

# COUNTY

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**Abstract**

County

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*County* is a book that examines relationships and forms myths through careful examination of and conversation with family photographs. The book relies heavily on the passing down of stories from one generation to the next. It looks at what it means to be from the South and focuses on the sacred nature of family.

## Table of Contents

Preface.....	5
Introduction.....	6
The Family.....	16
Louis and Johnny.....	39
Thick as Thieves.....	45
The Barbershop.....	48
Harlan's.....	61
Ernest in County.....	68
Frank.....	84
Ludie Lee's.....	95
Budding Business.....	99
Out and In.....	105
The Hogs .....	115
A Family Photo.....	127
The Sanctity of Family.....	131
Ernest.....	135
Regret.....	138
A Lost Brother.....	139
A Hunt.....	143
Afterword: An Attempt at Discovering My Poetics.....	145

## **Preface**

Margaret is my mother. Ora is my grandmother. She died when I was 21.

I never knew my grandfather, Louis. He died before I was born.

Their story takes place in south Alabama, a town once, now just a community: Brooks.

## Introduction

Ernest's in county waiting on trial for a murder he definitely committed, or was it manslaughter? He did it. He definitely did it. He peers out from behind Louis, embarrassed he had to remove the issued jumpsuit in favor of his Sunday best. This suit feels like a lie in the confines of the cold, concrete floored iron-walled cell. The camera can't capture the goose bumps that rise to the surface of his skin with the flash. The cold collar tightens around his neck. He shivers.

Some of the women want him to wear his prison jumpsuit so there is no question when future generations find the picture. Brotherhood won't allow that. Ernest's the one currently locked up, but the rest of the men are comfortable. They think they could get used to this place, this prison. They aren't afraid. Boldness and audacity seep from their faces. Especially Enos. Enos stares into the camera as if he's dueling with it. Daring the object to pull first. He smirks. He has won.

Claude, Enos, and W.A. all stare into the lens—a collective mug shot.

Preston clearly doesn't belong. He feels he married into something out of the wild west. His eyes are shielded from the surroundings by lenses of his own. A reflection from the flash cuts his face in half, top from bottom. He stands like he's waiting for the top to fall off.

And then there is Louis. W.A. is the father, Louis, his eldest son. Enos, Ernest, and Claude, Louis' younger brothers. Nature tells him he is responsible for their actions, he is to look out for them, help provide for them, yet here they are. Is this somehow his fault? Enos will find himself in trouble with the law, Claude will find himself in trouble with the bottle. Ernest has already found himself struggling with both those demons. And then there is Louis. Level headed, but living outside what most would consider the general boundary of the law. Not out of greed, but of necessity, to feed his wife Ora, his daughter Rosa, and the growing family of nieces and nephews and sisters and brothers who need him. They need an empire that can learn to live with a legal system already aware of its budding presence. Louis glares at the camera, his white shirt glowing above and below the

button on his coat. He reeks of ambition. His hair is slicked back with a good dose of pomade that hasn't seen a comb since he took off his newsboy. It sticks up boyishly. People don't take him seriously. Yet.

In the dead center of the photo there is a light. A hope. A tunnel that leads to freedom. But not for Ernest. Not now. The jailer stands just to the right of the light. She sinks into the shadows, trying to hide. Trying to allow normalcy in a room walled with iron bars. Ernest poses for the picture then takes off his Sunday suit, replaces it with his prison one, and watches his family walk out the door. Everyone knows he's guilty. It's a funny thing, the guilty awaiting trial. He did it. He definitely did it.



Brooks seems to be a place

I've run from

all my life

I tried to escape it

to get away

I hated going there as a kid. There was nothing to do except play in the yard and ride my bike for hours and hours on end. There was an iron rim to a wagon that stood alone half buried in the ground. I was never allowed to explore the woods, really explore, because of my overprotective, anxious grandmother, Ora. I guess she was the only one who had really seen the dangers, really lived that life in a place so dangerous and poor it almost disappeared entirely. In my mind Brooks was nothing, and it had always been nothing. But at one point it was a busy little town with a few stores and beer joints that a cousin of mine later described as like the wild west only worse.

I wouldn't have believed my grandmother even if she had told me this. But I stayed in the yard, under her watchful eye. Waiting for the weekend to be over. Waiting to go back to the city, to civilization, back to cable.

I wish I would've gotten away from the grip of her stare and stepped one foot onto those old logging roads to maybe find pieces of copper or iron, pieces of a past life, of the still, or maybe just some old whiskey bottles, broken and buried, only every now and then catching an occasional ray of sun. All of that was a part of a past with my grandfather Louis that my grandmother wasn't ready to dig up. Ora never talked about my grandfather more than she had to, and she definitely never got over him.

Whenever I'm in those woods now, I hunt on some land we call the George Place. It's named after one of my grandfather's uncles who originally owned the property. I kick dirt onto parts of my boots. I drag my heels or run the toes of my boots over the loose soil. I think it's so I can take

part of it with me when I leave. Back to my world away from this one. I push my way off the trails and through the brambles and bushes and listen to the wind, listen to the land, listen to you, Louis.

I try to find out who I am from someone too dead to tell me. Or are you? Tell me Louis. Tell me your story. Tell me my story.

My boots make no noise. I walk like the ghosts that travel with me. I can smell their fire. Their mash. Their burning sugar.

The rye. The yeast.

Whiskey hasn't been made in these woods in years. Not since Louis.

Whiskey that good hasn't been made since he died.

**Things I already knew about Louis:**

He was a good man.

My grandmother loved him very much.

He treated her well.

People liked him.

He was a farmer.

He made a little moonshine. Maybe a lot.

He had brothers and sisters.

A wife and daughters.

He has 6 grandchildren—including me—and

7 great grandchildren with another on the way.

**The things I know about him now:**

He was a good man, but people feared him.

He wasn't very big. He wasn't loud. He was that quiet type that people knew better than to mess with because if he told you something, he meant it.

Harlan Biggs didn't care for him, and he didn't like Harlan either.

Louis was a farmer. And a barber. And a politician of sorts. And a moonshiner. And a bootlegger. He and his cousin Frank made gallons and gallons a week.

When I walk on the George Place

only

I think of your footsteps

beside me

the only other sounds

the wind whispers back to me

the metal barrel of the gun

But ghosts aren't real

brushing against

are they?

overhanging

limbs

memories and images

of you

I turn around and say your name

buried deep in these woods

but you are gone

boiling mash over a violent fire

I say your name out loud

now come and go

and feel crazy doing so

as you please

I get back to the house just before dark realizing how glad I am to have left the light on over the kitchen sink. The house is filled with dusk.

I enter through the side door that separates the carport from the kitchen.

The house smells old—a mix of mold and mothballs and dust and years of stillness in the absence of life. I'm a disruption.

The screen door shuts behind me. The same metal screen door that's hung there for years. Rusty around the hinges from sideways blowing rain. Somehow the spring can still snap back into place. I feel my grandmother or remember my grandmother—I'm not really sure. I try and ground myself, think about how a door is just a door and now I'm safe inside it.

I haven't set foot inside this house since my grandmother's funeral. Parts of the dining room/ kitchen are exactly how she left them. There are open wooden shelves to my left filled with pots and pans, sticky from grease particles that once floated through the air—frying foods. Sticky enough to keep the thin top dust layer in place.

The kitchen table is to my right. Red, marbled formica and chrome with matching chairs.

My grandmother would fry salmon patties in vegetable oil on cast iron and sit the pan on the table for us to serve ourselves. We always ate them with syrup, and we would always have to fight the mounds of newspapers and magazines that would avalanche towards us from the far end of the table. It doesn't seem natural now to see the table cleared off. Void of clutter.

The light above the kitchen sink guides me through the first part of the house. I open the fridge and grab a beer that never would've been there when my grandmother was alive. When I open it and hear the *kssbbbbbb*, I realize I'm alone. It's dark out now, and the light across the road is the only one a mile in any direction. In that moment, I almost grab my stuff and leave but can't. I turn on music to keep me there, keep me in place, keep me in time. Hank Williams' yodels from the speakers of my computer.

The kitchen, dining and living rooms are all one space. Open concept before that was a thing. The black and white poster of Clark Gable still hangs alone on the wall of the living room. I look at him and say, “Just you and me tonight, Clark.” I think he winks at me.

I take a pull from my beer and walk down the hallway toward the back of the house. I need to check all the rooms to make sure I really am alone. The bathroom is the first door I come to. It’s just past the kitchen on the left side of the hallway.

It was rusty when I was younger and is even rustier now. I would fight the daily bath because the rusty water from the neglected pipes always seemed worse to me than the stickiness of a day’s worth of sweat. My grandmother never agreed. Alabama summers would leave rings of white salt deposits on your forehead. But my skin always smelled like iron for several days after leaving my grandmother’s house. I close the door to the bathroom and try not to think about the rust water shower I would need later.

The other two bedrooms are bare. Homemade quilts drape over mattresses that haven’t been slept on in years. I run my fingers across the iron framework at the foot of each bed then turn out the lights.

I push the door to the back bedroom open; it creaks and bumps into a flat iron on the floor that my grandmother used as a door prop. I think about how badly this could ruin your day if you stubbed your toe on it and laugh when I think about having done this and how my grandmother never threw anything away. Then I cry a little.

This was the room where my grandmother always slept. There was a wood burning fireplace on one wall. The hearth still covered with quart jars of figs, preserves, jams, and stewed okra and tomatoes. Other than these jars, décor is sparse. There is a bed and chest of drawers, but the closet door can’t shut because of the things that have been crammed in it.

I open it all the way, and it's filled floor to ceiling with boxes and clothes and shoes. My grandmother had taken everything she cherished and put it in this closet. My mother and aunt have never found the time to go through it. The same second I open the door is the same second I notice Louis' boots.

I never met him. He died long before I was born. But now, a part of him stares up at me. A man's boots are something sacred. You never mess with a man's boots. Louis had wanted to be buried in his boots, but my grandmother, Ora, couldn't bear to part with them. So here they sat. His boots. This was the biggest part of him that he could have left behind because a man's boots will tell you a story.

I look down at my own boots. Scuffed and creased along the top. Stained with deer blood and clay. Some of the marks match the ones on Louis' boots. I squat and rub the rough spots on my own boots then reach out to touch his. I see him standing in them. I follow his legs to his midsection to his torso to his neck and head. His hands are buried in his pockets, and I see Louis, really see him, for the first time.

I jump back and he stares at me through thick lenses in thick black frames. His eyes say, *Who the hell told you to touch my boots?* I don't know how to respond and stare at him. He smiles and fades away.

I run to the closet and spread the clothes wildly and shift boxes from side to side. He isn't there anymore, but at least he left his boots. My heart calms, and I open the top box. It's filled with loose photographs, so I take it to the front room. I leave the boots because, dead or alive, you just don't mess with a man's boots. I grab another beer and start looking through the photos.



## The Family

Benjamin and Sarah birthed:

James Newton (they called him Jim)

Amanda Elizabeth (Mandy)

Alice

William Asbury (W.A.)

Henry

Martha A

Emma

George Hillary

One more daughter whose name no one knows

WA and Margaret birthed:

Louis

Enos

Ernest

Claude

Mary

Zelda

Pearla

Louis and Ora birthed:

Rosa

Margaret

Louis' Grandparents: Benjamin and Sarah

They both sit perfectly still. Ben thinks the picture machine is way too frivolous. He squints at the lens and the sun. His face is hard with mistrust. Or maybe the sun's just in his eyes.

