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Outer Dark

CORMAC McCARTHY

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OUTER DARK

Cormac McCarthy

Vintage International

VINTAGE BOOKS

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THEY CRESTED OUT on the bluff in the late afternoon sun with their shadows long on the sawgrass and burnt sedge, moving single file and slowly high above the river and with something of its own implacability, pausing and grouping for a moment and going on again strung out in silhouette against the sun and then dropping under the crest of the hill into a fold of blue shadow with light touching them about the head in spurious sanctity until they had gone on for such a time as saw the sun down altogether and they moved in shadow altogether which suited them very well. When they reached the river it was full dark and they made camp and a small fire across which their shapes moved in a nameless black ballet. They cooked whatever it was they had with them in whatever crude vessels and turned in to sleep, sprawled on the packed mud full clothed with their mouths gaped to the stars. They were about with the first light, the bearded one rising and kicking out the other two and still with no word among them rekindling the fire and setting their battered pannikins about it, squatting on their haunches, eating again wordlessly with beltknives, until the bearded one rose and stood spraddlelegged before the fire and closed the other two in a foul white plume of smoke out of and through which they fought suddenly and unannounced and mute and suddenly ceased, picking up their ragged duffel and moving west along the river once again.

~~*SHE SHOOK HIM* awake into the quiet darkness. Hush, she said. Quit hollerin.~~

He sat up. What? he said. What?

She shook him awake from dark to dark, delivered out of the clamorous rabble under black sun and into a night more dolorous, sitting upright and cursing beneath his breath in the bed he shared with her and the nameless weight in her belly.

Awake from this dream:

There was a prophet standing in the square with arms upheld in exhortation to the beggared multitude gathered there. A delegation of human ruin who attended him with blind eyes upturned and puckered stumps and leprous sores. The sun hung on the cusp of eclipse and the prophet spoke to them. This hour the sun would darken and all these souls would be cured of their afflictions before it appeared again. And the dreamer himself was caught up among the supplicants and when they had been blessed and the sun begun to blacken he did push forward and hold up his hand and call out. Me, he cried. Can I be cured? The prophet looked down as if surprised to see him there amidst such pariahs. The sun paused. He said Yes, I think perhaps you will be cured. Then the sun buckled and dark fell like a shout. The last wirethin rim was crept away. They waited. Nothing moved. They waited a long time and it grew chill. Above them hung the stars of another season. There began a restlessness and muttering. The sun did not return. It grew cold and more black and silent and some began to cry out and some despaired but the sun did not return. Now the dreamer grew fearful. Voices were being raised against him. He was caught up in the crowd and the stink of their rage filled his nostrils. They grew seething and more mutinous and he tried to hide among them but they knew him even in that pit of hopeless dark and fell upon him with howls of outrage.

In the morning he heard the tinker's shoddy carillon long through the woods and he rose and stumbled to the door to see what new evil this might be. There had been no one to the cabin for some three months, he himself coming harried and manic into the glade to wave away whoever by chance or obscure purpose should visit so remote a place, he himself slogging through the new spring mud four miles to the store and back once a week for such few things as they needed. Cornmeal and coaloil. And candy for her. When the tinker came rattling his cart in drunken charivari through the clearing he was there with wild arms like one fending back a curse. The tinker looked up, a small gnomish creature wreathed in a morass of grizzled hair, watching him with bland gray eyes.

Sickness here, he called. Got sickness.

The tinker took a few last short steps, backing into the wagon's momentum like a balky mule, halted and lowered the shafts to the ground and passed one ragged blue coat sleeve across his brow. What kind? he said.

The man walked toward him, still waving one hand, his pegged brogans noiseless in the thatch of pineneedles and the only sound in the clearing the tinker's pails penduluming with tin clatter to gradual rest.

Old fevery chill of some kind, the man said. Best not to come round.

The tinker cocked his head. You sure it ain't the pox.

No. Done had the doctor. Said not to allow nobody around.

What is it. One of the youngerns?

No. My sister. Ain't nobody here ceptin me and her.

Well I hope her well anyways. You all need anything? Got everthing for the house from thread to skilletts. Got some awful good knives. Got Dupont's powder and most readyload. Got coffee and tea for when the preacher comes. Got—the tinker lowered his voice and looked about him cunningly—got the best corn whiskey ye ever put in your thout. One j left, he cautioned with upraised finger.

I ain't got no money, the man said.

