cussing. Besides, I'd waited plenty long enough. You were all I ever wanted in this world, you know. I never even really wanted to get married so much as I just wanted to have a baby. Times are such now that women can do that—just have a baby if they want one, husband or no husband. I'm not saying that's such a good thing. I think it's real important for a child, especially a boy-child, to have the fine strong male ways of a father about, but there are certainly much worse possibilities. There are any number of fathers whose bodies are hanging around, but their minds and souls are somewheres else. And they think that they've done enough to just bring home a pay check, then they just check out. Your own father . . . well, I reckon he does the best he can. He never really had much to go on, considering *his* own father, who was just never there for him. But that's the way things are, and we just have to make do with what we've got."

Comfort's eyes are beginning to take on that far-away look, as if she might like to think about slipping away herself. Jubal has seen this look in his mother's eyes before; he doesn't understand it, which is why it frightens him.
He clears his throat, and she forces herself back into the presence of this curious man-child.

"So. Come on in here and sit down to the table and tell me why it is that you've suddenly given up everything you ever dreamed of. You've worked so hard for all these years, and now that you're just right in reach of having everything you ever wanted, why would you just give it up? Come on, now, and just sit down here. I've got a pot of greens on, and I just put some corn sticks in the oven. Can I get you a cup of tea?"

There it is. He knows that it's coming, and sure enough, she finally says it: tea. A cup of tea. Comfort thinks the troubles of the world can be solved with a cup of tea. Every ache, every ailment, every disagreement, every disease: all of them can be cured and healed and resolved and made right with a cup of tea. But it can't be just ordinary Lipton's like a normal person would drink, oh no. She's got to go digging and scraping and boiling roots and leaves of plants that grow in the woods behind her house, the same herbs her great-granny Palmer would have used, but which Jubal thinks should be left to those fine knowledgeable folks down at the Eckerd Drugs. It makes him nervous, just wondering if she knows what she's doing, wondering where she ever learned about these things in the first place. Comfort has been known to serve up various concoctions of sassafras and boneset and yaller-root and penny-rile and most often peppermint, according to what body part is ailing at the time. And sometimes she'll just mix them all up with a big old glob of locust honey
and a squirt of lemon juice—which Comfort claims is right up there with garlic and vinegar as a cure-all—and then she doses you with the whole mess all at one time.

The truly amazing thing is, most of the time it actually works, somehow. Comfort's teas have been known to cure coughs and colds and the consumption and stomachaches and headaches, but mostly heart-aches. Jubal is convinced that it's not the tea itself that works the magic; it's just sitting at his momma's kitchen table—a table once hewed from the solid trunk of an oak tree by his great-grandfather Esau Goodloe, and given to his grandmother Lucinda as a wedding present—with his hands wrapped around something warm and talking out his troubles, while soup or beans or soup-beans or greens-in-pot-liquor bubble away on the stove, shutting off the outside world.

"I wish I could tell you, Mom. But I don't really know myself. It was like something just hit me all of a sudden, something from way down deep in my gut that was saying 'Wrong, Wrong, Wrong.' Like my eighth-grade geography teacher Rexall Sanders used to say when we'd give some stupid answer. He'd start shaking all over and roll those big old eyes and act like he was having some kind of a fit . . . and then he'd ask somebody else, somebody real shy like Oscar Fig or Raymond Mulvaney, and they'd just shake their heads back at him, not say a thing. Then he'd really go into it, start flopping around in the floor and saying, 'What's the matter, boy? You got the palsy?'

Well, I never even knew what the palsy was until years and years later. And
then it made sense to me, and I started feeling like I had the palsy. Only I wasn't shaking on the outside; it was all on the inside, where nobody could see. On the outside I looked great: I was starting to make some hit records and win some awards, and all the people who had made fun of me in high school were just eating me on a stick. And I thought that would do it. I truly thought that was everything I ever wanted. But on the inside I was shaking like Oakley Estep's bulldog in a thunderstorm. What was that dog's name, anyhow?"

"Junk Yard, I think. Or maybe it was Porta-Potty . . . Here's your tea."

"Oh, come on. Nobody could be mean enough to name a dog Porta-Potty, not even Oakley. What's in this tea?"

"Oakley was mean enough. Don't you remember that time a great big old thunderstorm came up, and that dog--actually I think there were two of them, a mother and son, or something. Anyhow, they took a running dive under the bedstead and Oakley decided it was time for those dogs to quit being such woosies, so he stuck his hand back in and under the bed, and when he pulled his hand back out, it looked like hamburger meat. Like somebody had taken a meat grinder and just run his arm through it, right up to the elbow. That was pure-tee-nasty. Oh, and the tea . . . I'm trying something new. They call it Luzianne and you can buy it in the large economy family size at the Piggly Wiggly. It's decaffeinated."

Jubal throws back his head and laughs; his mom can always make him laugh. He's not sure if it's the story about Oakley's bulldog, which he's already
heard about a zillion times, or the Luzianne tea, or just her. It's probably all of
the above. He takes a sip of the tea, breathing in the perfectly normal smell.

"I guess if I could pinpoint it, it was right after Montana Moon had
gone platinum . . . sometime right after that I woke up one morning real early.
It was just a little after four, which is not really day yet because it's still dark,
and it's not really night, because the air has already changed from that dead,
heavy feeling to something else, something just a bit lighter, and the braver
birds are starting to make little twittery noises. You know what I'm talking
about--you're still awake then, most nights."

"I am, indeed . . . and I think that's what your great-great-great-great-
however many greats it was Irish grandmother would have called a 'bardo'
state. It's like you're not really awake and not really asleep, but something
kind of strange in-between. Been there. So, what happened?"

"So I got up and took a walk, off into the woods; you know I have a little
patch up behind my house . . . it's not very big, but it'll do. And there's a little
creek that runs off that hill. So I'm sitting beside the creek, and I look down,
and durned if there's not a salamander sitting there, just looking up at me. But
it's not just any old salamander, it's some rare kind with two red spots on its
tail that look like big buggy eyes. It's only found in two or three places in
the whole world, and Davidson County, Tennessee just happens to be one of
them. And this salamander, it's like he's confused: he darts over to the water,
and just kind of looks at it, like he wants to get in. But then he backs out, and
comes back over to where I'm sitting watching him, and he's watching me with those big old buggy eyes, like maybe he thinks I'm going to tell him what to do. So after he's done this two or three times, all of a sudden it hits me: I'm just like this salamander. He can go wherever he wants to go, he can live on the land or he can live in the water, or he can do both. But he just doesn't know what he wants to do. And that's me. I'm singing these stupid songs about places I don't know anything about—hell, I've never even been to Montana and I've got a hit song about it. Now that's ridiculous. But the worst of it is, they're not even my songs. They're songs somebody else is writing for me, and if I sing them, they just naturally seem to turn into hits. Hell, I could sing a song about dog poop, and Crook and Chase would just about get down and start rolling around in it... it's just beyond me. What I really want to do, just one time, is write my own song—a song that means something. But seems like everything I write just turns into mush in my mouth. So. I thought I'd just take a break, come back here for a while, try to get my head straight and figure out if I want to live on the land or in the water, or what. And I just wondered if maybe I could help you with the twins, at least until dad gets back? I mean, I just thought you could maybe use a little backup...?

Comfort throws back her head and laughs; Jubal recognizes the gesture. He calls it the Pez-Head because it looks like the top of a Pez candy being popped back to grab for the goodies inside. He recognizes it because he has the selfsame gesture. "Jubal that is mighty sweet of you, and sure—I could use
some help. So you just stay as long as you like, but be warned: those twins are everything you were in double-time. But I've been raising things all my life, and they've not got the best of me yet. Let's just give it some time, and see how it goes. You'll find what you're looking for, it's just a matter of time and love. That's all it is, Jubal: just time and love . . ."

It is six-thirty in the morning on the eleventh day of October in the Year-of-Our-Lord Nineteen Hundred and Ninety-Three. It was exactly thirty years earlier to this very day and hour that Jubal's first musical note was sounded--the long, lusty cry of a healthy boy-child, right-ready to enter this world. This time on this day in this little corner of the universe has never been known before, and it will never be known again, as such.

Up to this hour on this day in this year these things have occurred: the National Archives first displayed the original Emancipation Proclamation and thousands of lives and millions of dollars were lost in the worst train wreck in Amtrak history and the second costliest U.S. natural disaster--the Great Flood of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. Toni Morrison became the first African-American to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, Michael Jordan was named MVP of the NBA championship series, and Jurassic Park attained the highest grossing movie of all time, earning $712 million worldwide. The World Trade Center was bombed, two more postal workers went berserk,
and Dr. Kevorkian struck again. Janet Reno (of the alligator-wrestling mom) became the first female Attorney General of the U.S., Ruth Bader Ginsburg was appointed the second female Supreme Court Justice, and Clint Eastwood was named best director for *Unforgiven*, which was also named best moving picture of 1993. Ross Perot set up the watchdog group called "United We Stand," Marshall Applewhite took out an ad in *USA Today* for "Heaven's Gate's final offer to advance beyond human," and the Branch Davidians' compound was harassed by the loudspeaker sounds of Nancy Sinatra, chanting Tibetan monks, Mitch Miller, dentists' drills, and shrieking rabbits being slaughtered. In Washington, D.C. three hundred thousand people rallied for equal rights for homosexuals, Heidi Fleiss was arrested, and Lorena Bobbitt bobbed-it. And a whole mess of people died, including Federico Fellini, Fred Gwynne, H.R. Haldeman, Pinky Lee, Thurgood Marshall, Spanky McFarland, Rudolf Nureyev, Vincent Price, and Conway Twitty, who died at the age of fifty-nine with fifty-five number one hit recordings.

Thirty years earlier Michael Jordan, Weight Watchers of Queens, New York, the national Zip Code, and the Hot Line from Washington, D.C. to Moscow, Russia were also born. The Speaker Ban Law passed in the final hours of the 1963 Legislature—at the height of the Cold War's social unrest, Barbara Tuchman became the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction, Betty Freidan wrote *The Feminine Mystique*, and Maurice Sendak
dreamed *Where the Wild Things Are.* Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream" speech during the March on Washington, D.C. and Medgar Evers was gunned down by a white supremacist, while the nation celebrated the one-hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. Mysterious clouds of hydrogen gas, some of the oldest "stuff" in the universe leftover from the formation of galaxies, were first studied and named "high velocity clouds," and Marshall Applewhite served as musical director for the outdoor drama *Horn in the West* in Boone, North Carolina. The Rolling Stones arrived at a London recording studio to make their first hit (with barely enough money to pay the cabbie), while American teenie-boppers were grooving to "Louie, Louie" of the unintelligible lyrics. And President John F. Kennedy announced the formation of a federal-state planning committee called "The President's Appalachian Regional Commission," otherwise known as PARC, just seven months and twelve days to the day before he was assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

One hundred years earlier, the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, universally known as the "White City," dazzled twenty-seven million visitors with wonders-unheard-of four hundred years earlier, when Columbus first stepped upon these shores. Almost half the American population was amazed by a Great White Fleet of Buildings around a Central Basin, like unto Baum's Emerald City, or Pilgrim's Celestial City: a spun-sugar marvel, but flimsy as a film set. Here were telephones and typewriters, phonographs and automobiles, and the first electric cookstove in this city of skyscrapers, this city
of the future. Here, too, were a Liberty Bell made of oranges and a life-sized knight made of prunes, buildings built from ears of corn and pyramids stacked with giant pumpkins, pictures of jackalopes and fur-bearing trout, and "Little Egypt" displaying her hootchy-kootchy charms in a fantastical, surrealistic dream of American mass-marketing "progress" soon-to-come. The dream dissolved into reality the day after the fair closed, when the mayor of Chicago was shot to death by a deranged malcontent, twenty-two years and a day after the Great Chicago Fire; and the frontier was officially closed.

But thirty years before the fair, and a hundred years before Jubal was born, Jules Verne had penned a mostly pessimistic view of Paris in the Twentieth Century, in which he saw the Year-of-Jubal-Lee-Nineteen-Sixty-Three as a land of a high-tech but soul-less society, where money and technology were the paramount forces, and people were moved by gas-powered automobiles and monorails and communicated with fax machines and electric chairs. It was the same year that West Virginia, being apathetic to the Confederate cause, was granted statehood, and Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation--celebrated by the NAACP in most parts of the country as "Jubilee Day." (Only this little corner of the universe is somewhat slow in hearing about it.)

"Hey, Jubal, wake up! IT'S YOUR BIRTHDAY!!!"

Jubal opens his eyes to an astounding sight: two clone-kids are bouncing up and down on his bed, alternating their ups-and-downs in a
constant jiggling, jostling imitation of circus trapeze artists descending into the nether regions, but not quite ready to let go of the dizziness of the heights. Jubal wonders if he is dreaming. He often dreams of being lost at some kind of a fair or a carnival, where he very deliberately sits down and takes off his shoes and then his socks, which he carefully rolls up and tucks inside those shoes, which then go into a cubbyhole before he climbs inside one of those big blow-up tents shaped like a dragon, or a shark with its mouth wide open. He then bounces and bounces and bounces until somebody (and he never can make out just exactly who it is, or even if it is a male or a female person) comes to claim him. But this is not the dream, it is his two twin brothers--Hagan Harper Goins and Palmer Presley Goins--aged nine years old and born seven months after Jubal turned twenty-one and became an adult, or so it's been said. Comfort had told him of their impending arrival exactly one day after that momentous birthday, and the next day Jubal went down to the Trailways station and got on a bus that would take him to Bristol and from there on to Nashville, Tennessee. It just seemed like the thing to do at the time.

"Hey, Jubal, watch this!" and Palmer takes an extra big jump, turns a complete three hundred and sixty degrees in the air, and lands right on top of Jubal's chest.

"Hey, watch it half-pint, or I'll rip your lips off and throw 'em in the floor." This is Jubal's best threat; sometimes it works, most times it's ignored.

"Yeah, Palmer, you really should be more careful, you might hurt
somebody fooling around." Most times Hagan is like a little old man, with his overly cautious ways. Fact is, these twins might be bodily carbon copies of each other, but they're natured as different as cats-and-crows, as Aunt Ozzy was wont to say.

Hagan was born exactly eleven minutes and eleven seconds before Palmer (which Comfort took as a very good sign--Jubal had been born on the eleventh), and that may or may not account for Hagan's paternal ways. She and Pebble flipped a coin for who would name which child. Comfort won the toss and named the first "Hagan" after the man who came from Ireland and built a great house over in Dungannon, near where her mother's people had lived--only it was called Osborne's Ford at the time. Patrick Hagan changed it to Dungannon to remind him of the town in the old country that he had left behind. Comfort never liked the changing of the name, because she was kin to those Osbornes; it was her great-grandmother Mary Ellender who had married Zacharias Josiah Osborne and birthed her own namesake--Comfort Susannah, the bride of Esau Elehue "Grandaddy" Goodloe. But she does love the story of the man who came from Ireland and built a lasting memorial to himself: the place called Hagan Hall that now stands empty, cared for by an Osborne who lives in an old log house nearby. But beyond that he left an even more lasting legacy, by hiring youths who showed promise, and paying for their schooling. Comfort is certain that her own passion for reading and learning somehow came through her Osborne blood: Zacharias Josiah was one
of those promise-filled youths whose education was owed to Patrick Hagan.

Then it was Pebble's turn to choose a name for the second twin, the one who came out literally turning flip-flops (he was breech, but turned right at the last possible moment before he would have to be taken). And he named him, of all things, "Palmer." Comfort thought it was after her family, but Pebble said no—that they had had a neighbor when he was growing up whose name was Palmer. Only he didn't pronounce it like the palm-of-your-hand, it was like a good buddy, a pal. And that's what he had been to Pebble, who was a good bit younger than he was. He took the boy (whose father was often gone) in and under his wing and taught him all the best things that a boy could learn: how to spot a deer track in the woods and tie a splint on a hurt animal; what bait to use for what fish—blood worms found where the sink-line emptied out into the chicken yard for trout, night crawlers that surfaced after the rain for bass, corn or balls of dough for carp and catfish; how to clean that catfish and gig a frog without getting barbed yourself; how to skip rocks, run rabbits, ride-down poplar trees, shoot a b.b. gun, make Mulligan Stew, and mostly just survive in the mountains. The "Presley," of course, was added in honor of The King. Comfort never objected, because she had looked the name up in her Name Your Baby book and discovered that "Presley" meant "priest's meadow," but she never told Pebble. It just seemed a nice secret for her to keep.

"Boys! I need you in here--NOW!" Comfort finds the drill sergeant technique is most effective with these willynilly twins. They go rolling and
tumbling out of the door, which opens again before Jubal has a chance to
even shut his eyes for a short nap, and there they are: the three of them.
Comfort is in the middle holding a precariously lop-sided cake with mounds
of cartoon candles and whipped cream and cherries and chocolate, chocolate,
chocolate everywhere. Hagan is to her right-hand side, holding a carton of
Heavenly Hash ice cream and Palmer is to her left-hand side with a jar of
hot fudge sauce.

It's your birthday, it's your birthday,
Shake your booty, shake your booty,
Like Sha-nay-nay, like Sha-nay-nay!

The twins stop fighting long enough to sing the new classic birthday
song in perfect unison, as if they really were just one voice.

"Nice, guys. I can't remember when 'Happy Birthday' sounded quite
that . . . spirited. Maybe I'll have to record a country version of that. Well,
let's bring it on over here before we have to call the fire department."

The twins naturally help him blow out the candles--they just can't stand
to leave him alone--and then everybody dives in to Comfort's traditional
birthday breakfast. For the space of at least three minutes, the twins' mouths
are happily occupied, but then Palmer remembers:

"Hey, Mom, Hagan stole my bike helmet."

"Did not."

"Did too, give it back . . . make him give it back."

"I didn'un't neither, you probably left it somewhere your ownself and
you're just trying to blame it on me."

"Am not."

"Am too."

"All right, that's about enough of that out of both of you. Go on, get
on out of here--Hagan, you help Palmer find his helmet."

"But Mom . . ."

"But nothing. Out."

The twins leave Jubal's room the same way they came in, looking like
one of those cartoons where the characters get to fighting, whirling around in
a big ball of dust, and every now and again you can see an arm or a leg come
flying out of the dust ball before it's jerked back in to continue the never-
ending fuss. Comfort hardly seems to notice, she is so used to what she calls
their "brouhaha." She has been sitting in the middle of Grandaddy Goodloe's
turned-spindle bed, eating cake and wearing equal amounts. Now she puts
her plate aside, pulls a deck of cards from her apron pocket, and begins to
lay out a game of Solitaire. This is what she always does when she wants
to talk.

"Well, I can see right now I'm not going to get back to sleep--so, what
is it?" asks Jubal, just a little bit afraid of finding out.

"What's what?"

"Come on, Mom, you don't come sit down in the middle of the bed at
seven-eleven a.m. for no reason whatsoever. Obviously you have something
you want to say . . . black queen on red king."

"Thanks. And by the way, Josh called."

"I've been wondering about the Josh-King. When did he call?"

"About an hour ago, he was just getting off the graveyard shift."

"He's working in the mines again? I can't hardly believe he'd go back underground after he almost got killed that last time."

"Naw, it's not the mines . . . he's working at the funeral home, which means he's REALLY working the graveyard shift."

"Aw, Mom, that's pretty slack. So what'd he say?"

"He wants to come get you tonight . . . take you out for a little birthday bash, which most likely means bar-hopping, I would imagine."

"That could be some fun. Don't worry, I'm of age, I hardly even get carded anymore. And Josh is all right--he's an idiot, but relatively harmless."

"That's what I've been meaning to talk with you about--Josh. I'm not so sure he is all right. I've been hearing tales that he's doing some pretty bizarre things, even more so than usual. Do you think he's ever dealt with his father's . . . disappearance?"

"I can't say, he never would really talk about it. All I ever heard were the stories that went around school when it happened. I never knew what to believe. What do you think really happened to Josh's dad?"

"You know, Jubal, the pure romantic in me would just love to believe that there was a woman waiting for him on the other side of that holler. That
he got into some big fancy automobile and the two of them headed for
California, or Mexico, maybe. But the realist in me says he's nothing more
than ashes at the bottom of that coke oven. That he felt bad enough about
his job, or his marriage, or his life in general that he just jumped through
that tiny hole in the top of that coke oven and burned it all away in one big
blinding flash. I truly cannot imagine what could possibly have been so wrong
as to make him do such a thing. I always did hear he had been depressed, but
he never was known to drink . . . what do you think?"

"I think you might as well give it up . . . the deck has you beat, again.
So when's he coming?"

"He'll be here around suppertime. I'll fix something to eat, so you can
put a little grease on your stomach. But right now, I think I'll take a little nap."

The door swooshes shut behind her and Jubal settles back into this
most delicious time of day, the school's-been-called-off-for-snow-and-I-can-
go-back-to-bed time of day. He pulls his great-grandmother's quilt up and
around him, and licking one last glob of hot fudge sauce off his beard, Jubal
Lee Goins "Nations"--aged thirty years and one hour--goes back to sleep.

At exactly six-thirty p.m., eleven hours and one excellent nap later,
a long black Cadillac hearse pulls up at Comfort's garden gate, and the famous
Joshua King steps out. "Hey, Jubal, come check out your limousine!"

The twins bounce off the trampoline Pebble insisted upon ("They'll
break their fool necks" . . . "But they need something to get rid of all that
energy . . .") and continue bouncing over to this gaudy piece of machinery.

"Hey, Josh! What a great car! Where'd you get it? Can we go riding in it? Does it have any secret compartments?"

"Oh, yeah, it's got a secret compartment, all right. Just hop right in here and I'll show you the best secret compartment yet." Josh folds open the rear doors of the hearse, revealing a brand new and never been used (he hopes) coffin. The twins bounce in whooping and hollering and singing You must never laugh when a hearse goes by or you may be the next to die . . . Jubal slides into the front seat beside Josh, and they're off.

"Joshua, good to see you. How'd you rate the company car tonight?"

"Well, let's just say I've 'confisticated' her for your birthday limousine. Ain't this some shit?"

The hearse makes one big loop of the valley, swaying back and forth on the narrow winding road to the sounds of shrieks and yelps coming from the coffin behind. They pull back up to Comfort's farmhouse, deposit the twins on their trampoline, and the two former good-time companions are off.

"So, where're we headed? Not to the cemetery, I hope?"

"Oh, no. There are much 'graver' pleasures awaiting you, my OLD friend, but first I've got to stop by my trailer and get started on filling up my new water bed. It'll probably take most of the night, wait'll you see 'er."

The 1981 single-wide Fleetwood barely hangs on the side of a hill over the Dummy Line, a road that used to be the narrow-gauge railroad
connecting the Iron Furnace-with the town-with the coal camps. It has one big bedroom in one end (big for a trailer, at least), a living room in the middle, a kitchen on the other end, a little closet of a bathroom and laundry wedged in the hall, and that is all. But that is all he needs. The water bed takes up almost the entire bedroom. Josh runs a garden hose through the trailer window, handing it up to Jubal who pulls it through the window hand over hand ("Hey, Josh, this durn thing is heavy . . . "). Then Josh hooks it up to the water bed ("The salesman said this would work . . . "), climbs back through the window and turns the faucet on (not too fast so as to give them plenty of time for making the rounds), and they're off again.

Jubal remembers the route well, but he's forgotten how run-down and sad looking these bars are; or maybe it's just a matter of comparison. Even the neighborhood bars in Nashville, with sawdust on the floors and pictures of stars-before-they-were-stars all over the walls, have a slick, high-tech feel compared to the places they are going tonight. First, they do the town round: Stoney's with the pool tables in front and serious gambling in the back; The Liberty with its long row of miners in between shifts on bar stools, their faces as dusky as the bar lights; Jim's and Ray's with their own standardized clientele and fried seafood and all-you-can-eat-ribs and just good mountain cooking, to boot. But the best eating is over in the Italy Bottom, where the Greasy Spoon and Knox's Cafe are the gathering spots for the more "ethnic" populations, the remnants of Italians and Poles and Hungarians shipped over
from Europe, and blacks railroaded in from Alabama to work the mines in the
early years of the twentieth century, in the boom-time. Jubal and Josh eat and
drink enough at each place so as not to not hurt anybody's feelings, and by
two o'clock a.m. there's only one place left: BESSIE'S!

It's a tradition. Everybody ends up at Bessie's, after getting off the
hoot owl shift at the mines, or an even harder shift of all-night-drinking,
like Josh and Jubal. Bessie's is strategically located down from the transloader
in the town of Appalachia, where all the mines up through all the hollers
eventually empty out. Jubal is feeling just a bit more than bleary-eyed and
bloated by this time, and would just as soon go home. He hunkers down in
the front seat. "Is she open?" He's hoping the answer is no.

"'Course she's open. Bessie stays open all night, 'cept from four to five in
the morning when she closes down to chop more onions for the chili beans." That's her specialty: chili beans with about an inch of grease floating on top,
and a handful of strong onions on top of that. It's all Jubal can do to finish off
his bowl; but it is his birthday, and it is a tradition. He's almost home safe,
back to the hearse, and Jubal is thinking *Thank God that's over with.* But
Josh is walking over to a 1968 Ford Fairlane painted primer red--a definite
farm car--attracted by the sound of banging and thumping and cussing.

"Hey, Josh, come on. Let's go home, buddy."

"Hold on a minute. I think somebody's in trouble over here . . . Well,
dang if it ain't Boney Collins. Hey, Jubal, come on over and say hey to Boney.
What's the matter, Boney? You stuck? Don't worry, we'll get you out of there."

Seems that Boney has been on "a big'un" of his own, and he thinks that he's stuck in the front seat of his car. So he's laid out full length with his head over on the passenger side, kicking at the door on the driver's side. Josh opens the door, which was not even locked to begin with, and Boney comes tumbling out--landing in a pile right at their feet, like laundry tumbling down a chute. He holds up a cigarette he has carefully guarded.

"You boys got a light?"

"Oh, sure, I'll get you a light. Just hold on there, Boney... here you go."

Josh pulls a lighter from his pocket--one of those Zippo's with the adjustable flame, and flicks it. The flame shoots up about three inches. Boney kind of staggers backward, looks at the flame auger-eyed and says, "Damn. I'd rather shit a turd."

"So would I, Boney... so would I."

The hearse is finally off and flying: back through Appalachia, down The Straight, passing Aviation Road, back through the town, and finally landing at the trailer on the Dummy Line, in the magic of suspended time that only accompanies drunks and small children.

"Holy shit, would you look at that?"

The trailer is tilting on a ninety-degree angle. The weight of over five hundred gallons of water at eight pounds a gallon is obviously too much for the water bed, and for the single-wide.
"Oh, man, what're we gonna do?"

"What you mean we, white man? Just take me back to Comfort's."

One more magic carpet "Whoosh!" and Jubal is deposited at the garden gate. The hearse pulls away and is immediately sucked up by the darkness. But floating back on the night breeze, Jubal thinks he hears: "Halloween, man. I'll pick you up right here Halloween night. We'll do the old Bullitt Mansion, just like in the old days. You and me, we're gonna hear them ghost dogs yet."

Glessye Barron Bullitt sits in the middle window of the Bullitt Mansion's top-most turret, and waits. They will come, they always come. From this height she can see all the way down Imboden Hill into the town which stretches out at her feet like a dusky purple-gray carpet. This is her time of day, the time when all the sharp edges of things are blurred, and it becomes impossible to tell memory from may-be, from mist-ery. It is, as they used to say: day-down, dusky-dark.

She looks for the moon, but it is still early for its rising. Last night it was fuller-than-full, spilling over and dripping shimmery droplets of moon-magic down over the dips and turns and gingerbread arches of the mansion, like sundae sauce and sprinkles over a gigantic ice-cream cone. Tonight the
moon will be just a sliver less, but it is definitely waning; she knows it is waning.

And now the lights of the town begin to blink on. Sleepy eyes opening slowly, steadily, beginning at the furthest end where the old school stood, now survived only by its rock wall exoskeleton. Here, she has heard, there now stands a Hardee's and a Long John Silver's and a Magic Mart and a Revco Drug Store, but she couldn't say, for herself; it is only servants that go to such places. The lights continue up through the heart of the town, where stood first the Duff Hotel (nothing more than a field of tents); then the Grand Central Hotel with its saloon full of prospectors and police guards; then the Hotel Eugene, destroyed by fire in nineteen-o-seven, when she was but a child first beginning to school; and finally the Monte Vista Hotel where handsome men and beautiful ladies in silks and satins and velvets and lace whirl and swoop and glide across the ballroom floor, yet. There are those who tell her that she is seeing only the street lights in the park, and the statue of a coal miner who stands motionless there, watching over the dance of those who now gather to drink cheap wine and tell tall tales. But she closes her ears against such blasphemy--for can she not hear the sound of a waltz playing, even now, on the breath of October's final fling?

Leaves of gold and orange and crimson blow across her porch, mixed with costume-clad clowns and witches, hoboes and vampires, ghosties and goblins and long-leggedy beasties and things that go bump in the night.
They tiptoe up to her door bell, ringing and running at the selfsame time, shrieking into the terror of the night with the deliciousness of their own fright. It is always the same. There is never one soul brave enough to stay and come inside to share . . . to share what with her?

She pulls back the Belgian lace curtain, and peers into the yard below. Shouldn't there be a carriage waiting for her? Oh, well . . . it shall surely be here soon. Should she be changing for the costume ball at the hotel? And what shall she be, this year? An empress, perhaps, with an empire-cut gown and the sapphire necklace Ballard has given her for their wedding anniversary? Or perhaps a tight-rope walker with a beaded bodice and parasol: yes. That might be more in keeping with the gaiety of the times, with the bustle and the boom of this Mountain Empire. She shall change soon; there is still time.

The wind blows again, carrying the pattering of feet and dried leaves far away and down the avenue of what-was-then, and now the whining begins: first low, as if it is nothing more than the wind itself, almost swallowed up by the night. But then it is not the wind, it is the sound of some creature or creatures in pain, or in fear, or in need. Much louder, now. Steady-like and insistent, as the beat of her own heart.

It is the dogs, they must want out. I shall go to quieten them.

She walks most carefully down the spiral staircase that coils itself inside the turret like a serpent--winding and winding and winding itself down three stories, until it finally reaches the front parlor. She stands for
just a moment in the gleam of lamp light, allowing her eyes to adjust to the
dimness of the room. *One of the servants should see to those wicks, they
need trimming. I shall have to speak with Father about those servants.*

She stands now in the downstairs window, looking out past the porch to
the gate in the picket fence beyond, and it seems strangely as if the light is
coming from somewhere outside the house, from something quite bright
that is making long shadows across her porch and into this parlor.

Now the whining turns into a keening howl, and the scratching begins:
along the window frames, then at the base of the door. And now she can hear
them jumping against the door itself, raging against that which keeps them
inside when they would be out, when they must be out.

_Hush, now. Hush you dogs; he'll be back soon. Your master would
never go off and leave you here, not when he knows how you love to go
into the woods hunting with him. He'll be back soon: now, Hush._

But he has gone and left his dogs—the handsome young prospector
come from Louisville to seek his fortune in this place that was to become
"The Pittsburgh of the South." He's ridden off on his bay horse with his
gun, and none to know where he's gone or why he's left his dogs and his
young wife and his infant son. For days they've searched the woods on top
of High Knob, that exclusive foreign-bought hunting preserve. And still the
dogs scratch at the doors and the windowsills, and still they whine and howl
and keen for the master they know will come home no more.
Hush, now, you dogs: Hush. He'll be back soon. Why would anyone harm him, this hunter so handsome and brave? No, it's only a tale . . . the Bullitt is only in his name, not through the back of his head. Why would anyone want him dead, this young father of my husband-to-be, his baby son? He'll be back soon: now, Hush.

But the ghosties keep company only with the night, and the ever-
keening wind.
"Good morning, Jubal, and isn't it a beautiful morning, indeed?"