He looks through the lens like he's having a conversation. His eyes say, *Cut the bullshit*. He looks angry, dying to get back to whatever hellish work he was doing on the cold, sunny day. There isn't rain, and mouths to feed are still just that, and he sits, staring at the lens, waiting for Sarah to let him get up. *Damned woman*.

His brow is furrowed. *How long is this going to take?* He thinks of other things to take his mind off all the work he is going to have to do this afternoon so he isn't so far behind tomorrow. *What is this fool wearing?* Ben almost smiles as he imagines the dress of the photographer covered in mud and shit, but he fights the urge, remembering that only men who dress like the photographer smile in photographs. *Has he ever done real work in his life?* Ben allows the flash to wash over him like absorbing a punch from the machine.

He feels himself pushing back on the lens every bit as hard as the lens and flash push on him.

## HOW TO GET DRESSED FOR A PHOTO:

Ben took off his hat only long enough to take the photo. A wide brimmed woolen Amish style open crowned winter hat. Black. No tie. *A tie is for weddings and funerals.* Even if he wore a tie, it wouldn't have been visible through his now gray beard.

Faded over time, bleached by the sun.

He buttoned the top button of his newest, colored shirt. Then he put on his gray vest. He pulled on wool pants, a matching jacket, and laced up his freshly polished Sunday brogans, almost completely visible when he sits, all but the top two eyelets. After taking off his hat, he combed through the hair with his fingers.

His beard covers most of the vest. His mustache covers the slightest smile.

Ben's hair flips out over his ears making him look younger than he is. Youth is running away from his face but has only made it to the tips of his hair.

He didn't always have a beard.

His right hand rests over his left. His right thumb rubs over the top of the left, calming him. His wrists are exposed, his jacket is a little too small, like a little boy who has outgrown last year's winter coat. He leans towards his wife.

Sarah is in black. She could be on her way to a funeral. She is staring straight ahead. Her right eyebrow is raised higher than her left, the exact opposite of her husband. The left side of her mouth is more turned up than the right. Her left collar hangs lower than the right, her left hand sits further back on her lap, an iron door handle rests on the inside of her elbow.

Her ears are more prominent than her husbands'. Does she hear everything like all good mothers? Can she hear this? She's older than she looks. Her long, graying hair, never cut, is gathered and pulled back in a tight Pentecostal bun.

Sarah's face has no wrinkles, and her skin is clear. She is smiling, thrilled by the idea of the camera and taking a break from her unending chores. She's thrilled by Benjamin being at her side in the middle of the day. Their eyes—his piercing, hers all knowing—acknowledge someone later will peer into their lives. They stare into a future they can't begin to imagine.

They know you better than you know yourself.



## Louis' Parents

Margaret was a mother to four boys and three girls. She was a grandmother and a great-grandmother to people she never met. They only know her by looking at pictures of her.

She's wearing her striped jumper. The wide legs of the jumper stop just below the knee leaving her stout, stocking covered calves exposed. The waistline of the suit sits above what many would consider the location of a waist, and five white buttons stick out even farther than the candy stripes. Her hair is pulled tight, her face is tight, exposing her entire forehead. Her chin points toward the ground and a little to the right casting a shadow over that side of her neck. There is nothing flattering about how she looks. Even her plain leather shoes pigeon toe toward one another.

Margaret stands beside her husband WA. He looks like a mass murderer. He stares emotionless at the camera, his hands resting by his side as if searching for his lap. His mouth, a thin flat line stretching across his face, hides every tooth in his head. His black, ill-fitting suit pants are wider than necessary through the legs and bunch around his ankles. Who did they belong to?

The couple stands proudly on a patch of dirt that does nothing but emphasize just how poor they are. Even the fence behind them can't stay alive. The yard overgrown, pampas grass taller than their heads. The weeds in the garden are the only things thriving, pushing through the background into the fore, encroaching on the couple. Neither of them knows what to do with their hands. They stare into the sun.



## The Bakers

A much younger WA wears a long handlebar mustache that flows beyond his face, translucent and glowing all at once, its own entity, separate from his face. He looks like he could be Wyatt Earp's brother. He doesn't smile but looks happy, full. His hands rest on his lap, but his left one looks anxious. It stands on its side waiting for a drink.

Margaret's hair is still dark, pulled back, of course. She is thin and composed. She tucks her white blouse in her simple skirt. Her left elbow rests on the arm of the rocking chair; her right hand out of sight poking Pearla to keep her standing up straight for the photograph.

They both sit in rocking chairs that aren't rocking. They are strict. Shadows replace WA's eyes and only the bags underneath catch the sun. Margaret glares. It's intended for Pearla, even though they are side by side.

Sarah Jane is alone.

Ben is dead.

She sits still, still transfixed by the lens.

Ernest doesn't look like a killer.

Enos doesn't look like an outlaw.

Louis doesn't look like a bootlegger or a barber or a farmer.

Claude doesn't look like an alcoholic.

Ernest doesn't look like a killer.

Ernest doesn't look like a killer.

They are all still kids but already unable to outrun their fates.

Ernest and Claude wear white. They are too young for coats, and coats are too expensive. They could wear hand me downs from Louis and Enos, but boys are boys and their old shirts are just too dingy. Instead Ernest and Claude wear hand me down blouses from Mary. She has always been the cleanest of the bunch, and even the frill around the neckline is still white. Hence the looks on their faces. Ernest will kill a man. Claude will become an alcoholic.

They win one battle and are allowed to be barefoot for the picture. Claude doesn't even wash his legs.

Ernest's hands hang by his side. His shoulders sag. He pouts a little. He is a little off to the side from the rest of the family. He's the only one framed by the outhouse instead of the family home. A darkened doorway rests above his head. Death. Bad luck. Both.

Claude wants to be like WA. He rests his right hand on his momma's rocking chair and positions his left like it's looking for a drink—like Daddy's. He practices entertaining his future demons and scowls at the camera.

The two older girls, Zelda and Mary, have very different reactions to the camera.

Zelda is angry she's wearing a stupid dress and her hair is in a stupid braid that goes across the top of her stupid forehead. She is tough and already thinking about whose ass she will have to kick for making fun of the way she's dressed. She can't wait to put on her overalls and run barefoot through the field behind the house to the catfish pond. She beats her brothers every time they race and always gets her choice of cane poles left on the bank.

Mary doesn't hate the dress. She is lost imagining marriage and kids of her own and sitting in that same rocking chair in that same skirt and blouse as her mother. Later she will be the one sitting in a dress in the sturdier kitchen chair, long after her poor husband has died, with her grandchildren all around her. She has the same dark eyes as her father, and her mouth cracks just a little as she thinks of her wedding night. Mary's eyes hang, stiff limbs by her side. The bulb flash startles Mary, and for a moment, she realizes just how uncomfortable she is in her own skin.

Enos and Louis almost become part of the background in their dark coats. The white in their shirts and ties is the only break.

Louis looks older than Enos in the photograph but still like a boy. He looks more like his grandmother than like anyone else in the photograph. He has the same ears.

Enos has the same dark eyes as his father, the same dark hair. His head is cocked a little to the side. Something glows above his head. He's not afraid of anyone. He should be afraid of Zelda.

Pearla. Solid, pure white dress, white frill around the neck, oversized white bow. She's only allowed to wear the bow and her hair down because she's so young. Her legs are shadows in black stockings, only visible because common sense says they have to be there. She stands with her legs together and her back straight. Her left arm sticks out. Her mother has just pinched her. She tries to smile, but the tears are beginning to gather in her eyes. She fights back a cry, but the stinging in her left arm burns and burns and feels as if it will never go away. She will be pinched 3 more times before lunch.

Clothes representative of Southern identities. The men wear dark clothes; they do dirty work. The women dressed in white, meant to be pure or at least cover the darkness.

Families will always have something to hide.

Families will be filled with unreasonable expectations.

Families whose parents are looking for a better life for their children.

Families whose children are looking for approval.

Families who never get what they want and repeat the same patterns over and over.



## Louis' Family

Louis, Rosa, and Ora before Margaret. Rosa is dressed in white like a baby should be. She has a ripple in her hair that will ripple her hair into her eighties. It will stay about as short too, only a little grayer.



Ora's cropped hair will skip gray and go straight from the brown in the photograph to solid white. Her hair will stay short because a bun causes headaches and she doesn't have time for that kind of foolishness. She wears a fur coat and felt hat with a ribbon. Things she would never wear later in life when Louis wasn't around. Here is a side of her that I never saw—still looking to impress a husband she loved deeply. Later there just wasn't anyone worth impressing.

Her shoulders are turned toward Louis and her eyes, sad, brave, take a side glance at the lens. She is looking into the future, daring it to do its worst but already accepting her fate and that fate of those around her. Brave, sad eyes.

Ghostly eyes  
is he already gone?  
floating from place to place  
and time to time  
leaving only a stare  
with the bluest of eyes

the bluest eyes  
meet the camera  
introducing themselves  
as what's left  
of a man  
with a quitting body  
not a dying soul

Louis' hair slicked back with a strong dose of pomade. He doesn't seem afraid of dying young.

## **Louis and Johnny**

A friend named Johnny.

Doesn't everyone have a friend named Johnny?

A friend named Johnny you can put your arm around and pull in close for a picture.

A friend named Johnny you let rest his hand on your knee.

Everyone has a friend named Johnny who dresses like you, cuts his hair like you, rolls his pants like you.

Everyone has a friend named Johnny.

Or wishes they did.

Louis and Johnny sit on the side of the house. Its vertical boards sit atop halved logs stilted off the ground by the flattest rocks they could find. It took all day to skim the bottom of the river for rocks that had been washed over enough to hold up a home.

It's a shack. They nailed boards over cracks in the wall to try and keep the winter wind from blowing through. But nothing stops this wind. From getting underneath the outer wall, through the floorboards, finding bare feet that constantly need to be warmed on a hearth.

When the weather turns warm, they take away these same boards so that whatever breeze is blowing can find its way inside.

Louis and Johnny sit on a crate. The same crate they use for:

1. filling with straw to bring in eggs
2. catching chickens
3. transporting beheaded chickens from the killing cone behind the barn to the plucking station on the porch
4. carrying plucked chickens into the kitchen
5. sitting for pictures

The two friends share a seat on the upended, blood stained crate, not a bit concerned about their own beheading. Half of Louis hangs off the side and he leans into Johnny and wraps his left hand around Johnny's shoulder to stay on top of the crate. Johnny holds Louis' knee. Louis reaches between his own crossed legs and grips the crate stool to keep from tumbling into the dirt.

They fight back giggles but keep their lips together. Their lips try to hide their laughter. Their eyes tip them off. Louis' are closed just enough that if he were to squint any harder, his mouth would involuntarily turn up at the ends and creases would form near his temples. The corners of Johnny's mouth have already turned.

They both wear Sunday coats. Johnny's a little darker, newer. Louis's dustier, grayer, more worn. Johnny's coat and pants are very different. Louis's a little closer in color. They both turn the bottoms of their pants legs up. Louis wears dark stockings that match his coat. Johnny wears white to match his shirt. They both wear white shirts. Both are a perfect white. The center of Johnny's torso glows where the lapels of the coat separate. His tie is white, indistinguishable from his shirt. Johnny's brogans lace up above his ankles, and the coat of polish on the instep of his left shines in the sun. Louis' loafers quit at the anklebone, and his laces, darker than the shoe leather, are replacements, fatter than they should be and floppy! The left shoelace loops are ears stretching toward the ground, listening to a secret the right is whispering.

Their haircuts—high, skin tight fades left much longer than necessary on top and slicked back with pomade. Louis combs his straight back from his widow's peak. Johnny parts his on the right side of his head and brushes it back. They love each other like brothers.