Well, the tinker said, musing. Listen. I like to help a feller out when I can. You got anything about the place you been lookin to trade off? We might could work up a trade some way. Somethin new and pretty might just set your sister up to where she'd feel better. I got some right pretty bonnets ...

Naw, the man said, toeing the dust. They ain't nothin I need. I thank ye all the same.

Nothin for the lady?

Naw. She's mendin tolerable thank ye.

The tinker looked past him at the ruined shack. He listened to the silence in which the man stood. Looky here, he said.

What is it, the man said.

He motioned with crook'd forefinger. I'll just show ye, he said. Here.

What is it?

The tinker reached down among his traps, groping in a greasy duck sack. He brought forth a small pamphlet and handed it slyly to the man.

The man stared at it, thumbed it open, riffled the crudely printed butcherpaper.

Can ye cipher?

Naw. Not good.

Don't matter noway, the tinker said. It's got pitchers. Here. He reached the book from the man and taking a confiding stance at his side flipped the book open to a sorry drawing of a grotesquely coital couple.

What about that? said the tinker.

The man pushed the book at him. Naw, he said. I don't want nothin. You excuse me. I got to see to my sister.

Well, sure now, the tinker said. I just thought I'd let ye take a peek. Don't hurt nothin of it?

Naw. I got to get on. Maybe next time you come thew I'll need somethin ... He was backing away, the tinker still standing with the little book in his hand and the cupidity in his face gone to a small anger.

All right. Didn't mean nothin by it. I hope you'ns well. And your sister.

Thank ye, said the man. He turned and half lifted one arm in tentative farewell, then thru

both hands into his overalls and strode toward the cabin.

I'll be clost by a few days yet, the tinker called out after him. The man went on. The tinker spat and stepped again between the prone tongues and hoisted the cart and turned it creaking and jangling, and set off again into the woods the way he had come.

The man had stopped short of the door and stood with one foot propped on the sill watching him out of sight. For a while he could hear the rattle and clang of the cart as it labored over the pocked and rutted road, fading, then ceasing into the faint clash of the pin and the drone of insects, and then he went in.

Culla, she said.

Yes.

That pedlar have ary cocoa?

No.

I sure would admire to have me a cup of cocoa.

She sat huddled in a ragged quilt, her feet gripping the bottom rung of the chair, watching the barren fireplace in which the noon light lay among the ashes and in which her voice trembled and returned about her.

He's done left, the man said. He ain't got nothin.

She stirred slightly. You reckon we could have us a fire tonight?

It ain't cold.

It turned cold last night. You said your own self it was cold. I sure do admire a good fire on the evenin. You reckon if it was to turn off kindly cool we could have us a fire?

He was leaning against the doorframe and slicing thin coils of wood away with his pocketknife. Maybe, he said, not listening, never listening.

• • •

Three days after the tinker's visit she had a spasm in her belly. She said: I got a pain.

Is it it? he said, standing suddenly from the bed where he had sat staring out through the one small glass at the unbroken pine forest.

I don't know, she said. I reckon.

He swore softly to himself.

You goin to fetch her?

He looked at her and looked away again. No, he said.

She sat forward in the chair, watching across the room with eyes immense in her thin face. You said you'd fetch her when it come time.

I never, he said. I said Maybe.

Fetch her, she said. Now you fetch her.

I cain't. She'd tell.

Who is they to tell?

Anybody.

You could give her a dollar. Couldn't you give her a dollar not to tell and she'd not tell?

No. Asides she ain't nothin but a old geechee nigger witch noway.

She's been a midnight woman caught them babies lots of times. You said your own self she was a midnight woman used to catch them babies.

She said it. I never.

He could hear her crying. A low bubbling sound, her rocking back and forth. After a while she said: I got another. Ain't you goin to fetch her?

No.

It had begun to rain again. The sun went bleak and pallid toward the woods. He walked into the clearing and looked up at the colorless sky. He looked as if he might be going to say something. After a while he licked the beaded water from his lip and went in again.

Dark came and this time he did have a fire, going out from time to time with the worn axe and splitting kindling and later by lanternlight scouring the near woods for old stumps which he split out and dressed of their rotted hearts, bringing in the hard and weathered shells and stacking them on the floor beside the hearth.

She was propped in the bed now with the frayed and musty quilt still about her. Periodically she would seize the thin iron headrail behind her, coming tautly bowed and slowly up with her breath loud in the room and then subsiding back among the covers like a wounded bird.