Comfort is folding back shutters, throwing up blinds, pulling back curtains, shaking off covers, just generally making herself obnoxious. Jubal has always hated it when she gets on a morning-kick; fortunately, it doesn't happen often. But when she's up, everybody has to get up--there's just no getting around it. He groans and turns over, burying himself under a pile of pillows. She counts with her all-time, sure-fire, best shot: "Hey, Jubal . . . what's the square root of three hundred and sixty-four?"

For a moment there's nothing but silence under the pillows. She's beginning to wonder if she's miscalculated, if she doesn't know her boy-child after all. But then from beneath the feather-fortress comes the inevitable muffled response: "I don't know, and who wants to know, anyhow?"

Comfort dodges the tossed pillow as she descends the stairs, knowing he's up now, for sure, trying to work the answer out in his head. It works every time.

Jubal rassles with the jack-legged shower Pebble has concocted to hang over the old claw-footed tub, skips the wash basin for shaving routine, throws on a pair of jeans and one of Pebble's worn-smooth flannel shirts, and allows
himself to be drawn downstairs by the smells of coffee and bacon (what used to be called "country bacon," not much more than fat back) and fried toast and grapefruit. Comfort always has grapefruit, like her Granny Goodloe who had taught her to mix the rinds with coffee grounds for the best compost; and even though Jubal was just a notion when she passed on, somehow the smell of grapefruit always reminds him of his great-grandmother. The twins are already at the table, doing their own rassling as evidenced by the sayings on their tee shirts: *I Always Get Everything I Want* on Hagan's, and *Not If I Get It First* on Palmer's. They are shoveling down food as fast as Comfort can pile it on their plates, and they're talking with their mouths full at the same time.

"He's looking at me."

"Am not."

"Am, too--Mom, make him stop looking at me."

"Both of you hush and eat. And close your mouths when you chew, that's disgusting," says Comfort as she hits the bull's eye of Hagan's plate with an over-easy egg. She has read that the government has now condemned this practice as potentially unhealthy if not lethal, but reckons her grandaddy would have given two whoops and a holler in the flat-lands for that opinion. So she ignores it.

"He's making spit come out of my mouth, make him stop . . ."

"How's about if I rip your lips off and throw 'em in the floor?" They both just look at Jubal with no expression whatsoever, fear or otherwise.
He's got to find a new threat, this one has obviously lost all its punch. "So, Mom, you're up bright and early, you must have something going. What's on for today?"

"Well, Jubal, it's All Saint's Day. Halloween is actually Hallow's Eve which is the eve of All Hallow's Day, or All Saint's Day, and that's today--which would be the perfect day to go see Aunt Cozy and Aunt Ozzy. Aunt Cozy's been wanting me to take over writing her 'Memories' column in *The Spot*, so I need to let her show me what's up with that, and you know how much your grandmother and your great-aunt would just LOVE to see you . . ."

"Thank you, Miss History Channel. Could I just chew on tin foil instead?"

"Now, Jubal, you know it'll be good for you; it builds character."

Barely a half-hour later Jubal and Comfort are walking up the neck toward Chandler's Ridge, the twins racing ahead on bicycles with their half-bulldog, half-Great Dane named Bullwinkle trailing behind, marking territory. This is Jubal's favorite season for walking; he loves to crunch through the crimson-scarlet-burnished-bronze-splendor of the last of the leaves. The deep amethyst glow of the earlier dogwoods and black gums and Virginia creepers has been replaced by flaming sugar maples and sourwoods, gilded beeches and tulip poplars, and the ancient giant oaks in their scarlet-gold cloaks. It is close to being miraculous, even though it happens just this same way at this same time every year.
Only a handful of regulars are sitting in front of the store. Most have already started moving inside to gather around the pot-bellied stove, now that winter's coming on. Baby Egan is outside sweeping the leaves away from the front of the store with the broom. "Hey, Baby, how's about selling me that broom?" Baby just grins real slow-like, looking akin to a dead possum in the middle of the road. It's a joke that all the locals know: how Rucker keeps the broom standing beside the counter and rings it up whenever some stranger passes through. Then if that person should complain about his bill being too high, Rucker will say " Didn't you want this broom? I'm sorry, I thought you meant for me to ring it up for you." But if the stranger doesn't notice, then the broom just stays next to the counter to get sold again and again and again . . .

"Naw, you can't have this broom, Jubal, it's going to pay for Little Baby's college education." Rucker has a whole mess of boys, big old boys with huge shoulders and not a neck amongst them, and they all have nicknames like Tank and Hood and Hoss and Big Boy and Bad Dog and Bruiser. And finally Baby, who was supposed to have been the last. But then poor old Nankey (who is called Tootsie) Egan found herself with still one more unplanned bun-in-the-oven, so they named him Little Baby, after which Tootsie Egan made SURE he was the last by having the doctor put a half-hitch in her. Every lasting one of those Egan boys plays football, and they're all smart, to boot. So it's a sure bet that Little Baby will be going off to college one way or another, with or without help from the broom.
And now Jubal and Comfort are passing by fields decorated with black and white cows ("Oh, look, Jubal: those cows must be Southern Baptists!"
"Huh?" "They're fundamental, black and white, no gray . . . get it?" "Huh?") and hayrolls that look like huge pillows of Shredded Wheat. The last brave wildflowers line the road side, making a color guard for this little passing parade: red cosmos, Indian blankets, and cardinal flowers; white rabbit tobacco and frost asters; blue boneset and "farewell-to-summer"; purple ironweed and Joe-pye weed, golden tickseed, sneeze weed, and sunflowers; and field after field richer than Fort Knox, stockpiled with goldenrod. Jubal breathes deeply, risking an attack of allergies, and is rewarded with that most unmistakable long-ago-and-far-away smell of the earth dying yet again, which nearly breaks his heart at the same time it makes him feel gloriously glad just to be alive, just now. Comfort is moved to break into song:

_We are going down the valley one by one,
With our faces toward the setting of the sun;
Down the valley where the mournful cypress grows,
Where the stream of death and silence onward flows._

_We are going down the valley, Going down the valley,
Going toward the setting of the sun;
We are going down the valley, Going down the valley,_
_Going down the valley one by one._

"Well now, that should cheer everybody up. Where do you get this stuff from anyhow, Mom? Sounds like something Aunt Ozzy would want sung at her funeral--that and _Put My Little Shoes Away._"

"Why, Jubal, it's an all-time classic: Lilly May Ledford and the
Coon Creek Girls?" Jubal looks blank. "The National Barn Dance?" Still no
response. "Fifty thousand clear-channel watts from station WLS in Chicago?"
"You know I don't do classical music, I'm just a country boy."
"Right."

And now they pass by what's left of the one-room Cracker's Neck
schoolhouse where Jubal went to first grade, right before they shut the school
down for good and moved all the kids to East Stone Gap. He and Comfort
have the same conversation they always have when she passes by this sad-
looking building that used to be so alive with children's voices:

"Jubal, that's where you went to school in the first grade; do you
remember going there?"

"Well, yeah. Kind of. Sort of." Jubal has long ago learned to tell his
momma what she wants to hear, so as to head off her school-teacher-routine.
Comfort's current diversion is to work at the twins' grade school as a teacher's aide. Jubal is afraid she'll make good on her threat to go back to school to
get a teaching certificate; he thinks she has enough useless information, as is,
without the benefit of a license to harass little kids with her Jeopardy-jargon.

But now the road makes a decided change. It is suddenly steeper and
more narrow, the sides falling off into scary ravines which plunge down and
down with nothing to break a fall, and no guard rails. They have left the neck
and started up into the very head of the holler. The houses here scrabble for a
handhold on the hillsides, to which they cling like an old granny-woman
hugging herself beneath her apron. Most have porches that are built up high to balance the back of the house which is wedged into a rocky slope, like the one they are climbing up toward right now.


"Is that Jubal? Well, I never did know that was him. Jubal, have you grown yourself a beard? I never did know that Jubal had a beard . . . did you know that Jubal had a beard, Cozy?"

The two sisters are sitting on the porch of the house they now share, the house that once belonged to Charmie Cozette Swinney and her husband Bood Iverson Goins--a.k.a. Pebble's Mom and Dad--until Bood did finally and effectually make good on his threat to up and die on her, which he did. At almost the selfsame time, Charmie's sister--Ozma Oleta Swinney--had lost her own husband Witcher Nickels in a flood ("Yeah, a flood of liquor," according to Pebble). So Ozma sold off her house, which was even further up the holler, paid off what was left of the mortgage on Charmie's house with the money, and the two of them have been arguing over who got the best end of that deal ever since. Fact is, the two of them will argue over just about ANYthing and EVERYthing at the drop of a hat. Today: it's the best variety of Little Debbie cakes.

"Definitely the Star Crunch."

"Star Crunch, my foot. Everybody knows it's the Choco-Party-Gel, you
just go ask Rucker Egan how many Star Crunches he sells against how many Choco-Party-Gels . . . you just go ask him."

"Well, of course I'm not going to go traipsing down the road to ask Rucker Egan any such of a foolish thing. Besides, you know I'm right."

"I know you don't know B from Bull's foot . . . Jubal, you know it's Choco-Party-Gels, just go on and tell her."

"Tell you what: I've just about given up eating Little Debbie cakes altogether. Had to, for my health. So how've you been doing, Aunt Ozzy?"

"Oh, very well, child, very well. See here?"

Aunt Ozzy pulls up the sleeve of her aqua fleece running suit; she's only recently made the discovery of these easy-to-wash, easy-to-fit, easy-to-wear marvels of modern science and flea markets. She has about two dozen in her hardwood chest of drawers, in all different colors. Now she shows Jubal her forearm, which is sporting much less of an outbreak of psoriasis than usual; this demonstration is a ritual.

"Looks great, Aunt Ozzy. I'm glad you're feeling better."

"Well, of course, my doctor says I do have to take all these pills, for my heart. I've got high blood pressure, you know, and he says that one side of my heart is just completely blocked, the blood can't get in there a-tall. He doesn't know how I'm still alive . . . and then these are for my brain tumor."

Aunt Cozy looks up from her crossword puzzle, peering at Aunt Ozzy over her reading glasses like a scientist might look at a curious specimen,
and snorts. "Brain tumor, my hiney. The only thing wrong with your head is in your head. And besides, I don't hardly think that any little pill is going to cure a brain tumor."

"These will. Doc McConnell give 'em to me, and he's got good papers. He said for me to be real careful with 'em and only take one at a time--they're real high-powered."

"He's got papers? What is he, some kind of cocker spaniel? Those pills are nothing but sugar pills. And there's nothing in this world wrong with you, 'cept that you're ornery, that's all."

"Why, I was so sick yesterday that I couldn't even get up and out of the bed. I swung my feet over to the floor and got all woozy, and the room started spinning around and then it got all dark. I just had to lay down the whole rest of the day. It's a wonder I didn't pass on right then and there."

"You never did any such of a thing. You got up and went out there to the barn and got into your Oldsmobile and drove to town. I saw you with my own eyes."

"I know. I was sick. I was driving to the doctor's."

"It was Sunday."

"I was practicing."

"And I suppose you were wearing your seat belt at the time?"

"Noo, I never trust those things. They'll get you penned in a wreck. Now, if I see that I'm going to crash, I'll just stop and get out of the car."
Comfort and Jubal both do the Pez-Head at the selfsame time. Aunt Ozzy is never going to let Aunt Cozy get one up on her, not for a minute. She may be just a bit addlepated, but underneath it all she's sharper than a hen's tooth and crazy like a fox.

"You just wait and see, one of these days you're going to find me dead in the floor, like Eulareid Belcher over at the Mt. Zion Baptist Church... you know Eulareid, don't you Comfort? Lives up on Hog Pen Branch Road?"

Comfort nods, but Aunt Ozzy doesn't even take notice; she's really on a roll now. "Well, all her life Eulareid said that she wanted to play the French-harp in church, it was just her lifelong dream. And so last Wednesday night instead of prayer meeting, they were gonna have a senior citizens' night. They fed 'em a real good dinner--I think they had Kentucky Fried Chicken cater the thing--and then they all went upstairs to the sanctuary and had a talent show, just for the senior citizens. So Eulareid and her daughter DeeDee Crabtree just did 'em up a big duet: Eulareid a-playing the French-harp like she always said she wanted to, and DeeDee a-backing her up on the git-tar.

"What'd they play, Aunt Ozzy?"

"Red Wing. You know that one, Jubal?"

"Can't say as I do, Aunt Ozzy."

"Well, you should, you being a young country-and-western singer. It's a classic, goes sorty like: Doo-doo, Doo-doo, Doo-doo-doo-doo-doo-doo-doo..."

"Oh, yeah, yeah--I got it now, Aunt Ozzy. I learned that in the third
grade, taking piano lessons from Miz-riz Harlow Johnson. I always called it 'The Happy Song.' So what then?"

"So Eulareid gets through the song and drops in the floor: deader'n a post."

Jubal registers the required response of surprise, but Comfort has heard this one before. "Well, at least she got through the song . . . Aunt Ozzy why don't you get Jubal to help you string up those leather-britches while Charmie shows me what I need to know to write this newspaper column?"

Jubal rolls his eyes at his mother, but sits down on the porch step and starts poking half-runners with a big darning needle strung with fishing line; Aunt Ozzy has figured out that it's stronger than the sewing thread she's been using for years. Comfort follows Aunt Cozy into the front room of the house, which always smells like something stewed--apples, or chicken, or cabbage. Her dining room table, sitting beneath the mantle-board laden with pictures of the two sisters' plenteous offspring, is covered with Charmie's writings, a whole and entire lifetime's worth. Pebble's mother started writing poems even before she went to school; it seemed she was just born knowing how to make pictures with words. She had gotten married when she was just barely out of grade school--said she saw Bood leaning over the schoolyard fence one day early in the spring when she was playing a recess game of "Going to Boston," and when first she set eyes on this dark, wiry stranger she just knew for sure and certain that he was the one she would marry. And she did, just as soon as
she could get her mama to sign for her. She was fourteen-and-a-half at the time, but knew everything she needed to know about keeping a house and raising young'uns—she'd been doing it all her life. That was sixty-six years, seven young'uns, eighteen grand-young'uns, nine great-grand-young'uns, and ten years of being a coal miner's widow ago. And she has no regrets at all, whatsoever.

"I got all these things out for you, Comfort—thought you might have some use for them. I can't really tell you much about writing the column... I've been doing it for going-on fifty years now, and I still can't say how it is that I do it. It just kindly comes out whenever I sit down and take up a pen. Now, it's supposed to be that you just write the news about people here in Cracker's Neck—who's dead or dying, or getting married, or having a baby, or getting a visit from some kin, or a long-distance phone call—you know, all the important things that go on. But just in the last year or so, they started having me fill-in on some other things, like writing up weddings and police reports, and I just tell you: I wouldn't get into that if I were you. It's been nothing but a headache. Everybody gets all hare-lipped if you get something wrong, 'specially in the wedding write-ups. Look at this right here: this is a whole lot of the reason I decided to give up writing the column all together."

Charmie rifles through a stack of pages from *The Spot (For News and Views)*, and flings one on the table in front of Comfort like a prize-winning fish; it shows two wedding write-ups, side by side. In the first one, on the left-
hand side of the page, the picture is of one of those turned-around-almost-backwards, looking-demurely-over-the-shoulder kind of brides. Long train, short veil, large ring, small bouquet, hair worn high, dress scooped low (in the BACK, only): just the perfect picture of proper wedding procedure. But the write-up beside the picture tells of a ceremony held at Bark Camp Lake, with a pig-picking reception and a honeymoon trip to Myrtle Beach for the bride who graduated from Freida's Beauty School, and the groom who is the owner of Munsey's Mobile Home Park and Septic Tank Service. On the right-hand side of the paper is a picture of a couple standing beside a lake. The bride is wearing a yards-and-yards-of-funky-fake-lace bodice with big swoopy sleeves over a tight black leather mini-skirt, rhinestone-studded cowgirl hat and boots, and is carrying a huge bouquet of lilies and gardenias tied with a ribbon from a funeral-home wreath. The groom appears to have borrowed his outfit from the Marlboro Man, and he's grinning like a carp at a sewer hole. But this write-up pontificates on Episcopal Churches and Very-Right-Reverend-Diocese-Bishops, a reception at the Martha Washington Inn and wedding trip to Hilton Head Island, South Carolina for these magna-kum-ba-yah graduates of Sweet Briar College and Washington and Lee University.

"Got 'em turned around, huh?" Comfort loves the unintentional prank that's been played on these unsuspecting nuptial-ites.

"Bass-ackwards. I had to do a complete and total reprint, along with an apology to these people who aren't even FROM here--it was the grandkid
of somebody who lives here just for the summer, or some such nonsense. Used to be that I knew everybody in these parts, and now there's so many folks coming in from other places, with strange names I can't even pronounce. And these pictures of brides on the back of fire trucks and backhoes and golf carts, dressed up like saloon girls and cow girls and call girls, and who knows what-in-all . . . well. It's just more than I can feature."

"So is that pretty much it, then?" Comfort is thinking that this is going to be more fun than the time the hogs ate up Carse Baumgarner's little brother.

"Oh, no. There's these Police Blotters . . . I wished I may-never. Look at this--shagnasties carrying off things from folks' backyards. Potted plants, a red push-mower, a statue of John Wayne, two ceramic ducks valued at twenty dollars. And what they take out of stores, goddlemighty! Here's one from the K-Mart: thieves took a wide-screen TV and VCR, videos including Angels in the Outfield and The Exorcist, some Goody's headache powders, a Bugs Bunny toothbrush, a bag of Doritos corn chips, and a two-liter bottle of Mountain Dew. Now what is this world coming to? I just feel like it's time for me to turn it over and put the rest of my time toward getting my poems published in a book. That's what I want to be remembered for."

"And you will be, Aunt Cozy. You're a wonderful poet. Thanks for all this great stuff." Comfort is gathering the papers up into a pile and putting them into her back pack. "I promise to take good care of it. I'll make copies and get it all back to you."
"You just keep it. Pass it along to Pebble or Jubal or Hagan or Palmer, somebody in the family who might want it. It'll mean more to them, maybe."

The two women go back out on the porch where Ozma has Jubal hanging strings of leather-britches from nails along the porch overhang. They mix in nicely with the potted plants, wind socks, signs reading "I (Heart) Country," and an occasional dish towel or pair of nylons hung out to dry.

Aunt Ozzy smiles up at her sister and this young woman with the long, wild June-Carter-Cash-hair who is some kin to her, even though she can't always remember her name. "So did you find everything you needed, dear?"

"Yes I did, Aunt Ozzy."

"And are you still teaching over at the college?"

"No, I'm a teacher's aide at the elementary school, Aunt Ozzy."

"I thought you had your teaching papers; didn't you ever matriculate, dear? I earned a diploma from the Normal, you know."

"Diploma, my foot. You went through the seventh grade over at Big Sandy Springs, and then quit to marry the first boy who ever gave you the time of day." Charmie figures as Ozma's older sister she should be the one to set the record straight.

"Well, leastwise I didn't marry me a six-fingered, moonshine-making, wild ramp." This is Ozma's ace-in-the-hole, and she knows it.

"Well, leastwise I'm not crazy enough to think that people are living under my house and listening in on my phone conversations." Charmie
actually thinks there could be some truth to this one, what with all the cell
phone towers they're putting up around Cracker's Neck these days and all.

Jubal has had just about as much of this conversation as he can take
in, for the time being. His daddy's people always leave him feeling just
a bit disoriented, as if he's been sleeping with his face in the light of the full
moon. He starts to make a move toward leaving. "I guess we'd best be getting
on. You two take care of each other, now."

"Oh, we get along very well. Nice to see you, Jubal—I like your beard."
Aunt Ozzy gets up from her rocking chair and starts down the steep porch
steps to dead-head the last of the marigolds growing along the walkway. The
smell reminds Jubal of something very long ago, something that he can't quite
name, but which fills him with a twinge of sadness. Aunt Cozy suddenly
pulls him toward her in an unexpected gesture of strength; he feels like one of
those Rye Cove children, being sucked into the ferociousness of the cyclone
that blew their schoolhouse away.

"You just keep a-climbing that mountain, boy . . . you'll get there. Just
remember how the cows get to the top: they don't just stand at the bottom
and shake their hooves around in the air and fuss and fume and rant and rave
at the idiocy of heaven, no. They just start a-climbing, real slow-like. They
don't go charging straight up the dadgum mountain, neither; they wind around
and around and around on those little twisty paths. And that way they know
they're going to get there. It may take 'em a while, but it doesn't matter, just as
long as they get there. So you just keep a-climbing, Jubal." She lets him go
just as suddenly as she had grabbed him; Jubal almost falls backwards with the
abruptness of it.

"Yeah, right. Thanks, Aunt Cozy." Jubal kisses her cheek; it feels
papery-thin, like the communion wafer he once had when he went to a
Catholic wedding-mass in Nashville.

They're almost around the bend and out of sight of the house before
Jubal recovers enough to ask Comfort: "So what was that all about? How did
she know I've been trying to ... figure some things out?" Jubal most usually
has a hard time letting anybody (except his momma) know what he's feeling;
it's just not his way to talk about things, much. It must be that he's natured
more like his father than he might like to admit.

"Your grandmother knows a lot more than anybody's ever given her
credit for, Jubal. She's part ramp herself, you know."

"Part ramp? And just what does that mean?"

"She's Melungeon--surely you knew your dad was mostly Melungeon?"
Jubal looks blank, again. "Haven't you been reading about it in the papers? It's
a hot topic these days. That Mullins feller over to Pound has everybody all
stirred up, looking in their closets and under their beds to see if there might be
some mystery Melungeon hidden there. He even made a video they've been
showing on PBS about these mountain people with unknown origins that
everybody all of a sudden wants to claim as their own kin." Still no response.
"Oh, Jubal, I thought you knew what wonderful mixed blood you have! Why, you could be part Portugese, Lebanese, Arabic, Indian, native-American, maybe even African-American . . . Anything! It's a wonderful time to be Melungeon, it gives you such infinite possibilities. Yes indeed, you could be just ANYthing."

The wind blows the last of the leaves in front of them, clearing a path for their descent, as the aunts' voices waft down from behind:

"Well, leastwise I didn't run off the Mormons."

"All I did was tell them that if their church said we'd all get back in our old bodies on Judgment Day then I didn't want no part of it, 'cause there's no way I'm getting back in my old body . . . it's all wore out. I told 'em I want me a brand new body, that's all."

"Oh, Ozzy, you could run off just ANYbody . . . "
DECEMBER

Struggling up a mountain, it seemed that he was sad

"... and so why was it that they decided to have this class reunion on Christmas Eve? It's such a family time, I just can't imagine ..."

Comfort is sitting on the floor of the den-library-music-sitting-room, a landslide of full-blown Christmas cascading down and around her. The room is lit only by candles and thousands of little twinkly lights that glow from all the wooden surfaces: the knotty-pine paneling on the walls; the golden-oak sideboard and piesafe and Granny Goodloe's treadle sewing machine that still works; the heart-pine floor boards worn smooth and wavy in spots that were loved the most; the musical instruments hidden here and there and round and about in every possible nook and cranny. Jubal has plucked Grandaddy Goodloe's curly-maple fiddle from its place of refuge over the walnut upright piano and is cradling it in his arms like a baby. Gingerly he plucks the strings, which feel like old baling wire. He wishes that he could remember his grandaddy playing this fiddle, but he was still dreaming when the old man crossed over the Jordan. Comfort has been trying to learn to play the thing, but her efforts sound a great deal like a whole mess of long-tailed cats in a room full of rocking chairs being skinned alive: bad. Actually, Jubal has secretly wanted to play the fiddle himself, but it's hardly
the instrument of choice in Nashville—just now, anyhow.

"From what I hear it was the only time everyone could agree to get together. There's so many that have moved away, but most everybody comes back for Christmas, and I reckon they figured they'd all be here by tonight, at least." Jubal's fingers stroke the fiddle, as if it were a harp.

"And so you're going? . . . How 'bout handing me that funky paper? No, not the pigs-on-skis, although they're certainly a good possibility, but I think I want Santa-on-the-surfboard for Lucinda's present, what do you think?"

Comfort's legs are extended in a V which encloses an incredible amount of things—piles of packages, paper, ribbons, bows, tins of popcorn and cookies (which seem to be disappearing faster than they get wrapped); tapes and CD's ("Hey, listen to this, my favorite--the Statler Brothers singing I Believe in Santa's Cause); three cats named Saphronia, Louvonia, and Caledonia (she calls Sappy, Lou, and CallyDee) who are bumfusticated, chasing after paper and ribbons and bows and each other; and Bullwinkle's head—which is the only part of him that can possibly fit.

The twins are hiding out beneath the naked cedar tree. Santa will come late tonight (when they are holed-up in their bunk beds) to add bubble lights and glass balls and angel hair everywhere, so that when the twins come racing downstairs in the morning they will be greeted by this most magical of sights. It is a tradition that Lucinda started and Comfort always loved. Most of the things on the tree have been handed down from various sides of the family--
all except for the angel hair, which Comfort buys new. The old kind that
her granny used was made from fiber glass, and flat tore her hands up. The
twins are poking through the treat pokes they've brought back from the
Christmas program down at the Baum (which everybody knows is pronounced
"Bum") Holler Independent Baptist Church. Grandaddy Goodloe, who was
himself a Methodist, would say the same thing every time they passed the
church: "And what Baptist church isn't?" Comfort was raised in the town
Presbyterian church, but she likes being able to walk down the road to church,
and that pretty much limits her to Baptist. Still, she likes the people and the
preaching and mostly the music--what she calls "GOBS" for "Good Old Baptist
Stuff." Jubal is relatively sure she's actually a Hard-shelled Hindu Holiness in
disguise, but is keeping this information to himself; he hates to blow her cover.

"Hey, give me back my wax-candy lips . . . He took my wax-candy lips!"

"Did not."

"Did too, give 'em back."

WHAM!!! The Twins head-butt each other at the exact same moment.

"YEEEEEEEOOOOWWWWWCH . . . HE HIT ME!!!!!"

"All right, you two. Quit acting like maniacs, at least for Christmas Eve,"
says Jubal, separating them with one hand and peeling the wrapper off of a
pacifying Snickers Bar with the other, "and to answer your question, Martha
Stewart: yes. I think that Lucinda will be thrilled to know she raised up a
daughter with such good taste." Jubal sneaks a chocolate drop from Hagan's
poke and bites into it, which sets his front teeth vibrating from the sugar-shock of the solid cream center.

"And to answer my other question? Are you going to the reunion?"

"Yeah, I think I'll go. But I can't decide if I'm looking forward to it, or dreading it—it's kind of a mixed thing. I never did make the five-year reunion, because I was too busy trying to become a star, so this will be the first time I've seen most of these people in ten years. Seems like a really long time, a whole lifetime ago in some ways. There are at least a few people that I would actually like to see, but I hate that whole 'story-book parade' kind of deal where everybody's trying to impress everybody else with what they've done, and make sure that nobody else gets one up on them, so they all just start making up a bunch of bullshit. And me, I have to go the other way to prove that I'm still just a regular guy, but I never was a regular guy in high school— to most of them I was just good for entertainment. They'd invite me to parties and things, but then tell me to bring my guitar. And now everybody wants to claim me for some big bosom buddy, but it wasn't like that. Josh was the only one I ever felt like really liked me for myself, not just for my music."

"Sweetie, you've got a good heart. Josh's best friend about now is the beer truck driver. But I do think he likes you as much as he can like anybody. He just doesn't like himself very much, and so he tries to drown his tears and fears in alcohol—I know. I recognize the symptoms. I've seen them all my life."

"You're talking about Dad, I suppose?" The question is not so much a
query as a confirmation hearing.

"Your father, his father before him, my father, several uncles and aunts-by-marriage on either side of the family, the doctor who almost delivered your father but had to go back to town--forgot his 'tongs,' according to Charmie. Pebble was pulled out by Big Bertha Bridges, the granny-woman who grabbed him by the foot and just kept jerking on him till he popped out, hollering and howling and wondering what he was doing in this world. And he's been doing it ever since. I'm convinced that it's what the Bible means when it talks about the sins of the fathers . . . not that God holds those sins against their offspring. It's just that the children learn certain ways of thinking and living from the generations before them, and they have no idea that there's any other way to live. And unless we know that we have a choice, we don't . . . have any choice, that is."

"Well, damn. Maybe I oughtn't to go tonight. Maybe I should just go ahead and check myself into a rehab center," says Jubal, trying to dispel the ghosts that have haunted him since he was a child, when first he figured out what his father really meant when he said he was "sick." But that was another old joke in these parts, the punch-line of which was "Don't tell him I'm drunk, tell him I'm sick." For Jubal the joke is starting to become not so very funny anymore; it makes him wonder about his own leanings in that direction.

"I think you'll know when it's time for that . . . meanwhile, I'll just hold your reservation." Comfort, too, is haunted by the thought that her children
will inherit this family tradition, but she refuses to be bull-dozed by worrying about it. "No, you just go on and have a good time; it really should be fun. Just try to keep your sense of humor intact if you possibly can . . . and be yourself. That's good enough for anybody who counts."

And who could that possibly be? It's nice to have a mother who thinks you hung the moon and one or two stars besides, and your own fan club website, and a nice enough place in the Nashville hills, and the car of your dreams, and teenage girls at county fairs falling all over you. But just once--would a real woman be too much to ask? Nothing particularly fancy: just a good-hearted, decent-looking woman with a little bit of common sense, who's just happy with who she is, and ready to share her life with an average ordinary everyday country super-star-wanna-be? Yeah, maybe that is too much to ask . . .

The midwinter night is brass-bra cold, but bright and clear. It is not much more than day-down, but already stars are dotting the moon roof, like wayward snowflakes. Jubal pulls the Porsche up in front of a single-wide at the end of a gravel road in the Wildcat's Irondale section. Here the iron ore deposits were supposed to have combined with the rich coal seams to make this little gap in the Stone Mountain the biggest thing since sliced bread; only the iron ore proved to be inferior, and that was that. Josh-the-King never was overly good at giving directions, and Jubal is hoping that this is the right place,
because the residents of these outlying areas are not especially known for their hospitality. He hesitates before getting out of the Porsche, waiting to make sure he's not greeted by the barrel of a shotgun, or worse. When nothing happens, he carefully walks past the "State Flower of Appalachia" satellite-dish and up the steep steps that lead to a naked trailer door. There is no porch, only the stairs and a small rough-wood landing. Again he hesitates when he sees that the door has been left half-open, and it the middle of winter.

"Hello!" He pokes his head around the side of the door, hollering at the selfsame time, in the standard practice of strangers entering strange houses in this neck of the woods. Inside there are no lights on, just long flickering shadows from the TV set, which is changing patterns rapidly, going from dark to light back to dark again in less than the blink of an eye. Nobody answers his "Hello!" so he steps inside and tries again: "Anybody home? I'm looking for Josh King," but still there is no answer--just some grunting noises coming from the TV set, and the repeated sound of bells clanging. Jubal instantly recognizes that sound as: "World Championship Wrestling!"

Cautiously he begins to feel his way over toward the other piece of furniture in the room--a large sectional couch that separates this living room from the dining area in a brown-velveteen L shape. Jubal is a rassling fan from way back, and he figures he might as well watch the match (it's Sergeant Shriver of the U.S. Marine Corps versus Wahoo McDaniel, two of his all-time favorites) while he's waiting for Josh and this latest girlfriend to come back
from . . . well, from wherever they may have gone. He's almost to the couch, when all of a sudden there's a great WHOMPing sound, and Jubal finds himself on the floor, tangled up with another body. Or bodies, actually. There's a full round of "Ooooff"ing and "Uuunnnggg"ing and "What'zzziiittt?" before somebody finally reaches the large lamp sitting on the corner section of the couch and turns it on. In the sudden glare of what seems to be at least a three hundred watt bulb, Jubal is treated to an amazing sight: two women of widely varying age and weight ranges, dressed in bicycling stretch pants and fish-net tee shirts, who have obviously been rassling each other on the floor in front of the TV set in a symbiotic duet with Wahoo and Sergeant Shriver. The one is probably at least mid-forties and would weigh-in around a deuce-and-a-quarter . . . if Jubal were guessing, which he's trying hard not to do. The other rassler is maybe fourteen or fifteen at the most, and to say that she's scrawny would be kind. The two are staring at him blankly, like baby birds waiting for the mother bird to bring them back a worm or two. Jubal feels compelled to say something, so he attempts his best rassling hold:

"Hey, there, I'm Jubal. Have you seen Josh King?"