## Thick as Thieves

The sun had just made its way into the sky. Louis was already in the front yard spreading corn for the chickens. If he was going to have to get up early anyway he might as well beat the rooster at his own game. The look on the rooster's face was enough to make it worth the effort. He didn't even crow, just stared at Louis. Louis let out a little chuckle before walking back up onto the porch.

*The coffee should be finished by now*, he thought as he went through the screen door. He could hear the percolator bubbling and grabbed his cup off the counter. Ora always told people she didn't even see the point in putting it in the cupboard as much as Louis was with it. He picked up the yellow ceramic cup, the white inside stained light brown, and filled it with black. He brought it to his face and closing his eyes, he let the steam wash over him, warming his lips and nose and eyelids. He pulled the cup away, opened his eyes and rubbed the residual moisture into his skin.

When mornings were warm enough, he would take his coffee on the front porch with a pipe. He felt the morning air would help him clear a cloudy mind. His mind had been plenty cloudy as of late. He had so many contradicting thoughts about the still and the community and the law and the church and all the people belonging to all these groups. What people expected of him and what he expected of himself weighed heavy on him.

He started to light his pipe just as Johnny drove up. He put it down and met Johnny in the yard, skipping the handshake, straight to a giant hug.

"How the hell are ya, Johnny?"

"I'm good, you son of a bitch, how the hell are you?"

"If I were any better you'd have to take me out back and shoot me."

They laughed, looked at each other and hugged again. It had been years since the childhood friends had seen one another.

Johnny had gone to do some work in South Carolina and liked it so much he didn't come back. He had also found a woman, but when her husband was released from prison, Johnny thought it was time to move on. He needed a new start, and thought he might come home for a little while to get his bearings. Louis was the first person he called to tell he was coming home.

Johnny and Louis couldn't get rid of their smiles. They just stood there staring at each other, the air between them full.

"You want a cup of coffee?"

"Love some."

Johnny's eyes looked heavy. He had driven through the night. Louis disappeared through the screen door, catching it and easing it shut before the spring snapped it back into place. Johnny found a seat in one of the rocking chairs on the front porch and took a pipe of his own from his shirt pocket.

He'd had to ride with the windows down the last 2 hours to keep himself awake, and even though the wind had dried his eyes out completely, the still fresh air on Louis's front porch could do him some good.

Louis returned with a fresh cup of coffee and laughed as Johnny held the cup up to his face, letting the steam warm his tired eyes.

"So what's next?"

"Not sure. I was thinking I might see if you needed some extra help."

"On the farm or in the shop?"

"Where can you use me?"

"Well you and I both know you're a hell of a lot better inside than out."

"Shop it is then." Johnny was a much better barber than he was a farm hand, even though Louis knew he could handle both.

The easiest job interview Johnny had ever had, the easiest Louis had ever conducted.

“When can you start?”

“I would say today, but no one gets his hair cut on Sunday, and if he did, he probably wouldn’t want me working the scissors.”

“Take a couple of days to get your things in order and maybe come in Wednesday morning.”

“Sounds good.”

“Where are you staying?”

“Thought I would go see Momma and see if she would let me have my old room for a little while until I could save up a little money to rent a place of my own.”

“Why don’t you stay in the cabin?”

“At the George Place? You know I couldn’t—”

“Yes the hell you could,” a third voice broke in, “and you know Louis ain’t gone let you go nowhere else.”

Ora stepped out onto the porch and went over to Johnny giving him a big neck hug. She was happy to see him. He was happy to see her. He was happy to be there. He was happy to have a place to stay that wasn’t with his momma. He began to tear up.

Ora stopped him, “Now you’re gone have to cut that out if you’re livin’ at my house.”

The three of them laughed. Now, the sweet smell of pipe tobacco was in the morning air.

## The Barber Shop

Louis' barbershop was attached to Claude's store. It had been a storeroom, but Claude knew Louis' bullshitting and barbering could bring some much needed overflow into his store. The walls were shiplap paneling painted white. He hoped the fresh paint and smell of soaps, creams, and aftershave would replace the smell of stale dust.

Claude and Louis even put in a couple of windows and a door with glass panes to the outside that brightened the space. Louis was meticulous and so was his shop. Claude knew this and didn't demand much in rent, only free haircuts for him, his family, and the occasional friend. Louis thought it was a good deal, and they really did get along.

The room was long and narrow. Two barber chairs were on one side, washing machines and a sink were on the other. Calendars and a coat rack hung on the same side as the chairs, and in the back of the room, a curtain that stretched across the space hid a toilet and cleaning supplies.

There was a wood-burning stove on the same wall as the washing machine, and throughout the morning the men drifted to make themselves coffee while Louis drew everyone in to whatever story was coming out of his mouth. When a good friend would come in, Louis would take the friend's cup and disappear behind the curtain where he would add a little nip of his finest he kept behind the bleach.



In the afternoons, Claude would leave a note on the door of his store:

**NEXT DOOR.**

**GET WHAT YOU NEED AND**

**COME HAVE A BEER.**

He would take a bag of bottled beers with him to the barber shop, sharing with the men waiting to get their haircut. People would come over, show him what they got, and pay him.

Nothing mixed better than a cold beer, late afternoon sun pouring through the windows, and the clean smell of the shop. These afternoons made Claude and Louis happy.

Claude wasn't as excited to see Johnny as everyone else was. Johnny owed him money that he knew he wasn't getting back, but that wasn't it. Claude knew that with Johnny back in town, afternoons in the shop wouldn't be the same. He knew that Johnny could replace Louis in the shop without skipping a beat. No one had Louis' charisma, but Johnny was pretty damn close.

He was that good. Louis would be in the fields more often, and Johnny would take care of the shop. Claude was afraid he was going to lose the closeness with his brother.

Johnny was so nervous about showing up late for his first day that he woke up much too early. Louis had given him the key to the shop when he had given him the key to the cabin at the George Place. Until recently, Louis had never locked the doors to his house, much less his barbershop, but because of the Biggs, Louis needed to be a little more careful. So he gave Johnny keys to the cabin and loaned him his spare 12 gauge.

Johnny parked on the side of the shop and unlocked the door by touch; it was still pitch black outside and the air was cold. The storeroom in the shop had been poorly, so Johnny made his way behind the curtain to grab a couple pieces of wood for the stove.

Once he got the stove going, he made a pot of coffee then he sat in the barber chair sipping slowly, letting the coffee warm him throughout. He picked up a mirror and looked into it, the first time he had seen his reflection in days. He had been so concerned about getting out of South Carolina, he hadn't even thought about his appearance. There wouldn't be time after Louis got to the shop to get him to trim his hair; he had to do it himself. He had dark bags under his eyes and wrinkles in the corners of them.

He hadn't had his hair cut in quite a while, and he didn't even have a clue where his razor was. He looked at his watch. Louis agreed to meet him at 7:30. It was 7:00. The sun was just beginning to come up.

He boiled some water and poured it into the wash basin. Steam rose off the surface and he leaned over letting it open his pores. He put his hands over the iron basin and felt the joints in his hands loosen. He took off his coat and unbuttoned his vest. Then he unbuttoned his shirt and removed it and the vest. He stood in his ribbed A-shirt and pinched the fat around his midsection. He turned to the side and looked at his reflection. It wasn't any better. He sucked in, let out, sucked in, let out, then tightened his stomach muscles for just a second before finally relaxing and looking on the counter for a brush.

Johnny grabbed a ceramic mug off the shelf and dipped it in the basin, gathering water to soak a brush. He finished his coffee while the brush soaked then shook it to get rid of the excess water, added some cream to the cup, and dripped a little water on top. Slowly, as if to get a feel for the brush, Johnny moved it in circles working from the center of the mug to the outside walls then back to the center again.

After a couple minutes the cream had completely transformed into a thick lather. It reminded him of churning butter as a child. He'd hated growing up on a farm; churning butter was the one chore he didn't dread. The monotonous motion and sitting in place for a long period of time allowed him rare moments of peace and quiet.

He loved this part of being a barber. It was easy to look deep into the cup, deep in thought, and have a moment of peace before finding ways to start a conversation. He grabbed the chain and turned the bulb off, there was enough natural light in the room now.

He moved the brush, full of lather, to his bearded face creating the same circular motions on its surface as he had in the cup. Smooth, slow circles on his right cheek first then his left, then his chin. Small circles that slowly grew to cover the entire portion of his face. Eventually, his beard had been replaced with the lather and he wet the blade of the straight razor before bringing it to his temple. In long, smooth strokes he removed layers of lather and beard leaving just his bare skin. He cupped his hands in the bottom of the basin and brought the warm water to his face, rinsing the remaining foam away. He didn't need a second shave. His first was perfect.

Johnny grabbed a towel and dried his face and neck. He looked at himself in the mirror. The hair on the back of his head touched his shoulders, the sides flowed past his ears, and the front below his eyebrows.

Johnny hadn't touched a pair of clippers in years. They sat on the shelf, resting on the head. He picked them up by the handles. The metal was cold. He turned them over and looked at the face

of the head. He ran his fingertips along the outside of the handles and sat them in his palm the way he found them on the shelf. He let his hand move up and down and felt the weight of the clippers. They weren't as heavy as he remembered.

He faced the mirror above the washbasin, it still steamed from the shave. Slowly, shaking at first, he pushed the legs of the clippers together.

He picked up the comb and pulled the hair on the back of his head away from his scalp. Pressing the cold at the base of his head, he squeezed the handles together again and again. Hair fell away from his head and into the wash basin. He looked at the clippers and noticed his hands weren't shaking anymore.



The bell hanging from the knob fell against the wood door with a jingle when Louis crossed the threshold.

The air was still and the sun was shining through the windows. Dust particles floated through the air and were caught in the rays of new sunlight.

Louis breathed deep.

He breathed past the dust until he could smell soap and shaving cream. The shop always had a clean smell about it.

It always had a clean look too. Scissors and combs always in jars, the scissors always pointed down, and the combs' teeth all pointed in the same direction. Louis made sure the floor was swept after every customer and mopped every other day. The clippers were brushed and placed on the same part of the counter every day.

Louis had been thinking about the few unhappy regulars he was going to have when they learned he wasn't going to be the only one cutting their hair. But like every other thing in their lives, they would get over it.

"Morning, Louis." Johnny stepped from behind the curtain. He had just finished putting the broom and dust pan away.

"Well, look at you!" Louis said.

"Yeah, I finally got a look at myself," Johnny laughed, "and I couldn't take it any longer."

"I don't blame you. I couldn't take it any longer either. I was going to cut it myself this morning."

"Oh shut the hell up."

Louis laughed and walked behind Johnny to look at the back.

"You didn't miss a spot."

"Yeah I was a little nervous at first, but the rust wore off real quick."

Johnny finished dressing as Louis poured a cup of coffee and settled into the other chair, propping his feet on the footrest.

“You get settled in ok?”

“Oh yeah. Best sleep I’ve had in weeks. It’s so quiet out there.”

“Yeah it is,” Louis said. “Sometimes it’s the quiet that can be the most worrisome.”

They thought a moment before Louis spoke, “Well, why don’t you give me cut and a shave this morning to finish shaking off that rust.”

“You sure? I know how particular you are about your hair.”

“If you are going to butcher somebody’s hair, I’d rather it be mine than a customer’s. Just know, people will see me afterward, and I will have no choice but to tell them it was you that gapped me up and forced me to shave my head entirely.”

“Oh shut the hell up and sit down.”