He had stopped asking her about it. He just waited, sitting in the chair and nursing the fire. I wisht they'd hush, she said.

What.

Them varmints.

He drew the poker from the fire where he had been absently stirring the coals. Somewhere between the wind's cry and the long rip of rain on the tarpaper roof he heard a dog howl. They ain't botherin you, he said.

He heard her fingers clatter at the iron and her body rattle the springs as it arched. In a few minutes she said: Well I wisht they'd hush.

She wouldn't eat. He set a pan of cornbread on a brick before the fire and warmed it and ate with it the last of the cold meat he had brought from the store. He took the axe from under the bed and set forth one more time for wood. It was still raining but the wind had died and he could hear the dull lowing of an alligator somewhere on the river. When he came in again he stood the axe in the corner and stacked the wood and squatted once again before the fire. He was there for some time before she said his name.

What, he said.

Could you put it under the bed again? I believe it does ease it some. And it's for luck. And toward morning she called him again.

Yes, he said.

What is it? Here.

I don't hear nothin.

Here. Over here.

He went to her. She put his hand on the crude tick.

Your water's broke, he said.

The rain had stopped and a gray light lapped at the window glass. There was no sound but the small patter of waterdrops on the roof, no movement but the slow wash of mist over the glade beyond which the trees rose blackly.

It's done mornin, he said.

I've not slept nary wink.

He was holding watch at the window, his own face drawn and sleepless. I believe it wants to clear, he said.

I wonder if they's ary fire in under them ashes.

He returned to the hearth and poked among the dead coals and blew upon them. I doubt they be a dry stick of wood in the world this mornin, he said.

The sun rose and climbed to a small hot midpoint in the sky. In the yard the man's shadow pooled at his feet, a dark stain in which he stood. In which he moved. In his hand a chipped enamel waterbucket now, headed for the spring, entering the woods where a path went and following it through kneehigh ferns, by rotting footlogs across a pale green fen and into pine wood, scrub hardwoods, the ground soft with compost and lichens, coming finally to a cairn of mossgrown rock beneath which water issued limpid and cold over its bed of suncolored sand. He bent with the pail, watched with bloodrimmed eyes a leopard foot scuttle.

Coming into the clearing again he heard her call out. He crossed the glade rapidly toward the cabin, the water licking over the bucket rim and wetting the leg of his overalls. All right, he said. All right.

But that still wasn't it.

It hurts bad now, she said.

Then let's get on with it.

But it wasn't until midafternoon that she began. He stood before the bed in which she lay bowsprung and panting and her eyes mad and his hands felt huge. Hush, he said.

Cain't ye fetch her?

No. Hush.

The spasms in which she writhed put him more in mind of death. But it wasn't death which she labored far into the fading day.

Late in the afternoon he rose and left her and walked in the glade. Doves were crossing toward the river. He could hear them calling. When he went in again she had crawled off fallen from the bed and lay in the floor clutching the bedstead. He did think she had die

lying there looking up with eyes that held nothing at all. Then her body convulsed and she screamed. He struggled with her, lifting her to the bed again. The head had broken through a pumping welter of blood. He knelt in the bed with one knee, holding her. With his own hand he brought it free, the scrawny body trailing the cord in anneloid writhing down the bloodslimed covers, a beetcolored creature that looked to him like a skinned squirrel. He pinched the mucus from its face with his fingers. It didn't move. He leaned down to her.

Rinthy.

She turned her head. Far look and slow flutter of her pale lashes. I'm done ain't I? she said. Ain't I done?

Yes.

They Lord, she said.

When he picked it up it squalled. He took up the cord like a hank of strange yarn and severed it with the handleless claspknife he carried and tied it off at both ends. A deep gloom had settled in the cabin. His arms were stained with gore to the elbows. He fetched down some towels of washsoftened sacking and wet one in the water-bucket. He wiped the child and wrapped it in a dry towel. It had not stopped wailing.

What is it, she said.

What?

It. What is it.

A chap.

Well, she said.

It's puny.

Don't sound puny.

I don't look for it to live.

It sounds peart enough.

You best sleep some.

I wisht I could, she said. I ain't never been no tireder.