"Don't know no Josh King." This from the "more mature" rassler.

"Well, I was supposed to pick him up here. He said he had a date with somebody named Velvet who lives here . . . is there somebody named Velvet here?" Just now Jubal is seeing anything but 'Velvet,' and is beginning to wonder if he's made a really bad mistake and ended up totally in the wrong
place. In fact, he's pretty much sure of it. Even if Velvet does live here, it's still the wrong place for him to be, but he's trying to make the best of it.

"Velvet's my oldest girl, this here's my least'un Precious Angel Orr. Say hello to the man, Angel." Angel has a rather peculiar look on her face, like Princess Diana in the BBC interview, and she seems to be searching the rug for something she may have lost. If she responds at all, it's lost in the ringing of bells and beeping of cuss words coming from the TV. Jubal is thinking Precious Angel, Or WHAT? "They've gone out to fetch me some cigarettes, I run out of Virginia Slims. They'll be back directly, I reckon."

Jubal starts praying that when this Mother-of-PreciousAngel-and-Velvet (he's afraid to ask her name) says "directly" she means just that very thing, when just about this time the door opens (Thank you Jesus, the Day of Miracles is not past) and Josh appears with what must surely be Velvet. She looks to be much older than Josh, even approaching her mother's age, but Jubal guesses that she just has that hard edge some girls seem to take on after the honey-moon of high school homecoming queens and club sweethearts is history. Velvet is what Josh calls a "long-tall," and her body looks good in her tight black leather Harley-Honey jeans and fringed jacket; but her face is already showing lines from too much sun, or from smoking too many cigarettes, or just from too much living. Jubal can almost make out the hilt of a hunting knife peeking over the top of her Tony Llama snake-skin boots.

"Hey, man, I've got to go to the can. You and Velvet get acquainted."
Josh never was big on social amenities. Jubal is considering his tin foil line, but thinks he'd rather live to see another class reunion. He decides on the polite conversation route: "So, Velvet. Josh tells me that you work down at the glove factory . . . how long you been working there?"

"Since I started." Velvet reaches for her mother's cigarette and takes a deep drag off of it; Jubal feels like he's going down for the count. Mumbling something about vehicle maintenance, he makes a break for the door.

"Hey, man, where're you going? Tag team's coming up." Josh comes out of the bathroom zipping up his pants and drinking a beer at the selfsame time—a good trick.

"Reunion time, Josh. Let's go." And the Porsche is off, right in and under the bell.

The Lonesome Pine Country Club parking lot is already slam-full by the time they get there. Most of the cars are late model, and quite a few sport tags which mark them as being leased: the sign of a not-quite-so-successful alumnus attempting to appear otherwise. Jubal pulls in beside a van boldly bedecked with: "WGAP--YOUR DOWNHOME PLACE FOR GOODTIME MUSIC!" Josh throws the Country Club Malt Liquor bottle he has just emptied in honor of their locale onto the hood of the remote unit. "Reporters! Let's run 'em, man!"
"You've been watching too much TV. Naw, I always strike a deal with reporters: I give them what they want, they give me what I want—peace and quiet. Besides, you're looking down right photogenic tonight. How's about some kod-i-acks of them-thar pinted-toed cowboy boots?"

Jubal and Josh make their way through a small squall of flash-bulbs (it's only the local station, after all), and then slip around the human wall of Baby Egan, who has appointed himself "The Door," a position which well becomes him. "Don't worry, Jubal. Them reporters ain't a-getting nowheres near you as long as I'm here."

"Thanks, Baby." Jubal has always been grateful for small blessings, and Baby is the large economy size, to say the least. The club house looks just about like what Jubal expected: round tables with plain white tablecloths and candles in Chianti bottles around a dance floor presided over by a disc jockey who is wired for sound and light. There is a bar at the far end where people are putting their autographed bottles and a glassed-in deck that overlooks the ninth green and Little Stone Mountain beyond. In the old club house, this had been a porch with miles and miles of rocking chairs, and hanging ferns and split-rail banisters icing a lodge raised-up from logs felled at the turn of the century, when everything around here was virgin forest. But that building died with the passion of a purported arsonist, and all that's left is the native rock foundation upon which this new, sterile building now stands; that, and the stories of some very wild salad days which refuse to die.
Jubal and Josh check in at the little table up front and get their badges with their high school annual pictures on them ("Hey, Jubal, been seeing you on TV. Is it true that the camera adds twenty pounds? I'd HATE that . . ."). Then Josh heads for the bar while Jubal stakes out the least conspicuous table: one way back in a corner as far away from the disc jockey as possible. With his back to the wall, he props his feet up on the extra chair, and waits. The required welcoming committee of mostly made-up-and-over women breezes its way into his corner, collecting some small share of notoriety ("Oh, Jubal, don't you remember how much fun we used to have in Study Hall? I just always thought you were the cutest thing . . .") and then is gone again just as suddenly--returned to bored husbands and picture-popping and swapping of horror tales about child-and/or house-and/or career-rearing. Josh returns with a bottle of Old Granddad and two Sprite chasers. He sets the bottle in the dead center of the table, and with great ceremony throws the top over his left shoulder. "Hey, I've got two dates for later on--Sunset Inn. Wanna join in?"

"Who with? Every woman in this room is either married or spoken for."

"Right." Josh turns up the bottle of bourbon, making his Adam's apple bob the minimal three times before setting it back on the table and going for the Sprite. Jubal hasn't drunk straight liquor since . . . well, since the last time he was with Josh, which was on his birthday--not all that long ago, actually. But it is Christmas Eve, and it is his tenth-year class reunion which will (hopefully) never-ever come again, and Josh did throw that bottle top away . . .
After more than a few hits from Old Granddad, everything starts to take on a funny far-away look, like one of those funky French paintings in the Nashville art museum Jubal frequents just to prove that he has some culture. Strange scenes pass before and by and over and around him; he feels as if this is a movie, but he's trapped in a silent one, while everybody else is in a talkie.

Here is Alexis Michelle Pippin . . . the girl of his adolescent dreams. Somewhat fleshe-out but dressed to kill in rhinestone-studded jeans and red spiked heels. Announcing the birth of a new condo from her once-star-athlete husband, who now flies all over the world selling shoes and sports equipment. ("So, that would make you . . . a real athletic supporter?" "Shut up, Josh.")

And here is David Thompson . . . who could have posed for a Charles Atlas ad, but now looks like the Poster Boy for Power Bars. Doing a "Saturday Night Fever" re-run while all the girls who ignored him ten years ago are now begging him for a dance. ("Can you say 'steroids'?" "Shut up, Josh.")

And here is Debbie Kilbourne . . . once known as "The Voice of The Valley." Who always knew the story on ANYthing and EVERYthing that might be happening. Now herself a teacher at the high school, she is still telling tales: " . . . so this woman called me up on the phone, and she said 'Honey, I hear my grandbaby Sabrina's been staying out of school, and I'd like to be able to help. Her mommie and daddy just can't do a thing with her--they're just stupid, you know--but they's not a thing I can do, I'm a-shrankin.' And I said, 'Pardon me, you're what?' And she said 'I'm a-shrankin. I used to be a big-old-girl . . . Law,
I was five-and-a-half-foot tall and now I'm barely four-foot and the doctor says before you know it I'm just a-gonna shrank away to nothing. I can't hardly even stand up now.' And sure enough, it wasn't a month later that Sabrina came up to me on bus duty and said, 'Miz Kilbourne, my grandmother died,' and I said 'Oh, honey, I'm so sorry. Is this the one that was having some difficulty standing up?' And she just looked at me kind of blank, so I said, 'When did she die?' and she said, 'I don't know.' I guess the woman finally just shrank away to nothing, bless her heart, just disappeared. They used to call me over the intercom and say, 'Miz-riz Kilbourne, you have a phone call . . . it's The Incredible Shrinking Woman on line one.' And Sabrina, she brought an ice-cream sandwich to school for lunch one day and put it in her locker! It was just pitiful . . . " ("You got Sabrina's phone number?" "Shut up, Josh."

And here is Mozelle Jolene "MoJo" Young . . . famed proprietress of "The Sugar Shack." Hang-out for high school boys of all ages, makes, and models, who frequented "MoJo's" to learn about life, love, and something-besides-candy. Now The Reverend Sister Joylene, proprietress of The Rapture-Bound Firm-Foundation Four-Square Full-Gospel-Holiness Church of God in the Name of Jesus Christ. Soon to be a center for tempest-tossed, delinquent, and wayward children. ("And that would be like--her own home?" "Shut up, Josh.")

They're all starting to blend into a carnival ride of whirling colors and sounds; but then Jubal's ears suddenly pop, like they always do on airplanes, and his sights focus in on somebody standing below the flashing bar of colored
lights over the disc jockey. "Hey, Josh, who'zat standing up at the mike?"

"Durned if I know . . . Buddy, have a drink."

"No, thanks. I think I've had enough. Shut up for just a minute . . . this
guy's saying something really weird, man."

The reunion has now progressed (an arguable point) to the time for
announcements and pronouncements and expressions and regressions and
confessions. The current speaker--a shortish, bearded guy wearing a white
Colonel Sanders suit and sporting a pseudo-Mohawk pompadour hairdo--
appears to be indulging in the latter.

"So, I see all you people walking up to each other and saying 'You
haven't changed a bit.' Well, I'd just like to say that anybody who tells me
I haven't changed is full of shit. 'Cause I have changed, and it's more than just
a bit. I've changed A LOT. I'll bet none of you even remembers me, now do
you? Well, come on, then: WHO AM I???

A current of speculation passes through the room . . . "Who is that? . . .
I thought he came with somebody . . . Does anybody remember his name? . . .
Hey! Check his name tag, that oughta tell us who he is . . . Can you get close
name, did you? . . . But there was somebody named Shook, I think . . . It wasn't
Clarence, though . . . Check the picture . . . Can you get close enough to see
his picture? . . . Yeah, I think I can see it . . . He didn't have that beard, of
course, and he was a whole lot thinner, had kind of long hair . . . Wait just a
minute! It's coming back to me now . . . It wasn't CLARENCE Shook, it was . . .
Ohmygod, I've got it now . . . It was . . . It was . . . CLARISSA Shook!!"

For the second time that night Jubal bolts for the door and fresh air.

"What's the matter, things getting a little too hot in there for you?"
The voice comes out of the darkness and slightly to Jubal's left, over toward
the rock wall that marks the first tee-off. He walks in that direction, taking in
large gulps of fresh, sharp December mountain night air. The stars watch in
absolute detachment and lack of sympathy. A shadow sitting on the wall shifts
slightly, almost imperceptibly, but Jubal can just make out a hooded figure
wrapped in what appears to be a long dark cape. "Are you feeling okay, Jubal?
You're looking just a bit peaked."

The voice is almost familiar, but not quite. The accent is one of
somebody who's been away for a good while, but has still managed to retain a
distinctive musical lilt, however slight. That, and the word "peak-ed" mark her
as being definitely mountain, and definitely female. "Allie? Is that it . . . Allie
Fraley? Yeah, sure. I remember. You are Allie, aren't you?"

"All my life. At least up to this point. You look like you could stand
a get-away driver right about now. C'mon, climb in." Jubal blinks a bright
orange CJ-5 into focus, parked right there on the number one tee-off: definitely
a Country Club taboo. Allie is already in the driver's seat, revving up the
subtle-as-a-fart-in-church Jeep engine. Jubal yanks hard on the lever handle which opens the other door and swings himself up into the passenger seat, feeling so sick he's thinking he'd have to get better just to die. "I know what'll perk you up, Jubal: Doughnuts!" The Jeep leaps forward and begins turning around and around in tighter and tighter circles, almost sloshing Jubal (who hasn't even had time to latch his door) out onto the tee-off pad. "WHOOEEE!!"


"Where're we headed?" Jubal is more than a little disoriented by now, and can't quite seem to remember how he managed to arrive in this particular place at this particular time.

"High Knob, although I must say I hate to miss out on the class picture. Wonder who's going to stand next to Clarence Shook?" Allie reaches over to turn on the heater which roars to life, sounding like a pulpwood truck crashing into a hog farm. "How 'bout sticking this tape in? The player's right there under your seat."

Jubal is glad for the opportunity to put his head between his legs. He fumbles around in the floor board until he finds the tape player, pulls it up into the light of the dash--dangling lines and wires--and pushes in the tape which Allie offers. The music that comes spilling out of the two back speakers of
the Jeep's primitive sound system seems as if it's coming from some other long-ago-and-far-away world, a world he may have known sometime before, but he's not at all sure where. Jubal turns down the blow torch of a heater to drink in muffled drums and deep bells, brass harps and pipes, and fiddles more-lonesome-than-Hank keening their way into his country music world.

"My love said to me: 'My Mother won't mind, And me Father won't slight you for your lack of kind.' Then she stepped away from me, and this she did say: 'It will not be long love 'till our wedding day.'"

"What is this music? I've never heard anything quite like it. And the singer's voice--it's very . . . haunting. Is it somebody I might know?"

"The music is Celtic, or what you might call Irish. And you may, or may not know the singer--it's me."

The Jeep roars its way up the back valley, through Little Stone Mountain Gap to the head of Hoot Owl Holler, like a roller coaster chugging its way to the top of its appointed track. The stars are closer now, but still emotionally distant from what is happening to these two people, at this specific place, at this particular point in time. Jubal is trying to fill in the gaps.

"This is you? It's just . . . well, it's just beautiful. Like nothing I've ever heard. It sounds like . . . Well. You must be Irish, to know what you're singing about like that, I mean. Are you?"

"Am I what?"
"Are you Irish?"

"A little. We're all of us a little Irish—around here, anyhow. Some just know it more than others."

"I didn't even know you could sing. Did you sing in high school? Like in the Glee Club, or anything?"

"Only for my horses, they were my very best audience. No, I didn't really do much of anything in high school. I always felt like I was so different from everybody else. But then I left to go off to the big city of Knoxville—to seek my fortune like they always did in fairy stories—and I found out that I wasn't so different, after all. I wanted the same things that everybody else did: mainly just to make a living doing something I loved, and to have somebody I loved to share it with, that's all. And the place I was from—well, whatever you grow up with is all that you know, your entire frame of reference, for better or for worse. I was just glad to find out that I wasn't any better off or any worse off than most everybody else around me. It's all in how you play the hand you've been dealt."

She stepped away from me, and she moved through the Fair,  
And fondly I watched her move here and move there;  
And she went her way homeward with one star awake,  
As the swans in the evening move over the lake.

The Jeep appears to hesitate just a bit as it passes by a large boulder off to the side of the road. Jubal knows this place; it is Benge's Rock. The
spot where Chief Bob Benge was finally killed, after putting his thirteenth and last notch on a sycamore sapling nearby: one notch for every fort of hated white settlers he had eradicated from the Clinch Valley. Benge had been making his escape toward Eola, the Cherokee's "Valley of the Whispering Winds." From there he would have wended his way homeward, to the Shawnee country in Ohio, but he was ambushed here at this rock by two full companies of militiamen, and in one of those companies was his own half-brother. It was told that his red-headed scalp was sent to the Governor of Virginia. Jubal wonders if it was the red hair from his immigrant Scots-Irish father's side, or the red skin from his native Shawnee-Cherokee mother's side that "willed-out" in the end.

But Allie is following her own escape route. She jumps out to lock-in the hubs, and the Jeep grinds into four-wheel for its pilgrimage through the Nettle Patch and Chestnut Flats, by the Hanging Rock and down Devil's Fork of Little Stoney Creek, finally landing near the very top of High Knob, right beneath a great sheltering rock with a natural spring flowing from the western end. With no word spoken, the two begin to climb down into the great yawning crevice which seems to shut its mouth behind them, the friendly dark closing in around them. Jubal pulls a Zippo from his pocket and lights it; the puny flame guides them toward a circle of stones and the charred remains of a campfire left by hunters, or campers, or lovers, or drunks. Jubal is thinking that he could probably fit into any or all of these categories right about now.
Allie begins gathering up enough brush and twigs to rejuvenate what is left of the firewood. She kneels beside the circle, blowing through cupped hands, willing the fire to grow from the teensiest spark into a fledgling flame into a lusty, full-fledged blaze. "I reckon that'll do." Spreading her cape on the sandy ground, she stretches out beside the fire. Jubal hunkers down beside her.

"So, where are we?"

"They call this Orsborne's Rock; it was the home of a woman named Squirrel-Head Cindy Orsborne."

This sounds familiar; the fog is beginning to lift. "My momma's people were Osbornes, from over in Scott County. I think the name of the town was Dungannon. Comfort used to tell me bedtime stories about it."

"So were my people . . . We just may be some kin, Jubal--way back. You know that if you just keep going over the top of this mountain, you'll end up in Fort Blackmore and Dungannon, which used to be called Osborne's Fort. But our branch of the family wrote an R into the name, 'cause that's how they pronounced it. I was named after my great-grandmother: Allifair Orsborne."

"That's your whole name--Allifair? I've never heard that name before, it's beautiful. What's it mean?"

"It means 'All Fair.' The old folks around here, the ones who knew my great-grandmother, tell me what a 'handsome' woman she was. I love the way they say the word 'handsome,' it sounds foreign--German, maybe, or Dutch. My great-grandfather was the game warden in this part of the country back at
the turn of the century; he knew Cindy. Used to tell my momma stories about her, and she told me. He said she came to live here right after the Civil War up until about the mid-twenties, when somebody finally built her a ten-by-ten shack over at Pine Branch, and that's where she died, in nineteen-sixty. They said she was a hundred and seventeen years old when she died; but of course nobody could verify that--it was just her own word, and she was mostly addlepated by the end."

Jubal is glad to know that somebody besides his momma and "quare" old Aunt Ozzy still uses such words. Coming from Allifair's lips, it sounds lilting, musical, almost magical. Her voice and the story itself are carrying him over into that bardo state Comfort was trying to tell him about. "So why'd they call her Squirrel-Head Cindy?"

"Because she had a tiny little head that looked like a squirrel's head. And I guess she kind of ate like a squirrel, too. She'd gather in nuts and berries and dry stuff and then bury them in the ground so that she'd have something to eat through the winter . . . can you imagine that? She had children, too--three or four of them that she raised up right here under this rock."

"How'd she have children if she was living out here all by herself?"

"Hunters. They'd come through and visit her from time to time; bring her some small game and pelts for blankets and clothes, and then leave her with a baby for company--not a bad arrangement, really. The thing is:
I always thought that I must have been one of Cindy's babies. My momma told me the story so much, I just got to putting myself into it. It never occurred to me that the timing was WAY off, by almost fifty years. It just seemed like the only possible explanation for my wild side, and for my always feeling so different. And then just a year or so ago I finally asked my momma if I was really Cindy's girl, and she said that maybe I was, somehow. Because she had prayed for a child for the longest kind of a time, and then I was born when she was almost forty years old, and that makes me a miracle child—just like Cindy's young'uns raised up here under this rock. It was just a miracle, that's all."

A log falls, sending up a shower of sparks that could be a sign, or an omen, or simply the natural ways of a fire. Outside big black cotton balls of snow clouds begin to cover up the dispassionate stars. Allie sits up, moving closer to the fire.

"And so you came all the way back here just to see this rock?"

"No. I've spent a good bit of time visiting this rock in the last few months—since the fall when I came back. I'm living here now, you know, at my mom's. I needed to get away from Charlotte—that's where I was last."

"And was there a man there?" Jubal finds himself hoping the answer is no, but figuring it's probably otherwise.

"There was a man there. He helped me find my music, and myself at the same time. But he wasn't ready to settle down and raise up a family, so it was time for me to leave him be."
"And you are . . . ready to settle down and raise up a family?"

"I'd best be." Allie's hand is resting lightly on her stomach, and in the faint, gentle light Jubal can see the rise and fall of the small mound as she breathes in perfect rhythm with the flickering flame; while in the world outside an early Christmas morning snow blankets the rock in the Silence of the Ages.

The people were saying 'No two e'er were wed
But one has a sorrow that never was said.'
And she smiled as she passed me with her goods and her gear
And that was the last that I saw of my dear.

I dreamed it last night that my true love came in,
So softly she entered her feet made no din.
She came close beside me and this she did say:
'It will not be long love 'till our wedding day.'
A tramp snow is sending smoke crashing to the ground and making
the "pat-pat" sound of boots tramping in the fireplace, a pot of field peas and
fatback is simmering on the cookstove, and Comfort's dining room table is
starting to look an awful lot like Charmie's--all spread with newspaper
clippings and photographs and notes scribbled on scraps of paper and who
knows what-in-all. It is the first day of January in the Year-of-Our-Lord
Nineteen Hundred and Ninety-Four. Jubal is creaking back and forth and back
and forth in Granny Goodloe's red velvet parlor rocking chair, trying to write a
song; but the creak of the rocking chair is just about to put him to sleep instead.

"Would you just look at this, Jubal . . . I declare. This column is making
me as nervous as a Christian Scientist with appendicitis. " Jubal grunts an
agreement, hoping to put her off. But Scots-Irish ornery woman that she is,
she comes right over to his rocking chair and sticks the offending column in his
face, so that he has no choice but to acknowledge it. "Just LOOK at this, I don't
know whether I'm writing a newspaper column or a soap opera:

_Ersol Blevins and Sarah A. Tolliver attended the 'Snow Queen' Ball_
at the Appalachia Towers Hotel last Friday night . . .
_Ersol Blevins and Sarah A. Tolliver were seen at The Country Cabin_
in Josephine last Saturday night . . .
_Ersol Blevins and Sarah A. Tolliver enjoyed a concert at the Paramount_
_Theater in Bristol last Sunday afternoon . . .
The Reverend Hilo Bishop called on Ersol Blevins and Sarah A. Tolliver last Sunday night . . .

Ersol Blevins and Sarah A. Tolliver are at least in their eighties, and they're having a whole lot more fun than I am. What's up with that?

"What's the A stand for?" Jubal's given up on laying low; it was a good idea whose time had obviously not come.

"She was an Ayers, and she won't let anybody forget it."

"That's supposed to mean something?"

"Well, of course. You know where the town museum is, up on Imboden Hill? That huge stone building was the Ayers Mansion--built during the big boom by Colonel Rufus Ayers, who later became a state senator, or some such. And that reminds me, now that you brought it up: The Spot is going to pay me to do some free-lance writing, and I'm really excited about it. They want to publish a history of the town as a part of its centennial celebration, which has been going on for over five years now, but hey! That's typical of Big Stone's boom-and-bust outlook on life. If you've got a good thing going, you've just gotta ride it out, right? So, anyhow, you could get in on this. Why don't you go stay with Lucinda for a while, kind of pick her brain? She knows an awful lot about the boom time and you could get it out of her--she's always liked you. And besides, there's got to be a hit song in the stories she can tell . . ."

Jubal cannot even remember bringing it up, but that's how it is with Comfort. Less than an hour later the Porsche is winding its way through
East Stone Gap, over The Dip (at the bottom of which Junior Begley's house acts as a magnet attracting lost semi's that come crashing into his front room right regular, knocking over gun racks and kids and furniture and dogs and what-not-shelves and what-not), past the high school, through the Southern section and down the Dummy Line--which empties itself out at the old school. Or at least what's left of the old school, which is mostly just one impressive sandstone block wall that now surrounds a Hardee's, a Long John Silver's, The Magic Mart, The Piggly Wiggly Grocery Store, The Old Dominion Bank, and The Revco Drug Store. The wall is now as bare as the giant oak trees which have thankfully been allowed to remain alongside of it. But come spring the adolescent cruisers will return to perch on top of these stone ramparts, like so many birds-on-a-wire who go flying away in their pickups and Jeeps and half-tons and compact cars, but always to return: habitual homing pigeons wending their way home, to the wall.

The town is not nearly as crowded as he remembers it, but then it is the middle of winter. Somewhere in the back of his mind he seems to recall talk of the mines laying off workers, even shutting down; but that's never been anything to worry about. Miners have been in-and-out of work for years--for layoffs and strikes and shutdowns and blowups. It's just the nature of the job. Everybody expects it, nobody's surprised by it, this latest layoff will be just another turn of that wheel. Driving down through town, Jubal is a bit surprised to see several out of state license tags, but the bumper stickers on
the unmistakably local cars are a dead giveaway: *I'll Give Up My Gun*  
*When They Pry It Out of My Cold, Dead Hand, and NRA Freedom, and Don't Laugh: Your Daughter's in This Truck, and Earth First: We'll Mine the Other Planets Later,* and first choice--according to raw numbers: *Eat More Possum.*

As Jubal passes through the first of two stop lights on main street, he waves to the statue of the miner who stands in "Miner's Park," where the old Monte Vista Hotel once stood. Boney Collins waves back; he and Worley Wells are sharing a spot of afternoon refreshment poured from a bottle wrapped in a brown paper poke. Two more blocks down the Porsche claims a parking space in between the recently sand-blasted Federal Building--where U.S. District Court Judge (third generation) Slemp presides and the town gathers to pick up daily mail and information--and the Mutual Pharmacy, which is Lucinda's home away from home. Jubal's grandmother is sure to be inside; he has already spotted her hummer-sized slate gray American-made Lincoln Town Car with the vanity plate which reads "I M 4 U S A."

He turns, climbing out of the Porsche, and is surprised once again by the sheer audacity of the Minor Building which commands the other side of the street. This one building takes up an entire block of the town, and is indeed often referred to as the Minor Block. Carved into the huge sandstone blocks over the portals is the name of the building, and the date: 1908. Jubal is not real sure he knows just exactly what "portals" are, but he is absolutely dead certain that this building has them. How very ironic that a man named "Minor"
would have built the center for the mining industry in this town created only for that very industry . . . but then again, there are no coincidences. That man was drawn to this mining-Mecca by whatever Great Producer in the Sky is in charge of writing The Perfect Country Song, just as sure as a yaller cat's got a climbing gear. And that's a sure thing. There are men hanging around on the street in front of the Minor Building, which is a good sign that coal is still alive and well here. Jubal does notice, however, that a goodly number of them are not dressed in the old uniform of khaki work pants and black steel-toed Wellington work boots, but rather in a new uniform of tweedy sport coats and rainbow-colored dress shirts and power ties: lawyers. A brassy eagle (rumored to be solid gold beneath its protective veneer) sits motionless atop the flagpole out front, watching the comings and goings of these inhabitants of the Black-Gold City in sullen silence.

A cold January wind chases Jubal into the Mutual's haven of warmth; he has always loved the name of this drugstore. It conjures up images of thundering herds of wild animals crashing across dusty plains and crazed men rassling gigunda pythons and alligators and boa constrictors on Saturday afternoons' Mutual of Omaha's "Wild Kingdom." Inside, the drugstore exudes an aroma that is a peculiar but very familiar mixture of unknown medicines, frying hamburgers, and lemon (or maybe orange) ade which Jubal remembers well. He was young—probably only three or four years old—when first he discovered the ultimate pleasure of spending the night with Lucinda, who
would bring him downtown for a lunch of grilled cheese sandwiches and french fries cut from REAL potatoes and a too-sweet orange(or lemon)ade; it was always a tough choice. He would perch on a counter stool (sometimes green, sometimes red) and spin himself around and around while the girl behind the counter squished the juices out of his lemons-or-oranges in the rocket-domed squeezer machine, until he'd make himself so sick he almost couldn't eat one of Johnnie's pies for dessert. Almost, but not quite. For Johnnie's pies were just too good to pass up: apple and peach and blueberry and blackberry and chocolate cream and coconut custard and butterscotch with meringue on top, the kind that wept shimmery brown sugar tears and rippled like mountain ridges tumbling into Jubal's coal-mine-mouth. Johnnie's pies! I hope she's got chocolate cream today, or possibly I'd settle for blueberry with a scoop of ice-cream on top . . . What he's forgotten, or perhaps failed to sit up and take notice of, is that Johnnie's been gone these past five years—crossed over the Jordan to her sure and certain pie-in-the-sky reward.

Jubal walks through aisles of shampoos and Slinkies and shaving cream, newspapers and nail polish and Nair hair-remover, weed-killers and Wet Ones and wart-removers, finally arriving at the cafeteria area hidden in the very innards of the store. And here she is: Lucinda. In the very middle booth of the farthest-to-the-right-hand row of booths. Her chosen and appointed spot forever and ever from this time forth and forever more, amen. Jubal is always surprised by how physically small his grandmother is. She has such a presence
that he always thinks of her as being much larger, but she is what most usually is called a "petite" woman. Her hair shines white as first-fallen snow now, but for years it looked more like what the snow plows pushed up against the curbs, mixed and mingled with dirt and gravel and boot prints of children who loved to climb these winter sandpiles. But she stuck it out, and that's surely something to be proud of. She never did give in to RauLa, her maybe-French hairdresser come from who-knows-where, who would say "Now honey, I can do something about that gray, just cover it up enough so that nobody knows. It's not like coloring your hair, it's just kind of a touch-up job," every Saturday morning of the world when Lucinda would have her hair "fixed," and every other month or so when she'd get a slight perm. But she never did color her hair, like so many other women of her generation, and now she has her just reward: a shining crown of purest silver. And she didn't even have to die to collect it.

"There you are, Jubal; I was starting to get worried about you."

This is what Lucinda always says, no matter if he's coming from halfway around the world, or the restroom. It's her liturgy. She says it just as reflexively as she says the Apostle's Creed.

"Hey, Lucinda, no need to worry about me. What'cha eating?"

Jubal has always called his grandmother Lucinda, because she could never quite fix on a moniker that bestowed her grandmother-status with just the right amount of dignity without sounding stuffy. She does hate sounding stuffy, but
even more she hates all the cutesy "granny-maw-grangran-mawsie-me" titles that most everybody else seems to find endearing. Well, she is not everybody else; she's worked hard to better her generation, and she's just glad to see that at least a grandchild of hers has gotten the idea, even if he is making good in a somewhat unorthodox way. Still: he is somebody, and that is something.

"Jubal, you remember Nancy Masters . . . and Maude Nickels . . . and Naomi Meade . . . and Maxine Necessary . . . and Nita McChesney . . . and Moxie Newberry?" Jubal is getting just a bit dizzy trying to remember who gets a nod, or a wave, or a handshake, or a hug—depending on the degree of intimacy with which he has known each of these women. Perhaps he should have taken notes. "Why don't you go over to the counter and order yourself something to eat? Here's some money." Lucinda waves a bill at him, her trademark greeting, which he sticks into his pocket without even trying to argue with her; he's learned better. The girls (all single, mostly widowed) are beginning to disperse as he carries a piece of egg custard pie back to the table. He slides into the still-warm spot recently vacated by Maxie-or-Moxie, he never can quite remember which.

"So, how's politics?"

"Same-old same-old. We did manage to save Big Cherry Lake, but now they're trying to sneak in landfills. I've got to go to a meeting about it this evening, it's always something. How's your pie?"

"Well, it sure ain't Johnnie's, but it ain't bad."
"And I see your grammar could use some improvement; we'll work on that while you're here. I've got to run over to the post office and pick up a few things in town. Why don't you just take your time, finish up your pie and meet me at the house? . . . and here's some money if you want something from the downstairs." The wind swooshes Lucinda out into the January cold, blowing back another bill which lands in Jubal's lap like a leftover autumn leaf. He laughs out loud. How like Lucinda to forget that he's much too old for cardboard airplanes and whirligigs and modeling clay and comic books and such in the Mutual's Magic Annex below. But then again . . . He sticks the bill in his pocket and ducks under the red velvet rope marking the nether-land entrance.