Louis unbuttoned his vest and shirt. Johnny moved in and out like he was dancing with the chair. His movements were flawless.

Johnny had just finished giving Louis his trim and shave when Claude came in for a cup of coffee. Claude maybe wasn’t the meanest of the Baker brothers, but he was in the running. Johnny got goosebumps on his skin.

“Hey Claude!” Louis said, “Look who’s back in town!”

Louis didn’t know about the money Johnny owed.

Claude didn’t look up from the percolator. He didn’t speak. Johnny knew this moment would come, but he had not expected to be this afraid of a man he had known his whole life. He and Claude had grown up fishing, hunting, playing baseball, and working in the fields together.

“Claude,” Louis said, “What the hell is wrong with you? I said, look who’s back in town!”

“I heard you.”

“Well, aren’t you going to say something?”

“Not likely,” Johnny butted in.

Claude picked the cup of coffee off the counter and returned to his shop.

“What the hell was that about?” Louis asked.

“Long story,” Johnny said.

Before Louis could demand he tell him what was going on, the bells on the door jingled and the first customer of the day crossed the threshold.

“Later,” Johnny said.

“Johnny, is that you?”

“Yeah it’s me.”

“I haven’t seen you in a month of Sundays! How the hell are you?”

“Good, Clive, good. How the hell are you?”

“Fat and sassy.”

“Yeah me too.”

“I almost didn’t recognize you.”

Johnny had put on a good bit of weight in the years he’d been away. His face was much rounder, but at least he had a fresh shave. He was wearing his barber clothes, a plain, white shirt, buttoned to the neck. The last closed button dug into the flesh underneath his chin more than it used to. He wore a dark vest and dark jacket.

“The usual?” Johnny asked.

“Hell, you don’t remember the usual.”

“Clive, you’ve been wearing that same damn haircut since your momma let you into this world.”

“Johnny, you don’t know—“

Johnny held his hand up. “You want it about an inch and a half on the sides and three inches on top so it looks like you have more hair than you really do.”

A big smile crept onto Clive’s face. “Maybe you aren’t as soft as you look.”

As much as Johnny didn’t want to smile, he couldn’t help himself. The corners of his lips turned up.

He felt at home for the first time in a long, long time.

Claude reckoned that ten o'clock was late enough to drink a beer instead of coffee. He didn't need coffee in the barber shop, and he didn't need Louis. He couldn't believe Johnny had just walked right back in and picked up where he had left off. Claude could tell Johnny had been a little afraid when he walked through the door. Claude liked that.

He thought about the different ways to make Johnny sweat over the money. He thought he might hit him with the wooden bat he kept under the cash register and get it over with. Maybe he would invite him on a hunt like when they were kids and point several times to the fact that they were alone in the woods. He could tell when he saw Johnny's face that he was already scared. Maybe he didn't need to do anything at all. Claude decided he would just let Johnny think about it until he couldn't stand it anymore.

## Harlan's

Seven men sit around the table. The room is filled with smoke. The men around the table look between their cards and the others looking back at them. They nurse snuff glasses of 'shine or cold bottles of beer from Harlan's cooler. You never bring your own drink to Harlan's. You buy it when you get here. His house. His rules. No matter how intolerable, it's still the best card game in the county.

Seven wives are home, angry and overworked, thinking about how the money made this week will all be pissed away, promises of winnings, proven false, and the only thing left from the night before is bad breath and a hangover.

You never left Harlan's with more money than you came with. If you won a little, you'd spend it on your bar tab. If you won a lot, you'd get so drunk you didn't know what happened to the money, or wish you had. It wasn't uncommon to win a few hands, catch a little buzz, and wake up in your truck the next morning with a black eye and sore body. Maybe a tire slashed or a headlight busted. Few men ever approached Harlan about these matters, but the ones who did always got the same answer.

"Man, you went on a tear last night. You broke just about every damn thing in the bar and we had to get you outside. I had to take what you owed to pay for the damages, and you fell asleep in your truck."

If you challenged Harlan, he threatened you and you were not invited back to the game, so you shut your mouth.

Harlan's hands were also in all the politics and businesses of Brooks. If it had to do with money or power, Harlan wanted a piece of it.

And if you didn't drink? Well, then you weren't invited to the card game. Harlan wasn't a card shark, and his game depended on lowered inhibitions. If you were too sober to be duped and

planned on leaving the game with your winnings, Harlan would discover the “extra” King of Hearts or Queen of Diamonds or Ace of Spades you had been housing under your chair all night. The men you had been cheating would be so upset they would beat the winnings out of you while Harlan stepped back and watched. Strangely enough, the men would never see actual money returned to their pockets. They would get too caught up in the moment to think that far ahead.

They’d then load you into your own truck. Harlan would drive you home while one of his own men followed behind to pick him up. Harlan would leave you in the seat of the truck parked in the yard and fish through your pockets for whatever was left.

When Harlan and his man had left, the rest of the men would stumble back inside and play a few more hands. Eventually, they would stop playing cards and just drink. They always took the bartender’s word they had drunk more than they thought. Harlan had an agreement with the sheriff that none of the deputies would bother the men as long as they were home before sunrise. The men would stumble to their trucks just as the sun began to cast light through the pines.

**Things I know about Claude:**

Claude frequented Harlan's card games.

Claude was a pretty good card player but  
an even better drinker.

Claude never went home with money;  
he never expected to.

Sometimes he lost more money than he had taken with him.

Harlan would come into Claude's store to settle up.

Claude never questioned his tab.

Harlan never much liked the idea of working. He did, however, like the idea of people working for him. He owned the beer joint where he held the card games. He owned a saw mill where other people did all the work and he reaped the benefits. He owned land with planted pine trees and dabbled in the lumber business. He bought more land from people who couldn't afford to make payments, under the guise he would let them stay there until they got back on their feet and could buy their homesteads back, but of course, they never could make enough to get that far ahead. Most of them were his employees indebted to the very person who was holding them down. He owned heads of cattle and chicken houses and hundreds of goats.

He even had his own whiskey stills. His 'shine wasn't nearly as good or strong as Louis', but he could sell it in parts of the county Louis couldn't. It's easy to transport bootleg liquor when the law is in your pocket.

There was one world he couldn't quite enter openly, politics. In a small town, election results effect everything. Harlan found a way to get into bed with most public officials, especially the sheriff and his deputies, but even these elected officials that were up for re-election didn't trust him. And their opponents damn sure didn't trust him.

The mayor needed someone unbiased who could keep the ballot boxes safe, who wouldn't play the numbers to his advantage, that would offer a fair election. He needed Louis.

Harlan hated Louis. He hated the fact that the public officials, even the ones on his payroll, had rather have Louis keep the ballot boxes than him. Harlan hated the fact that every election cost him a lot of money and effort swaying the newly elected officials.

Louis didn't ask for this responsibility. He did agree to do it through a sense of public service. He did it because he thought it was a better option than sending them home for Harlan to rig. He did wonder on those nights, sitting in the rocking chair by the fire, shotgun laid across the armrests, ballot box under his feet, how he got in this situation in the first place. He thought about his cousins who were on guard, hiding in the woods right outside the house, and his brothers spread through the living room and kitchen and laughed a little. He laughed and thought, *It's a damn shame that the most honest people in this town are bootleggers.*

So they sat and waited, but no one ever came on those nights. Every now and again headlights would search slowly on the highway in front of the house and everyone inside would tense up like neurons in an atom. For that moment the house becoming a ball of energy, waiting to explode, but always the headlights kept moving, kept searching for something else.

As much as he hated doing it, Harlan did nothing. He knew that the sheriffs in his pocket could do nothing to help the backlash he would feel if he murdered Louis and his family while they held the ballot boxes. Plus, they weren't pushovers, and who's to say they would be able to storm the castle anyway. A failed attempt would be even worse than a successful one. He would lose face in a world where he thrived on fear. Attacking Louis' home just wasn't an option.

So on those long nights, he sat in his own rocking chair, on his own front porch; the only sign of life in the darkness, the red glow from the end of his cigarette.

## Ernest in County

Ernest sat on the edge of the bed and stared down at his hands—they still trembled. He couldn't keep his feet still either. Only the balls of his feet touched the ground, and his knees bounced as if he was keeping a baby from crying. He might start tearing up if his knees stopped moving.

Ernest and ■■■ had gotten into the hooch just after lunch. They started talking about what men usually talk about when they drink. Women. The conversation became more difficult when they realized they both loved Rose. Ernest was convinced he was going to marry her. ■■■ had the same idea and had already bought a ring.

They had been in the woods all afternoon shooting guns and drinking. Calling it “hunting” made it ok.

■■■ raised his gun first, but Ernest was a better shot. ■■■'s bullet grazed Ernest's shoulder. Ernest's bullet went straight through ■■■'s heart. Neither would marry Rose now.

Ernest fished around in [REDACTED]'s pockets for his truck keys then lay his friend in the bed of the truck. Ernest looked at the hole in [REDACTED]'s chest. It was so small. He didn't dare look at his back. He felt the cold, sticky blood as he shoved him into the truck, but after he pulled away from the body, he bent down and buried his hands in the sand and scrubbed them against one another until they were no longer sticky.

Every time he had seen a corpse in a funeral, the eyes had been closed and the hands rested peacefully on the stomach. He didn't know how exactly he should go about doing this, so he wiped his tears and snot away with his sleeve and used his fingertips to close the lids shut. He placed the left hand first, then laid the right on top of it.

Ernest felt like he should say something, maybe a prayer, but he couldn't remember any. His head was pounding. Thoughts came like 4 or 5 freight trains running between his ears. His own crying was the whistle. His sobs grew louder. He felt very alone. He sat down, pulled his knees to his chest and shook uncontrollably.

He thought about stopping in to see his momma on the way to the sheriff's office, but seeing her wouldn't do him any good, not really. Plus, it would only upset her. Plus, there was the body in the back. So he drove straight to the sheriff's office. He left both rifles in the bed of the truck.

The Covington News January 10, 1949

**ERNEST BAKER ON TRIAL FOR MURDER IN CIRCUIT COURT**

Brooks Man Charged With Killing [REDACTED]

The trial of Ernest Baker charged with killing [REDACTED] at Brooks sometime ago has been in progress since Tuesday. This killing grew out of an altercation between defendant and deceased near Brooks.

Ernest sat on the edge of the bed looking not at the cement cinder block walls and iron bars that held him there, but at his shaking hands. His hands were the only part of him that still felt alive. The whiskey had worn off. The room was darkening. His head throbbed and his stomach churned.

When all light had left the room, Ernest propped his feet on the bed, lay back, and crossed his hands over his ribcage—just like he had done to ██████'s hands—and stared at the ceiling. There was a crack. Something with movement but no life. He pretended he was in a casket, then (and only then) he was finally able to drift to sleep.



Louis woke up with the sun shining on his bed. He felt another day older, stiffer. He smelled bacon frying and knew Ora had beaten him to the kitchen.

He reached his hands over his head, and stretching, pushed against the bed frame. He swung his feet to the floor and pressed his palms to his eyelids rubbing them open.

He stood up and put on a fresh t-shirt. Ora had laid out a pair of clean overalls and he pulled them on then made his way into the kitchen.

“Morning, Love,” Louis said as he kissed Ora on the cheek.

“Morning. Sleep ok?” she asked.

“Like a rock.”

“That’s good,” she offered, “because it’s going to be a long day.”

“Why’s that?”

“Claude came by right as I was getting up.”

“Already? That’s early for him.”

“That’s how I knew something was wrong, but I told him whatever it was could wait til you was awake.”

“Well...What did he want?”

“Ernest’s in trouble.”