He rose and went to the door, standing for a moment in the long quadrangular light of evening, his elbow against the jamb and his head resting on his forearm. He opened his hand and looked at it. Dried blood sifted in a fine dust from the lines of his palm. After a while he went in and poured water into the tin basin and began to wash his hands and his arms, slowly and with care. When he came past the bed wiping his face with the towel she was asleep.

The child slept too, his old man's face flushed and wrinkled, small fingers clenched. Reaching down and refolding the towel about it he took it up in his arms and looking once again at the woman crossed to the door and outside.

The sand of the road was scored and banded with shadow, dark beneath the pine and cedar trees or fiddle-backed with the slender shade of cane. Shadows which kept compass again all the road's turnings. He stopped from time to time, holding the child gingerly, listening.

When he reached the bridge he turned off the road and took a path along the river, the swollen waters coming in a bloodcolored spume from about the wooden stanchions and fanning in the pool below with a constant and vicious hissing. He followed it down, carrying the child before him delicately, hurrying at a half-jog and keeping one eye skyward as if to measure against his progress the sun's, the deepening shade. Half a mile downriver he came to a creek, a stream of amber swampwater that the river sucked from high grass banks into a brief immiscible stain of dark clarity. Here he left the river and took a new course into the wood.

The country was low and swampy, sawgrass and tule, tufted hummocks among the scrub trees. He veered from the creek to gain drier ground, half running now, breaking through a patch of alder upon a small pothole out of which a heron exploded slowly and rose before him with immense and labored wingbeat.

Before dark he came upon the creek again, smaller and clear, choked with duckwort and watercress, the flat verdant ground stretching away everywhere beneath the sparse cover of trees and a coppery haze quivering like some rare dust in this twilight. The child had come awake again and begun to squall. He entered a stand of cottonwoods where the ground heaved with moss of a fiery nitric green and which he prodded with his foot for a moment and then laid the child upon. It howled redgummed at the pending night. He stood back from it and watched it dumbly. It kicked away the towel and lay naked with legs pedaling. He kneeled forward in the damp earth and covered it again and then rose to his feet and lumbered away through the brush without looking back.

He did not return along the creek but took his bearings by what faint light still lay in the west and struck out across country. The air was dank and stormy. Night fell long and cold through the woods about him and a spectral quietude set in. As if something were about the crickets and nightbirds held in dread. He went on faster. With full dark he was confused in the swampy forest, floundering through sucking quagmires and half running. He did not come upon the river but upon the creek again. Or another creek. He followed it down, in full flight now, the trees beginning to close him in, malign and baleful shapes that reared like enormous androids provoked at the alien insubstantiality of this flesh colliding among them. Long and long after he should have reached the river he was careering through the woods with his hands outstretched before him against whatever the dark might hold. Until he began to stumble and a cold claw was raking upward through his chest. When he came upon the creek again he splashed into it thigh and crotch before he knew it was there. He stopped, his breath roaring, trying to listen. Very far away lightning quaked once, again, soundlessly. The current moved dimly about him. He spat. His saliva bloomed palely on the water and wheeled and slid inexplicably upstream, back the way he had come. He turned and watched it in disbelief. He plunged his arm into the water. It seemed motionless. He spat again, and again the spittle flared and trembled and listed perverse. He surged from the water and began to run in the return direction and at a demented pace through the brush and swamp growth, falling, rising, going on again.

When he crashed into the glade among the cottonwoods he fell headlong and lay there with his cheek to the earth. And as he lay there a far crack of lightning went blue down the sky and bequeathed him in an embryonic bird's first fissured vision of the world and transpiring

instant and outrageous from dark to dark a final view of the grotto and the shapeless whiplasm struggling upon the rich and incunabular moss like a lank swamp hare. He would have taken it for some boneless cognate of his heart's dread had the child not cried.

It howled execration upon the dim camarine world of its nativity wail on wail while he lay there gibbering with palsied jawhasps, his hands putting back the night like some witle paraclete beleaguered with all limbo's clamor.

~~IT WAS EARLY MORNING~~ when the tinker appeared upon the bridge, coming from the woods with a sprightly hop like a stage dwarf after the main company has departed. He peered both up and down the road. Satisfied, he left the bridge and took the path along the river, going bowbacked among the rushes with his curious magelike agility. The sun was well up and the bracken along the shore steamed in the rising warmth. The tinker hummed a little air to himself as he went.

When he came to the branch where it joined the river he cast about for a crossing, coming finally to a narrows a short distance upstream. When he came back into the river path on the far side the tracks he followed had ceased.