The businesses along Main Street are still alive and relatively well, in spite of the Wal-Mart shopping center on the outer edge of town that threatens their existence. The storekeepers have been smart enough to adapt; to change with the changing times; to make-do with what they've got: a mountain coal-field boom-and-bust town sliding into yet another bust, but doing it in the throes of a national techno-boom. This is the reason for all the multi-businesses which Jubal passes as he drives on out of town, heading upward now toward Imboden Hill and Lucinda's house: George's Town-and-Gown & Cellular Phones. Buddy's TV, Video, One-Hour Photo & Tuxedo Rental. UnaFaye's Mystic Mirror Beauty Salon and Funeral Monuments (When We Say Permanent We Mean It). The Wholesale Carpet and Computer Barn. Tony's Taxidermy
and Tanning Booth. And the inevitable: Sam's Subs and Satellite-Dish Station.

The First Baptist Church--now completely renovated and modernized--marks the end of town and the beginning of Imboden Hill. The houses and trees which note the passage of the Porsche seem to be getting older and older the higher they climb, until they top-out at what is now the Southwest Virginia Museum, but was formerly home to the Ayers family in the year 1888: the selfsame year in which the town of Big Stone Gap, Virginia was incorporated.

Here the Porsche hangs a left and climbs the leg of the Q which was to have been the driveway of the Imboden Hotel—a grandiose idea that never got beyond the building of this road, which now makes a complete and perfect circle around Lucinda's house. The Porsche pulls up to the wrought iron gate aptly framed by two large stone pillars; Jubal jumps out to search the right-hand pillar for the secret button which will automatically swing the gate open. It is one of the gadgets Hale Hamner left behind when he died almost eleven years ago, fulfilling his own prophecy that he would never reach the age of sixty. Jubal has always thought that his grandfather should have been named "Houdini," so bobby-trapped is this house with his gadgets which somehow continue to work, even beyond the touch of their master's hand.

He parks the Porsche in the shelter of one of the ancient oaks. And now Jubal stands in front of the heavy-as-a-tree-trunk door and commands it to "Open up, dadgum it." The door swings back, bidden by a ghostly hand and Lucinda's keys which are forevermore left in the lock. Jubal slips into the
dimness of this house--big as a barn, but now housing only one solitary person.

"Lucinda, it's Jubal . . . Hello! Where are you?"

Her voice comes trickling down the polished mahogany staircase: "I'm upstairs, Jubal. In Comfort's closet. How about getting a flashlight from the kitchen drawer, I can't seem to get the timer on this light to work." *Another one of Hale's tricks*, thinks Jubal, pushing through a series of swinging doors to reach the inner sanctum of the kitchen.

"Got it, Lucinda. Hang on." Jubal takes the back stairs up to the second floor, pushing through more swinging doors to reach Comfort's room. Here is what he has always loved about this house: it is flat eat-up with the potential for secret passages and hidden cubbyholes and unknown nooks and crannies. Not that Jubal ever found anything all that secret or exciting, but still--there is always the possibility. The beam of the flashlight illuminates the mothball-smelling chifforobe whose heavy drawers hold all the family linens, bounces off a mirror in the back of the closet, and comes to rest on a pair of strangely disembodied legs--pale and dangling from a forest of car coats and evening gowns and worn-only-once Halloween costumes. "Here's your light, Lucinda. What're you looking for up there?"

"I'm looking for . . . " Lucinda's voice is coming and going as she pokes and prods and pulls boxes from the terraced, built-in shelves she is standing on, "... some of your gran ... photo albums that ... helpful to you and Comfort ... history project, or whatev ... are trying to do. Here, catch this
box." Her voice is clearer now, as she begins to emerge from Comfort's childhood-closet-kingdom. "I think that's the right one."

"Got it." Jubal drags the dusty box—which is more like a small wooden trunk—out into the daylight. Something about this trunk is familiar; he doesn't know if he has seen it himself when he was a child spending the night in this very room, or if Comfort has told him about it, or if maybe he just dreamed it. But somehow he knows for sure and certain that when he pries back the lid he will find what is left of Hale's war-wounds. And that is just perzackly what comes trickling from this faucet of crumbly memories: a gas mask and a pack of playing cards. A German helmet and a hank of hair from a horse's mane, or tail. A picture postcard of the Vatican City and another of Mussolini's naked hanging body. A package of Camel cigarettes and a can of Spam. Jubal is turning the vintage lunch meat can over and around, looking for an expiration date; but, of course, this was long before any such convenience. "What's with the Spam, Lucinda?"

"I can't believe you found that. Hale used to tell that Spam story over and over, and I always did wonder if he was just making it up; but there it is. I guess he was telling the truth after all—at least one time. May I hold that?" Lucinda takes the can from Jubal very gently, almost as if it were a fragile bird's egg she is afraid of breaking. When she begins to speak her voice is far-away-frail, and the lone grandchild wonders if she is telling the story to him, to Hale, or to the can itself . . .
"It was the winter of forty-four, just months away from D-Day. But those were the very hardest months of the whole war, at least for your grandfather. He was stationed in Italy, and he was young--just barely twenty and already a sergeant in the army. He had taken ROTC training at prep school."

"I always thought you and grandfather went to school together."

"We did, at first. But in his junior year of high school, his father decided to send him away to McCallie--that was a very prestigious boys' prep school in Chattanooga. Hale fought it all the way. He didn't want to go, he just wanted to stay here and live an ordinary kind of life. But his father--that would have been your great-grandfather who was named Harley Hamner . . . "

"It wasn't Horsely?"

"No, that was HIS father, which would be your great-great-grandfather. This family had a thing about the letter H. They named all the boys something that started with an H, and boys were mostly what they had. Your grandfather had six brothers . . . let me see if I can name them all: Hillman was the oldest, then Hamilton, Harlan, and Hale--he was the middle child, which I think made him feel like he could never do enough to please everybody else. And it's a shame, because he did so much good, but he never really enjoyed it; he always had to keep trying to achieve something else. But, anyway, after Hale came Henry--he's the one who was always sickly and got petted by everybody, especially Hope."

"Hope was . . . their sister?"
"No, she was their mother. You see, they really did have a thing about the letter H. Harley went so far as to marry the initial. That's where your mom got her middle name, you know. She was named after both her grandmothers: Comfort after my mother and Hope after Hale's. I always thought the two names together were so pretty . . . But then after that there was a sister—they called her Irene—and the last two were twins: Hubert and Hobart. They were a strange family. I remember once right before we got married, Hope pulled me aside at a bridge party and told me, 'If I were you I wouldn't get mixed up with these Hamners, they're a quirky bunch.' But I did anyway. And I can truthfully say that my life with Hale was never boring."

Jubal sees that Lucinda is getting lost in the mists of time, and he is close to being pulled along himself; so he searches back along the trail of bread crumbs, trying to recover the way. His compass needle finally points to:

"Prep school . . . So, why was it that Harley sent Hale away to school?"

"Harley was a smart man. He knew that the lumber business which Horseley had started back at the very beginning of the boom, right around eighteen eighty-seven, I think, had run its course. All of the virgin timber was gone, and there was nothing left to do here but to go into the mines. Harley had seen enough of the ups and downs of that business, and he wanted his boys to have a more secure future. But then the war intervened, and when Hale came back, the mines were booming again, and so he naturally went with it. Mining was his first love; sometimes I wonder if it wasn't his only love."
Lucinda is drifting again. She lifts the can and holds it in front of her, as if she were gazing into a crystal ball. This is a sure sign for Jubal. "The Spam, Lucinda... What about the Spam?"

"The Spam was a joke, an outrageous prank that his so-called 'buddy' W.C. Ramsey pulled on him. W.C. had already come home from the war that winter—I believe he was wounded in action—and Hope asked him what she could possibly send Hale that would be the very best treat of all for a soldier who was far from home and hungry. Well, he told her that what Hale wanted more than anything was that brand new product all the service men were just wild for: Spam. So Hope sent him a whole and entire case. What she didn't know was that Spam had been invented just for the military, and that's all that they had had to eat for months. Every day, every single meal, nothing but Spam." Lucinda gently sets the can back down in the trunk. "Hale always said that when he died he'd know for sure if he was in heaven or hell, according to the Spam-count. Your grandfather had a marvelous sense of humor."

Lucinda is brushing the dust from her clothes as she leaves the room.

"There are all kinds of pictures in the bottom of that trunk—parties at the club and weddings and socials after the war when Comfort was born—just all kinds of things. Take all the time you need to look through there; I'm sure you'll find plenty of useful information. I'll be up at the courthouse if you need me for anything, but I'm sure you'll figure it out. A picture is worth a thousand words, after all. I'll leave dinner money on the radiator..." And Lucinda's
voice fades away again and is gone, like time-in-the-trunk.

Four days later Jubal is still sitting in the middle of the floor in Comfort's childhood room, surrounded by old dusty boxes and baskets and file folders full of fragments of more than fifty forgotten years. But not quite forgotten, because Lucinda (doubly blessed with Scots-Irish perseverance and Depression-mentality) never throws anything away. She has stockpiled not only the "stuff" from her own family, but also everything from Hale's quirky kin, so that her house has become a veritable Swift's Silver Mine of hidden treasure. Jubal has pulled things from closets and attics and basements and the old servants' quarters out back, and has piled them in concentric circles around himself in the center. He is beginning to feel like Richard Dreyfuss in Close Encounters of the Third Kind—making mountains of modeling clay, and mashed potatoes, and memorabilia. Each trunk or box or basket or folder has its own story to tell; and each story reveals a slightly different face of this family, Jubal's own family, but one in which he can find little trace of himself.

The face at the bottom of the war trunk is all paint-and-powder and lights-and-mirrors. Here are images of the old Country Club, when it was so exclusive that a single blackball could doom a family to permanent social insecurity; shunned pariahs were often known to move away in an attempt to shake their outcast status. In one picture Lucinda and Hale are sitting at a round table with three other couples. This appears to be a dinner dance, for the men are dressed in tuxedos and the women are wearing satiny gowns with
tiny spaghetti straps, modestly covered by short-sleeved jackets with hundreds of little buttons up the front, and long gloves that end not in fingers, but in points over their hands. Another picture shows a flamboyant Mae West-type sitting on the massive log mantel over the stone fireplace. She is wearing feathers and plumes everywhere--around her neck, sticking up out of her hair, in the slippers on her feet--only she is holding one of those plumed slippers and drinking something from it. Champagne, most likely. Other pictures are of Christmases at the Old Club: Santa himself actually coming down that huge stone chimney, sporting a real beard and a white-fur sack on his back. Giddy children perched on his lap dressed in sailor-blue suits and red wool coats with embroidery on the collars, holding pop-guns and fur muffls. Bright packages tumbling down and around and hanging all over the Scotch-pine tree that nods against the log rafter-beams soaring fifteen or twenty feet up to the roof. A "real" reindeer looking suspiciously like Winfield Scott Taylor's racking horse standing on the cedar shakes of that roof, antler-altered for fantasy-effect. Jubal is trying to find his mother in one of these long-ago children; he squints, hoping to bring her into focus, but the image he conjures up looks more like Lucinda. It is almost impossible for him to believe that Comfort was raised up in this kind of world--indeed, that she and Lucinda are even of the same bloodline, much less mother and daughter. But there must be something there . . .

He opens another box. This one wears the face of the Hamner Lumber Company, established in 1887 when Horsely Hamner bought up all the black
walnut trees in Wise County. Here are men dressed in striped shirts and leather aprons and bowler hats, perched on hardwood timber loaded onto a puffer-billy engine. Here are sawmills and commissaries and company houses and the log flume that extended almost thirty-six hundred feet down the Powell's River. Here, too, are the burned-out remains of sawmills and commissaries and company houses which fell victim to timber's most feared demon: fire.

The later boxes, less dusty than the rest, display the face of Hale's love. Pictures of mines and miners, and tipples and transloaders, and young boys leading ponies and riding on mules--dinner buckets hanging from their belts--and old black faces turned white in the light of a carbide lamp, and old white faces turned black with coal dust. Then there are pictures of the collieries, with their stores and theaters and boarding houses and schools and dance halls and saloons and rows and rows of duplex houses strung along the sides of mountains like paste baubles in a grungy necklace nestled into the folds and wrinkles of an old woman's neck. Two families to the house, four rooms to the family, no matter how many children. Most of the mining gear and equipment has been taken to the museum Hale opened right before he died; Jubal is glad. He's just shy of being bumphusticated by the sheer volume of so many images, and the unlikelihood of these myriad images fitting together in any one place, at any one time, for any one family. And yet, this is his family. He can't imagine how he could possibly be anything at all like the people in these
pictures, but some of their blood must surely run in his veins. Blood as cool and icy-blue as Harley Hamner's eyes, gazing across the distance of miles and years directly into Jubal's now-gray, now-green, now-hazel, sometimes muddy-blue Melungeon eyes with a message, a thought, a word. *And what word is that, Harley? What word do you have for me, here and now?* But the eyes are mute; the message is his own forever-kept secret.

He closes the last box. Lucinda's voice arises from the kitchen below, where she is most likely reading the evening paper. "Jubal, Josh King is down at the gate, honking his horn. Could you please go let him in?"

He's forgotten: it's Old Christmas Eve, a bad night for Josh. There have been fifteen of these anniversaries since his father disappeared, and Jubal tries to hold vigil with him through the night when he can, when he's here. He grabs his Iver Johnson .38 special and a ham sandwich from Lucinda's frigedaire, kissing her on the forehead in a rushing-diving-leap out of the door and into the cab of Josh's red Dodge Ram V-8 pickup truck. Jubal is thankful to see that it's not the hearse; tonight would not be a good night for the hearse.

"Hey, man, how's it going?"

"Not too bad, not too bad. Me and Mr. Beam here have been keeping company a good part of the day, and I'm feeling just about tolerable: able to feed myself, but not able to work. Care for a drink? The bar's in the back."

Pivoting his body around, Jubal reaches for the bottle of bourbon, a blue plastic party cup, and some ice, all of which are hunkered down in a U.S. Army
surplus pine ammo box which sits on the latter-day rumble seat behind the cab.

"Nice set up. Got any branch water?"

"Oh, yeah, we got branch water--right there in the cooler. Don't let the plastic bottle with the fancy label fool you; I just filled it myself, right out of Roaring Branch, and you can't get better branch water than that."

Jubal settles back into the coziness of this cab: the glow of the basic dials on the dash, the crackle of the radio whose reception comes and goes according to what mountain ridges they are passing, the easy grind of gears, the smell of maybe-snow-air coming through the gaps around doors and windows. For just a moment, Jubal thinks he hears Allie's voice through the static; but then it becomes just another young female rock singer--long on looks but short on talent and good sense. "So, where're we headed tonight, good buddy?"

"I don't know, I thought we might just ride around for a while. Maybe stop by The Blue Star, see what's happening in Keokee. We could go on over the Black Mountain into Kentucky, I've got a whole tank of gas."

"What's over there?"

"Same thing that's over here, only different. Maybe we could get us some 'strange,' man."

"No thanks. The last time you talked me into some 'strange' I ended up at the county health department. Didn't they just open up a place over at Rawhide? Yeah, somebody was telling me: they have some local band
playing live music, and dancing . . . what do you think?"

"I think I know a shortcut." Josh is famous for these shortcuts, which always take at least twice as long, and end up with everybody getting lost. But it doesn't really matter; tonight they've no real reason to get anywhere fast.

The two bump and bounce along on one paved-gravel-dirt road and then another, turning at signs with nothing but county road numbers, until they finally top a knoll. And there the road just stops, altogether. Off in the distance, just beyond the next ridge, Jubal thinks he can see an orange glow lighting up the sky; he wonders if they're anywhere near the coke ovens. But then again, maybe it's the moon rising. Josh sees it, too, and for him there is no question: it is the coke ovens, those brick beehives from hell where coal is reduced to a pure state in oxygen-starved temperatures of thousands, maybe millions of degrees. The coke ovens are where Josh's daddy Starling King worked, and where he was said to have reduced himself to a purer state, although he left not a word of explanation, so nobody will ever know for sure.

Josh launches into the middle of a thought, a conversation that he's been having with himself for over fifteen wondering years.

"I wonder if you'd feel anything at all, or if it would just be a flash of heat and light, and then . . . nothing? You know, my mom still believes he ran off with some other woman. She just refuses to think about the evidence—the metal they said was probably his belt buckle and the steel toes from his boots, the fact that he's never been seen by ANYbody . . . why, you know a man
can't go running off with a strange woman in this part of the country and somebody not report it. No, somebody's gonna talk. But mom just chooses to believe that he's off somewhere and happy, and that makes her happy—even to think that he's with another woman."

"And what do you think?" Jubal is amazed that Josh is finally talking about his dad. His old (not so good-time, now) friend looks like a dam with a little hole in it, likely to bust wide open at any moment.

"I think he's as much history as these coal mines are gonna be in ten more years. But sometimes a funny feeling just comes over me, and it's like he's somewhere real close to me, but I can't see him or touch him—I just know he's there, somehow. Maybe we are living in two worlds, side by side with ghosts. I know that sounds funny—but if you think about it, there's a whole lot of things we can't see, but we know they're real. My grandmother believed in signs. She said it was sorty like sending a message across a wire from one world to the next. Well, if that's true, I would just like for him to send me a message, just one time, just so I could know the truth."

"I know, man. My Aunt Ozzy says the same thing. I know what you're talking about, man. It makes good sense to me."

The two pilgrims sit in silence, watching the glow from the distant ridge. Every now and again Josh turns up the brown paper poke which holds the topless bottle of Jim Beam, and chases it with the bottled branch water. The sky above the ridge gets lighter and lighter, until a shockingly full moon pokes
its head over the top, eloquent but mute. "Could that be your sign, Josh?"

Josh lets go of a startled laugh, cranks the truck, and turns it around. Less than a half-mile back down the road they come to a crossroads that neither one can remember seeing before, and there in the dead center of the road stands a white mare, wearing no saddle and no bridle. Just a wild white horse standing in the crossroads mist of close-on-to-midnight Old Christmas Eve.

*What was it that Aunt Ozzy used to tell me about the animals talking on Old Christmas Eve? She always said that they would kneel down in the barn, and then they would actually begin to speak, in human voices, come midnight . . .*

But Josh, without speaking a word, stops the truck in the middle of the road. He pulls a coil of rope from beneath the back seat, and very gracefully—almost as if he were dancing with the animal—throws the rope around the mare's neck, grabs onto a hank of her mane, pulls himself up onto her back, and the two disappear into the midnight-mist. The only sound is the long ago and lonesome wail of Mel Street singing "Smoky Mountain Memories," hundreds of miles away, but just on the other side of that radio dial.

Jubal slides over into the driver's seat, and pulls on the headlights; they illuminate nothing but empty road as far as he can see. "Maybe she's the one to tell you the truth, Josh. Listen to her, now . . . It just may be her time to speak. Listen real close and ride 'er on home, friend. Just ride 'er on home."

Jubal puts the truck into gear. Then he, too, disappears into the night.
Jubal comes tumbling down the back staircase and slides into the
kitchen, looking for all the world like his child-self of two decades ago, the
one who used to sleep over here and come tumbling down the back staircase
and sliding into the kitchen. He is greeted with the sound of some rather
peculiar (to his ears, at least) music coming from the radio:

    Wet up your knife and whistle up your dog,
    Wet up your knife and whistle up your dog,
    We're off to the woods for to catch a groundhog:
    OLD GROUNDHOG!

"... mighty fine, mighty fine. And this next one goes out to Lucinda
Belle Goodloe Hamner, the finest little buck dancer in three counties! Roll
back the rug now, Lucinda. We're a-gonna dance on your puncheon floor."

"Oh, hush, Jubal. You're a mess, teasing your grandmother like that.
What would you like for breakfast?"

Lucinda is already sitting at the breakfast table, eating a piece of dry
whole wheat toast, drinking a cup of Lipton's sweetened with Equal, and
reading the morning paper. A boom box squatting on the back of the table is
turned up loud.

    Work boys, work just as hard as you can tear,
    Work boys, work just as hard as you can tear,
"The meat'll do to eat and the hide'll do to wear:
OLD GROUNDHOG!

"Thanks, I think I'll just wait for lunch at the Mutual. What IS that you're listening to, anyhow?"

"It's the public radio station over in Whitesburg, Kentucky. They play all kinds of different things. It's really very interesting, you just never know what you might hear. They do seem to play an awful lot of this 'old-time' music, that's the big thing these days. But now, I can remember my own dad playing this tune on his fiddle, back in his salad days before he got religion."

Woodchuck, whistle pig, call him what you will,
Woodchuck, whistle pig, call him what you will,
You can sell his hide for a two-dollar bill:
OLD GROUNDHOG!

"Hey, I get it . . . It's GROUNDHOG DAY! That's why they're driving us all crazy with that infernal noise." Jubal is searching for the volume control on the boom box; Lucinda spreads margarine very thinly on a piece of toast.

"It's not what you would call country, Jubal?"

"It's not even what I would call music." Jubal is now grappling about in Lucinda's frigedaire. He emerges with a flat diet Coke and a Little Debbie Choco-Party-Gel, which is not exactly breakfast but something of a warm-up for lunch. Lucinda hands him a Blue Willow plate; eating properly is always important.

"This area has always been known for 'old-time' things . . . folklore is the proper term, I think. I can remember when Richard Chase came through
here, back in the fifties, collecting old songs and stories and teaching people how to square dance in the gym at the elementary school. Everybody just thought he was kind of quaint, they didn't really pay too much attention to him. But now those stories and songs are written down in books which we have in our own library . . . it's a funny thing."

"It is that. But I'll tell you what: in honor of this old-time Groundhog Day, I'm going to venture forth into the great outdoors and see if I might can see my shadow. Garnett Gilley said he'd be happy to walk around town with me, tell me the stories of all these old houses--which should make Comfort happy, which should make EVERYbody happy. I'll let you know if I find my shadow." Jubal kisses Lucinda on the forehead and grabs his Pentax camera from the hall tree as he rassles the tree-trunk door shut behind him.

To say that Garnett Gilley is the local historian is like unto saying that Billy Graham is a Baptist: it somehow doesn't quite begin to cover the territory. Garnett eats, sleeps, and dreams about the early days of this area he calls "the Bear Grass." He is already warmed up and well into his routine of tale-telling when Jubal plucks him off of his lattice-iced front porch.

"Howdy, Garnett. What'cha know?" . . . Wonder if he has an on-off button hidden somewhere? Or maybe he's on auto-pilot and he doesn't even know I'm here? Maybe he's motion-activated. If I wave a hand in front of his mouth, will he stop and start? . . . guess not. Maybe I'll just turn on this tape. . .
"... and it was my five times great-grandfather Elkanah Gilley--they called him Uncle Caney--who traded an old bear gun for a fan-shaped piece of land that he called 'Three Forks,' because it was where the three forks of the Powell's River had it's confluence. Came together, you know. Then when all the big prospectors and land speculators and such came in, why they just up and changed the name to Mineral City. I always kind of wished they'd stuck with that, instead of Big Stone Gap. I reckon they changed the name again when the bottom dropped out of things--that was way back in eighteen and ninety-three, that first bust, when the whole durn town caught on fire and liked to have burnt slam to the ground. But, anyhow, I reckon they figured they'd best just call the town after something that was sure to stick around, so they named it after the gap in Stone Mountain and that was probably as good a choice as any. It's just not quite as colorful as Mineral City ... did you get all that, Jubal? You need for me to slow down a bit?"

Jubal is trying to juggle the operation of a tape recorder, a camera, and a note pad all at the same time, which is about to make him as nervous as Dan Quayle at a spelling bee. He decides to trust the tape recorder and give up on taking notes--so as to free his hands to take pictures, something he has always liked doing. Sometimes an image will get stuck in his brain: maybe something that looks perfectly ordinary, like a flock of birds rising up sudden from a tree. More birds than he can possibly imagine being in that tree, all at once covering up the sky with their dark bodies and their darker cries.
And that image will haunt him, returning to roost in his brain at the most inexplicable times. If only he could capture such a thing on film, and then take that picture and turn it into the perfect words of a perfect song . . . Jubal finishes winding the film and snaps the back of the camera shut. The number 1 appears in the little window just like it's supposed to: a very good sign.

"No no, you're fine, Garnett. Just keep talking. I've got this tape recorder going now, and I think I'll just take some pictures as we go along, if you don't mind."

"Fine. Here's a good place for you to start--this is the old Bullitt place. Be sure to get a good shot of that widow's walk, that's where Old Mrs. Bullitt used to wait for her husband Taggart Bullitt to come back from a hunting trip he never did come back from. You know that story, Jubal?"

"Sure." Click. "We used to go there every Halloween and try to hear the ghost dogs. In fact I went just this year, and still didn't hear 'em, dog-gone-it."

His pun is lost on Garnett, who is already back on auto-pilot. "The Mrs. Bullitt who lives there now was a Barron. Her father and Taggart Bullitt came from Louisville together; they were some of the first big-time speculators, opened up the first bank. Then she married Taggart's son Ballard who was just a baby when his father was murdered. There was always talk of some kind of conspiracy--something about the railroads, or some such. Old Mrs. Bullitt was from a very wealthy family and she was just furious with her husband for getting shot in the back of the head the way he did and leaving her all alone
here in this wild frontier town, but she kept up appearances as best she could. They say she had the most wonderful birthday parties for little Ballard. She'd have ice cream flown in . . . you knew there was an air field over on Aviation Road, that's why they call it Aviation Road? They'd have all kinds of air shows with daredevils walking the wings of biplanes, and barnstorming and such . . ."

"And Old Mrs. Bullitt?" Click.

"Oh, yeah. Old Mrs. Bullitt would have these huge parties and put on pageants, and Ballard had live ponies and peacocks and magic shows . . . that must have been a sight in this world. Then when he got growed up he married Glessye Barron--that's the Barron house over there, it's really gotten run down--and she kindly took over Old Mrs. Bullitt's place as the queen of Imboden Hill."

"So what ever did happen to Old Mrs. Bullitt?" Click.

"Went stark raving mad. Crazy as a bess bug. They kept her that way for years up on the top floor. There are still some around who say they can remember seeing her come out on that widow's walk, wearing an old white tattered gown with her long white hair just a-flying in the wind, and her just a-keening like the banshee. And then to hear that cry all mixed up with those dogs a-howling for their master who never came home: well. It's no wonder Glessye Bullitt followed in her mother-in-law's footsteps and went crazy her ownself. She's inside there right now, probably watching us. No telling what she sees and hears in that old house after day-down." Garnett pauses for air, and to give Jubal time to shiver and reload. "But now, look here . . . this is the
Imboden house that the hill is named for, almost got the whole town named for him. He was a general in the War of Northern Aggression--General Imboden, they called him. He explored all this land and bought up mineral rights in 1879, thought he'd found silver. Did you get a good shot of that gazebo?"

Click.

The walking tour continues with Jubal snapping and Garnett yapping, Jubal clicking and Garnett ticking off time, digging up ghosts long laid to rest but not gone--not as long as even this one solitary tale-bearer remains to make them live again, in the speaking of their names:

"Andrew Redwine. Lived in that big white sprawling house there. I always did think that place looked sorty like a ship that had been wrecked, run a-ground way far from the sea. His grandfather was a ship's captain, sailed all over the world and brought back furniture from the orient and exotic places. Massive dark wood with carvings of strange animals what had their body parts all mixed up. I remember seeing them when I was just a boy. They'd have a party every Christmas Eve and invite everybody, didn't matter if you had money or were of the right society. Seems like they just liked to shock the proper people, company people who had to do the right things to make sure they kept their jobs. The Redwines didn't give a rat's ass for that kind of malarkie. He had his own business somewheres else--nobody ever knew perzackly what it was--and he must've done all right, because they had enough money to throw a party any old time, and that's what they did. The harder the
times, the more parties they had, which pissed a lot of people off. But still they came; nobody wanted to miss a Redwine party. There'd be Japanese lanterns strung all over the yard, and champagne fountains, and a big-band combo in white dinner jackets. And Andrew Redwine in the middle of it all, just doing as he damn well pleased. Yes, sir: he was a man for a boom time . . . " Click.

"John Fox Junior. Now surely you know him. Probably had to read his books in school, I know I did. The Trail of the Lonesome Pine? . . . The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come? . . . A Cumberland Vendetta? . . . A Mountain Europa? The Fox family came in early-on, buying up land, investing in the boom. Then John Junior figured out an easier way to make money, an even better natural resource—he could write about the mountain people and sell what he wrote to those big magazines up north that were wanting exotic tales of strange places and peculiar people. And wasn't nobody stranger than a mountaineer—leastwise to a Yankee. He hit a gold mine while everybody else was trying to hit a coal mine! The house is set up just the way the family left it; his last sister died only a few years back, and her almost a century old. You like pictures? You'll have to go through the house sometime and see all the pictures of him and his dogs and horses, up on top of High Knob in the game preserve the boomers had built up there. Over three thousand acres it was, with game keepers and a Swiss chalet lodge, eight o'clock suppers and dancing there on the terrace under the stars. And his wife Fritzi, the famous opera singer, standing on the balcony of the Monte Vista Hotel with her six, or eight,
or ten, or-however-many trunks she brought from New York City, and a slew of hat boxes and personal maids and all. Must've been a sight . . . " Click.

"Enoch Horton. Lived in a house that burnt down, but it was right here on this spot, where this log cabin is now. He was the caretaker for Bullitt Park which was named after Taggart or Ballard Bullitt—I'm not sure which, but it doesn't really matter. The Hortons were one of the three oldest families in Big Stone, along with the Gilleys and the Flanarys. Had 'em a grist mill on down the Powell's River from Caney's mill. That was the thing to do in those days: come in, buy up some farm land, and start up a grist mill. Enoch was one of H.N. Horton's sons. Never did want to do much work, so he thought this caretaker job'd be the very thing. I guess he got fooled! The park was booming as big as the town. There was a race track for racing horses, and baseball fields, and tennis courts. And men would get all dressed up in armor like knights and go riding around with lances, trying to grab some little ring off a pole, or some such. They called 'em 'Jousting Tournaments,' but I don't reckon anybody ever got hurt; it's like they were just playing, like the whole place was just some big pie-in-the-sky-dream of . . . well, of something bigger than anybody'd ever known. And then, of course, the iron ore turned out to be a bust, and the biggest railroads built to somewheres else, and the town caught on fire, at least twice. But the park's still used a lot . . . you've got your baseball games, and the high school football team still plays here. And the singing convention will be holding forth on Judgment Day, most
likely: first Sunday in June, rain or shine, come hell-or-high water. Then there's the wall--it's still standing. Looks like it was built for a European castle, reckon it'd take an earthquake to knock it down. Did'ya get a shot of that?" Click.

They're coming out of the back gate of the park, now, and Jubal is glad to see that somebody has cleaned up the Powell's River. It used to be really nasty, with Clorox bottles and panty hose and dead animals floating in it--most particularly after it flooded, which it did almost every spring. But for now it looks inviting, like it might be fun to take a canoe or even an inner tube down it. Pebble used to tell him about the swimming holes that were here when he was a boy: long summer days spent swinging on grapevines and tire swings way across the river, sometimes making it all the way across, sometimes dropping (by chance, or by choice) into the welcome coolness of the water. It's hard for Jubal to imagine his dad's life then--living way up the holler in a coal camp, but walking everywhere. Miles and miles traveled along railroad tracks, over whole mountains, hitching rides with strangers, jumping trains, sometimes ending up in Kentucky, or Tennessee, or even down into North Carolina. But it was nothing to Pebble; he was already working in the mines in high school and his father had gone underground when he was in grade school. They had to work hard, but they knew how to play just as hard, in a time when a swing on a grapevine was just about as close as you might get to heaven, so you'd best not miss out.

Across the river Jubal can see the remains of the Yeary house, the
one that was said to be the very oldest in town, though now a tramp's fire has reduced it to just a skeleton of its old self. It was a tavern, and Jubal would like to hear the story about how the Indians would come canoeing down the river and get up under the building somehow, and drain out the whiskey kegs while unsuspecting patrons played at cards and smoked Havana cigars and drank their whiskey from a faucet. He'd like to, but he'd just as soon run rabbits as remind Garnett of even one more story.