“What happened?” Louis asked as he fished utensils out of the drawer and set a couple plates at the table.

“He didn’t say. Just said to tell you to come over when you could.”

“I’ll head over there after breakfast.”

Ora knew Louis trusted her—hell, all the brothers did—but they had their fair share of secrets, and in some cases, even she felt the less she knew the better.

“Biscuits are almost ready.”

“You spoil me,” he said and gave her a hug from behind.

“Damn right I do,” she said as she slapped him with the kitchen towel. Louis poured coffee for both of them and sat down at the table. So much for work today.



When Ernest woke up the deputy was staring at him through the bars. Ernest had no idea how long he had been there, but his coffee cup was nearly empty. He had to have been there 15 or 20 minutes.

“You awake?”

“Yeah I am. Weirdest thing. It felt like someone was watching me.”

“Get used to it. You probably won’t be sleeping by yourself for a long time.”

Ernest’s eyes dropped and he sank back. The deputy immediately regretted his words. Ernest hadn’t begun to imagine life in prison, but now the wheels were turning.

“Want some breakfast? Cup of coffee?” the deputy asked.

“Sure,” said Ernest. He wasn’t very hungry but knew he ought to eat something.

The toast was cold and the coffee tasted like dirt, but somehow he already felt better. The deputy explained the process of hiring a court appointed attorney, and how they would be moving him from the holding cell to county that afternoon. Ernest didn’t say much, only nodded his head to show he understood what the deputy was saying. He would be in County until the trial. There would be no bail.



Warm yellow yolk spread across his plate as Louis pinched the remainder of the biscuit between his middle finger and thumb and sopped up the mess. Ora had brought out his thick flannel shirt—the air was a little cooler than normal this morning. Louis refilled his coffee cup and grabbed a couple pieces of bacon before heading out the door.

Ora heard the heavy truck door open then slam shut. The engine turning over. Louis putting it in gear and backing out of the yard. She thought of Ernest, wondered what he had done this time, and thought about how it could've been Louis.



Claude was sitting on his porch with his morning pipe.

“That bad huh?” Louis asked as he walked up. He didn’t wait for him to answer before he sat his coffee beside the beer bottles and opened one for himself. He could see in Claude’s eyes it was bad.



Ernest finished his coffee and waited.

He waited for his lawyer.

He waited for his brothers.



Louis and Claude finished the beers. They sat in silence on the porch and stared into the front pasture. Two heifers grazed as a little calf ran clumsily away from them.

“Well, we gotta go up there,” Louis said.

“They ain’t gonna let us in to see him; I tried this morning and they said he couldn’t have any visitors.”

“They’ll let us,” Louis said.



“I’ll figure it out.”

It was all Louis could think to tell Ernest.

“I’ll figure something out.” It took everything he had to believe it.



Louis and Claude left the county jail and walked across the gravel parking lot back to the truck. Louis had a little pull. Maybe he could talk to the judge. He knew if he was going to do anything though, he was going to need some money. And fast. The barber shop barely made ends meet, and crops from that dry field wasn't going to do it either. He didn't own enough cows to sell, and land was all he had. He had a feeling that Claude's store wasn't going to be the answer either, and Louis needed to fix this. He had to. That's what big brothers do. Claude would sit back and let him take care of this like he had every other thing in their lives.

Once when they were little boys, Louis saw an older kid picking on Ernest after school. Claude was sitting on a stump nearby playing with a stick, trying to not draw the attention of the bully to him. Louis took care of the bully. At home, he took care of Claude.

Louis knew Claude would just sit on the stump and wait for someone else to fix the problem this time too—wait for Louis to take care of it. And Louis needed Ernest out. He needed him helping on the farm. He couldn't afford to hire someone who didn't have a personal interest in the family business.

As Louis slid into the driver's seat, he brushed up against the cold metal of the seat belt buckle. A shiver went up his back. The metal made him think of the iron bars he stared through looking at his brother. He settled back into the cracking vinyl bench seat, warmed by the sun. He stared past the gravel in the parking lot, past the chain-link fence crowned with barbed wire, past the jailhouse yard. He stared at the cinderblock side of the jail and suddenly realized how quiet it was in the cab of the truck.

“What are we going to do?” Claude said. Louis knew he meant *you*. What are *you* going to do?

“I don't have any idea,” Louis said.

They sat there together for a few more minutes looking out the windshield. Looking in some way for their brother to walk out the jailhouse door. Explain it was all some big misunderstanding. The door remained shut. No one came outside. Ernest would be in County 'til his trial—if convicted a little longer then shipped up the river to Kilby, the state penitentiary.

Physically, Ernest could handle himself. He really was a tough son of a bitch. Emotionally...

Finally, Claude asked, "Figure it out yet?"

"Not quite," Louis said. They both smiled. Claude because he thought the two of them were lost together. Louis because he knew exactly what he had to do.

Louis also knew he couldn't speak a word of it to his brothers. Claude's drinking had gotten worse. He would be too sloppy for this job, and Louis couldn't trust him.

In Louis' eyes there were two kinds of men. One was the man you told your darkest secrets. If you did something that you weren't supposed to do around this man, that was ok, because you could trust that he wouldn't tell a soul. Then there was the other kind of man. The kind of man that ran around the county from one store to the next talking and blabbing and running his mouth. Claude was the latter.

His daddy showed him how to make the mash—a recipe he tweaked to perfection over the years. He had cleared a little spot in the middle of some pines, not far from the house. Pine needles covered the floor of the woods, so he built a rock pit to keep the fire contained. He would sit by the fire all night, dozing in an old wooden chair, his feet propped on a rock, toes warmed by the fire. The mash gurgled like music, and the sounds grew sweeter as shine ran from the end of the pipe filling glass jugs.

Louis would make a couple gallons for himself and sell the rest to a select few, trying to make only enough to pay for the sugar, yeast, and rye. People paid what they could. Making whiskey was his art, and it made people happy. That made Louis happy.

A couple times in the past when the crops didn't make and money became tight, Ora thought upping whiskey production might be a good idea. She's showed Louis a stream that would make a good water supply on the lower end of the George Place. She's helped him with the first couple of big batches—deep in the woods, just the two of them around the fire. Their daughter, Rosa, asleep in the backseat of the car, the fire her nightlight, and her parents' shadows puppet show out the window. Witches dancing around a fire.

Louis knew he couldn't keep dragging Ora down into the woods night after night, but he needed someone he could trust almost as much as he trusted her. He needed someone who could be as invested as he was, who needed the money, and wouldn't rat him out.

Claude was out of the question; he was too busy with the store and he was already at this point drinking too much. Enos was off somewhere in Oklahoma, and Ernest was too lazy. Making whiskey was a family affair, so even if Johnny had been around, Louis still wouldn't have asked him. He needed a hard worker, someone as poor as he was; he needed Frank.

## Frank

Frank was married to Ora's cousin Vera. Frank and Louis were also cousins.

Louis had a nip or two every night.

Frank drank all the time.

Louis was soft spoken.

Frank roared.

Louis was mild mannered.

Frank had one hell of a temper.

Louis never had an unkind word for Ora.

Frank beat on Vera and the kids every chance he got.

Ora hated Frank.

Frank and Louis got along famously.

When they started really making whiskey, they made two batches a week and worked through the night.

Ora hated Frank.



Frank, Vera, Ora, Louis

Louis and Frank had two ruling principles:

1. Hard work. Sun up to sun down, six days a week.
2. Mean what they said and say what they mean.

That is what landed Frank in prison and left Louis in the woods, alone.



“Frank, I’ve got a good mind to come out there and chop you,” Neighbor said calmly. Frank was walking down the clay road that ran past this neighbor’s house. It was early on a Sunday morning. Frank had been hunting. Neighbor was using an ax to chop kindling for the wood stove. Frank and neighbor didn’t like each other. There had been a dispute over some property lines.

“What’d you say?” Frank squared his shoulders at Neighbor, his feet firmly planted in the soft clay.

“I said, I believe I’ll come out there with this here ax and chop you down,” said Neighbor.

Frank said, “If you take one damn step out of that yard, I’m going to kill you.”

Neighbor took one step out of the yard. He didn’t make it across the ditch.

Frank was sent to the state pen in Atmore. Vera and the kids moved in with Louis and Ora. They both loved having them around, Ora especially. She knew they were safer with her and Louis. Ora hoped Frank stayed locked up forever and that she and Louis could help raise the kids. Vera wanted Frank out. Even though she knew he wasn’t the best husband or father to her kids, he was still her husband and still their father. Louis wanted him out. He never told Ora.

48

Name

Alias

Crime

Murder 2nd Degree

Sentence Began

4-24-44

Term

40 yrs.

Received

5-11-44

Serial No.

49772

Race

White

Sex

Male

Age

24

Court No.

5998

Long  
Short

Time

7-27-84 thru

Time

12-27-70 } 1-16-46

Time

Time

Hold Over

Ex. Convict

County

Escaped 1-13-46

Recaptured 1-16-46 Vol. sur.

Date of Death

Cause and Place

Discharged Paroled P# 13 atmore 11-11-49

Temporary Paroles

Name:

County:

White

Murder 2<sup>nd</sup> Degree

Male

40 years

Escaped

White

Male

Recaptured

Atmore

Parole

Frank hadn't even served 2 years of his 40-year sentence when he tried to escape. Trustees walk away all the time. Somehow, even after that, words like "model prisoner" found their way into his file. He really was one hell of a worker, so he got an early parole. Real early.

Louis stared into the fire trying to think. He rocked on the back end of the rockers and propped his feet on the brick hearth. He stared as the flames jumped for the top of the chimney. He felt like those flames—looking for a way to escape, but never finding it and falling back again.

Maybe it was the whiskey, but there was single flame that stood out. It leapt and stretched higher than the others, but it always returned to its spot with the rest of the flames in the hottest part of the fire. A couple of times, the tip of the flame broke off from the rest of it, but without that fire it just fell apart into the air and vanished into nothing.

Louis stared into the fire. The weather had started to change. It was cooler now; rainier. A quick breeze blew under the floorboards. He shivered and snuggled further into his rocker, further into his glass. The whiskey burned as it made its way down his throat.

Ora walked in from the kitchen and saw him sitting by himself, a shadow in front of the only source of light. She was haunted by his shadow as much as he was haunted by the fire.

Ora hated Louis for helping with Frank's early release. She didn't talk to him for a month, but deep down she understood. Louis needed Frank. They needed the money to help get Ernest out. She needed Frank. She hated that. But Frank was a hard worker, loyal, and quiet about the things that needed to be kept quiet.

When Louis and Frank made moonshine together, Frank would stay up with Louis three or four nights in a row and make enough whiskey to supply the entire county. He also helped Louis sell it, was a good driver, and had good ideas about how to haul the liquor.

There wasn't a man in the county who knew those old dirt roads and logging roads like Frank. He stayed calm and always seemed to be in control.

Frank also came up with the idea to sell moonshine to the black folks of Brooks. Although Harlan already had a grip on the market, Frank saw an opportunity too good to pass up. Louis and Frank were both aware of the consequences of undermining Harlan. They didn't care. They hated the son of a bitch, and unlike the rest of the county, they weren't afraid of him either.

## Ludie Lee's

Frank had the idea while sitting on a barstool at Ludie's. Ludie's bar was two separate, adjacent rooms, one room for whites, the other for blacks. A Dutch door, the kind of deal where the top and bottom can each open on two separate hinges, divided the two rooms and was positioned on the section of the dividing wall right next to the bar. This way, as long as everyone could get along, Ludie would open the top half of the door, creating a much needed cross breeze while at the same time keeping the customary separation between black and white. Every now and then, Ludie would open the bottom half of the door as well, and it felt in those moments that the two groups were almost in the same place. But usually she only did this when she needed to sweep or drag a table from one room to the next, then she would shut it back.