Whoa now, he said. Which way we a-goin here?

He recrossed the creek and picked up the man's trace in a furrow of crushed ferns that led into the woods. Ah, he said. We a-takin to the deep pineys.

He lost the tracks more than once going up the branch but he paid that no mind. He was watching for tracks coming from the other way and he could find none. After he had gone a mile or so he ran out of any kind of track at all. He circled and returned, finding nothing. Finally he crossed the branch and went down the far side and very soon he came upon the tracks again. He followed them into a small clearing and here they ceased. He looked about for him. It appeared to be the same place in which the tracks coming up the near side had vanished. As if their maker had met in this forest some dark other self in chemistry with whom he had been fused traceless from the earth. Then he heard the child cry. He turned with a small grin among his wire whiskers. He found it at the far end of the clearing in a cup of moss, naked and crying no louder than a kitten.

Well well, he said, kneeling, you a mouthy chap if ye are a poor'n. He poked a finger at the child as one might a tomato or a melon. Little woodsy colt ain't ye? Looks like somebody mean for ye to stay in the woods.

He folded the towel about it and picked it up and holding it against the bib of his overalls with one arm began his way down the creek again.

When he reached the bridge and the road he had not been gone two hours. The child blinked mindlessly at the high sun. The tinker entered the woods on the other side of the road where he had hidden the cart and searched among his goods until he came up with some cheap gingham in which to wrap the child. It drooped into sleep against his thin chest, its face mauve and wrinkled as though beset already with some anguish or worry. He placed it between some sacks in the floor of the cart and regarded it.

Well, he said, you alive if ye ain't kickin. He stooped and took up the tongues of the cart and set off through the woods, into the road, the wending trackless corridor down which he echoed the clatter of his wagon and the endless tympanic collision of his wares.

He did not stop when he reached the store. He turned left onto the state road, going north now, moving with the same tireless pace. The child had not cried and he had not looked at it. Late in the afternoon he stopped to eat and it did cry, a thin and labored squall as he bent above it, his mouth slow and ruminative, chewing, dry cornbread collecting in his beard and sifting down upon the child. Tell em about it, he said.

When the sun had gone he went on in darkness, the child quiet again as if motion were specific against anything that ailed it. The moon came up and grew small and the road before him went white as salt. He jangled on through an iceblue light in his amulet of sound.

Before midnight he entered a town. Past a mill where a wheel rumbled drunkenly under its race and water fell with a windy slash. Past stores and shops, dark clustered houses, heralded and attended by the outcry of dogs down the empty streets and on again into the patches of farmland. Another mile and he came to a wagon drive and a house a short way from the road that sat likewise in darkness. He pulled up before the door and lowered the cart to the ground. Halloo there, he called.

He waited. After a while light appeared very faint and yellow among the weather-riven slats and a woman's voice said: Who's out there?

Me, said the tinker.

Come in, she said, swinging open the door and standing there in a rough shift with a tall candle in one hand.

He stamped his boots ceremonially once each on the sill and entered. Howdy, he said.

Late hours for a old man ain't it? she said.

It's late hours for a young one. I need me a nurse woman.

I've never questioned that.

No ... here, don't shut the door. It's for this here youngern.

What youngern.

One I got in the cart. Bring that candle here.

She followed him out suspiciously and peered past his shoulder down into the cart where the child lay sleeping.

Looky here, he said.

They Lord God.

Here, let me fetch him out.

You take this candle, she said. I'll fetch him out.

It came awake with a thin yowl. She gathered it up and they went into the house and stretched it out on the crude board table, hovering above it nervously. Lord, she said, it ain't but just borned.

I know it, he said.

Where all did it come from?

I found it in the woods, he said. It'd been thowed away and I found it.

This poor thing needs fed.

I know it, he said. Is they ary nurse about here?

She was biting the backs of her knuckles. Mrs Laird, she said. She's just got her a new chap.

You reckon she'll take it?

She ain't got nary choice. Here, he needs better wrapped. Mind him a minute while I g

some things and we'll go.

Where does she live at?

Just up the road. You mind him a minute.

Setting forth in the faint moonlight, the tinker now at her elbow and her carrying the child wrapped completely from sight, they appeared furtive, clandestine, stepping softly and so their voices over the sandy road in shadows so foreshortened they seemed sprung and frenzied with a violence in which their creators moved with dreamy disconcert.