Another block over and one up, and the end is in sight; Jubal can see the back of the Minor Building and across Main Street is the Mutual and lunch. He's already planning what he's going to order, depending on the special in the cafeteria line: meat loaf or Salisbury steak? . . . turkey and dressing or Swedish meatballs? . . . or the old stand-by soup beans and cornbread? . . . And then there's all those congealed salads lined up, shaking and shimmering in rainbow colors like opening a new box of crayons on the first day of school--how to choose? When from out of nowhere he's broadsided: "Hey, Jubal. Where you been?"

"Hey, Darwin. Just down the road a piece, where you been?" He should have known he couldn't possibly get through town without seeing Darwin Duff; he's just always here. And no matter how long Jubal's been gone, no matter how far away he's traveled, Darwin greets him in just this same way--as if he's only been across the street to the barber shop, or playing a game of pool at Stoney's.
Darwin is smoking a big cigar; it's a habit he's taken up later in life, although nobody knows just exactly how old he is. When Jubal was in high school, Darwin already seemed old to him. He never went to school himself; there weren't programs in the regular schools that would fit him--not at that time--and his family couldn't afford to send him away where he could be "helped." So he just kind of hung around, became the mascot for the Powell's Valley High School marching band. Every Friday night football game halftime would find Darwin strutting around the field in a Viking uniform: horned helmet on his head, (hopefully) fake sword in one hand, knotty club in the other. Then after halftime, Darwin would entertain the crowd by jumping off the back of the heaven-knows-how-high bleachers, or by climbing the buckeye trees and throwing missiles at little kids, who would throw them back at Darwin hanging there at the tip-top of the tree, or light pole, or flagpole looking forevermore like somebody's pet monkey. And this was good, free entertainment, which was especially appreciated if the football game score was catywampus, wopsided--which it often was. Darwin looks exactly the same now as he did then. Maybe even a little younger, maybe a little older, it's next to impossible to tell. "Been over to the church. Got a light?"

"Naw, Darwin, you know I don't smoke. But I bet we can find you a light over here . . . Hey, L.C., you got a light for Darwin?"

They are standing directly beneath a white cinder block tower which is directly west of the Mutual Pharmacy and directly north of the Minor Building.
On top of this tower there is a sign which reads simply *Gulf* and beneath this tower there is a filling station, called *The Gulf Tower*. It is a full-service filling station (*Mechanic on Duty*) where you can still get your gas pumped and windows washed, and air and water are free. Perched on the windowsills and squatting around the grease pits are the boys, town version, who vary only slightly from the valley boys in their dress (fewer overalls, more ballcaps) and in their names. These boys go mostly by initials, or by degrees--Big Hank and Little Henry, High William and Low Bill, Old Teddy and Young Ted.

Darwin is making his way down the line, trying to get a light. The boys like Darwin. He's what they would all like to be if only they didn't have to hold down jobs, to make mortgage and car payments, to feed kids and provide shopping trips to Kingsport for wives who need to stay in fashion and *Judy's Sew-n-Go* is just not going to do the trick.

("Got a light, R.W.?")

"Now, come on Darwin, you know you're too young to be smoking that cigar. Why, Chilton Howard would have to take me over to the jailhouse and lock me up for contributing to the delinquency of a minor--or a miner, maybe."

("Got a light, Low Bill?")

"Ain't got no light, but I got a match: N.E. Neeley's face and a bygod house-ape." This is an old one, but it still gets some yuks and a few elbow jabs. Darwin makes his way on down the line, when just about this time the town
clock begins to strike. The boys freeze, counting off the even, measured
strokes: One! Two! Three! Four! Five! Six! Seven! Eight! Nine! Ten!

Eleven! Twelve! High noon. A collective sigh meanders down the line and
around the circle at the grease pit. Time for lunch.

Across the street the front door of the Minor Building begins to grind
open—slowly, steadily, the boulder rolled away from the tomb. Framed in
the gaping monster mouth is Dan Allman: Wizard of Odds in the Black-Gold
City, the One Horseman in this One Horse Town, the Very-Best-Idea he himself
has ever thought of. He is wearing the uniform: khaki work pants (to let every-
body know that he can still go down into those mines and whup the land and
the men back into shape, bygod, if he has to) with a Smith-and-Wesson in the
back waist band; khaki jacket and blue chambray shirt; dark navy blue striped
tie (NEVER a power tie) tucked into the chambray shirt in between the second
and third buttons, which is both fashionable (looks smooth) and functional
(keeps the tie from getting caught in mining machinery); and the inexorable
steel-toed Wellingtons. His cloak is a cloud of underlings. Yes (oh, yes) men.
Big-shot, power-hungry, wanna-bees who surround him. Moving when he
moves, laughing when he jokes, frowning when his brow furrows. They
make their way out onto the sidewalk, and now they are standing directly
beneath the brassy-golden eagle, when Dan looks across the street and sees
Darwin. Darwin is otherwise occupied with his cigar. Dan turns to the mob,
over his shoulder ("Hey, watch this . . ."), and then back to Darwin. He
throws up an arm, waving broadly across the street. "Darwin, my man!"

Darwin does not even look up. Dragging a light off of Big Dave Bailey's unfiltered Camel cigarette, he shoots back:

"UP YOURS, OLD KING COAL!"

Dan ducks, too late. Darwin's aim is deadly. He grins, and blows a blue cigar-smoke cloud toward the eagle. Dan is smart enough to know when he's been smoked out of his hole.

"Well, boys. Looks like this ground hog has seen his shadow."

It is close-on to midnight. Comfort stands at the back door of the farmhouse and listens for the chiming of the town clock to mark the hour for crossing over, a clock whose voice couldn't possibly reach her--not all this way out into the valley. Still, she listens; she knows that she will be able to hear the tones inside her head, when the time is upon her.

She pushes back the old wooden screendoor which allows her to pass by in the wake of its satisfying creak, then walks down the steps and whispers herself through the wet grass until she reaches her fire circle. The fire has already been laid, much earlier on this Groundhog's Day. If any of the curious neighbors had asked (which, of course, they never would), she would have told them that she was only celebrating Candlemas, a perfectly respectable Christian festival from the old country; and this is mostly true. But she knows that Candlemas sprang from the old feast of Saint Brigit, which sprang from the
older rites of the Celtic fertility goddess Brigid, which sprang from the older still, even ancient pagan festival of Imbolc—a celebration of the very earliest breath of spring emerging to awaken the earth from its winter slumber.

She leans over and lights the fire. The flames lick at the dry twigs and dead branches, gingerly at first, and then with a lustier appetite as the solid wood beneath joins in with the dance. Comfort arises: her long, wild, rusty hair frozen in a dark wave silhouetted against the lightly leaping flames. And now she is moving to a tune only she can hear; swaying with arms wide open and reaching toward a moon that only she can see; head thrown back and her whole body listening to the sounds of all the stories she's ever heard, and all that she's conjured up her ownself. She begins to nudge her way toward the dark line of the woods that separates this world from the otherworld—a world filled with critters who are half-human and half-bear, or half-wolf, or half-cat, screaming and crying and moaning in the night like the banshee. A world of witches and demons and haints and boogers her Irish ancestors hoped they had left behind in the old country. A world of invisible spirits conjured up by her maybe-Cherokee ancestors, who themselves might have danced in this very spot. A world that only her blood can remember.

She hoovers there, on the edge of the woods, listening. The clock begins its midnight chime, its longest of all journeys before returning once again to the beginning. Comfort glances back, briefly, at the warmth and light of the fire. Then, with a sigh, she disappears: into the otherworld of the yet-wild woods.
MARCH
Yet shouted as he journeyed:
"Deliverance Will Come!"

Monday morning the fourteenth of March dawned as bright as a shiny new Indian-head penny; then right around suppertime the rain began to fall. It started gentle-like, just the slightest hint of a shower, sprinkling the snowdrops and Easter flowers and trilliums and Jacks-in-the-pulpit with a dose of "how-do," like housewives misting their rolled up shirts and sheets and undershorts before ironing them. But just after midnight the rain turned into something else, something more insistent and unyielding, unbending and brutal. It began to sweep down in sheets that blossomed the Powell's River into great swishy-swashies, making mini-maelstroms in the erstwhile placid waterway. Then lightning commenced to ripping the sky into electric-charged-shards, and the thunder turned itself into a fist which hammered and hammered at the ground, throwing up great clods of earth and rumbling down the valley:

BEWARE THE TIDES OF MARCH. . .BEWARE THE TIDES OF MARCH. . .

Flood. Maybe the biggest in history, or at least in the history of this corner of the universe. Below the town in the Strawberry Patch and Frog Level roads and bridges were already washed out and trailers were beginning to rip free of their flimsy foundations and float away--two by two. A pair would be found the next day wedged in behind the old tannery and extract
plant; another pair would be cozied up to the glove factory; yet another would be found shamelessly doing the tango with the liberated Frog Level bridge. And then there were those that just simply floated on downstream, never to be seen or heard from again . . . mobile homes on the free-range.

Telephone and power poles surrendered to water and mud. Folks who lived along the north and south forks of the river—below town and out through East Stone Gap and into the valley, up along the Appalachia Straight all the way to the heads of the hollers in the collieries—were cut off from the rest of the world: no phone, no power, no possibilities but to leave their homes with their lives and a few treasured objects, only what they could carry in their hands. Photo albums and yearbooks and family Bibles. Shotguns and pistols and rifles. Rings and lockets and broaches. Mantel clocks and coffee grinders and pictures of Elvis-on-Velvet . . . only the truly important things they valued most highly. Those who had seen it coming earlier had loaded pickup trucks with Naugahyde sofas and La-Z-Boy recliners and headed for the homes of kinfolk who lived on higher ground. Those without kin took refuge in the high school and National Guard Armory where cots and pallets had suddenly mushroomed up all over the gymnasium floors; here they slept in surprising serenity while volunteers moved up and down the aisles, serving coffee and biscuits and burgers so kindly provided by Hardee's and the Dairy Queen.

About daybreak the propane tanks broke loose, riding the high tide until they came together. Congregating now into rafts built not from the
prosperity-driven timber of a century ago, but from a newer, more dangerous
technology-driven explosive potential. The rescue-boys confluenced at the
town bridge: members of the National Guard and volunteer fire departments,
the REACT CB Club and all the local Rescue Squad units, waiting. The tanks
reached the bridge and jammed up against it, thumping about like so many
apples in a Halloween bobbing barrel, but that was all. The rescue-boys
breathed sighs of disappointment and went home, to waiting wives or mothers
and hot breakfasts. Over in Beamontown the Church of God squatted on its
soggy haunches where once sat the Three Forks of the Powell's River Primitive
Baptist Church, first church in the Bear Grass. The porch light somehow kept
burning, a beacon for those seeking safety and salvation.

Sunday morning the twentieth of March dawns chilly, but bright and
clear. Out like a lamb. The sounds of singing come from the four corners of
the town--from First Presbyterian and St. Mary's Episcopal Church, from the
United Methodist and First Baptist Church: Jerusalem! Jerusalem! Lift up
your gates and sing! Hosannah in the highest! Hosannah to the King!

At the Gulf Tower the boys are gathering--drinking coffee, telling tales.

"Yeah, that was a good'un all right, but she won't nearly as big as the
Flood of '77. Why, a mud slide come right acrost the Appalachia Straight and
chunked off one whole and entire lane of the highway, just took it off down the
river slip-sliding away . . . that was something else. And the river won't but a
half-a-foot below the bridge. Yeah, that Flood of '77, she was a whole hell of a
lot worse than this'un."

"A half-a-foot, my ass. H'it was all of two foot below the bridge, R.C. And besides, ain't none of 'em can touch the Flood of '18, that'un they called the 'ice tide.' I orter know, I was there. Seed it with my own eyes."

"Hell, that was seventy-six year ago, Junior. And you can't be a day under seventy-five."

"I'm not but seventy-four and I was two-year-old. I remember it well. That winter was colder'n a mother-in-law's kiss. Ground stayed froze over for three solid months. Snows over two-foot deep and the river rock solid. Then there come a gully-washer. The temperature rose twenty degrees in one day, and that did it. The snows all melted at oncet, but the ground was still solid froze-up, so everything just run right over it like cats' guts on a linoleum floor. We lived down in the Cadet--there where the sewer plant is now, right where two forks of the river come together. They was a sheet of water six-foot high come swooping down on our house. My daddy climbed up on the roof and heisted us all up behind him. Then we waited 'til old man McConnell come rowing by in his little john boat, and we slid offen the roof onto that boat ... went on down the river that a-ways. But my grandaddy Cling DeBoard, he just sot there on that roof. Him just a-rocking in his goose-neck rocking chair and dipping Bruton snuff. Said he was a-trusting in the Lord to save him, and that was that. My pa said he figured the Lord could work just fine through old man McConnell's john boat, but he'd have none of it. The last we seed of him,
he was just a-rocking and a-singing . . . the Lifeboat soon is coming to gather the jewels home. He was a tough old buzzard."

"Sounds like a stupid old buzzard to me. Reckon ya'all heard about Dan Allman going off to rescue them folks stranded across the river from the Country Boy, there where the bridge washed out."

"Turned his Jeep into an all-terrain vehicle, did he?"

"He did that. They say you could hear him all the way up to the country club, standing on the top of his Jeep, waving his fists in the air and hollering 'I SHALL RETURN!' Must a-thought he was McArthur or Patton or some such nonsense. But you've got to give him credit for perseverance."

"He is that. I seem to recall him doing the same sort of thing in the Flood of '46, right after the war. He'd just come back from Italy that time, and thought he was riding down the Tiger or the You-Fray-Tease River. He's a piece of work, all right."

The town chimes echo the church bells which are announcing the noon hour: church is out. Flocks of hungry pilgrims come, assaulting the Mutual Pharmacy cafeteria next door--Baptists jousting with Methodists for the best corner booths. Lucinda walks over from the Presbyterian Church. She is dressed in her Palm Sunday suit, the navy with white piping, navy pumps and matching purse. Her hair shines silver in the bright noonday sun. She nods and waves, looking toward the group of men perched on the ledges and windowsills of the filling station, hesitating. Then she squares her
shoulders and walks toward them, determined.

"How is everybody this beautiful Sunday morning?" The boys nod and shuffle, some reaching out a hand. They know Lucinda from her visits while walking the campaign trail. And besides, they like to watch her on the televised meetings of the Board of Supervisors. She is the only woman on the board and the only Republican, to boot; but she can hold her own with that pack of yellow-dog-Democrats. And when it comes to getting elected, she'll go after those votes like a chicken on a junebug--walking up and down creation and knocking on doors all over the county, even on up into the coal camps. No doubt about it, this is one spunky woman. She scans the men perched like crows on the windowsill, looking for a potential target . . . nothing too likely. Finally she just throws out the question, like the disciples casting their dubious nets upon the waters. "Has anybody seen my grandson, Jubal?"

"He was here a while ago; said he was going to take a little walk around, maybe go down to the ball park and see if Fraley's gotten it shoveled out yet."

Lucinda is already nodding and turning to go; the line at the Mutual gets backed up fast. "Well, if you see him, tell him that his mother called. His dad's come back. He's staying out in the coal camps, in Derby. Please tell Jubal that Pebble wants to see him."

The maybe-golden eagle watches glassy-eyed from the flagpole across the street, while Lucinda disappears into her haven of home away from home, and Sunday dinner.
"So, who's winning the race?"

"Hard to say. They're only thirty laps gone, and just about anything can happen at Bristol. Care to take a hit off Swift's Silver Mine?"

Pebble is squatting at the bottom of a flight of steps leading up to the front porch of a wooden frame house. He is listening to a small transistor radio; the sounds of roaring race car engines and static compete for first place.

"Don't mind as I do."

Jubal reaches down for the bottle of Smirnoff's Silver Label Vodka, almost shaking hands with his father in the exchange. He's not used to drinking these foreign spirits; the bite makes him shudder. "Damn, that's bad."

"Yeah, I know. Now you hold the gun on me whilst I take a drink."

Pebble accepts the returned offering and goes for another round, but chases it with something in a coffee cup that has Stonega Coke and Coal Company--We Dig Coal printed around it.

"Well now, there's a golden oldie. Where'd you get the cup?"

"Found it on the top shelf of the kitchen cabinet. They's all kinds of relics been left here. Who knows but what it might have been Bood's, I seem to remember him having one of these. Company gave 'em out for Christmas
bonuses one year. Come on inside and have a look around."

The old-fashioned wooden screen door screams back to announce their entrance into the house which witnessed Pebble's entrance into the world fifty years ago in this coal camp called Derby—after the town in England, or because somebody was passing through on their way to the Kentucky Derby and just stopped by to name this colliery of what was then one of the most progressive coal companies in the nation—it doesn't really matter much which. The house is small. There's only the front room and kitchen downstairs, and two bedrooms under the sloping eaves upstairs. But a bathroom has been added, which is perhaps an improvement over the outhouse which stood out back for years (although there are still old-timers who question why anyone would want to eat and do their business under the same roof). This is a duplex. Like most of the coal camp houses it provided space for two families: two bedrooms, regardless of the number of inhabitants. Most of the houses have been converted in recent years—the dividing wall knocked out, the extra door turned into a window or just boarded over, the second set of steps removed. Pebble's birthplace retains the wall, but the second half of the duplex is empty; the house will be sold as a single unit.

Jubal closes his eyes and tries to imagine Charmie living here, birthing three of her five sons in the bedroom to the right upstairs, raising them up in the bedroom to the left. He can't imagine Bood at all; his grandfather had been long dead of too much alcohol and tobacco and too many pills and just flat-
out hard living by the time Jubal came along.

Most of the furniture is gone, but there are a few scattered pieces lying around: a brown plaid sofa with an end table on one wall, a picture of the famous bearded Jesus on another, magazines and newspapers drifting across the linoleum floor and up the baseboards like leftover snow against curbs. Jubal sits uneasily on the couch. He clears his throat. "Mom says you're thinking about buying this place."

"Yeah, I just may do it." Pebble is moving about, slowly. He picks up an old newspaper and begins flipping through it, speaking now through a veil of advertisements for tonics and toiletries. "The company's been selling off these old houses for the last couple of years, ever since they shut down and started moving out. The miners who had in enough years, they just went ahead and took early retirement and bought the houses they were living in. Been fixing them up, adding on rooms, putting on siding. Some of these places are looking pretty damn decent. Now this house--she could use a little work, but I wouldn't mind having a go at it. Might as well, I been working on that old farmhouse of your mom's for years now, and made a pretty fair place of it, if I do say so myself."

"So you'd live here? You're not going back out in the valley? You know Comfort misses you. And the twins . . . she could sure use some help with those boys, they're meaner than a pair of stripe-ed snakes and backing up."

"Comfort doesn't miss a thing in this world, she's got everything she'll
ever need. But who knows? I may just fix this one up as a little vacation home, a place to get away from it all, at least while I'm looking for a job. 'Course I could move over to Kingsport or Bristol and get on with one of those big surveying companies. I've got experience. Oh yeah, that's one thing working with the engineering crew gave me for sure and certain—experience. That, and a bad back. But there's worse ways to make a living; at least I never had to crawl around on my belly like a reptile in a doghole mine. Come on, let's have a little walk around the camp. See what's left after Mr. Imboden's coal train got through hauling away anything worth hauling away."

Jubal's been to Derby before, mostly for homecomings which are still held here every year in late summer. He remembers lots and lots of cars—big Buicks and Studebakers and Oldsmobiles with license tags from Ohio and Michigan and Pennsylvania, where busted coal miners had migrated to take jobs in rubber plants and automobile factories and steel mills. People would be scattered like flowers across the churchyard and under green funeral home tents, eating and hugging and shaking hands and sharing old scrapbooks full of photographs and letters and clippings, the fallen leaves of their former lives. Then these same people would come back for the funerals of those who had stayed, and for the funerals of those who had left but asked to be brought back here for burial: the ground holding their bodies just as surely as this piece of earth had held their hearts. Jubal always found it hard to imagine how anyone could claim this place as home; it seemed so dingy and dirty and depressing
to him, a small boy climbing on the slagheaps at reunions, terrified of the smoldering heat beneath that he'd heard could erupt into flames at any given moment. Charmie used to tell him stories of the camps they had lived in, all over West Virginia and Kentucky and this part of southwest Virginia, until Bood at last took her back up in the neck to settle near her birthplace. That's where he had finally "crossed over," or so said Aunt Ozzy. Charmie was just glad to be back home, but it wasn't because she didn't like living in the camps, not at all. Her memories of camp life had been good ones: neighbor women gathering on porches to laugh and cry and talk each other through good and bad times. Baseball games when boys and boys-grown-tall dressed in brightly colored uniforms would slug it out with teams from other collieries while the whole world cheered them on. Baptizings where hundreds of people would gather at the river to witness a cloud of lost souls washed in the Blood of the Lamb and the coal dust drifting down from the Derby tipple. Glory Days. She never seemed to recall the layoffs and shutdowns and cave-ins and the miners who were killed or maimed or mutilated leaving widows and orphans and destitute families unable to care for themselves. But then, it all seems like a dream to Jubal; to Pebble it's a film playing itself over and over again in the moving picture showhouse of his mind—in sound and living color.

"Now, right over here, this was the theater. They'd show cowboy pictures every Saturday afternoon. It cost a dime to get in, and they had tickets on a big roll. You'd put your money up to the window and they'd
hand you a ticket that you had to give to the man at the door; he was all
dressed up in a uniform with little wings on his shoulders. I started going
to the movies when I was so little I'd have to stand up on my tip-toes to get
my dime up to the window. And I worked hard for that dime, too, picking
coal and plucking chickens . . . Over there's what's left of the boarding house.
'Course it was already gone by the time I can remember. That was back in the
days when there were three or four saloons here, back when Derby was built
in nineteen-o-three. Lord, that was over ninety years ago, hard to believe . . . "

It doesn't take them long to make the complete tour of the camp. There's
not much left except for the company houses lining the railroad track to one
side and the creek to the other side. The ghosts of a bustling mini-kingdom
hover all around in the vacant schoolhouses ("There were two of 'em: one for
whites and the other in the lower camp--called 'colored town'-- for the blacks
brought in from Alabama to work off their transportation in Derby . . . ") and
hospital; dance hall and train depot; bowling alley, beer joint, and churches.
The company provided for it all--including the salaries of the preachers (who
were Methodist, by and large) and of the Catholic priest, shepherd to the flock
of southern Italians brought here by the padrone system. Their vestiges are
everywhere--in the buildings and bridges and walls crafted from huge cut
blocks of sandstone, the products of Italian artisan hands who envisioned their
work not so much as a job, but as a loving manifestation of their art, of their
lives. So, too, must there be art in the endless row of beehives, some made of
stone, some of brick, the omnipresent day-and-night lights of the coal camps: coke ovens. Jubal stares at this specter of supposed suicide, fascinated by the possibility that the father of his best-old-friend could have actually jumped into the bowels of these fiery monsters to instant and absolute annihilation.

At last they come to the company store, sitting empty now at the very center of the coal camp—the omphalos of the universe for those who were born, lived, worked, played, and died here. This is a two-story brick building with gas pumps where the hitching post and watering trough used to be; a canopy over the pumps is also made of bricks. An original wooden structure had been destroyed by a fire that claimed the life of a solitary child in 1929. This brick replacement was built to last, and lasting is what it has done best. It looks as if a bomb could blow the entire known world all to smithereens and this one building would still be left standing when the smoke and dust cleared, window-eyes impervious to the rockets-red-glare, the-bombs-bursting-in-air. It is that solid. Pebble squats, smackdab in the middle of the porch; Jubal sits cross-legged beside him, the bottle of Smirnoff's standing sentry in between. Pebble lifts the bottle in salute to the old store, then settles back on his haunches.

"This place was something else in its time, Jubal. It was always busy, but come payday it looked like Grand Central Station. People everywhere—women to one side of the store buying up groceries, canned goods, factory cloth; men to the other side with their chewing tobacco and Bruton snuff,
playing checkers and mumbletypeg. Then there'd be the young'uns a-running around crazy like a pack of wild Injuns, trying to sneak penny candy and such as that--it was a sight in this world. My dad was always real patient. He'd just move through the store kindly quiet-like, picking up what he needed. Then he'd give it to Charmie with his scrip and she'd finish up inside, while he'd come on out here. He'd take a plug of tobacco and cut it in two, put one half in one cheek and one half in the other. Then he'd pull hisself up a straight chair, right about where we're setting now, and he'd commence to telling tales. I'd be just sorty laying low, up under the porch or somewheres close by 'til he'd get to my story. That's when I'd sneak up real close and listen so hard I could scarcely breathe, but he never took no notice. He'd already be off in his own world . . .

"T'aint no two ways about it, boys . . . that there silver mine is out there somewheres, maybe not too far from where we're a-setting right now at this very moment. Somebody's got to find it and I'm the very one what's gonna up and do it, just you wait. Hit'll be me just a-sashaying in this store one day, all loaded down with sacks full of them silver French Crowns . . . Now won't that be tearing up sand?

"Then some smart ass would ask him, say 'How'd ya know it's out there, Bood? You know the rocks in these mountains are sedimentary rocks, and silver only shows in rocks left by a volcano.' But that never phased him a bit, he'd say: It's all writ down, boys, all the particulars on perzackly how to get there. You could read it for your ownselfs, if you wadn't so doleless. Swift hisself left them directions . . . Said to come through the Indian gaps called Mecca, through a bluffy
region with a cliff to the right, up a creek, then cross to a bottom by an old Indian graveyard. Then on to a buffalo lick gap, through a valley what run east and west, and finally to a rock house shaped like a half-moon. Now that just has to be a dead giveaway, plain as the nose on your face. All's anybody has to do is find that rock house shaped like a half-moon, and they's as good as spent that treasure. From there you commence to take a sighting along the rocks, lining it up with a saddle gap in the ridge and eastward with a fork in the creek branch, and then, bygod, you're home free. The mouth of the mine is about three or four foot around, then it goes straight down about ten foot and levels off into a tunnel where that silver is just a-shining in a seam of gray sandstone rock. They's a sign tacked up right there at the entrance, says 'Swift and Monday's Mine Map. Take Notice.' That was his partner--Monday. But Swift was the onliest one what knowed for sure, 'cause he was the first white man what ever seed that mine. Them Cherokee Indians what took him prisoner just had to show it off to somebody, and he was the very one. Reckon I'll be the next white man to lay eyes on it.

"Then some other smart ass would up and say 'Ah, come on Bood. You know them Cherokee Indians didn't have no use for that silver, they never even made themselves any jewelry,' and that'd really set him off. Then before you knowed it they'd be Indian rassling right here on the porch, knocking off chairs and dogs and young'uns, a-punching and a-gouging and a-cussing and just a-carrying on like two mules in a tin barn with not a lick of sense atwixt 'em. Lord! That was something." Pebble empties the bottle with one last satisfying
"So'd he ever find that mine?"

"'Course not. You think we'd be sitting here now if he'd found that mine? I don't know about you, but I'd be living where the weather suits my clothes. Nah, that mine probably never even existed. I've surveyed all over these mountains and I never saw hide nor hair of anything that looked like a volcanic rock. Geologically, it's just not possible. But in Bood's mind, it was the impossibility of it that made the idea so exciting. It was all he ever thought about, the center of his whole and entire world." Pebble picks up the empty vodka bottle and drinks in nothing but air. "Damn. I'm out of liquor. Let's head over to the mine office and see if we can roust us up something to drink."

The last decade has witnessed a slow retreat by the one big coal company which has ruled this corner-kingdom of the universe for the past century. Now the company has returned to parts north, home to Philadelphia, to regroup before heading westward in the ever-rejuvenating hope that somewhere there is filthy lucre to be drawn from the guts of the earth. The chunks and bites and bits and pieces of yet unclaimed and unmined coal have been leased by those who have caught the mining-mania, mostly local men who are not yet ready to give up the boom-dream. Such is this mine, the mine that used to be called 'Wentz' after one of the early developers, and is now called 'Westward.' Pebble tends to think that 'Wentz' is much more appropriate, because that's what most of the mines have up and done: went, the plural of which would
be wents, and so they goes. This is a small operation, but quite efficient. Where four hundred men (and several women, in the last score of years) had worked three shifts 'round the clock, seven days a week--less than a score now work one long shift, as many days a week as they're needed. They're a pretty tight crew, bound together by years of working literally side by side, often lying together in the underbelly of the earth through more booms and busts than anybody cares to count. Some go back to the handloading days. A scant dozen of these men now sit around a table playing cards, just outside the new steel building that serves as office, supply hut, locker room, gathering place.

Pebble's pickup raises the ubiquitous cloud of dust as they come to a stop in front of this eternal poker game. When the dust returns to its usual place (which is everywhere), Pebble can see that his liquor-seeking mission is to be rewarded: Murdock Caudill is passing around a quart mason jar which almost certainly contains his famous homebrew. In the background a long brick building, now abandoned, is casting strange reflections where the sunlight dances through solid glass window blocks. Many of them have been broken and scattered about on the ground by vandals who have unwittingly loosened rainbow-makers in the shards of prisms that glitter here and there--unlikely jewels from this abandoned bathhouse. Through the gaping holes of extracted doors and windows, Jubal catches glimpses of the skeletal remains of this once bustling center of union activity: a light bulb in a metal casing lined with porcelain swinging over an empty wooden table. Rows of shower heads
protruding from a wall running the length of a football field. Empty wire baskets which once held clothes--now clean, now dirty--suspended from the roof on chains moved by pulleys, looking like cured country hams and pungent sidemeat swinging in a smokehouse.

"Say, where could a feller find a drink around here?"

"Pebble, you old fart! Where 'ya been? Somebody said you'd done gone off to Florida to pick oranges, just like Bood used to do every time he'd get hare-lipped with Charmie. Anything to that vicious rumor?"

"Now you ort to know better than that. I've been off to Bible college, learning them learned professors how to sang. Hit's 'bout time they got that old-time religion. And speaking of religion and being in the spirit . . . ?"

The quart jar comes round full circle. Pebble turns it up, sets it down again, and wipes his mouth with the back of his sleeve in one fluid motion.

"Deal me in, boys. Jubal, pull up a chair; you boys remember Jubal, don't'cha?"

Fuzzard Carroll comes up out of his chair and across the table to shake hands with Jubal. "Why Lord, yes, we know Jubal: he's coming-on famous. We catch him from time to time on WSM, live from the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tennessee--which ain't the Virginia-Kentucky Opry, but close. It's you we're not so sure about, you old sum-bitch. What'd you say your name was?"

"'Straight-Flush-Ace-High is my name and Winning is my game. Read 'em and weep, boys; read 'em and weep." Pebble fans his cards on the table,
then rakes the pile of quarters and dollar bills into his lap.

"Damn if he don't play cards just like his daddy." Fossil-Head Bolinsky has a "handle," like most of these men. They communicate by CB radio and answer to such names as Bear, Bull, Mule, Hornet, and Rabbit; Flontz, Wad, Icky, Short Dog, and Rabbi; Buzzard, Fuzzard, Easy Rider, and Father Time. Fossil-Head's appearance makes his name self-explanatory. "Why, I can recall many a night when Bood would head for home, bills just a-hanging everwhere. Fives and tens and twenties sticking out of all his pockets and out of his shirt collar and from the tops of his boots--he was a sight."

"Yeah, well. They was just as many nights when he'd come home buck-nekkid with nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist, and Mom would whomp him up the side of the head with her old iron skillet. That'd always sober him up fast. Three of a kind: Jacks. What you got, Jubal?"

"Enough sense to stay out of this game. I don't want to have to pawn the Porsche to get home. So what was it you told me about that time that Bood was digging a basement under the house?"