And for the most part, everyone got along, but if there was a night where she had a couple of rowdy Klan sympathizers or members, she would close the top half of the door. If there was a large crowd on the black side of the room, Ludie would tell the Klan supporters that they could shut the hell up or leave. The Klan members would often threaten to burn the place down, but Ludie wasn't worried. She didn't buy into that bullshit. For the most part everyone got along.

Money is money, and it has no racial alliance.

Frank was sitting on a bar stool at Ludie's when the idea hit him. He drained what his beer, left money on the counter, and went straight to the field where Louis was working.

The conversation went something like this:

“Louis! Louis! We go to Ludie’s and talk to the black folks,” Frank began.

“What?” Louis asked.

“We talk to them see. We feel them out. Find one we can sorta trust, and ask him if he needs some hooch.”

“How many beers have you had this afternoon?” Louis said.

“Think about it. They love their dances and singings and get together just as much as us white folks. Wherever there’s a dance, there’s liquor.”

“But they already get liquor from Harlan,” Louis started, “what’s going to make them want to buy from us instead of him?”

“We will give them a fair price.”

“That’s it? That’s your great idea?” Louis asked, “Don’t cheat black folks out of money? Give them the white folks price?”

“It’ll work,” Frank said.

“We’ll see.”

Ludie Lee opened her beer joint in downtown Brooks. She was a big woman with a big personality, and she served the coldest beer in town. Everyone knew Ludie. In a time and town and place where men ran everything, she figured owning the bar could be a way to try her hand at politics. She'd be there to lend an ear. Overhear secrets. Become every man's confidante.

There weren't many beer joints in Brooks, so Ludie's place couldn't survive as a whites only establishment. To Ludie, all money was green, she didn't give a shit about the color of the hand that gave it to her. But laws were laws, and social norms were social norms. The bar was two large rooms. One for white. One for black. Two entrances. One white. One black. The white side was a little larger because of the stage for live bands.

The building was cinderblock walls and a tin roof. You could almost run your fingers through the air inside; it was so thick with cigarette smoke and humidity. There were a couple of big windows on each side, but Ludie liked it dark. "Keeps it cooler," she would say when someone asked her about raising the blinds. Every once in a while some brave soul would start to open them anyway. Ludie would calmly ask if he liked having both those hands and suggest he not do what he was thinking about doing. Really, she just thought the darker it was, the more people would drink.

Men from Brooks would often slip into Ludie Lee's for a beer after work and waste an afternoon the way men do. Louis and Frank saw this as a perfect place to drum up business, and even though she didn't sell liquor, they would give Ludie a quart here and there so she wouldn't be upset with them encouraging men to stay home and drink.

Everyone came to Ludie's bar. She opened at lunch every day but Sunday, and stayed open until the bar was empty. Friday and Saturday nights the dark room would be filled with people and live music. This was the land of Hank Williams. He was raised 10 miles or so from the bar and had frequented a time or two. These were his people, and on Friday and Saturday nights, the music

blasting from Ludie's could prove it. The doors to the outside had to be propped open, and the top half of the Dutch door kept open.

Sounds of the steel guitar and drums and voice broke through the smoke. White and black danced separately. The sounds of the band never had quite the same affect on the black side of the bar, but the black folks danced anyway.

The place smelled of spilled beer, burning cigarettes, and sweat. Sticky limbs, wet hair, hardened torsos all moving at once in rhythm. A few naked bulbs hanging from the ceiling cast dim light and dimmer shadows throughout. Even fewer bulbs in the black section. Ludie felt it was a smart way to save money.

## Budding Business

Frank and Louis wove their way through Friday night's smoke and mess of bodies. The three or four bar stools on the end closest to the black section of the bar were left open. Frank took the one closest to the Dutch door and Louis sat beside him. They talked in glances. They looked into the other room then nodded or shook their heads at one another until they found someone they recognized. They tried to look at his movements, his eyes.

They waited until he went out for some fresh air and pushed through the crowd to meet him outside.

Felix was in his thirties. He worked for Louis' cousin, and when Frank and Louis burst through the door, fear gripped his face.

"Felix, right?" Louis asked.

He didn't respond. He looked beside him, behind him and back at Louis. Pointed a finger at his chest and with his eyes asked, *who me?*

"Felix is your name right? You work for the Hill's," Louis added.

"Yeah that's right," Felix said, worried.

"We need to talk to you," Frank began.

"I-I need to get back inside," Felix said. No matter how decent a white man or two seemed, talking to whites outside a bar in the dark was never a good idea. He turned to leave but Frank continued.

"We need your help," Frank said. Louis looked at him. If Felix wasn't interested in the conversation, Louis was going to let him walk. He never thought he, nor Frank, would ever ask a black man for anything.

"I can't help you with anything, mister. I think you're looking for someone else."

Frank stared at him for a moment. The three men stuck under the light of the moon. Frank looked him in the eyes and said, "You're wrong. It's you. It has to be you."

Ora looked out the living room window as headlights pulled into the yard. The beat up Oldsmobile pulled around the side of the house and the engine cut off just as Louis came out of the bedroom.

"Who is that?" Ora asked.

"The guy I was telling you about. Felix."

"He's here?" she asked.

"Well where else would he be?"

"Where's Frank?"

"He's on his way."

"Well, have him come in. He's going to have to try it before he agrees to sell it."

Louis went out the back door and came in through the screen as Ora sat three glasses on the kitchen table and took a quart of 'shine out of the cupboard.

"Ma'am," Felix said. He took his hat off and followed Louis into the kitchen. His eyes stayed down.

Ora stared at him then nodded. She said, "Look me in the eyes."

Felix's gaze shifted upward. He looked defeated already.

"You drink much?"

"A little, ma'am."

"How little?"

"A few beers a week, a nip every now and again."

"You still work for the Hills?"

"Yes ma'am."

“Ever been in trouble with any of them?”

“No ma’am. Not ever.”

His eyes looked down again.

“That’s enough Ora,” Louis broke in. “Leave Felix be. That’s no way to treat our guest.”

She glared at Louis. “I’ll talk when I want to talk and ask questions when I want to ask questions. This is my house too. You got that?”

Louis nodded, “Yes ma’am.”

“Look at me,” she said to Felix. He looked up and met her eyes. “Can I trust you?”

He thought for a moment. He needed to say the right thing.

“I said, can I trust you? Can we trust you?”

He looked her in the eyes without blinking, “Ma’am all I have is my word. A poor black man’s word, but you’ve got that.”

“Sit on down,” she said and filled the three snuff glasses with whiskey. As they toasted, lights from Frank’s truck shone in the yard. They threw back a drink and Ora went to the cupboard for another glass. Louis got up from the table, took the glass from her hands, and kissed her forehead.

“C’mon Felix,” Louis said as he grabbed the quart jar and headed for the back porch.

Ora watched them walk through the screen. She had done all she could do.

The three men sat on the porch, smoking pipes and sipping whiskey from snuff glasses until they reached an agreement. Louis and Frank were making whiskey runs a couple times a week. Felix would meet Frank every Sunday night, and they would go to whatever spot Louis and Frank chose that week to stash the whiskey they had set aside for their new customers. They didn't need to tell Felix what would happen if he were to try to double cross them. He had no intention to do so anyway.

Felix would be responsible for taking the gallons home and pouring up pints. He would bring the empty gallons back and tell the buyers to bring back the pints if they wanted more. The whiskey would sell for \$0.75 a pint, undercutting Harlan whose pints sold for \$1.25. Felix was to keep a dime from every pint he sold.

Felix was terrified of Harlan Biggs.

Louis and Frank didn't give a damn about Harlan Biggs.

Ora stood at the back door listening. A couple of times during the conversation she thought about busting through the door to fix something Frank might be messing up. But Louis always beat her to it, stepping in and adjusting whatever he thought Frank may not be thinking about. Frank would have fought Ora tooth and nails just because, but he always agreed with Louis. It worked out better this way. She went into the living room and sank into the wooden rocker—her knees cracking as they bent.

Louis, Frank, and Felix had set up quite the operation. Business was booming. Tensions ran high between their group and Harlan's. There were a few times where Felix had to be talked into staying with the operation. He really was afraid and rightfully so. Black men often went missing when they caused problems for powerful whites. Frank and Louis both did a good job reassuring him he would be ok. They didn't make empty promises.

Harlan was even more afraid of Frank than he was of Louis, but he had to do something about their attempt at overtaking his empire. He sent threats and warnings. None of them ever heeded. In fact, the threats were reciprocated and warnings were heightened especially when about threats to Felix.

Louis and Frank had made a promise to Felix, and they intended to keep it. They felt a responsibility and almost guilt when they saw how afraid he was. He didn't ask to be a part of this. They had dragged him into it. Now it was their job to protect him.

It all became a moot point when Frank went to prison. Louis couldn't keep up the operation alone, and Felix didn't feel nearly as safe. Production and sales came to a halt, and Harlan took over where he left off, watering down his whiskey and charging \$1.50 now to make up for losses.

Louis went back to only making enough for his friends.

Felix only came around now to say hi or have lunch with the Bakers. Ora had really grown to like having Felix around. Louis had too. They were both sad when Frank got pinched because they knew it was the end of this era. Louis always dug out a couple quarts for Felix to take home with him.

But Ernest was in County awaiting trial, and Louis figured making moonshine was the only way to get him out. Grease some throats with white lightning and pad some pockets with cash.

Louis needed help; he needed Frank.

## Out and In

Frank walked out of Atmore in 1949

a free man

a model prisoner

even after escape and recapture.

He served four and half years of a 40-year sentence.

Ora hated Louis for it, but she understood.

God, she hated Frank.

The jailer brought a bundle of clothes and lay them on the counter directly under the bright hanging light.

-1 pair blue jeans (32x30)

-1 white cotton undershirt (L)

-1 button up men's dress shirt (L)

-1 denim jacket (L)

-1 pair men's boots (size 10)

-1 pair white socks

-1 pair white underwear

The clothes felt stiffer and newer than anything Frank ever remembered wearing. He picked up the bundle and went to change.

The denim was rough against his palms. When he pulled the jeans on, creases ran the length of his legs, they'd been folded the past four and half years. All of a sudden he longed for his old prison jumpsuit. Maybe they would let him keep it.

By the time he finished buttoning his jacket and pulling on the denim jacket he felt more like himself. Then his boots, God he had missed his boots. They echoed in the empty hallway of the prison. The sound of one life leaving another behind. He stepped out into the front stoop of the prison and breathed what felt like his first breath in years. He stepped out from the awning a free man and into the pouring rain.

Vera opened the door of the car and ran to him. He picked her up and hugged her close. Both got soaking wet, his boots sinking in the gravel, their bodies pressed against one another, sharing the rain, sharing breath.

Louis and Ora stayed in the car. She wasn't going to greet that son of a bitch. Neither was Louis. He didn't want to ride the hour and a half back soaking wet. He laughed a little when he saw how happy they were. Ora glared at him. He quit smiling.

"People change," he said.

"No they don't," she said.

"They can," he said.

"Not him," she said and she turned back to the front, glaring out the windshield. She didn't say a word the entire ride back. The other three were too lost in conversation to pay her much attention.