~~IT DID NOT~~ rain again. He looked for it to, dark and starless as it was, coming down a road he could not see and through a wood kept by nothing he could hear. When he entered the glade a small hot moon came dishing up from the overcast to see him home. There was no light in the cabin. He stood for a moment with the rack of his chestbones rising and falling.

She was sleeping. When he emerged from the cabin again he was carrying the axe. He crossed the glade to the spring path and entered the woods. In a grove of blackhaws he stopped and looked about him and then sank the axe into the earth. He passed his shirtcut across his forehead and took up the axe again and began to hack at the ground with crazy industry.

She had tried once to reach for the lamp but she could not move. She called his name softly in the quiet but there was no answer. The door was open and after a while he was standing by it, he and the axe in an assassin's silhouette against the slack gloss of the moon. He crossed to the table and took up the lamp and lit it, shaping the room from darkness. He turned to see her watching him, pale and disheveled and with such doll's eyes of painted china.

Culla? she said.

You best hope it's me.

Where you been?

Out.

Where's it at?

There was a long silence. He had not set the lamp down. He was holding the stained chimney in one hand and she could hear him breathing in the quiet. The flame trembling unhoused between them held her eyes.

It died, he said.

When she woke in the morning he was not there either. There was a small fire on the hearth and she watched that. He came in after a while bearing wood but he did not speak. He got the dipper from the waterbucket and brought it to her, helping her up with one hand, his neck craned, drinking, on her lips a white paste that clove to the dipper rim.

I want some more, she said.

He brought it. When she had finished she lay back and watched the fire again.

How you feel this mornin? he said.

I don't know. I don't feel much of nothin.

You'll be ailin some for a spell I would reckon.

I feel fevery.

You hungry?

I ain't real hungry.

You want eggs? I believe they's a egg.

If we got ary, she said.

There was one egg. He spooned lard into a pan and fried it over the fire and brought it to her along with a chunk of cornbread. I got to go to the store today, he said.

I got to go somewheres myself but I ain't able.

She was eating very slowly, her eyes on the plate.

Yes, he said. All right. I'll get somethin.

And she was bleeding again. He wet a fresh cloth and gave it to her.

You want anything?he said.

No. I don't want nothin.

He took down a knotted handkerchief from the sideboard and untied it, laying the cloth on the table and unfolding a small sheaf of paper dollars. He counted them and took one, together with what loose coins there were, and put these in the pocket of his overalls. Then he retied the handkerchief with the remaining money and put it back in the cupboard.

I'm gone, he said.

All right.

He stopped at the door and looked at her. She turned her head away slowly.

It was midmorning when he set out and it took him just a little over an hour to reach the store at the junction, the sun warm on his back and the fine pumice of the road already palin and going to dust again. A horsefly followed behind his head as if towed there on a string.

When he got to the store it was closed. He rattled the latch and peered inside. From an upper window a voice called down: We still christians here. You'll have to come back on a weekday. He turned away. By noon he was at the cabin again, sitting on a stump in the glare and carving at it intently with his knife. When he went in she was asleep in her foul bed. He sat before the fireplace watching ashes rise and wheel feebly in the cold light that fell there. She stirred heavily in her sleep, moaning. He watched her. When he could stay no longer he went out again and walked on the road. He could not decide what to do. He sat on a stone by the side of the road and with a dead stick drew outlandish symbols in the dust.

They made their meal that night on the last stale pieces of cornbread, a fine mold like powdered jade beginning on them where they lay dried and curling in the cupboard. She did not even ask him about the store. After she was asleep he again appropriated the quilt from off the bed and spread it upon the floor. He removed his shoes and lay down and folded the quilt over himself and stared at what shadows the joists and beams made upon the roof underside. The lamp guttered and ceased. His eyes were closed. Before he slept he saw again the birth-stunned face, the swamp trees in a dark bower above the pale and naked flesh and the black blood seeping from the navel.

He woke early, the hard boarding laminated against his spine. A smoky light crept on the one pane of glass. He rose and refolded the quilt, replaced it at the foot of the bed and got his shoes and put them on, watching her, finally leaning above her wasted face to hear her breath. He took a drink of water from the bucket and opened the door on this new day, leaning in the doorframe, drinking. He shook the last of the water from the dipper and stretched, one hand to the small of his back.