This sets the table to rocking with laughing and slapping shoulders and chugging homebrew and throwing cards and money into the growing pile in the center of the table: a story approaching legend, and Pebble holds the mike. "Well, it seems that dad decided he wanted a basement under the house; only it belonged to the company so he's got to dig it at night when they can't catch him. Which is all the same to him, he's been in the mines
day and night since he's twelve-year-old, handloading coal and swinging that lantern to burn off that old firedamp. He was the fireboss for well over forty years, and he's used to day-looking-like-night-looking-like-day down in the mines. So one night he gets to digging with his pick and he hits something. Solid rock. Didn't have nowheres to go. But he's wanting that basement pretty bad and he's not going to let the fact that the house just happens to be sitting on a chunk of solid rock put him off. So now, this was back when they were still using powder to blast the coal out of the mines, and he knew where he could get a-holt of some. Got him some Red H Dynamite and a blasting cap. Took his drill and drilled him out a hole in that rock and stuck three sticks of dynamite right down in that hole. Put the blasting cap in there and run him some wires from the blasting cap into an extension cord. By this time it's getting daylight and Charmie's up fixing breakfast. Well, he walks right over to the kitchen window and hands her that extension cord and says 'Honey, would you mind plugging this in for me?' Well, she figures he's out there working on something with a power saw, or a drill, so she plugs that cord right into the wall. That blast shook every window, every dish, every glass, everything in that house that wasn't nailed down, and some that was. Mom thought it was the end of the world, that Jesus was coming back right that very minute. So she goes running out in the road in her house-shoes hollering 'Lord, lord, I'm a-coming! Wait up for me!' She like to've killed him when she figured out what he was up to."
Amid the laughter punctuating the end of Pebble's story can be heard
the Whitesburg radio station playing a Carter Family classic:

I've got a home in that rock, don't you see?
I've got a home in that rock, don't you see?
I've got a home in that rock just beyond the mountain top,
Hide me, Oh Rock of Ages, cleft for me.

God gave Noah the rainbow sign, don't you see?
God gave Noah the rainbow sign, don't you see?
God gave Noah the rainbow sign, no more water but the fire next time,
Hide me, Oh Rock of Ages, cleft for me.

"Hell, that ain't nothing. What about the time old Wormy Fisher 'bout
blowed up the whole damn Liberty Cafe and everybody in it, stealing copper
wire out of the gas stove?" (Now the race is on for best blow-em-up story, and
Mad-Dog Bandy's trying to cut everybody off from the inside.) "'It was right
about eight a.m. on a Saturday morning and the hoot owl shift had just settled
in for some serious drinking."

"Hey, let me tell it. I was there."

"It's my story, Hoss. I was the one what picked him up out of the sewer
line he got blowed into; you can tell your own damn story. So, anyhow,
Wormy Lee's done crawled up and under the cafe figuring on stealing some
copper tubing and selling it to Clyde Roberts for scrap, make him a little
pocket money to buy cough medicine, you know. Well, he's found the line
that connects to the gas stove, so he pulls that off and commences to rolling it
up. Only it takes him a little while 'cause he has to keep stopping to take a little
snort--for medicinal purposes, you understand?--and then he sorty forgets
what he's a-doing and snoozes off for a minute or two. Then he snores himself awake and starts all over again: rolling up the tubing, having a little snort, taking a little nap. And all this time the gas has been leaking out of the lines where he's pulled off that tubing and it's just filling up the whole crawl space there under the Liberty with gas. Well finally, finally he gets through with his rolling, and he starts to crawl out from under there . . . but he decides he needs him a smoke. So he pulls his Prince Albert can out of his overalls pocket, and he gets out his rolling papers and just rolls him a big'un. And then: He lights it! Shit, they say you could hear that blast all over town and why in hell it didn't kill everybody in there is anybody's bet. Just knocked the glasses down from behind the bar and 'bout gave J.D. King another heart attack. Blowed Wormy right through that crawl space door and out into the sewer ditch. But it never hurt him none—oh, maybe singed his eyebrows a bit, but with Wormy it's hard to tell what's singed and what's just Wormy."

East and West the fire will roll, hide thy me,
East and West the fire will roll, hide thy me,
East and West the fire will roll, how will it be with my poor soul?
Hide me, Oh Rock of Ages, cleft for me.

"Hell, that's just piddling shit. What about that time the whole damn town of Appalachia almost blew all to kingdom come? Remember that? . . ."

(A murmur of acknowledgment goes around the table; Night Train Holmes has them all beat down the backstretch with this one.) " . . . wadn't but a few years back, as best I recall. Took out one entire block over on Callahan Avenue, but it
got Junior Phillips' garage the worst, 'cause it was built right smack on top of that abandoned well. And when the methane gas from the old Bullitt mine started seeping up and out of that well, there just wasn't anywheres for it to go but into Junior's garage. Which didn't make for any problems when the garage was open during the day--doors opening backwards and forth all the time, people coming and going and all. But then at night when the garage was closed down, that gas commenced to building up and building up. Then it come a January night, colder than whiz, and they'd left a little kerosene heater going . . . that's what sparked off the gas. Hell, they say you could hear that blast on over the mountain into Kentucky. Sounded like Hiroshima! It's a wonder that thing didn't kill nobody, but it didn't--not a soul, it being the middle of the night and the businesses all closed down. Well, the company never would take responsibility for that blast, said 'How'd you know it was gas from our mine? It could've come from just anywheres.' Well, damn. It ain't nothing but a big network of mine tunnels under Appalachia, anyhow. Just like a catacombs. Any day now I'm expecting the whole dadburn place to just fall through and disappear right off the face of the earth."

"When this world's all on fire, hide thy me;
When this world's all on fire, hide thy me;
When this world's all on fire, let thy bosom be my pillow,
Hide me, Oh Rock of Ages, cleft for me.

Jubal has been taking all of this in; it almost feels like he's sitting through' some kind of revival meeting where everybody's caught the salvation-fever
except for him. He can remember his daddy playing an old Merle Travis
record over and over, late at night when he'd sit long by the Warm Morning
and sing into the glow of the coals:  *Lord, it's dark as a dungeon and damp as
the dew; Where the dangers are double and the pleasures are few; Where the
rain never falls and the sun never shines; Lord, it's dark as a dungeon way
down in the mines.* This is absolutely beyond him. How could such a *lust
for the lure of the mines* possibly run in his own blood? Jubal swallows a long
breath, as if he's getting ready to dive under water and he doesn't know how
long it might be before he comes back up. "So what's it like . . . down in the
coal mines?"

A great gasping sound, like all the vacuum cleaners in the world have
been turned off at one time, travels around the table; for just a moment all
heads turn to Jubal and hold, frozen in amazement and bewilderment. Then
just as suddenly the table erupts in volcanic laughter. "Say, Pebble, how in
this world did any boy of your'n manage to keep hiself out of the mines?"

"I do not know, I surely do not know. Jubal, do you mean to tell me
that you've *never* been inside? Reckon how I missed noticing that?"

"It might've had something to do with that jar you're holding on to . . .
And no, I never have been inside a coal mine. I don't suppose that's some kind
of major crime, is it? But I wouldn't mind seeing it for myself, there just might
be a hit song in there somewheres."

"Sure worked for Merle Travis and Tennessee Ernie. Well, all right then,
Jubal. I'd say it's about time your old man showed you your roots. Can't get much more rooted than a couple of miles underground. What'dya say, boys? How's about if me and my son have a little look-see at this last chance saloon?"

The men rise up from the table as one body. Like a team of doctors and nurses and anesthesiologists and scrub'-em-up orderlies in an operating room, they commence to push and pull and poke and prod the pair with coveralls and steel-toed boots, hard hats and battery-operated belt packs attached to caplights, self-rescuers and a methane gas monitor. The team then deposits them (fully outfitted) into a diesel mantrip which roars to life, sucking them through the brattice-curtain entrance into the yawning mine-mouth before Jubal half realizes what is happening to him. Just as the last wink of sunshine disappears, a small mongrel dog comes running from who-knows-where and jumps into the mantrip, perching itself on the front of the car like the figure-head on a ship. Jubal hollers back over the roar of the motor which Pebble is trying to navigate like an outboard engine on a bass boat: "What's his name?"

"Arithmetic."

"Arithmetic?"

"Yeah, he's got a bum leg. Puts down three and carries one. Watch your head, Jubal."

And Jubal ducks, just in time. The mine has just gone from high coal to low coal in two blinks of his already shadowy eyes. He lies back against the inclined headboard of this magic carriage, trying not to think how much the
plastic padded backrest resembles the upper half of an open coffin. Arithmetic comes and lies down on his chest, paws under his chin. The dog's washcloth tongue makes a brave attempt to remove the layer of coal dust that is beginning to accumulate on Jubal's face, peppering his already dark beard another shade toward black-black. "Hey! You sure you know how to run this thing?"

Pebble's voice is but another register of sound, singing a high pitched harmony to the rum-a-thu-rum-a-thu-chung-chung-rum-a-thu-chung of the diesel engine. "Oh, yeah . . . nothing to it . . . like falling off a . . . " Jubal gives up conversation, and settles into watching the roof passing by above him, like the ocean waves he never saw until he left these mountains: patches of grayish foam in between mottled greens and browns of slate and sandstone and solid rock that has no name he knows. Ahead his caplight picks up the glint of silver tracks which are beginning to dip and turn with the rise and fall of the coal seam; Jubal feels a bit seasick. He turns his head to the side. Pillars of coal (called ribs--but he doesn't know their names, either) click by, alternating with dark breaks. These are passages that lead off to the air intake escapeway which is barricaded by permanent brattices built of cinder blocks to keep fresh air circulating around the mine from a giant fan--lungs for this underground behemoth--somewhere just out of sight. Every fifth break a steel escape door in the cinder blocks makes the government and this somewhat dizzy passenger happy. Jubal has heard stories of miners trapped by roof falls pushing through these doors, using their last adrenalin-energy to overcome the suction of the
cyclone strength fan and reach the safety of daylight, and natural air. The fan
is off today and the cool, damp air smells like the old football locker rooms
beneath the stone bleachers at Bullitt Park--secret sanctuaries for lovers and
winos and kids concocting mischief.

Now the breaks are punctuated by wooden towers of criss-crossed four
by four timbers; cribs which (hopefully) help hold up the low roof of this mine.
These are backup units for a network of rusted metal plates bolted into the rock
overhead. Jubal turns his face back up and watches these roof bolts clicking by
in a monotonous rhythm; they look like the staves in a woman's corset, an old-
 fashioned way of keeping things in their proper place. It seems that the air is
getting even cooler the further down into the mine they travel, but it's only
because he is lying so still. The temperature here actually stays close to fifty-
eight degrees day and night, summer and winter, the earth's own perfect
natural refrigeration unit. But Jubal has none of this information, never having
been here before and having nothing to compare it to. He does know that the
tone of the wheels against the steel rails is strangely hypnotic, and he is just
about to pass into that liminal state between waking and sleeping when the
mantrip comes to a deafening halt, wheezing out its last urgent breath which
ends in a satisfied sigh. Pebble jumps off the engine. "End of the line, Jubal.
We'll have to walk to the face from here."

Jubal crawls out of the mantrip and scurries to catch up with the
disappearing backs of his dad and the dog. WHAM!!! The impact of his hard
hat against this unbelievably low roof takes him by complete surprise; staggering backwards Jubal lands in a pile of gob on the floor of the mine, melting down into the muck of soft shale and fine coal and mud. Images begin to whirl and swirl all around him, taking on strange shapes in the coal dust playing in the beam of his caplight: ghosts of howling hounds and hanging elephants. A red-headed Indian lifts up a tomahawk that turns into a red-eyed salamander which scurries over his steel toes and disappears into the blackness of a tunnel. A woman with a tiny little head rocks a baby, crooning a misty far-away lullaby. And then, a light. Piercing the perfect darkness, shining directly into his suddenly awakened eyes. And a rumbling sound that starts low and builds and builds until it peaks in waves of applause. He is onstage again--standing in a cold and unyielding spotlight all alone--and he doesn't know how he got here, or what he's supposed to be doing. He can't remember the words to any song, and he has nothing to say.

"Jubal, are you all right? Low coal got you, huh? It'll do that. I can't count how many times I've seen men knock themselves out just like that. Come on now, I'll help you up." Pebble is leaning over him, his caplight shining directly into Jubal's face, his raccoon-ringed eyes showing more concern than his son can ever remember seeing. Between Pebble's legs something is glowing, something that appears to be a horizontal stoplight--red light, green light, side by side, shining at the selfsame time. The stoplight moves until it is standing right in front of Jubal, its tongue seeking his face: Arithmetic. Border
collie crossbred with some northern breed, which gives him one funny glassy blue eye that shines green in the beam of his caplight; the other "normal" eye is shining red, like Jubal's eyes when he has his picture taken. "Watch your head coming up, now," and a surprisingly strong fifty-year-old arm pulls him up into the miner stance. "Follow me, this way. The face is just up here a few more breaks." Jubal's body bends itself into an almost perfect forty-five degree angle, his hands clasp themselves behind his back, and he is moving—a dusky mirrored shadow of his father, moving in the direction of the rumbling sound.

"What's that noise?"

"The belt. I cranked it up to show you what it's like when the mine's working. Noisy, ain't it? 'Course that's nothing compared to when the miner's gouging into the face and the belt's going and the fan's going and the roof bolter's drilling and the whine of shuttle car wheels is bouncing along those steel tracks. I reckon that's why I'm deaf in one ear and can't half hear outten the other. Here we are, this is the belt. It's what carries the coal out of the mines. After it comes out of the innards of the miner and onto shuttle cars, it lands here—damn thing's always breaking down. I started out working on the repair crew before I got on surveying; it was a pain in the ass to keep going."

"I got the idea!" Jubal is shouting over the *whumpity-whump* of the rubber conveyor belt. "You can turn it off now!" Pebble opens the box on the side of the contraption and pushes a button. Two sparks shoot out, and then sudden silence, all the more complete in contrast to the recent onslaught
of machine music. Somewhere nearby Jubal hears a very faint dripping of water, and above him the mountain seems to creak like the timbers in a sailing vessel.

"Hear that? The old miners always told me to listen to the mountain. *Listen to her,* they'd say—the mountains were always female, like a woman they were conquering with their picks and shovels and drills and blasting powder. *Listen to her, she'll tell you what you need to know:* If she's getting ready to set down on top of you, or if she's just shifting about, finding her footing, getting comfortable. *The mountain will always tell you what she's about, if you know how to listen to her.* They were a superstitious bunch, them old handloaders. Didn't want women working in here, said it was bad luck and sure enough—look what happened right after they let the women in: the mines started shutting down. *Course that might be looked on as good luck, too. Depends on if you can find another job, which a lot of these fellers can't. Mining's all they've ever known. Come on, the face is just a ways further up.*" Pebble sets off again, walking easy, bent over. Jubal is having a hard time getting used to the position; his muscles are already complaining.

"What else?"

"What else, what?"

"What else did those old handloaders tell you?"

"Oh, yeah. Well, they all swore by the gob rats, said they knewed for sure when the roof was coming down, and they'd start abandoning the mine.
You could see them running down the entryways in packs, big waves of them.
Like rats off a sinking ship, same thing. And that one was true, I've seen it my
ownself. It's a sight in this world--you'd have to see it to believe it, but you'd
best pray that you never do. So. Here we are, Jubal. This is the face of the
mine. Only a few people have ever stood at this one place on earth--just a
handful of miners and you and me and this here dog. Gives you a funny
feeling, huh? Turn off your caplight."

Both men reach up and twist the knobs on the front of their hard hats in
one unison movement; all light is swallowed up and immediately digested in
the bowels of blackness. Nothing could possibly have prepared Jubal for this.
He holds up a hand in front of his face. He can almost feel the heat coming off
of his own body, but there is not the slightest hint of form, of figure, of figment
of imagination of what his appendage might look like. All sight is gone, all
memory of sight has vanished. Even the little balls of white that chase each
other inside his closed eyelids when he lies down to sleep have disappeared.
But the odd thing is: this is strangely comforting. As if he has returned to the
womb, with nothing but a slight rushing sound in his ears, and the cool fluid
air around him--rocking him, quieting his thoughts, hushing his yearnings,
recalling him home. He reaches out his hand and touches the new face of the
coal seam; it is much smoother and colder than he would have thought. His
father's light catches him petting it, like some stray animal that has suddenly
and unexpectedly showed up at his door, imposing its way into his life.
"Dinner time, Jubal. Over here--on the seal pack." Pebble is sitting on top of a metal box with myriad wires extending out from it, octopus arms that transform the electrical energy into the proper voltage to run all these mining machines. Jubal can now see the dance-hall-dandy of them all: the continuous miner, its huge spiked drum head ever-ready to take yet another bite from the black belly of the mountain. On the side somebody has written in red spray paint: Miner Man My Ass. Jubal makes his way over to sit beside his father on top of the seal pack. It is warm: a welcome surprise.

"What's it mean, what they've written on the side of that machine?"

Pebble pulls the quart jar of confiscated homebrew from inside his coveralls; he unscrews the top and takes a long drink. "Well, you see, they call this machine 'the miner.' It has a proper and official title--the 'continuous miner'--marvel of science and technology. This machine can mine more coal in one hour than a hundred handloaders could mine in an entire day, which is both a blessing and a curse, like most everything else. But now, everybody calls it 'the miner,' that's all. And the man what runs it, they call him 'the miner man.' He's got probably the toughest job in the whole crew, but it's a job that everybody looks up to, everybody wants. Because the man what can run this machine is all man and nothing but man, no two ways about it. The miner man is the man and everybody knows it. Now, apparently somebody wanted to bait this miner man a little, and that would surely be the way to do it--to question his ability to run this here machine. But things have changed.
Now, they tell me, you don't even have to ride this sucker. It's all done by remote control. The miner man just stands off to the side somewheres and pushes buttons, like Hagan and Palmer with their remote-control trucks and bulldozers. I reckon that's what it means—Miner Man My Ass. Anybody can push a button. It's a sad thing, Jubal. Mining just ain't what it used to be, nothing much is anymore. So . . . As my fireboss daddy Bood would be wont to say: 'Buddy, have a drink.'"

Pebble turns up the quart jar; Jubal watches as three bubbles make their way to the top of the almost empty container. Suddenly Jubal lunges toward his father, grabbing for the mason jar, startling both men and the dog. "I think you've had enough."

Pebble is taken aback for only half a second, then a grin fills in the coal-dusted shadows of his face. "Well, now, looks like somebody's wanting to rassle me over this last drink. What'dya say, Jubal? Think you're man enough to take on your old man?"

Jubal knows he has stepped over some line that he didn't draw and he's not sure who did draw it, or what the rules concerning its boundaries are. He clears his throat, hoping his voice is still there. It is. It rings clear in this damp mid-earth silence. "I'll tell you what, dad: I'll rassle you for this last drink. You win it and it's yours—do with it as you please, and you can keep on drinking 'til Judgment Day, if you want to. But if I win it, I'll give it back to you and that'll be it, for good. Your very last drink of liquor ever. I think it's
time for you to quit and now's as good a time as any. What'dya say, Pebble?"

Pebble doesn't say a word. He very carefully screws the top back on the mason jar, sets it down on top of the seal pack, and begins to back off into the open space in front of the coal face, circling like a buzzard looking for road kill. Jubal picks up the rhythm of the circle; it is his best childhood memory of his father. No matter that he was gone much of the time, no matter that he was drinking way too much of the time, no matter that he can't remember much more than this—it is enough. A simultaneous leap forward catches them entwined in midair, a double headlock that brings them both crashing to the ground, rolling about in the gob like two ancient underground monsters unleashed on the world in a Japanese horror movie. And now the Big Show is on the air! Steve Austin puts his famous Stone-Cold-Stunner on Diamond Dallas Page who counters with his own brand of Diamond Cutter . . . Big Boss Man lands The Rock with a pile driver, but is waylaid by The People's Elbow . . . The Undertaker nearly annihilates Mankind (who used to be Texas Jack, who used to be Dude Love) with a choke-slam, when suddenly without benefit of warning from the referee or announcer or a word from our sponsors: this becomes a cage match. There is a great crashing sound. The contestants freeze, then look up. Their prison is not the metal cage suspended above a rassling ring; it is a crib of wooden four by fours, supplemental support for a geriatric mine roof, and they have propelled each other into its now splintering innards. "Whoops." It is a small round unison sound they both make, an
almost amusing sound if not followed by the rumbling roar of rocks tumbling, not directly above them, but close. Very close. Too close.

Pebble scrambles out of the crib, the miner man now bent in two but running, somehow. Running to the entry where he barely catches one last glimpse of silver track before it is buried in blackness. Jubal is but a moment too late. By the time he reaches Pebble, panting and winded from rassling and rousting about, there is nothing but a wall of rocks and coal and dirt blocking the passageway back, the aorta which fed the heart of this mine. Jubal can only look at his father, stunned into choked silence. But Pebble's face is strangely calm; he speaks in a hushed tone of reverence, as if he were in a high church service. "Well, Jubal, now you know what it's like to see a mountain setting down on itself. Pretty amazing sight, huh?"

Jubal sputters into something resembling speech. "What the hell? . . . You mean you're not just the least bit worried? This whole damn mountain is getting ready to set down right on top of us any minute now, and you . . . "

". . . and I'm getting out of here. And taking you with me. It's just a matter of figuring out which one of these tunnels will carry us out, that's all. And no, the mountain's not gonna get us, not if she hasn't done it already. Those engineers have got this thing figured out--how to pull back these pillars so she'll set down easy-like, one joint at a time, and that's just perzackly what she's doing. Now we're temporarily blocked off, that's all, but there's a way out, Jubal. There's always a way out."
"Well, just let me know when you find it." Jubal sits down on the floor of the mine, leaning back on one elbow in what is here a nice soft sand-like silt. He can see Pebble's caplight moving down the breaks, stopping briefly at each one while the light beam--thick and palpable in the dust of falling rocks--moves up, then back down, then moves on until each possible escapeway has been eliminated. The light becomes brighter as it turns and moves back to Jubal.

"Okay."

"Okay, what?"

"Okay, now we go to plan B."

"And that would be . . . ?"

"And that would be to find the abandoned works. Murdock said they were getting ready to move into old Wentz Number One. Said it hadn't been but about half mined out, and they were just a couple of weeks shy of it. That means it's close by. What say we find it?"

"And just how do we go about doing that?"

"I'd say we follow Arithmetic . . . he seems to be working it out just fine."

Jubal shines his caplight back in the direction of the face. In a tunnel leading off perpendicular to the shattered crib he sees a red light and a green light; the seemingly incongruous signs beam in his direction for a heartbeat, and then disappear down the tunnel. Jubal follows, in what must surely be a trance. Winding down passageways where no human being could possibly have been, wondering what natural or supernatural force engineered this
elaborate labyrinth, wishing he had listened to the voice that told him not to put himself in such danger. And yet he is strangely invigorated by this peril, by the possibility that he may never get out, by the possibility that he will emerge: awakened, aware, energized, alive. He feels the slightest pressure on his left elbow and turns in that direction; Pebble is walking beside of him now, guiding him along, or seeking to steady himself with the sureness of his son's arm. The passageway undulates like the neck of that primeval sea monster, dipping in and out of the coal-seam-waves until it glides to a halt. The three of them are standing in front of a cinder block wall, final barricade to freedom. Without a word Jubal searches among the rotten timbers lying on the floor of the mine until he finds one with some substance. Pebble claims the back end and together they commence to eliminating cinder blocks in a neat cube--three rows of three across and down, just the exact sized hole for a miner man. Arithmetic is well pleased. He sniffs the entrance, then jumps high and disappears into the hole; Pebble follows close behind the half-breed dog. At last Jubal crosses over, thinking he should somehow draw this entrance shut again behind him, like the ending to a Warner Brothers' cartoon.

Inside, the tunnel smells like someone has opened up an old trunk in the attic of the Barron mansion on a rainy Sunday afternoon--a wonderful mixture of memories and magic and maybes. Pebble is walking about among layers of rotten timbers and trash--old fruit jars and paper pokes and powder bags filled with sticks of dynamite and blasting caps--but he is standing almost
bolt upright, now: this is high coal. He picks up a rusted tobacco can. "I'll be damned. Look here, Jubal. The date on this Prince Albert can—1963. Ain't that some shit? That's the year you were born, the year I went to working on the survey crew. I was twenty years old and out to make it big with the company. That's been thirty years ago, long enough to figure out that no matter what mark I make in this world, it'll always be outdone by somebody just a little bit bigger and a little bit smarter than me... that's just the way things are. But I can't half complain, really. It's not such a bad deal, once you finally come to a resting place. I'm mostly glad for what my life's been. There've been some good times and there've been some bad times, but when I think back it's the real basic things that I'm proud of: loving your mom, having three fine, good-looking sons. And I always provided for my family, that much I know for a fact. Yeah. When everything's done and done, I can say it all turned out not so damn bad, after all."

Pebble draws a long hock, spits off into the decades-old debris, and pockets the Prince Albert can. Jubal is shining his caplight onto the roof of the tunnel; something is gleaming golden there. No, not golden but copper--tags hanging from pieces of wood drilled into the solid rock roof. "Do you know what these tags mean?"

Pebble reaches up and pulls one of the tags toward him, his caplight illuminating the coppery sign. "Well, yes, now that you mention it, I most surely do know. They mean that this mine was surveyed thirty years ago, and
the reason I know that is because I stood here and drilled those holes into that roof with a star drill, and tamped those wooden stabs into those holes with a ball-peen hammer, and marked them with those copper tags. There are numbers etched into those tags, and if you were to find the company records from sixty-three, they'd tell you that this was the very first mine that Pebble Goins ever surveyed, but it was old even then. We found pages here from a Montgomery Ward's catalog, dated nineteen and twenty-eight. Figured they'd rolled 'em up and used 'em to tamp dynamite, thirty-five years before we ever set foot in here. Now, ain't that some shit? Maybe I have left some marks after all. Not new marks, but then the Bible's right about that thing: there is nothing new under the sun. Or out of it, either . . . So, you gonna stand around here all day or follow Arithmetic? Looks like that dog is headed for the light."

Jubal turns in time to see the dog's tail disappearing in the direction of a tiny circle of daylight, no bigger than the end of his thumb; but it grows larger and larger as they move toward it, until it turns into that cartoon circle, big enough to liberate a man's head. Another half-hour of unpiling rocks widens it enough to accomodate the narrow Goins' shoulders, and then . . . they're through. Jubal is all-but blinded by the sunlight, which hits him like a staggering slap in his face. Rays of color dance off of the rocks lying about the ground, and he almost misses it: a silver belt buckle half-hidden by a trailing arbutus vine, right beneath his feet. He picks it up, polishes it on the one clean spot left on his coveralls, and places it carefully in his left breast pocket. He
turns. Pebble is holding the quart jar high above his head, laughing at the rainbow bouncing off the last inch of liquor in the bottom of the jar.

"Well, what'dya say, Jubal? I'd call it a draw, wouldn't you?" He throws the jar up in the air; the rainbow spreads itself into wings that feather themselves down and over the heads of the father and the son, baptizing them in homebrew. The jar falls upon a rock, smashing into at least a million myriad rainbow-making prisms. "Well then, that's the end of that."

As Pebble walks away, something silver shines from his back pocket--the flash of a lighter, perhaps? or the label on a pint bottle?--and from the other side of the mountain comes the tinkling of voices, silver temple bells snickering on the wind:

"Hell, me and my brothers used to shoot carbide cans all the time. We'd dig 'em out of the creek where the miners had dumped 'em, put a little water in the bottom of that twenty-five pound can, screw the lid on tight and BLAM!!! Sounded like dynamite going off. Liked to've deafened us, couldn't hear a thing for two or three days. When granmaw seed we wuz all right again, she'd whup us good with a willer switch. That damn thing'ud wrop around our legs, get us twicet--coming and going. Her whoopings was enough to keep us off the carbide cans for a spell, but then we'd forget and go and do it again. You'd think we'd've learned . . ."
MAY
*Crowns of Glory*

The First United Methodist Church is slam-full: front, back, center, side aisles, choir loft, balcony. Both pulpits are ripe with visiting pastors, and the current resident reverend Tolly Hollifield is waiting below, in one of the high-backed official pastoral waiting chairs. He has generously given the visiting team first crack at the ball, knowing full well that it will be on up into the second half before the emotions of the crowd reach their peak, and that's when he'll take to the field. He can wait.

And now people are beginning to line the walls of the church, forming a backfield of mourners, double-deep around three sides of the playing field with a fully-robed choir flanking the goalpost end. Ray A. Grubb has had to instruct his boys to go back over to the funeral home and fetch some folding chairs; this is a successful funeralizing.

Outside the cars are parked all the way up Wyandotte Avenue in both directions. They've spilled over into people's driveways, and even onto well cared for lawns; but nobody's complaining, not today. Chilton Howard is squatting beside his patrol car, smoking a cigarette and listening to Bear Bolling squawking through the static on the radio that everything is clear for the final procession to Glencoe Cemetery. The Chief leans through the
window and turns a knob, sending the patrolman's voice into oblivion. Not today, Bear . . . I just don't need to hear your mess today. He flicks his cigarette butt over into the Banner yard, where it comes to rest beneath a large cedar tree. I never have noticed that cedar before, it must be thirty feet tall . . .

Jubal sits on the other high-backed, high-church chair below the pulpit. The seat is covered with a thick, dark-red material—like heavy duty velvet, maybe—that's supposed to look rich and impressive, but feels stiff and scratchy against Jubal's rear end, like sack cloth. He is very uncomfortable, and wishing that he didn't have to sit up front like this. He'd much rather wait in the back or anywhere else until it's his turn to sing. This whole thing seems unreal, like he's fallen asleep in the grass while out playing and when he's awakened it's already coming on dark, and he can't remember where he is, or how he got there, or why . . . And why DO they play organ music at funerals? Surely it's the worst kind of sound, all schmucky-schlurpy like molasses dripping off of a sassafras paddle. Please-dear-Jesus, DO NOT let anybody play organ music at my funeral. Sad is good, even haunting: yes. The sound of a sorrow so old it can't be spoken. But make it a lone fiddle, keening like the banshee, something worth crying over. Or better yet, make it so bouncy-happy nobody can stand it, like Eulareid's French-harp. Hell, I'd take a set of bagpipes over that damn organ, or even an accordion . . .

The organist finally finishes her clever "valley medley" that she made
up her ownself (*Going Down the Valley, Peace in the Valley, and Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley*); the last notes of the organ hang in the air for the shortest of spells and then die a natural death. Jubal takes in a deep breath, but is almost smothered by the stickysweet scent of thousands of carnations in shapes of crosses and open Bibles and telephones-to-heaven. He has always hated the smell of carnations for this very reason. The first pastor stands: "Let us pray."

Jubal is so glad for the opportunity to close his eyes, he decides to avail himself of it for the remainder of the service. Maybe everybody will think he is deep in prayer, or maybe they'll think he is overcome with grief, or maybe they'll think he's asleep, or maybe . . . maybe it just doesn't matter what they think. Words begin to weave a web around him: tickling the high back of his chair and the visiting pastors in their pulpits; on up into the choir loft where they embroider the draped-crimson robe stoles with a spidery script from an ancient hand (* . . . could this be the writing on the wall?*); then on out and over the entire congregation gathered here to bid farewell to one who belonged to all, and belonged to none; and finally up into the bell tower, where words turn into deep rumbling-clanging-clappering-tittering-tolling-belching-bellowing sighs of sadness beyond words. But still, those who are left behind must try, to work what little leftover magic they can with the only words they know:

". . . and I remember how he would always say that he was going to win the lottery one day and marry the prettiest girl in town, then use all that money to take care of her parents. Well, sure enough, he finally did win a
lottery; but it wasn't for a girl, it was for a riding lawn-mower, something he'd always wanted. And that was probably a whole lot more practical, too. He'd use that mower to cut the grass here at the church, where he put in many devoted hours of service as custodian, and then he liked it so much that he just started cutting everybody's lawns. If his 'customers' could pay, then he'd take the money and buy suckers and bubble gum to give to little kids and to his beloved Viking football players just before they ran on the field. And if they couldn't pay, why he'd just do it for free. Because he loved to be of service, it was his greatest pleasure . . . that, and his cell phone. Oh, yes indeed, he had a cell phone! He figured if Chuck Bradshaw and Brownie Tipton had a cell phone, being big successful business men, then he'd just have a cell phone, too. So he got him one and put it on that riding lawn-mower, and there he'd go: riding down through town just talking away on that cell phone. And I just feel sure that heaven's a much livelier place today. In fact, there's probably already a brand new cell phone tower rising up just to the right-hand side of the Judgment Throne . . . "

Jubal shifts his weight to the other cheek; the chair squeaks. Another commentator takes the microphone.