White Male Murder 2nd Degree Male 40 years Escaped White Male Recaptured Atmore White Parole  
Male Released Male White Male Sentenced 40 years Recaptured Escaped Murder Murder Murder  
White Male Parole White Male Received 40-year Sentence 4-24-44 age 24 Escaped Discharged 1949  
White Male White Male White Male Parole Parole 11-11-49

Frank walked out of the penitentiary and into the woods. While Louis had waited for paperwork to be pushed through, he re-built his second still. They called the land the George Place after Louis' grandfather. The still sat on the dead center of the property, deep in the woods, buried under pine limbs.

Mash bubbles over a fire  
evaporates to steam  
cools to liquid  
drips out a copper pipe as pure  
shine.

The still was buried deep enough that no one should know it was there and far enough from property lines that no one would stumble across it accidentally. If you found it, you were bad lost or looking for something. It was only a half mile behind the hunting cabin where Johnny had been staying since he was back in town. Louis was going to have to ask him to move. He couldn't let Johnny know about the still. Johnny knew Frank was getting out. He knew Frank and his family would need a place to stay besides with Louis and Ora. Johnny gave the keys to Vera one night at Louis' and told her he had already moved his stuff out. Louis was relieved.

Louis took a swig and said, "I'll be damned Frank! This is the best whiskey I've ever had!"

Frank nodded and smiled and turned back to the fire.

"I mean it Frank. The best damn whiskey I've ever had in my entire life."

The smoldering fire stoked back into flames, casting light and shadows against a coal black backdrop of trees and bushes. Even Frank's silhouette smiled as Frank poked and prodded the flame. He made it tickle the bottom of the copper pot.

Louis stood above the lip of the pot stirring the mash.

Despite the winter air, both men were drenched in sweat from the hot fire.

It was quiet in the woods that night. Quiet is good.



Johnny had started working more and more by himself at the shop. He didn't think much about it. Just figured Louis was tired of cutting hair and was taking a little break. He knew Louis made whiskey. Louis always took care of him when he made a fresh batch. Johnny had no idea how much he actually made, nor that Louis' business was part of the reason Frank was out.

Claude knew exactly what Louis was up to, especially when Louis put Johnny completely in charge and only came in for a hair cut or an afternoon beer. Johnny and Claude's relationship was on the mend. Johnny paid him back everything owed plus interest only a few weeks after coming into town.

Claude began to like having Johnny around.

Johnny occasionally asked how Frank got out so early.

Claude pretended he didn't know.

Johnny would ask occasionally what they were doing about Ernest.

Claude pretended he didn't know.

Louis never told Claude anything.

Claude pretended he didn't know.

Greasing the pockets of the wealthy  
takes much effort from the poor.

## The Hogs

The old truck rumbled to a stop. Knee high Bahea grass tickled the running boards along each side. It was a sunny day, and the hood was warmed by both motor and sun.

The bed of the truck was covered with a giant canvas tarpaulin. Underneath the tarp 5 pound bags of sugar filled the floor space. No one was baking cakes.

Louis left Frank in the yard to run inside and speak to Ora. She was beside herself.

“They’re gone,” she said. She was pacing.

“Who’s gone?” Louis asked.

“The hogs. A section of the fences must’ve broke or something because when I went to feed them this morning there were nary a one left in the pen.”

This wasn’t the first time the pigs got loose, and it probably wouldn’t be the last, but Louis had to find them. They needed those hogs to sell, and a couple to eat during the winter.

“We’ll find ‘em,” Louis said.

He went back out the back door, down to the truck at the edge of the yard where Frank had just finished unloading the bags of sugar into the driest part of the barn. He was sitting on the tailgate smoking a cigarette.

“Ready?” Frank asked.

“Not quite. Pigs got out. I need you to help me find them.”

They went through the wooden fence, past the barn toward the old fishing pond where the pigpen was just on the other side. You don’t keep hogs right next to the house on account of the smell, especially in the warmer months. The rotting food, shit, and mud came together to create something godawful.

Louis’ hog pen, on the other side of the pond, was a little less than a quarter of a mile into the woods. There was one man-made trail that led in and one man-made trail that led out. When

Louis and Frank made it to the pen, they saw an entire section of the pen lying on the ground. The pigs had walked right over it. Their tracks led into the woods, hoof prints, away from the pen and pond and house and straight towards Harlan's saw mill just on the other side of the planted pines.

“Great,” Louis said.

“What kind of person builds a fence with three sides?” Frank smiled, making light of the situation. He loved being around Louis when he had to deal with Harlan. It made Louis seem more human—angrier, less forgiving. It made Frank feel like less of an asshole, worthy of Louis' company.



Frank had just finished hooking up the trailer when Louis brought them two glasses of sweet tea.

“You found them already?” Ora asked as she walked across the yard toward them. She had her doubts.

“We’ve got a good idea where they might be,” Louis said.

“And where is that?” she asked.

“Hoof prints headed straight towards the saw mill,” Frank said.

“You ain’t really going over there to look for them are you?” Ora said.

“We don’t really have much of a choice, Ora. We need them pigs,” Louis said.

She squinted at the sun and raised her hand flat above her eyebrows to cast a shade across her face. She stared at the two for a moment wanting to say something to spite Frank or prove him wrong or question his motives. She didn’t want him around Louis. She didn’t want him around her cousin. But she couldn’t think of anything to say, so she turned away from them. She wiped her sweaty hands on her apron and went back to the house, slamming the screen door behind her.

Frank kind of grinned. He never spoke much around Ora or ill of her ever. He was afraid it would get back to Louis, and honestly, he was a little afraid of her. He did like seeing her feathers ruffled every now and then.

Louis grinned too, “She knows I’m right is all. That’s why she’s so mad.”

As soon as that last word came out of his mouth the screen door flew open and Ora burst through, towards them as fast as she had left. She wore a scowl on her face and carried the .20 gauge in her hands. Frank flinched and ducked behind Louis. Louis kind of stepped in front of Frank. Maybe this had pushed her over the edge.

When she got to the truck where the two men both stood afraid, she straightened the shotgun out in front her offering it to Louis. He took it as a peace offering.

“You’re going to get your fool selves killed is what you’re going to do.” And she walked away. She smiled as soon as she turned around, knowing if Frank was good for something it was this. “Don’t come back without those hogs!” she yelled behind her, “And take Johnny with you; you might need some help.”

Louis walked into the shop just as a customer was sitting down.

“How you doing this morning, sir?” Louis asked.

“Doing good Louis, how you?”

“I’ve been better. Got some hogs loose, and I need to borrow Johnny for a couple hours.”

“Aw hell Louis, I’ve been waiting twenty minutes, and I need a trim pretty bad.”

“You sure do, but you know what you need more?” Louis asked him.

“What’s that?”

“A free one. Let me have Johnny now and I’ll come cut your hair myself this evening.”

Customer thought on it a minute, “Bring a pint with you for us to sip on while you cut it and you got yourself a deal.”

“Deal. Tell me you got some of that pound cake laying around and I’ll hurry over sooner.”

“You know we do.”

Louis flipped the sign to CLOSED and looked at Johnny, “Come on.”

Claude saw the three laughing as they piled in the truck and drove away.

Louis, Frank, and Johnny pulled up to the saw mill just as Louis had finished telling Johnny all about Harlan. Johnny knew who Harlan Biggs was; he did not know Louis and Frank had kicked the hornet's nest. Personally, he stayed as far away from the son of a bitch as possible. But he had a feeling that after today, he wouldn't have much of a choice.

The truck came to a stop on the middle of the logging road that led to the mill. The smell of cut wood, that scent of freshly shaved pine and cedar, was tainted by the stink of hogs. Harlan was too lazy to move them to his own pens, but instead had his men build a makeshift pen to house them until later. The same men that built the fence sat atop the posts making sure no one came and got them. At least for free.

The hogs were Louis' for sure—a clear LB marked on each of their left ears. Harlan had left the men with clear instructions, if the owner came looking for them. He knew damn well they were Louis' hogs, but pretended they had just wandered up from afar. “If the owner of the hogs comes back for them, you tell him he's welcome for us keeping them safe, and he can have them back as soon as he pays the small finder's fee.”

In Harlan's eyes, the pigs had trespassed, and Louis was going to have to pay if he wanted them back.

“Afternoon, boys,” Louis said as he walked towards the rails of the makeshift pen. “I sure do appreciate you fellas keeping my hogs safe and all, but this was too much—you really shouldn't have. This pen's almost as nice as the one I have on my place. You should've come up to the house and told us they were out. Ora could've come and gotten them.”

“Afternoon, Mr. Baker,” one of the young men replied.

Three of Harlan's men sat atop the fence posts, their legs dangling off the outside, feet resting on the middle rail, smoking cigarettes. They were the chosen few that were to collect the ransom. “Mr. Biggs told us to wait for whoever it was that owned these pigs and collect four dollars

a head for them when they were returned.” He said it with confidence. He believed he had done his job.

“Let me get this straight...Harlan, your boss, wants four dollars a head for my own hogs?” Louis looked towards the truck, “Frank, you believe this shit? These boys must be out of their damn minds.”

Somehow they hadn’t noticed that Louis wasn’t alone until that very moment. Frank opened the passenger door of the truck and set foot on the grounds of the saw mill for the first time in years. As a boy, he had spent many summers working for old man Biggs—he wasn’t quite as bad as his son, but he was still a son of a bitch to Frank. As soon as his boots sank a little in the mud, he remembered how bad he hated that place.

“You know, I was cooped up in the truck. I must’ve heard them wrong. I could’ve sworn they said that stupid son of a bitch wants four dollars a head for those hogs. Are you buying them from him? This whole time I thought they were yours!”

“They *are* mine!” The two of them caught a look at each other and had to turn and face the truck and trailer to chuckle a little. They were having a good time now.

Frank pulled his pouch of tobacco from his pocket and leaned against the hood of the truck. He took a pinch from the pouch, made a boat out of the rolling paper, and rubbed his thumb and forefinger together—sprinkling flakes of tobacco from one of the paper boat to the other and back again until he had grinded everything from out between his two fingers.

He tucked the end closest to him over the tobacco and under the other flap, and bringing the flat end furthest from him over the top, then rolled slowly, surely, examining each millimeter as if he was Prince Albert himself, until there was a little piece of flap to be licked and he sealed the cigarette and twisted each end.

The tobacco neatly tucked away, he patted his overall chest pockets looking for something. A puzzled look spread over his face and he turned his attention to the men on the fence. They had been staring at him the entire time.

“You boys wouldn’t happen to have a light would ya? I must’ve left my matches at home.”

They were too far away from the saw mill to have left one and their cigarettes were too fresh to have brought them lit, so they scrambled to find the box of matches as quickly as they could. The one who found it started to jump down and take them to Frank, but Frank put his hand up stopping him before he left his perch.

Frank walked slowly from truck to fence letting them think about the matches. He smelled the cigarette one last time then placed it between his lips.

Clouds started to roll in. There would be a shower this afternoon. The sounds of the mill somehow seemed covered by quietness near the new hog pen.

Frank nodded to the young man and took the box of matches. He struck the tip along the box and the sulfur tip burst into a flame. Frank held the stick out in front of his face and let the initial burst calm down a little.

Lots of men strike a match and put it straight to the end of a cigarette as the flame is still at it’s brightest point, but not Frank. Frank waited. He watched it. Patiently, he waited for it to die down and reach a normalcy, then and only then did he light his cigarette.

He inhaled deeply. The first burn of tobacco, the first pull is always the sweetest.

The road was darker now with clouds overhead, and Frank’s face was partly hidden by the clouds and his wide brimmed hat. The flame from the match went under the bill and for a moment the men on the fence posts could really see his eyes. His eyes stared out from under the hat back at them, unblinking, gray. His face weather beaten, tan, tough.