Before it was full daylight he had gone to the spring again, the empty pail jiggling against his thigh, against pathside briars with a tin squeal, kneeling finally and watching the water suck cold and sandy over the bucket rim, filling and setting it on the bank and laving water on his wrists and forearms, dipping two palmfuls against his forehead, leaning his mouth in the meniscal calm of it, wide and tilting in the water the eyes that watched his eyes.

He set the bucket on the table and took up the weightless dipper and floated it on top. She was watching him.

I'd admire to have me a drink of that there fresh springwater, she said.

He brought it to her, watched her drink.

You want more? he said.

She held up the empty dipper. If there is some, she said.

There's a bucketful if you want it.

She sat with her hands clasped between her breast and her belly while he brought the dipper to her again. Light from the window lay in a niggardly stain across the bed.

If that old window was washed, she said, I bet you could see out ever which way.

Funny to me you never noticed it when you was up and able.

I could get out my own self then, she said. Stead of havin to lay up and look out a window.

He took the empty dipper from her and crossed the room.

I ain't washin no windows, he said.

Well.

Well what?

Nothin. I just said well.

You better just.

I thought I heard that old tinker back this mornin, she said. Messin around.

He had been looking through the cupboard and now he stopped and closed the doors and looked at her. She was staring vacantly out toward the pines. That old tinker, he said, is long gone.

She looked at him. I just wondered, she said. I heard some kind of commotion sounded like him.

Well it wasn't.

She watched him. Where you goin? she said.

Store.

You reckon they got any bit more of that black candy like they had?

I'll see, he said.

All right.

Don't take in no strangers while I'm gone.

She sighed deeply. They ain't a soul in this world but what is a stranger to me, she said.

She was keeping tally of the days. At the end of a week she climbed from the bed and walked to the foot of it and back. The next day she couldn't get up at all. But within the week she was walking about the cabin painfully each time he left.

One evening when he came in she was sitting in the chair, demurely and half-smiling, her figure thin and wasted under the ragged shift she wore as if great age had come upon her and her eyes huge and fever-black. He entered slowly and shut the door. Well, he said. You feel that peart?

I'm better from what I was.

You've fell off considerable, ain't ye?

Lord, she said, I've gained back from what I was. I was puny as ... I wasn't nothin but shadder.

He eased himself down on the bed. When he looked at her again and the light falling slantwise across her he could see like dark tears two milkstains in the thin cotton cloth. He looked away. His hands lay palmupward on his thighs and he sat watching them as if they were somehow unaccountable.

Within the next few days she was walking about in the dooryard, taking the sun, as she said. He watched her poke along in her mincing shuffle, as if she carried an egg between her knees. Mend, woman, he said. He was sitting crosslegged in the shade of the house with the shotgun dismantled and hammering at the worn sear-notch with a piece of wagon spring.

You fixin to tear up daddy's gun, she said.

It ain't daddy's gun, he said, not looking up.

She watched him. You ain't got ary shells, she said.

He held the lockplate between his knees and cocked the hammer. Now damn ye, slip if you can, he said.

What? she said.

I was talkin to the gun.

Culla, she said.

What.

Nothin.

But two days later she stopped him as he came through the door with the chipped and yellowed pail in which he bore water, her standing almost in the doorway and arresting him with one arm. He paused to lean against the jamb and looked down at her. Well, he said, what?

Culla ...

He went past her and put the bucket on the table. She had her hand to her mouth, watching him with huge eyes. He put the dipper in the pail and took a drink. He wiped his mouth and

looked at her.

Culla ...

What, damn it.

I just wanted to ast where it's at.

He winced and his eyes went narrow. What do you mean? he said.

Her hands worked nervously. I just wanted to know where it was you put him ...

In the ground.

Well, she said, I just thought maybe if you was to show me where at I could see it ... and maybe put some flowers or somethin ...

Flowers, he said. It ain't even got a name.

She was twisting her hands again and he came from the table where he had been leaning and started past her.

Culla ...

He stopped at the door and looked at her. She hadn't even looked around.

We could give it one, she said.

It's dead, he said. You don't name things dead.

She turned slowly. It wouldn't hurt nothin, she said.

Damn you, he said. The flowers if you want. I'll show ye.

He crossed the clearing in the windy sunlight, unmindful of her hobbling behind him, stopping at the edge of the woods where the path went until she should catch up, not even turning to watch this child's figure that struggled toward him like a crippled marionette. He pointed out the way to her. To the footlog, he said. Then you want to go right. They's clearin, a clump of blackhaws. You'll see it.