". . . but then we all know how persistent he could be. At times he was downright ornery. And I'd say 'Now you know I can't afford to be giving away fresh flowers this time of the year, I've got a florist business to run, here.' But he'd just keep on aggravating me until I'd give him what he wanted just to
get rid of him, and the next thing you'd know, those flowers would show up in the rest home, or at the bedside of somebody who was sick and shut-in . . . "

Jubal's elbow slips off the chair arm; he switches to the chin-on-chest-rest, just as the coach enters the locker room for the half-time huddle.

" . . . the team's number one supporter, he maybe missed two or three games in the fourteen years he served as mascot. And I'd just like to say today that he was more than any mascot, he was a star. I just wish that we had told him that while he was still with us. But somehow I feel that he's looking down from heaven right now; that he sees us all sitting here, and he's just grinning, probably smoking a cigar--heaven's newest and brightest shining star."

The murmur that has been getting louder and louder now turns into a shout of triumph, and Jubal is lifted up to join this almost-heavenly-host's song:

* A mighty fortress is our God, A bulwark never failing:
  Our helper He, amid the flood Of mortal ills prevailing.

* Let goods and kindred go, This mortal life also:
  The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still,
  His Kingdom is Forever! A - men.

Everybody sits back down, with a great shuffling sound like a thousand hymn book pages being turned all at one time, and then . . . it is Jubal's turn. Slowly he arises from the red velvet sack cloth, but then he has to stand for just a moment and wait; his foot has gone to sleep. He steps down off the platform (which most likely has a name, he just doesn't know what it is) and walks right over to the coffin. It is closed, shut tight with a huge spray of hothouse flowers guarding the top--roses and lilies and gladioli seasoned with the whisper of
baby's breath and all tied up with a satin ribbon embossed with the words
*Gone Home* in silver glitter. Jubal stares at the flowers, wondering how he can
possibly get past such a thing. Then he scans the crowd of mourners (most of
whom are looking a bit perplexed, as if they have somehow found themselves
at the wrong funeral and are wondering how to get out gracefully without
making a scene) and his eye comes home to rest on Ray A. Grubb. "Excuse me,
Mr. Grubb, would you mind helping me here for just a minute?" Ray A. is
more perplexed than most. In all of his forty(some-odd)years as a mortician
and a friend-to-the-family-in-their-time-of-need, he has never had anyone
speak to him in the middle of a funeral, at least not out loud. But he is a
professional. Adjusting his tie and clearing his throat, he walks over to the
casket. "Yes?"

"Do you think you could help me move these flowers and open up
this pine box? I want to speak with my friend."

Ray A. hesitates only for the space of a thought (*What the . . . ? Well,
why not?*) and then he does just that; together he and Jubal pick up the corpse
of flowers, already dying themselves, and set it down on the floor. The
seasoned mortician then quietly and discreetly folds back the top half (only)
of the casket lid (like he's done hundreds, maybe thousands of times before,
but never quite under these circumstances), and there he is: Darwin Duff.
Laid-out in his Viking uniform, helmet-on-head, sword-in-hand. Jubal pulls
a chair over beside the coffin and rares back in it, like this might be just another
meeting at The Gulf Tower.

"Well, Darwin, old buddy, I've got to say that you're looking good. Yes, sir, I can't remember when I've seen you looking any better . . . I'll bet you've even got those Viking boots all polished up. And everybody's here, you old sum-bitch. It's just like you to pull something like this to get us all to come out and see you. Just any time now, you can come on up and out of there and start passing out suckers and bubble gum and cigars--it's a mighty good joke you've pulled. You got us this time, Darwin, you really got us with the old 'brakes failed' trick. And that car rolled down the hill and turned over with its top all smashed in--that was a good one. But there's one thing that's for sure and certain: I just know you enjoyed that last leap two hundred feet over the bank, flying through the air like a bird. Did you think you were riding a roller coaster, old buddy? Did you put your hands up in the air and holler WHOOOOOOEEEEEEE? Well, you can ride this one out as long as you like . . . I'll just be seeing you over home."

Jubal walks over and picks up the curly-maple fiddle from beside a mason jar filled with masses of coreopsis and dame's rocket, toadflax and Sweet Williams, bachelor's buttons and ox-eyed daisies, Black-eyed Susans and sneeze weed. The horsehair bow protests the first pull across the strings, but then settles into a low drone, the sound of the mountain dulcimer and the highland pipes, the sound of the wind across moors and down mountain passes, the sound of time and love and life and death and everything in
between. And in that drone that is part and parcel of where he is now, and
where he has come from, and where he will surely be, Jubal finds a voice--
of ancient Appalachian balladeers entwined with Allifair's more ancient-still
Celtic bards, calling him home. And he is glad, for it is very own voice:

The mists o' er the waters have muddled our view,
Concealing eternity's door;
The mists now are parting, the lifeboat slips through,
Revealing the way to cross o' er.
Gone home is the sailor, now home to the sea,
And the hunter gone home to the hill;
The tempest-tossed waters that raged through the night,
With the morning lie peaceful and still.

The table is spread with eternity's feast,
Celebrating the bliss of the Lamb;
O servant now enter, claim your rightful seat,
There to sup with the Great I Am.
Gone home is the seeker, now home to The Source,
As the river returns to the sea.
The cup of salvation is costly and rare,
Like the water: Abundant and free.

Gone home is the pilgrim, now home for a rest
And the wanderer no more to roam;
No longer a stranger, no longer a guest,
But like a child gone home.
But like a child gone home.
He is just God's child...Gone Home.
The Porsche waits at the end of the funeral procession. When the very last car pulls out, heading east in the direction of the town cemetery, she makes a move as if to follow, but then suddenly executes a close-to-professional state trooper turn right in the middle of Wyandotte Avenue, and heads due north: back in the direction of Appalachia and the coal camps. There is still time. Association meetings always go on and on and on and on, with one elder preaching until the spirit gives out or he gets sung down, and four or five more elders waiting in the wings to take his place. Then, of course, there is dinner-on-the-grounds, followed by singing and more preaching, when those faint souls in need of reviving will make their way back to the planks-on-sawhorses table. There one more deviled egg, or ham biscuit, or piece of perfect pound cake awaits to snatch them back from the jaws of sin-and-starvation, all in the fullness of time, and of belly... And thus does the Lord truly feed His sheep.

The Porsche passes by Roaring Branch and on up The Straight, sardined between the north fork of the Powell's River to the right, and the Interstate Railroad tracks to the left. Just before the oasis of Bessie's and the transloader, she makes a sharp turn to the left, crossing those railroad tracks which are rather rude to her shocks and suspension. The earth and gravel in between the tracks has been washed out by years of misuse, and now dis-use. The Porsche hangs in the gap briefly, then gathers courage and fortitude to go on. Past specters from the past: coal camps that don't even exist anymore, but still hold reunions once a year, come laying-by time. A time for lost Appalanteans
to migrate homeward, swallow-like from all over the country, to nests that live only in pictures, and in stories, and in hearts. And in the names--mostly names of women. Daughters and wives and lovers and mothers of coal bosses: Linden and Laurel and Loma and Levola . . . Roda and Rhonda and Rhodora.

Not too much further, now, I'm almost sure . . . It's been years since I was here, and I wasn't even as old as the twins are now, but I can remember that old stone bridge the CCC boys built, and there's the Osaka tipple, so it's got to be just up and around this bend . . .

The Porsche is barnstorming now, doing loop-the-loops and crazy stunts, careening down this gravel-dirt road looking for all the world like an old biplane. Jubal is just shy of climbing out to walk the wing, the way Josh would always jump up on the hood of somebody's car and just dare them to throw him off, when the Porsche goes into a nose dive and crash lands at the very bottom of the holler. The dust clears; Jubal climbs up and surveys the scene from his moon roof. It appears that they are resting in a grove of oak trees that form a living gate. The gate swings back now in a fitten salute to this wayfaring stranger who has arrived, just in time. Lime-green oak leaves are still rolled tightly inward, but the opening is near. The leaf time is soon upon those who would but tarry, and wait.

Jubal gets out of the car and stands, leaning over the open door, taking in the picture painted before him, surely just for him. A familiar three-tiered stairway rises up the terraced hillside, but the steps themselves are rocks, not
wood; the rails are grapevines lashed to hickory posts--tough and straight as The Way itself. The Church sits at the top of the stone steps. There is no sign to tell the world that this is the Oak Grove Primitive Baptist Church, but those who need to know, know. The white-washed wooden frame building is not much more than four walls and a roof; there is no porch, no steeple, no stained glass windows. There are only four windows, two on each side, and the glass in them is wavy, like old soda bottles. The blank wall on the front of the church is interrupted twice by two doors: one on the right-hand for the men to enter, and one on the left-hand for the women. The sheep and the goats, the wheat and the tares, those who are for Me and those who are against Me. Outside is a canopy of rough pine lumber covering the planked-dinner remains; children are playing kick-the-can in and out and all around the building. An outhouse stands sentinel outback. It also has two doors: a two-holer.

Jubal walks up the stone steps, slowly, stopping between tiers to rest and listen. Through windows left open to waller in the glory of this Memorial Day comes a song--or is it a chant? Of monks or mendicants or martyrs deep in the innards of a monastery, or a circle of standing stones, or a secret sepulchre? A solitary man is playing his voice as if it were an instrument, the only true God-given instrument and therefore all he needs:

I've got a mother in Bright Glory . . .

and then a great wave of voices picks up the line, rising and falling in the ebb and flow of emotionless passion for what has been lost along this pilgrim way.
I've got a mother in Bright Glory,
I've got a mother in Bright Glory,
Look away over yonder on the Golden Shore.

(Some glad day I'll go and see her . . .)
Some glad day I'll go and see her,
Some glad day I'll go and see her,
Look away over yonder on the Golden Shore.

(That glad day may be tomorrow . . .)
That glad day may be tomorrow,
That glad day may be tomorrow,
Look away over yonder on the Golden Shore.

And beneath it all is the drone, a human drone somehow akin to the
drone of Granddaddy Goodloe's curly-maple fiddle, which is somehow akin to
the Irish pipes in Allifair's ancient song, which is somehow akin to the drone of
Jubal's own heartbeat. He pushes open the right-hand door and slides into
the back pew, giving a futile nod to Pebble's head bowed in prayer.

... and Lord, we would beseech you in your infinite wisdom and
mercy to feed these little lambs. Refresh them with the water
that flows from the Living Spring! Nourish them with the tender
young blades of spring's new grass that grows in your verdant
pastures! But Lord, I would also pray that you remember to
throw out some roughage for us old sheep, as well . . .

Jubal sneaks a peek at Pebble; his narrow shoulders, so much like
Jubal's own, are shaking with about-to-bust-out-laughter, just like he figured.
"Come on, dad, let's make a break for it."

The fugitives sit on the steps outside the left-hand door; through the
windows they can still hear snatches of the service. It sounds like a lawn-
mower buzzing gently, grazing on somebody's yard just down the road.
Jubal plucks a long blade of grass, growing up in between the rocks. He loops
the ends and flicks the seed-head into oblivion, just as his child-self was wont
to do. "I never thought I'd find this place, but somehow I came right to it.
How's it look to you?"

Pebble reaches for his back flask-pocket, but pulls out a pocket knife and
commences to digging at a hang-nail. "'Bout the same. Old School churches
never change much. 'Course they's not nearly as many people. If you don't
believe in recruiting, it tends to make the numbers fall away, once the old folks
start dying off. And the young'uns don't want to go to a church that doesn't
have electric guitars and all--you can understand that. But this church will be
here, I guarantee it. They'll always be a remnant, just like my daddy Bood
used to tell me. I think it was the only Bible verse he knew, but it was a good
one. The remnant will always return."

... A hundred and fifty three years-uh, That's the Word of God-uh,
If you can't prove it by the Scriptures-uh, You're a-hollerin' on sandy soils-uh.
A hundred and fifty three-uh, Take off the trinity-uh, And that leaves fifty-uh,
The Year of Jubilee-uh, In three dispensations-uh, The ones who will return-uh,
His ways are not the ways of man-uh, His ways are FAR above our ways-uh,
His ways are a MYS-tery-uh, GLOry to God-uh! His ways are a MYS-tery-uh . . .

Jubal rises, shaking his head like a dog coming up and out of the water.
"Well, dad, I guess I'll be seeing you. I just came up here to say good-bye."

"Where'ya headed, Jubal?"

"I'm not sure. I thought I'd go on back up to the camp, get my things
together and just take off driving. The Porsche is getting a little antsy, seems
like she's been in one spot for too long. I may head back to Nashville, the
time's about right. The old Ryman's opening back up, you know, and I'm
supposed to appear in a special tribute to the original members of the Opry.
It's kind of an honor, just to be asked. So, anyhow . . . thanks. For being here."

Pebble pulls himself up to shake hands with the son who has suddenly
topped him by half-a-head . . . Now when did that happen? "Yeah, well . . .
Maybe it's time for me to be moving on, too. I've been thinking about going
back up the valley, maybe see what Comfort's got cooking for supper. You
take care, now. Keep that thing between the lines, don't let 'er get away from
you." The hand shake becomes a rassling hold as Pebble pulls his son into a
half-hug, half-choke. It is a familiar move, the selfsame parting gesture of his
own mother, Charmie. He watches as Jubal walks back down that long flight
of steps, slowly and deliberately; but every now and again the man-child does
a little hoppy-skippy-jump, bouncing down the next few steps, just the way he
used to descend the farmhouse stairs when he was just a shirttail young'un.
Pebble watches until Jubal disappears into the Porsche, which in turn
disappears through the oak grove. A single arm blows back out of the driver's
window--flag on the play. He grins, then turns and walks back into the church.

. . . A-why many things has been done-uh, In the fullness of God's time-uh,
A-why from the beginning of time-uh, That all things might come to pass-uh,
A-why we're given power to preach, pray, and sing-uh, In the spirit of God-uh,
A-why we don't know a-why-uh . . . H'IT'S A MYSTERY!
And now the road belongs to the Porsche, and to the night. Jubal is somewhere else, in a mental darkroom developing pictures as they go rushing past him:

Black-faced miners, sitting around a table beneath a bare light bulb in the mine office. Playing poker. Smoking Camels and Pall-Malls and Marlboros. Laying most of their cards on the table, holding onto one ace . . .

Bessie, perched on a high stool over a massive chopping block once used to butcher meat at the company store. Peeling onions, tears rolling down her cheeks. Tuning the radio to Loretta, or George, or Conway, or Merle . . .

Josh, standing high on a rock over a pool (how deep?) left behind by a strip mine. Pondering if the danger is worth the dive. Buck-nekkid . . .

Roaring Branch, water abundant and free. Roaring from the heart of the mountain. Baptizing the Porsche and her driver as they pass by . . .

Glessye Barron Bullitt, frozen behind the pane of a middle turret window. Shadowy through the Belgian lace curtains. Listening, watching, waiting . . .

The Gulf Tower, keeping watch over those who sit and squat and spit and talk and come and go and come again. Solid. A sign . . .

Lucinda, sitting in her farthest-to-the-right-side booth. Drinking her afternoon Coke. Smiling and nodding. Right where she's supposed to be . . .

The Eagle, silent. Maybe golden, maybe brass, maybe nothing of value . . .

Stoney Kelly, racking up pool balls. Pouring a beer. Feeding slugs to the jukebox. Breaking up a fight. Ever rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves . . .

The Miner, standing diligent in a park where people once danced in a ballroom. Dowsing-rod for derelicts and dabbbers and dreamers and drunks . . .

The Wall, covered with spring cruisers. Cozied-up in good company . . .

The Drama Cast, rehearsing for the thirty-first season opener of the longest running outdoor drama in the state of Virginia. Forever replaying the old story of an innocent-ignorant mountain girl who falls in love with a civilized-urbanized mining engineer. On The Trail of the Lonesome Pine . . .
Rucker's Broom, sold and reclaimed, and sold again, and reclaimed . . .


The Stone Mountain Lights, man-made sign of danger. Lately placed on a hill which has claimed far-too-many-victims. A remembrance of Darwin . . .

Allifair Fraley, sitting atop the highest rock on the highest mountain in this little corner of the universe. As ripe with life as is the earth with spring . . .

It is this last picture Jubal holds onto the longest, just wondering. He is hardly aware of the steady motion of the Porsche as she backtracks along the trail, from Derby down the Appalachia Straight through the town and out into the southern section of the valley; taking the long road through the back valley and looping around to Cracker's Neck; slowing through East Stone Gap and finally coming to rest--where?

Jubal alights, as if in a dream, and stands facing water: a river. Yet almost as wild and free as the day Caney Gilley built a sawmill on this very spot, a hundred years ago and then half-again as much. It is the south fork of the Powell's River, and Jubal knows the place well. It was here that Pebble taught him what bait to use for what fish--blood worms found where the sink-line emptied out into the chicken yard for trout, night-crawlers that surfaced after the rain for bass, corn or balls of dough for carp and catfish--and how to clean that catfish and gig a frog without getting barbed, and what it meant to be a boy growing into a man in just such a place as this. Jubal sits down on the river bank and takes off first his shoes and then his socks. He then
commences to rolling up his socks and putting them into his shoes, which he
carefully places into a nest among a clump of catkins growing up and out of
that bank. Jubal steps lightly into the river. The water is a bit chilly yet, but
the mud is warm and squishy between his toes. It is just perzackly as his child-
self remembers it—a bit scary (wondering what might be under there) and yet
also comforting, somehow. Carefully he begins walking upstream.

The reflected stars mix with the petals of redbuds and service trees
floating on the water, making a curtain of the finest lace. Jubal parts the lace
with his fingers as he moves upstream, silent as Chief Benge escaping to the
Valley of the Whispering Winds. It’s only up around this last bend . . . maybe,
just maybe this time you’ll make it . . .

Something rises up from the other bank, something tall and rustling
in the warm breath of May, something that looks like the branches he used
to wave in Lucinda’s church come Palm Sunday. Palms! Could this possibly be. . .

Bear Grass? He has never seen it with his own eyes, but he has seen it through
the eyes of his father. It is one of Pebble’s clearest memories of Bood, who
would bring him to the river to watch the bears come down and feed on these
bamboo shoots that they loved. Bears EVERYwhere there would be, so many
you could hardly count them. But they never shot them—just watched them
feeding with their cubs, fishing in the water for the trout that ran plentiful then,
and feasting upon the delicacy that gave this whole area its name. But that was
years and years ago, and now both the bears and their grass have passed into
that misty region of remembering. And yet, here it is: a single patch of Bear Grass. It must be that; how could it be otherwise?

...But what is that glowing on the ground beneath the Bear Grass? It could be foxfire, or it could be swamp gas, but it seems to be moving--now here, now there. It seems to be...blinking. Like fireflies. But it's way too early for fireflies. They don't come out until the air is much warmer, when it's safe to mate and lay eggs. So what could this possibly be?

The only other light is that of the stars, tiny pinholes in the black water. Jubal moves closer to the bank, and now he sees that there are hundreds, maybe thousands of these blinking lights--covering the bank like stars fallen to earth. Like forgotten fairies coming out to dance. Like nothing he's ever seen or could possibly imagine. And now the lights begin to rise up into the air, and it becomes perfectly clear: these ARE fireflies. The very first ones, just now emerging from their winter waiting-time. The braver ones send signals back to those still on the ground, to those waiting on the fingers of the palm branches--male fireflies in search of mates. They look like so many flash bulbs aimed at some famous recluse who has suddenly emerged; the bulbs popping here and there and there again, wildly scattered, willynilly...

Or are they scattered? Don't they seem to be coming together now?

Yes. Deliberately gathering into a most definite rhythm, a simultaneous flashing...all together, blinking at the same time? Surely this is a sign...
And now Jubal leans back until he is floating in the water, magically suspended by the starlight and the sarvice blossoms. And the glow of a thousand fireflies blinking together in perfect synchronicity, such as happens in only two places on earth: one way far across the Big Water in the Empire of the Sun, and the other right here in the Bear Grass. But Jubal doesn't know this. He knows only the thrill of this most glorious of light shows, and the wondrous caress of this water-womb, and the Voices of Eola

come whispering
down the valley
on the wind.
The hardtop road ends at the Chandlers' barn. Jubal backs the Porsche around onto the shoulder, widened and graveled to allow those vehicles lacking four-wheel drive to park here. Most of the time disabled drivers will climb into somebody else's Jeep or truck, or onto a dirt bike or four-wheeler; but the driver of the Porsch is going to walk up this mountain. He approaches the Chandlers' house, bent on doing the polite thing in alerting them as to whose car it is that's sharing their parking space; that, and because he just likes to make sure that nothing has changed here. A large rock--almost a boulder--forms a natural portal to the left-hand side of the door. A blue-tick hound sits on top of the rock, still as death. Jubal used to love to come up here and take pictures of this dog at all different times of the day and night, and always it would look exactly the same. If the photographer were to put several portraits of this catatonic sentry side by side, maybe (just maybe) he could detect some slight variation--a tilt of the head, a crook of the tail. But then again, maybe not. He looks closely at the the current rock-hound, squinting into the early morning sun. It looks like the same dog, but it's hard to say.

To the right-hand side of the door is the smokehouse. Jubal peeks
through the cracks to see country hams hanging there: salty-sweet rewards of last Thanksgiving's hog killing. The Chandlers still kill three or four hogs a year, one for each of the three grown boys and their families, one for the homeplace here and whatever children or grand-children or great-grand-children need some meat to eat and a bed to sleep in at the time.

Jubal knocks on the storm door that was added five-or-so years ago when Mr. Chandler (whose name is Arville, but has always been Mr. Chandler to Jubal, and so will remain) and Melvin glassed in the front porch, making a sun room for their wife and mother, Alvadean Chandler. Melvin his ownself comes to the door, eating a piece of rhubarb pie. "Hey, Jubal, come on in . . . Care for a piece? Mom's pie-plant turned out real good this year."

"No thanks, Melvin, I had breakfast at Rucker's. Good to see you, how've things been up here on the mountain? Your folks gettin' along?" Jubal realizes that he's slipping back into mountain-talk, but it seems like the natural thing to do. Besides, he doesn't want Melvin to think he's gotten above his raising, whatever that might mean.

"Not too bad. 'Course dad's been kindly down in his back. He's took to the La-Z-Boy most of the winter, but he's got his remote and C.B. radio and manages all right, I reckon. And mom's arthur-itis 'bout has her crippled up, she didn't hardly get up a hundred quarts of beans last year. And you know that I had open-heart surgery back in March, they had to go in and scrape out my veins with some dental floss, or some such. But other than that, we're
gettin' along just about tolerable. Why don't you come on in here and see where mom's got your picture up everywheres? She's just proud as a dog with two tails to say she knows you. Reckon you could maybe give her your autograph or something?"

"I'll go 'er one better. I've got some tapes and CD's and just a shit-load of stuff in the car. Let me see what I might can dig out of there." Melvin follows him back out to the Porsche, still eating his pie.

"This your car, Jubal? She's one fine piece of machinery. What'll she run?" Melvin is running his hand over the Porsche's hood, as gentle as stroking a kitten.

"She won't run a-tall up this mountain, which is why I stopped by to ask if it'd be all right for me to leave her here while I walk up to the cabin?"

"Sure, Jubal, you just leave 'er as long as you like. Say you're a-walking? Want me to come with you? I've been tracking some coons up that way for Cindy Lou Jean, here. She's got a fine nose but she's a-whelping and ain't much count for hunting these days."

"Naw, Melvin, I reckon I'd best go this one alone. Take these to your mom and dad and tell 'em I said hey. Tell 'em I'll stop in and visit on my way back down."

Jubal fills Melvin's arms with enough contraband to keep him well occupied for a spell. As the last son staggers (either from the weight of the day's offerings, or from the dregs of last night's libations) back to the house, the
pilgrim sets off in an upward direction, assured that all is well here: nothing has changed. Before passing the barn Jubal pauses a moment to admire last winter's crop of coon hides displayed there, stretched tight and tacked to the well-weathered chestnut-oak boards with roofing nails, to cure out. Used to be that the boys would make their pocket money selling the hides, but the current batch looks as if it may have been there for a while, as if the hides are now mostly decorative. On the backside of the barn is the pig pen. A good sized brooder sow is laid over on her side, a land-locked behemoth, suckling her backup copies for hog killing time.

A few hundred yards past the barn, climbing straight up already, Jubal comes to the creek and stops to rest. This is where the four-wheel drive vehicles always hover to lock in their hubs, and the person in charge of holding onto the liquor bottle dispenses with the top. The old-timers would always carry their bourbon or sour mash or Scotch or grain alcohol in pint bottles, so only a minimal amount would be lost when the bumps and grinds of the Jeep-road claimed its shares. Jubal almost wishes that he had one of those pint bottles stuck in his back pocket, just for the feel of it, but he is traveling light; today he carries nothing at all. The creek is running remarkably clear and fast. Jubal dips his hands into the yet-spring-chilly water and splashes it on his face. The shock of the cold water revives his senses, and he presses on.

A half hour's climb brings him to the first plateau--another vehicle stopping point--where everybody would tumble out and lollygag
around, take a few drinks of liquor, maybe shoot a pistol, let the dogs run some rabbits or rats. Jubal has none of these things to commemorate the spot, so he settles for a short trek through the laurel thicket to reach Arnold's Rock, an overhang from which the town below can be seen. The view from here is not overly spectacular, being not nearly high enough yet, but it's a nice pondering place. Sitting on the farthest edge Jubal commences to take off his hiking boots and shake out the little pebbles that always seem to accumulate automatically no matter where he hikes--mountains, swamp, beach, backyard--they always seem to seek him out. He remembers being here another time, on up toward Christmas of one of those dimly lit years after he had finished high school and before leaving for Nashville. There was a thin layer of snow on the ground and snow was just beginning to fall again, very lightly, when he heard a loud crashing sound and a six-prong buck bolted out of the woods right behind him. It ran by him so close that Jubal could feel its breath, snorting hot and panicky, and then it was gone down the winter-rough road. Just a few moments later those same woods opened up again to release yet another wild creature: Melvin Chandler, chasing that buck for all he was worth, barefooted in the December snow.

"Did'ya see him, Jubal? Where'd he go?" Jubal had only nodded and pointed and Melvin was off and gone, his flannel shirttail flipping up behind like the trademark of a white-tailed deer. "We'll be eating deer steaks for Christmas dinner, come on up to the house . . ."
But now Jubal's ears suddenly prick up, like Bullwinkle's when his hound-half catches some ultrasonic vibration way above the range of human hearing. He turns in the direction of the woods, half expecting to see Melvin appear, still on the trail of that buck. But the sound is not coming from the woods, it is coming from the direction of the town below, and it is music--music loud enough to reach all the way up to Jubal's perch on the rock. It would have to be broadcasting over a powerful loud speaker to make it this far up the mountain. But what could be going on down below that would be potent enough for him to hear it so clearly? . . . Well, of course: The Singing Convention. It is the first Sunday in June, and that means it is inevitable—the Tri-State Gospel Singing Convention will be held in Bullitt Park come hell or high water . . . "rained on but never rained out" . . . the good Lord willing and the creek don't rise . . . hold my baby while I shout GLORY, amen and amen.

The song that's playing is the opening Star-Spangled Banner, followed by the invocation delivered by Brother Nunley Mumpower from over at the Dry Branch Missionary Baptist Church in Harlan, Kentucky--Kentucky being the "tri" of "tri-state." His words waft about on the wind, which carries only the rhythm and cadence of what the preacher is saying, but not the specific meaning. And yet, it doesn't matter; Jubal has heard it a thousand times before, and just the sound, the measured vibrations of the voice are enough.

And now (Jubal knows the program by heart) the Wise Family Quartet is climbing up onto the platform, dancing around color-coded microphones
(red for Jimmy, blue for Johnnie, orange for Mildred, yellow for Mike), playing hopscotch with microphone cords and rassling with microphone stands, pushing and pulling them up and down while speakers hem and haw and squawk out the required feedback. Then finally—the opening gospel hymn:

*I saw a way-worn traveler in tattered garments clad,*
*Struggling up a mountain, it seemed that he was sad.*
*His back was laden heavy, his strength was nearly gone,*
*Yet shouted as he journeyed: "Deliverance will come!"

_Then Palms of Victory, Crowns of Glory,*
_Palms of Victory I shall wear!_

It seems to Jubal that he's been given his marching orders, a camp meeting exhortation to be up and doing, ever onward Christian soldiers. Arising from the rock ledge he sees a hickory stick lying in the brush, straight as a mortician's face and just as big around as one hand-hold. It must surely have been somebody's walking stick, somebody who accidentally left it here and has wondered about its whereabouts ever since. Jubal picks up the stick and begins climbing again. The road is rough, with too many large rocks and gullies and wash-outs. Even four-wheel drives are going to be hard put to make it up through here, at least until Truman Quesenberry unleashes his tractor and box-scrape onto the road for its annual summer barbering.

The day is beginning to warm up considerably. Jubal sheds his sweatshirt, while in the park below old women with their hair piled on top of their heads in holiness-nibby-nobbies unwind from the cocoons of shawls, revealing freckled forearms big-as-country-hams crossed over billowy bosoms.
One hand on the outside of one forearm (only) keeps steady company with the whomp of the doghouse bass. The men, too, lose their protective coverings—jackets announcing various brands of machinery and auto parts, promoting rasslers and Nascar drivers and Jesus and country music singers (most particularly the home-boy-done-good and almost-famous, Jubal Lee Nations). Beneath the jackets and on top of their heads, tee shirts and ball caps make the same sort of proclamations. Young girls, mostly skinny, wear their Sunday-best dresses over panty hose ending in little white sling-pumps, bows in back. They carry gold purses and a certain look on their faces that lets any interested male within fifty feet know they're available. The very oldest men wear overalls and straw hats; the very youngest are but babies being pushed around in strollers, wearing bibs that say *If you think I'm cute, you should see my Grandpaw.* They are all drinking lemonade and iced tea and Kool-Aid from gallon jugs they've toted from home. Jubal is well over halfway up the mountain, now, and is wishing he had thought to bring along something to drink.

The summer sun was shining, the sweat was on his brow,
His garments worn and dusty, his steps seemed very slow.
Yet he kept pressing onward for he was wending home.
Still shouting as he journeyed: "Deliverance will come!"
Then Palms of Victory, Crowns of Glory,
Palms of Victory I shall wear!

And now the sometime street-preachers are gathering in their flocks, calling them (not softly and tenderly, but) from the very depths of hell-so-hot-you-can-smell-the-smoke-and-feel-the-heat. Each has his appointed place
under a particular tree or beneath a certain picnic shed; some have claimed
these pulpits for sixty-some-odd years, since this convention's birth. The
temperature of the preaching rises with that of the day itself, but not a stitch of
clothing will these hard-shellers shed. They wear the uniform: a worsted wool
jacket, long-sleeved collarless shirt, galluses holding up pleated suit pants, and
a King James Bible the size of a Chevy, which becomes a drum leading them
(and all who would take up the cross) forth into battle:

Are you washed in the blood of The Lamb? (thump)
Can you stand in the presence of The Great I Am? (thump)
And where will your soul spend eternity? (thump)
Is a cross a-waiting there for you and for me? (thump)

Jubal reaches the crossroads. The right-hand fork would carry him
higher, yet—to the imposing sandstone boulder deposited on top of this
mountain by the last Ice Age (or so it's been told). The rock is called Duff Rock,
after the family who used to have a farm here, raising cattle on slopes so steep
the cows developed legs shorter on one side than on the other to keep from
falling off (or so it's been told). Yet another branch of this selfsame family
opened the doors of the Duff Academy over a century ago, ushering into the
Bear Grass an age of learning and enlightenment, a legacy for their most
famous son: Darwin. The left-hand fork leads down through a meadow to the
bordering woods, where a shady path empties into a sunny clearing and the
nest of Grandaddy Goodloe's cabin. Jubal ponders the choice briefly; there is
plenty of time. First the cabin, then the rock.
The meadow is eat-up with wildflowers shouting loud in Kodachrome:
bee balm and bouncing bet and blazing star; Indian pinks-and-paintbrushes;
cosmos and chicory; green-and-gold and Aaron's rod; wild sage and horsemint;
and scattered over them all like a skiff of late snow are the asters and yarrows
and Queen Anne's lace. The sun is almost blinding in the open field, but then
the woods close around him. It is not nearly so dark as the coal mine, but
dusky—as if the day has suddenly flown and he didn't know it was time to be
heading home until it's too late, and night is fast falling. This path has always
seemed like another world to Jubal. He can remember looking for fairies
among the maiden-hair ferns and moss-covered rocks and decaying limbs
that flank the way, like ordinary people come to watch a parade passing by . . .