She went happily, flushed, shuffling through the woods and plucking the shy wildflowers that sat upon the sun-patched earth and half shrouded under old leaves glared back a small violence of color upon the bland March skies. With her bouquet clutched in both hands before her she stepped finally into the clearing, a swatch of grass, sunlight, birdcalls, crossing with quiet and guileless rectitude to stand before a patch of black and cloven earth.

Some willingness to disbelief must have made her see and reflect. Certainly it could have held a grown man, this piece of ground gutted and strewn with mulch, slugwhite roots upturned to the disastrous light. She bent slowly and with pain and laid the flowers down. She knelt so for some time, and then she leaned forward and placed one palm on the cloven earth. And then she began to scoop away the dirt with her hands.

She had not dug but a few inches before she came upon packed clay, unsevered roots. She chose another spot and soon uncovered a bedded rock which bared to the oblique lightfall of the sun's retrograde lay scored with powdery axemarks.

His long shadow overrode her but she did not see it. She stood and turned and found herself against his chest. She screamed and fell back, stumbled to the ground crushing the flowers, the blood starting again, warm on her leg. But he was the one: kneeling in the dark.

earth with his writhen face howling at her, saying Now you done it. Now you really went and done it. And her own face still bland and impervious in such wonder he mistook for accusation, silent and inarguable female invective, until he rose and fled, bearing his clenched hands above him threatful, supplicant, to the mute and windy heavens.

THEY ENTERED the lot at a slow jog, the peaceful and ruminative stock coming erect, watchful, shifting with eyes sidled as they passed, the three of them paying no heed, seeming blind with purpose, passing through an ether of smartweed and stale ammonia steaming from the sunbleached chickenrun and on through the open doors of the barn and almost instantly out the other side, marvelously armed with crude agrarian weapons, spade and brush-hook, emerging in an explosion of guineafowl and one screaming sow, unaltered in gait demeanor or speed, parodic figures transposed live and intact and violent out of a proletarian mural and set mobile upon the empty fields, advancing against the twilight, the droning bees and windtilted clover.

THE STORM had abated but rain still fell. He sat watching it with his chin propped on the soured and thinworn knees of his overalls, crouched on his narrow strip of dead earth, the fine clay dust musty and airless even above the rank breath of the wet spring woods. Night came and he slept. When he woke again it was to such darkness he did not trust his balance. He was very cold. He curled himself up on the ground and listened to the rain drifting in a rapid patter with the wind across the forest. When morning came he was sitting again with his knees tucked up, waiting, and with the first smoky portent of light he rose and set forth from the shelter of the cliff and through the steaming woods to the road, now a flume of ashcolored loam through which he struggled with weighted shoes, his hands pocketed and his head cupped between his shoulderblades.

He reached the town before noon, mud slathered to his knees, wading through a thick mire in which the tracks of wagons crossed everywhere with channels of milky gray water entering the square among the midday traffic, a wagon passing him in four pinwheels of flickering mud. He watched it pull up before a store, the horse coming to rest in an ooze that reached its fetlocks and the high wheels of the wagon sucking halfway to their hubs. He reached the store as the driver was turning and getting down. Howdy, he said.

How do, said the driver, pulling a sack from the wagon bed. A mite boggy, ain't she?

Yes tis, he said. You need any help?

Thank ye, said the man. I can get it all right.

He levered the sack onto his shoulder, nodded to Holme standing there holding the door and went in, disappearing to the rear of the building. Holme approached the counter unknitting the kerchief and removing two coins.

Yes, the clerk said, looking up out of the shabby and ludicrous propriety of his celluloid collar and winecolored cravat, his slight figure lost in a huge green coat coarse-woven and yieldless as iron.

Dime's worth of cheese and crackers, Holme said.

A dime's worth each?

No, both.

A nickel's worth each then, the clerk said.

Holme was looking about him at the varieties of merchandise. He looked at the clerk. What? he said.

I said a nickel's worth each.

That'd be a sight of crackers wouldn't it?

I don't know.

Holme seemed to be thinking about something else. After a minute he drummed his knuckles on the counter and looked up. You ever eat cheese and crackers? he said.

Yes, said the clerk with dignity.

Well, I'd like a dime's worth like a person would eat.

The clerk adjusted the shoulders of his weighty coat with a shrug and went down the counter to where a wooden box stood and from which he began to ladle crackers into

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