. . . but what was it that Aunt Ozzy used to tell about the little people, the
ones called 'Nunnehi' by the Cherokee? How they could take on any form they
chose, become a friendly old crone to lead lost children back to their homes, or
carry them deeper and deeper and deeper into the woods, until they were
hopelessly and forever lost. And then the old crone would just simply disappear.
. . . Now what is that tall, willowy form just up ahead? Could be an old person
with a Santa beard, or some sort of wild critter standing on its hind legs, or . . . ?
Jubal laughs out loud; it is nothing in the world but his poplar tree,
the one he has been riding-down ever since it was just a sapling. He shimmies
up the trunk quicker than a cat can wink an eye, climbs out to the end of the
top branch and leans . . . W-A-Y-O-V-E-R . . . until the tree becomes a sling
shot dropping him to the ground, then whipping itself back up and over in the opposite direction. Jubal figures it's a good sign that he can still ride-down a tree. And not only that, the trip is almost as much fun as when he was a kid.

The path has been steadily moving downhill until finally it reaches bottom, and he tumbles into the clearing. At the furthest edge is a log set up on tree stumps. The remnants of unshot beer and liquor bottles still perch on top of the log; carcasses of those not-so-lucky targets litter the ground. A fire circle with a mesh grill for cooking hamburgers and hot dogs squats just below the cabin, looking rather forlorn, as if it hasn't been used in quite a spell. Jubal walks the perimeter of the clearing to see that all is in order, and then begins to climb the steps up to the cabin porch. An old sedge broom stands beside the door; he trades his walking stick for the broom and begins sweeping the porch. This is a ritual. It is always the very first thing that the very first person onto the porch must do. He sweeps around the two oak rocking chairs sitting patiently there, waiting for passengers. One is slightly larger than the other, having an extra slat in its back. Jubal sits in his grandaddy's chair for just a moment, then switches to his granny's, which seems to feel better, somehow. The creak of the rocker sets up a rhythm, a slight pattering sound that is humming through his creaky-rocky-trance, becoming louder and louder until it turns into: Rain! Beating a reggae-steel-drum-band cadence on the tin roof, the sudden shower drowns out all possible sounds from the nether world.
The rain is coming harder and faster now, sweeping the porch with a new-found earnestness. Jubal searches out the door key hidden beneath the eaves and coaxes the rusty lock into granting him entrance to the cabin's inner sanctum. Heavy wooden shutters are closed from the outside making this place cavern-dark, but there are matches hidden in a waterproof tin and kerosene lamps scattered about. He lights the one which hangs over a table made from a whiskey barrel; it sputters, then catches, throwing shadows into the hills and hollers of the cabin.

Jubal pushes open a door to his right and sticks his head in, just far enough to see that nothing catastrophic has happened to this original section of the cabin. The lamp light barely trickles into the stone fireplace and bunk shelves there—only the bare rudiments of a hunter's needs when Grandaddy Goodloe brought them here on the eve of a new century. Drug the logs right up the mountain with a horse and a sledge, he did, and everybody laughed at him. "Why would you want to go and build a cabin out in the wilderness, when there's as much wilderness right in your own backyard as a body could stand?" But then came the boom, and all the trees were cut down, and all the land was bought up. Yet this place remained—his sanctuary. Jubal retreats back into the added-on room, which will be much cozier once he gets a coal fire going in the heater confiscated from a railroad caboose. The crackle of the flames mixes with the rain still falling on the tin roof, steadier but more gently now as Jubal sinks down in a feather-ticked iron bedstead. He lights another
kerosene lamp and sets it on the neighboring washstand, then pulls a leather-bound journal from the lower drawer of the stand and opens it. The voice of his great-grandfather becomes a sing-song quilt he pulls up and over and all around himself.

07 October 19and27. The weather is grand today, somewhat chilly but clear. We shot a few squirrels and made a stew with Irish potatoes and carrots packed from home . . . 25 November 19and33. It is Thanksgiving day and the weather is cold--snow clouds but no precipitation as of yet. Shot a wild turkey and cooked it in the camp oven . . . 18 February 19and47. Today it is wet and raining. Cooked hot dogs in the fireplace, ate with chili sauce brought from home. Those in attendance were Broadus Lytle, Sam E. Young, Thomas Broadwater, Grover Cleveland Honeycutt, and E.E. Goodloe, Senior.

In the park below umbrellas are popping up everywhere like so many mushrooms after a shower, all colors and shapes and patterns: polka dots and stripes and whirligigs and one that boldly spells out USA in bright golden stars on a red-white-and-blue-flag field. The faint of heart are running for the shelter of trees and picnic sheds, but the true gospel music die-hard fans are toughing it out in their folding chairs, tarps and slickers and parkas and hooded sweatshirts pulled up and over for temporary shelter. They know that this rain will stop, it always does. It's just a matter of time. Some of the street-preachers who have passed out from heat and their own passion lie under the
trees; the splash of raindrops on their faces revives them again . . . *Showers of blessings, dear friends . . . the living water flowing from a rock in the barren wilderness.*

On stage a mother and three daughters are in a rassling match for the gospel music championship. The mother stands straight and stern, no hint of facial expression betraying the eternal message of salvation. The three girls dip and sway with the music, their pouty Wynona-months begging for the lipstick which is still forbidden their denomination.

*The songsters in the harbor that stood beside the way,*
Attracted his attention, inviting him delay.
*His watchword being 'Onward,' he stopped his ears and ran,*
Still shouting as he journeyed: *"Deliverance Will Come!"
*Then Palms of Victory! Crowns of Glory!*
*Palms of Victory I shall wear!*

And once again, Jubal is climbing. Up through the canopy of leaves dropping remnant blessings onto the path and the pilgrim below. Up through the tall meadow grasses shimmery with spider webs made visible in this heaviest of dews. Up through the twisting trail left by the wop-sided cows. Now winding back and forth across the hill, rising up a slight degree with each tier until slowly, steadily, surely, victoriously--Jubal makes it to the very top. Perched on the highest point of Duff Rock he can see everything clearly below: the town in the heart of the gap; arteries of the river forks feeding it from north and south, one vein leading off to the west; creek-capillaries flowing into the hollers; the gullet of valley stretching to meet the neck that ends at the base of this mountain--this huge head on which he himself is the jewel on the crown.
The startling shriek of a whistle and a loud BOOM! turns his head in the direction of Bullitt Park. From the old jousting grounds there arises a collective 
"Oooohhh-pop-boom-flash-crackle-crackle-crackle-AAAAHHHHhhhhhhhh!!!" Fireworks. In honor of the coming Jubilee of all Jubilees. It is the fiftieth anniversary of the day allied troops stormed the beaches of Normandy: D-Day. Jubal has never been sure quite what the D stood for: Deliverance? Death? Destruction? Destiny? But there are those in the park below who know the meaning all too well, for they were there—fighting and fleeing and staying and praying and learning all they will ever want to know about the honor and glory of this war-to-end-all-wars. Then there are those who can only remember it like Jubal, through the blood. He can see that blood now, a mere trickling of red that runs down this rock and off the mountain, through the hollers and valleys and gaps until the land finally flattens out. Then the swelling crimson artery mixes into the rivers flowing toward the sea, filling up the rivers like Pharoah's plague-blood, until they spill over into Homer's wine-dark-sea. Across the Big Water to the Old Country, to islands once called Albion and Caledonia and Eire where wild Britons fought wilder Gaels who fought even wilder Picts. Buck-nekkid, blue-blazed-bodies: now savage red, now pale white, now blue-blooded border-lords. Fighting, and foraging, and freeing, and forgetting, over and over and over again. And so they fight on, until the blood makes a moat around mountains that were once joined, then pulled apart, now joined again by the red blood, the white skin, the blue bodies.
All of them forever border-bound, just like the crown-jewel on this mountain.

In his peripheral vision Jubal senses, more than sees, a flash of red.

*Must be something to that conjuring thing Aunt Ozzy says she can do. Says*

*if you think about something long enough and hard enough, your thoughts*

*will be like spider webs that stretch out into the world and bring the very*

*thing that you're thinking about right to you. Well, now. If I'd known this*

*thing could work, I would have conjured up something better than blood . . .*

The red is rising up now, coming from way below, from somewhere near the valley floor. It is moving in a spiral, disappearing on each downward diving dip, then the flash of red reappearing on the upward loop of the curve. It gains altitude with each cycle, spiraling upward in slow, lazy gentle waves. And now Jubal can see that this flash of red is nothing more than the banner of a hawk's tail. Of course: a red-tailed hawk. It has caught a thermal and is riding it upward, never once flapping its wings, just rising with the lift of the warm air. Nature's hang-gliding, lighter-than-air craft. No barnstorming for this bird, and no sign of the fierce war-hunger mankind has attributed to it. The hawk is only gliding, rising by degrees in the gracious air of the thermal.

*Well, Aunt Ozzy, there's my sign for sure and certain. You always told*

*me to watch careful, to be aware, to 'redden up' because we never know when*

*a message is coming across, and I did. And I am. And this must be it, so tell*

*me now—what should I take this to mean? Is it telling me that my blood is just*

*as savage-scarlet as that hawk's tail? That I'm condemned to always rushing*
and roaring through life down the valley, on a Benge? Or is my red blood all
mixed up like that half-breed Indian's—white underneath, like the hawk's wings?
Maybe I should look outward: to the blue sky all around me, the waves of light that
carry this sign ever onward and upward. And what if the colors of my blood were
to somehow all come together, mixing and melding into a red-blue-purple-poem?
Like your iris that bloom early in the spring, their deepest hidden indigo hearts
white-washed as a picket fence, revealing: Violet. The final color of the rainbow,
home of harmony and balance and light. Maybe, just maybe. . .maybe it's a mystery.

Jubal slides down off the backside of the rock, picks up his walking
stick, and begins walking back down the hill, following the winding cow paths.
He glances back over his shoulder, only once, but the hawk has already
disappeared; it must have wended its way to wherever it calls home. The
mountain air is shimmery with the last of the early-summer rain, nature's own
fireworks announcing the coming of yet another season. The earth is spiraling
upward in one more slow, lazy, gentle cycle . . . rising by degrees in the warm
air of promise and potential and possibilities. And now Jubal remembers.
There is to be another Jubilee celebration tomorrow. It is the re-opening of
the building first known as The Union Gospel Tabernacle, then the Ryman
Auditorium, and finally Home: to the Grand Ole Opry and to all country
bards who come a-spiraling up toward it. Maybe it's time for him to find
his own thermal—maybe, just maybe. Keeping a close eye on the winding
path in front of him, Jubal laughs, and disappears around the next bend.
While gazing on that city across the narrow flood,
A band of holy angels came from the throne of God.
They bore him on their pinions across the dashing foam,
Then joined him in his triumph: Deliverance has come!

Then Palms of Victory! Crowns of Glory!
Palms of Victory I shall wear!
Yes, Palms of Victory I shall wear!
when I think of who and what have had lasting effects on my work, I prefer to think of "confluence," coming together with intent. The landscapes I have known, the writers who are essential to me, the words and songs and trees I search out, all form confluences that . . . make me stronger and allow me to flow toward and beside others.

(Maggie Anderson 1998, 32)

This experimental novel is such a work, of "confluence," flowing "toward and beside" the lives of all who are "coming together with intent." Anderson's confluences echo those of many Appalachian writers: landscapes, other storytelling writers, words and songs and symbols. The presence of these symbols is one of the most fundamental elements of all mythologies; they are the motifs, images and heroic characters which are known in the collective unconscious. Joseph Campbell (1988) maintains that many of these archetypes are so basic to the human experience that they are recognized by all nations, races, and cultures worldwide. But there are certain cultures which seem to possess a stronger sense of symbolism, a more distinctly expressed mythology. Such is to be found in the culture of the Celtic peoples.
The Cultural Origins of Appalachia

In surveying the burgeoning body of Appalachian literature, I have been made aware (as I have always known through the "ancestral imperative") that there surely must be a mythological connection between the people living in the southern Appalachian mountains and the people who still inhabit the "Celtic fringe" (Cunningham 1987, 1990) of the British archipelago. The people of Appalachia, however, are not usually labeled "Celtic," but are either thought of as "pure Anglo-Saxon" (from William Goodell Frost's 1899 article), or "Scotch-Irish," the most common American term for the "Ulster Scots" who became the predominant settlers of the mountainous backcountry in the 1700's. James Leyburn (1962) traces the history of these people of Scottish descent who had earlier been planted on northern Irish soil by King James VI of Scotland (who became King James I of England); when their plantations became too successful, they were forced to migrate to America and settle along the (then) frontier of the southern Appalachian mountains. Grady McWhiney (1988) contends that these Scotch-Irish settlers were mostly Celtic, transplanting a "cracker culture" among the "plain folk" of the southern backcountry; if his argument is sound, the Appalachian people are "culturally descended from the ancient Celts" (xxiii). David Hackett Fisher (1989) assumes this same "cultural" stance when he proposes that:

the four basic regional cultures of America take their character from four regional cultures of Britain . . . From East Anglia came the Puritans to New England . . . From southern England came the Virginia Cavaliers . . .
From the North Midlands came the Quakers . . . And from North Britain and Ulster came the backcountry settlers. (Cunningham 1990, 87)

These scholars emphasize the earlier Celtic influences (originating in North Britain and Ulster) as remaining significant despite the cultural differences between the Scots and the Irish. In *Apples on the Flood* (1987) Cunningham further notes that:

The "Scotch-Irish" themselves experienced many admixtures of immigrants, especially English ones, both in Scotland and later in Ireland. . . . a goodly proportion of Appalachians themselves are not of "Scotch-Irish" origin at all but are derived from the original natives; from Welsh, English, Highland Scottish, German, and Black settlers; or from later arrivals . . . by virtue of their choice of region and neighbors they have become part of that "Appalachian" culture which, by and large, is a transformation of "Scotch-Irish" culture . . . mainly "Celts." (xxviii, i)

For my purposes, there is no need to settle the argument concerning the cultural origins of Appalachia; suffice it to say that we are surely a mixed product of many ancient cultures, including the Celtic peoples who were the primary inhabitants of Great Britain for over seven hundred years. These Celts have passed along traits which continue to influence Appalachian culture today.

**Connections with Celtic Mythology**

My ongoing research into the Celtic peoples and their belief systems has led me to the works of Nora Chadwick (1971), Jeremiah Curtin (1890), J.G.
Frazer (1922), Simon Goodenough (1997), Elliot B. Gose, Jr. (1985), Jennifer Heath (1998), George Henderson (1911), Stephen R. Lawhead (1987), Morgan Llywelyn (1989), Proinsias MacCan (1970), and John Sharkey (1979). From these sources I have discovered that there are many similarities between Celtic mythology and what is generally referred to as Appalachian "superstition."

Several of the symbols which I included in *Palms of Victory* can be compared to some basic elements of Celtic mythology:

1) **The Sacredness of the Spoken Word and Importance of Names**

Celtic culture was overwhelmingly oral in nature, which makes it difficult to determine what they truly thought and believed. Celts did actually possess writing, but were forbidden to use it for any sacred purpose; their belief (like that of the ancient Hebrews) was that the divine was present in the spoken *logos*. It wasn't until much later that their stories of ancient gods and heroes were written down, and then by Christian monks who feared the pagan past, and so they denigrated it by turning the gods into "little people" and the heroes into Christian saints.

A similar atrocity is the movement to remove cultural dialects from the language of the Appalachian people today; Denise Giardina gives a poignant description of her own loss of innocence incurred in this process of becoming educated, in "No Scapin' the Booger Man" (1998). Maintaining the integrity of a peoples' language is of paramount importance (the resurrection of Gaelic was a riveting factor in the Irish Revolution), but there are problems inherent in the
attempt to transcribe any form of dialect. The word in print can never duplicate the true power and beauty of the spoken word, and it generally only succeeds in contributing to the "backwards" notion of mountain people. But language is an integral feature of these stories, so I attempted to incorporate dialect into the tales told by "the boys" at the store, around the filling station, outside the mine office; many of these were transcribed from tape, hopefully giving the resulting dialect some measure of authenticity. (For inspiration on writing dialect well, I look to James Still; for injunction on how not to write dialect, I have attempted to read Mary Noailles Murfree.)

A primary example of belief in the power of the spoken word is found in "old-school" Baptist preaching; an unwritten rule forbids the use of any written sermon notes in a Primitive or Old Regular Baptist pulpit. The preaching transcribed in *Palms of Victory* is of this nature; there is a strong use of rhythm and repetition in the potently voiced words of these preachers.

The power of the word is also manifested through the constant telling of stories, which are always spoken from memory, and often told repeatedly in a rhythmic ritual. The stories are layered, beginning first with those that belong within a specific family (the stories told to Jubal by Comfort and Lucinda, by Aunt Cozy and Aunt Ozzy, and by his father Pebble), then those local stories that are known within a community (the stories told at sacred spots in the trinity of valley, town, and collieries), and finally the legends which are known throughout the region, to which everybody connects on some level
(the stories of Murdering Mary, Chief Benge, the Ghost Dogs of the Murdered Speculator, Swift's Lost Silver Mine, and principally the legend of a boom-and-bust town that was Almost-an-Empire).

The names of people and places assume an important role in the mythology of a community; the very word *naming* is synonymous with the idea of speaking the truth in Wilma Dykeman's *The Tall Woman* (1962), as the character of Lydia McQueen will say "Name it to me," in her attempt to learn the truth of any situation, or get to the heart of any conflict. In *Palms of Victory*, everything has an official name which is conferred upon it through the proper channels; but the names which are used on an everyday basis are unofficial, familiar names, and almost everybody has some kind of a nickname. Jubal's mother gives him a name representing his eventual transformation into a bard, his father's contribution ("Lee") is symbolic of his own rebellion, and the family name of Goins (which is one of the most frequently occurring Melungeon names, second only to Collins!) is evocative of the journey-quest Jubal has undertaken. He takes for himself the name of "Nations" in an effort to become a star, to appeal to all peoples and places in "country" music; his original motivation may be shallow, but at length the contrived name comes to represent individual and regional quest for identity within the "country-nation" as a whole.

The names Comfort and Hope are frequently found in my family's genealogy; they represent maternal roles in general, and the way Comfort would like to see herself, specifically. Pebble is a name which may be peculiar to this
area; I have yet to hear of it elsewhere. It evokes the image of a rock—hard and enduring—but a piece broken away and in motion. The name Lucinda means "bringer of light," and represents her chosen role as an educator and law-maker. Josh King, comic helpmate to the hero, can be shortened to "josh-ing," and Darwin Duff is modeled on the now-deceased town "witty," whose name is amalgamated with that of Jubal's real-life counterpart.

The nicknames of the men reflect their physical attributes, character traits, or work-related roles. I have collected these colorful names for years; following my father's death in 1981, my mother found a list which he had made of miners' nicknames, going back to his own father's reminiscences of the early 1920's. I was "comforted" to know that the basic names remained the same. On my own journey-quest into a coal mine, my miner guides were called "Bear" and "Short Dog"; they gave me a listing of names which are now CB "handles"—an indication that nicknaming is still an important part of this mining culture, only modified by modern technology.

Cracker's Neck is the actual name of the valley area; I have been unable to discover the exact origins of this name, as noted in the text, but I tend toward the "cracker culture" theory—that those who inhabited the area were known for their boasting and bragging. The evolution of the town's name from Three Forks to Mineral City to Big Stone Gap is appropriate; the earliest connection is to the river, the "boom days" connection is to the mineral that was to have made everybody rich, and the current connection is simply to the
geographical significance of the place: it is a gap in the Big Stone Mountain, in contrast to the nearby Little Stone Mountain.

All of the names in *Palms of Victory* are drawn from the actual people and places of this region of southwest Virginia; most of the place names I kept "as is," but the names of the characters are amalgams. I put first names into one hat and last names into another and drew for the combinations; this seemed a "fitten" way of naming the peoples who live in this area of cultural diversity.

2) Connectedness to the Four Natural Elements and the Supernatural

Each of the four places Jubal inhabits in his journey-quest is aligned with one of the four elements. He first stays in the valley, where people are closely connected with the earth and farming. Images are of growing things (mostly "wild" flowers) and food. The stories which are told by the farmers at the store are "earthy" stories that have to do with bodily functions, primarily sexual. A recurrent image is that of spat tobacco ambeer—golden brown, pungent, truly a product of the earth going back to the earth.

Jubal next stays in the town, whose main artery is a river of water. The stories that are told by the local historian have to do with the early boom days when the river was of major significance. The town itself was first called "Three Forks," built at the confluence of the forks of the Powell's River. Early stories spoke of the river's role in the timber industry, of children swimming (buck-nekked, another recurring symbol) in the river, and of the drinking of liquor ("fire-water") in taverns along that river. The spring flood which briefly
destroys modern-day electrical power and communication is that water breaking loose from its appointed place in the river; it conjures up stories of earlier floods, stories of water told at the "filling" station in the heart of the town (where air and water are still free).

The third stage of Jubal's journey is the house of his father's birth in a coal camp, from whence they descend into a coal mine, the fabled realm of fire-in-the-hole. The stories told by the miners are all what I call "blow-em-up" stories; there is fire everywhere in the cigarettes they smoke, in the lighters all the men carry, beneath the smoldering slagheap. The synchronistic fireflies which light up the Bear Grass are symbolic of this primeval energy, and also of the eyes of the supernatural world which are always watching us.

Jubal's final journey is to climb the mountain into the pure air of its heights; all of the elements come into play in this last stage of his quest. We again experience the earthiness of farming and hunting among the Chandlers who live just at the foot of that mountain—hams hanging in the smokehouse, the sow and her brood in the pigpen awaiting their turn, the hunting hound forever fixed on its rock, animal hides nailed to the side of weathered barn-boards, the wild-child chasing barefooted after a buck deer through the snow (water frozen in air). There is water in the rainstorm which sends Jubal into the shelter of his grandaddy's cabin-cave, and fire in the lightning which rips through the darkened mountain air. The fireworks shooting up in colors of red, white, and blue reflect the fire of Jubal's passion to know who he truly is, the
real color of his blood. The final image in the last verse of *Palms of Victory* is that of angel wings, bearing the victor on their pinions up through the air "across the narrow flood . . . the dashing foam," a mixture of water and air, sometimes associated with the frothing mouths of madness, or the substance which is used to put out fires in contemporary extinguishers.

The Pro-Logos is a re-telling of the Welsh myth about the birthing of the first bard known by name; this was a man called Taliesin who probably lived in the sixth century A.D., according to Mara Freeman's (1998) version of the story, "Cauldron of Changes." In my "Celtalachian" rendition, the child (who parallels Jubal) undergoing initiation into rebirth as a bard must shape-shift through these same four elements. He first transforms himself into a jackrabbit running along the earth, then into a rainbow (colors produced by light passing through water) trout swimming in the river water, then into a snow-white dove flying through the air, and finally into a seed, container of the primal energy of fire, whose potential life can only be realized when it is buried in the ground to be born again in the spring.

These four elements form a connection between the natural, physical world inhabited by mortals and the supernatural world inhabited by spirits through "signs," a prominent feature in both Celtic mythology and mountain "superstition." Jubal has been told by his Aunt Ozzy (who is considered a bit "quare," meaning she is in touch with this otherworld) to watch for signs, particularly in the form of animals, which is where he finds them. The white
mare is a predominant Celtic symbol, often the manifestation of goddesses. When she appears, it is in the mist—a mixture of water and air which is neither one nor the other, but that border between the two elements, threshold into the supernatural world. It is said that the animals can speak on this Old Christmas eve, a vestige of the "old country" retained by mountain people; the possibility of her speech is a magical connection between the ancient wildness of humans, and language, which is symbolic of civilization. There is also mist on the river when Jubal spies the fireflies which hover first on the ground, then rise into the air—a combination of all four elements finally coming together when they begin blinking in synchronicity. These fireflies actually do exist in only two places on earth: in the mountains of Japan (the old-old world), and in the mountains of southern Appalachia (the new-old world).

One of the most prevalent signs in myths the world over are birds; they are constant harbingers of the turning of seasons and fortunes, of births and deaths, and of messages from the spiritual world. Jubal's red-tailed hawk fails to conform to the fierce symbolic nature which is generally attributed to it, a creature of war. Instead, it is seen peacefully going with the flow of nature, riding on a thermal of warm (fire-driven) air which is carrying it upward through absolutely no effort of its own, just letting things be as they are. This is a sign for Jubal, a message from the spirit world that he needs to stop fighting against his nature and accept himself for the salamander that he is—a creature who can move between the two worlds of earth and water—and be happy in
either, or in both worlds. Jubal's final choice is to "disappear" around the bend.

In *Ravens and Black Rain*, Elizabeth Sutherland (1985) states that "Celtic mysteries occurred in twi-states between night and day, in dew that was neither rain nor river, in mistletoe that was not a plant or a tree, in the trance state that was neither sleep nor waking . . . The key to the Celtic philosophy is the merging of dark and light, natural and supernatural, conscious and unconscious" (26). This twi-state is also called a "liminal," or "bardo" state, that place between the worlds of the natural and the supernatural when it's not clear if things are "real," or if they're occurring in a dream. Jubal enters this state several times in the course of *Palms of Victory*: asleep in the moonlight at the valley overlook, in the early morning mist when he sees the salamander in the mountaintop creek, dreaming the story of Glessye Barron Bullit's ghost dogs, beside the campfire underneath Squirrel-Head Cindy's rock in the snow, living through the past in Lucinda's closet-trunk world, riding into the coal mine on the mantrip, floating in the mist of the river with the synchronistic fireflies, drifting on his grandaddy's featherbed (stuffed with the pinions of birds) through the thunder-storm, while reading the otherworld-words in his journal. The queen of this bardo state is Glessye Barron Bullitt, a character who came from another world as a small girl. She witnessed the transformation of the Bear Grass from the rough frontier of Three Forks, to the glittering almost-empire of Mineral City, to the boom-and-bust reality of Big Stone Gap, a reality which she refuses to accept but chooses instead to dance in a bardo-ballroom dream of the glory days.
Storytellers speak of something called a "story state," an almost magical suspension of time and space that only rarely occurs between a storyteller and a story-listener. This trance-like state is akin to the Celtic bardo state, occurring as it does in between the two worlds of waking and sleeping. It is well known that the storytelling of bards was a sacred function of Celtic culture; likewise the storytellers of Appalachia continue to be venerated persons in their specific communities, due to these basic beliefs in the sacredness of the spoken word, and the closeness of the natural and supernatural worlds which is revealed in the bardo state.

3) Animism

Celtic mythology is characterized by the belief that all things possess a spirit. Human beings are not the exclusive containers of souls, as in Judeo-Christian theology, but everything living (animals, trees, fruits and flowers) and non-living (rocks, rivers, the wind, heavenly bodies) is endowed with this vital substance of existence. The first two characters which appear in *Palms of Victory* are the road and Jubal's car, the Porsche; both of these symbols are portrayed as not only having human characteristics, but as almost possessing souls. They seem to know where it is that Jubal needs to go and make decisions on where to take him based on a supposed concern for his well-being. Vehicles are an important part of the identity of many mountain people—particularly those from small towns, and particularly male persons. When I was growing up in the mountains of southwest Virginia, there was a specific litany
which was repeated whenever the name of a new boy in town was brought up:
"You know Billy Joe so-and-so?" to which the proper response was, "What's he drive?" A man's car, truck, or (preferably) Jeep is still considered an integral part of his persona; many are given names reflective of this alter-ego, secret-sharer status. Gurney Norman's character of "Divine Right" (1971) names his '63 (the year of Jubal's birth) VW microbus "Urge," which reflects the essence of his own journey-quest to discover his rightful "space."

Trees are another important spirit-bearing element in Celtic mythology, and also in Appalachian "superstition." The tree which Jubal "rides-down" is symbolic of his youthful ability to run wild and play in the woods; it also reflects his need to bend. The cedar tree which the Chief sees outside the Methodist Church during Darwin Duff's funeral is symbolic of an old mountain saying: if a person plants a cedar tree beside a grave, when it grows tall enough to shade that grave the person who planted it will die. The cedar tree possesses a soul which is also a sign from the supernatural world, a message to mortals when it is their turn to cross over. Lucinda's heavy door is made from the trunk of a large oak tree; the oak was the most sacred of trees to the Celts. This door, like that in Ali Baba's cave, will open when it is spoken to ("Open sesame!") because it still contains the spirit of the tree from which it was built. Doors are apparent throughout Palms of Victory: the trailer door which has been left open for Jubal to enter into the wrestling match, the old-fashioned screen door which opens into Pebble's birthing place, the huge door between the portals on the
Minor Building, the doorway into the driftmouth mine covered with moveable brattice-cloth, the rusted lock on the door to Grandaddy Goodloe's cabin.

4) Embracing both Life and Anti-Life/Violence

Grady McWhiney (1988) lists violence among the chief characteristics of the Celtic people; Appalachian people have also been portrayed as being excessively violent. This could be yet another stereotype, or it could be an expression of the Celtic philosophy of the merging of darkness and light. Drinking is a part of this lust for life, as is sex, and most especially the pervasive presence of wrestling. It was the preferred method of settling disputes in Celtic culture; the same is true in my corner of Appalachia yet today—a sanctioned display of same-sex bonding in an eternal grappling with the dark sides of both male and female natures. Wrestling matches occur between Jubal and his twin brothers on his birthday, between the mother and daughter "Precious Angel Orr" on Christmas Eve in Irondale, between Pebble's dad Bood and his detractors (as told in the story of Swift's Silver Mine), and in the climactic encounter between the father and the son in the bottom of the coal mine. The characters wrestle each other physically, as well as verbally; there is a running argument between the twins, and between the two aging sisters Charmie and Ozma, as well as among "the boys" who constantly dispute each other's stories.

5) Embracing Diversity

This is, perhaps, the element of Celtic mythology which has most insured its long-lasting influence as shaper of other cultures. When the Celts conquered
another group of peoples, they didn't destroy their culture as did the Romans; instead, they assimilated their beliefs, their ideologies, their philosophies into the Celtic belief system. Rather than watering down that system, as it would seem, this process actually made the Celtic culture stronger, richer, more distinctive and viable. This notion of cultural diversity has been problematic for Appalachia in the past; there has been a failure to embrace such diversity due to the stereotyping of homogeneity which came from the outside, and the fearful lack of acceptance of those who "aren't from here" which has come from the inside. This is beginning to change, and Appalachia's recent rush to not only accept but to claim and embrace our newly-discovered Melungeon kin is symbolic of that change. These people of unknown origins and race (deemed "free persons of color" for voting purposes in the nineteenth century according to Ball, 1977) are the perfect symbol for this new Appalachian response to identity in diversity. They are mixed, adaptable, full of possibilities, representing the very best possibility—that our identity as a region will at last be discovered by embracing all facets of our culture: darkness and light, the conscious and the unconscious, in both the natural and the supernatural worlds.

The end of Jubal's quest is an acceptance of all the different colors which flow in his blood, of all the different facets of himself, of all the possibilities that lie ahead of him. The final sound that he hears is his own voice, laughing; it is the expression of one hopeful voice in one small corner of Appalachia, the "voiceplace" which this child of the mountains calls home.


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The author currently earns her living as a professional storyteller and folk musician, passing along the old-time tales and tunes she learned while growing up in the Blue Ridge Mountains of southwest Virginia. She has taught preschool, elementary school, and high school; with the completion of this thesis-novel, she has become a published author.

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