“Much obliged,” Frank said as he tossed the box back to the boys on the rail, “but it’s a damn shame you boys spent all morning building that fence.” All three had a look on their faces that said they had just made some sort of deal with the devil himself. That wasn’t far from the truth.

Louis couldn’t help but grin at the boys who seemed scared to death. This whole time, Johnny just stood at the front of the truck in awe of Frank in awe of Louis—thankful that he was on their side and not sitting on that rail.

“Tell you what boys,” Louis began, “here’s what we’re going to do.”

They knew Louis and they knew Frank or at least knew of Frank. Both men had a reputation for saying exactly what they meant and meaning exactly what they said.

Louis continued, “Johnny here—you boys know Johnny?” They shook their heads.

“Johnny ...boys, boys...Johnny.” They nodded. Johnny nodded back. “Johnny here is going to back that trailer up, right where you boys are sitting, and I’m going to climb that fence and get in the pen with my hogs. I’ve half a mind to knock the damn thing down, but you fellas did such a good job building it, I’d hate to ruin your hard work. Anyway, Johnny here is going to back that trailer up to the fence and climb in the trailer. I’m going to hand him the hogs one by one while you boys stand over there and watch.”

Frank interrupted, “Well what in the hell am I supposed to do?” He knew what he was going to do and smiled as he asked it.

“I’m glad you asked Frank. I almost forgot.” He went around to the driver’s side of the truck and pulled out the old shotgun. He tossed the gun to Frank and said, “Any of these three try to stop us, you shoot ‘em.”

“Will do,” said Frank and put a shell in the chamber.

“Well, now wait just a second, Mr. Baker...”

“Yes?”

“What are we supposed to tell Mr. Biggs?”

He thought about it for a second, “Boys I couldn’t give less of a damn what you tell that asshole. You can tell him you fell asleep or we knocked you out or the pigs ran away.” They looked at him for something else. “Harlan will understand—there ain’t nothing in this world worse than a hog thief, and he knows it.”

Louis added, “If you tell him we pulled a gun out, I was holding it understand?” They nodded, “We’d hate for Frank here to be in violation of his parole.”

They looked at Frank and he winked at them as took a long drag off the cigarette and propped the gun on his shoulder.

Everyone hates a hog thief.



“They did what?!” Harlan was irate.

“Mr. Baker stood there with the shotgun as Mr. Turner and some guy named Johnny loaded the hogs in Mr. Baker’s trailer.”

“And you just let them?” Harlan asked. He was angry, and the smoke from his cigar made it seem as if he was actually huffing and puffing.

“Well, what did you want us to do?”

“I wanted you to do what I pay you to do!” Harlan said. He had had enough of Louis Baker. “Tell you what,” Harlan continued, “you boys see Mr. Baker at Ludie Lee’s pretty often don’t you?”

“Yessir, he comes in nearly every afternoon.”

“Boys, you owe me,” Harlan said. “I want it known that no one messes with Harlan Biggs.”

“What do you have in mind, Boss?”

“You make it known in Ludie’s that I’m not happy about them taking those pigs without settling up. Make it known that it’d be a shame as dry as it is for a barn full of hay to catch fire. Make it known that I’m owed,” Harlan said.

“You got it, Boss. Let’s go boys.”



Message received.

Stamped with a black eye.

Louis wasn't afraid. He was never afraid. But he knew in some respects that Harlan was a lot more like him than he'd care to admit. If he said he was going to do something, he was going to do it. Louis would have to make sure someone was always near the barn. Because words overheard in a barroom wouldn't be enough to prove Harlan was responsible, even if the barn went up in flames that very day. The barn was in the pasture behind the cabin at the George Place.

Louis felt better knowing Frank was the one staying there now instead of Johnny. He knew Johnny could handle himself alright, but Frank was fearless.

## **A Family Photo**

While Ernest was in County, the family decided to get a portrait taken. Louis pulled a few strings and took Ernest a suit. They wouldn't let Ernest out to take a picture, and if he was convicted of murder, this might be their last chance to get all of them together in one place.

All of Louis' brothers and sisters and their families were able to make it. They all have a way about which they look at the camera. It's a strange thing seeing children holding dolls, squatting in front of their parents, reflections off a shiny floor, iron bars behind them. One lady, the one in the back center, hides her face in the shadows. No one knows who she is but assume she's the jailer. Our family's reputation precedes us, and the sheriff must've been a little worried that someone was going to try and bust Ernest out.



Johnny and Frank sat on the back porch of the George Place cabin. Harlan had made it known that this family outing might just be the best time to watch a barn burn. Frank wanted to drive up to his house and dare him to. Louis didn't want to poke the bear, no matter how fat or lazy, so he asked Johnny to go sit with Frank that day in case he needed an extra set of hands or an extra barrel.



Ernest was convicted. 2<sup>nd</sup> degree murder. Just like Frank. And like Frank, Ernest didn't serve anywhere near his full sentence. Louis needed him out. Ernest did 2 years in the state penitentiary Kilby and was released.

## The Sanctity of Family

Authorities often got tips about where Louis and Frank might be. The only people who had a reason to notify the sheriff when they saw smoke rising out of the deep pines was Harlan and some religious types. But even some of the religious types bought whiskey from Louis.

The sheriff's deputies, Harlan's deputies, only got close a couple of times.

One such occasion was when Louis and Frank were trying to make a quick batch before heading to the Hill's family gathering. Louis and Frank knew those woods better than anyone in uniform. They were careful too. But there was this one time when they didn't hear anybody until it was almost too late. The dogs had fallen asleep and didn't hear the deputy coming through the woods. Frank went a little up the trail to take a leak and saw the man walking through the woods.

Frank turned and ran as fast as he could. He grabbed Louis and they grabbed what whiskey they could carry. They left some mash burning over an open flame. They went far enough away to lead the deputy deeper in the woods, then doubled back to the truck. They passed him heading in the opposite direction.

The deputy knew who he was after. Harlan made sure of that, but by the time he realized he was chasing something that wasn't there, it was too late. The men were gone.

Louis and Frank headed to Preacher Hills' as fast as they could. Louis and Frank went straight into the kitchen and hid the whiskey in the back of the pantry. They had just finished cleaning the sweat and soot off their hands and faces when the deputy pulled into the yard.

Preacher Hill met him at his door and asked the young deputy how his day was going and what it was exactly that he could do for him.

"I'm looking for two moonshiners," the deputy said.

"Moonshiners? Here? Son you do realize who I am don't you?" Preacher Hill actually sounded surprised.

“I know who you are, Preacher. I also know who your kind folk are. Is Louis Baker here?” the deputy asked. He was still sweating. He also didn’t seem very happy.

“Louis? Yeah, he’s around here somewhere I think.” Preacher Hill said.

“That so?” the deputy asked, “He been here long?”

“Hey there, deputy,” Louis walked out onto the front porch eating a piece of pie. “I could’ve sworn someone said you were looking for me.”

“Now Louis, I know where you were—“

“Where I was?” Louis interrupted, “I’m here. I’ve been here. Where was I?”

“Now Mr. Baker, you and I both know about that still on your land, the old George Place. So let’s us cut the bull shit.”

“A still? On my land? I’ve never seen it. It must be buried deep,” Louis said. “And don’t forget deputy, we are in the presence of a man of God; he might not take a liking to you speaking like that in his yard.”

The deputy was growing angrier by the second but choked out an apology to Preacher Hill before redirecting his attention to Louis, “So it wasn’t you I was just chasing through the woods? You and Mr. Tucker?” the deputy asked.

Just then Frank walked out the front door and joined them in the yard.

Frank said, “You know, I was inside just now, but I could’ve sworn I just heard my name.”

Louis said, “The deputy here was just running around on the George Place, my land I may add, chasing what he’s only been able to describe as a couple of moonshiners.”

“Well I hope you caught them!” Frank said.

“Almost, Mr. Tucker. Almost.” The deputy added, “I’ll leave you folks to it. Enjoy the rest of *your* day.”

Before he reached his car, the deputy turned back to the reverend, “One more thing Preacher Hill. You never answered me when I asked had Mr. Baker been here long. Has he? Has Mr. Baker been here long.”

“I told you, deputy—“ Louis started but this time he was the one that was cut off.

“I know what you told me, Mr. Baker, but I didn’t ask you. I asked the reverend, a man of God, to confirm your whereabouts today.”

This made Louis and Frank both nervous. Preacher was about as straight as they come.

“So I’m going to ask you one more time, Reverend. Have Mr. Baker and Mr. Turner been here long?” the deputy asked. He smiled. He knew he had the preacher where he wouldn’t want to be. He knew Preacher Hill was a good man. An honest man, but before that smile got too comfortable on his face, Preacher Hill said,

“All damn day.”

The deputy nodded, got in his car, and drove the way he had come from, back to the still, to no doubt take it apart, not destroy it, take it apart, and take it to Harlan.

Harlan never did burn down that barn, and his deputies never caught Louis and Frank at the still. But he never quit looking for a way to get back at Louis. It wasn't about the money with the hogs. He didn't need the money. It was about power, and he couldn't have anyone challenge his authority, especially someone like Louis Baker that everyone on that end of the county looked up to. He had to send some kind of message.

## Ernest

Ernest had been out for a month now. He was working on the farm, but it was Sunday. The woods were calling his name. He decided to grab his old rifle and see if he couldn't round up a couple of squirrels for dinner. He heard a truck coming down the logging road toward him but didn't think much of it. He thought he might have forgotten a chore on the farm and Louis was coming to look for him. Claude might have changed his mind and decided to come hunting with him after all.

He stepped off the road and waited for Claude or Louis or whoever was coming to see him.

He didn't expect to see Harlan Biggs.

Harlan Biggs had not expected to see Ernest. Ernest with a rifle! That had to be a violation of his parole.

Ernest tried to hide the rifle behind a tree, but it was too late.

Harlan looked Ernest in the eye. His expression told Ernest all he needed to know. Ernest's eyes pleaded with Harlan to smile or wave or do something that would let him know his secret was safe. That he wasn't going to tell anybody. Harlan never waved.

He didn't smile either. What he did do was turn the truck around and headed back towards Brooks. He didn't care about Ernest's begging eyes. Begging him to stay quiet, filling up with tears. Ernest thought about raising the gun for a moment, but realized it wouldn't do any good. All he could do was watch the dust rise from under Harlan's tailgate.

Ernest knew Harlan was going to do one of two things, maybe both:

1. Go straight to the sheriff's office and let his buddies know that a convicted felon was hunting with a rifle.

2. Let Louis know that he had something on him now. He would try to make Louis pay for those hogs plus interest, make Louis give him a plot of land, or make Louis quit making whiskey. Maybe he would make Louis make whiskey and run it for him.

When they would come for Ernest, it would be his word against Harlan's—a felon's word against an "upstanding" member of the community.

Ernest knew he was in violation of his parole. He left the woods and mumbled to himself as he walked up the road, "I can't go back. I can't go back." He found a scrap of paper on the dash of his truck and pulled a piece of a pencil from his toolbox. Louis shouldn't have to keep cleaning up his messes.

The clay was muddy. His boots squeezed water out of the clay as he walked. Old pine trees cast their shadows, but rays of sunshine still found their way through the gaps in the limbs and warmed his face.

He had to go somewhere. He thought about the church, but he had never felt comfortable there. Margaret had made them go every Sunday when they were growing up. She needed all the help she could get raising seven kids.

Ernest remembered himself squirming in the pew. The oak felt harder and harder every week. As soon as he got old enough, he stopped going. This made his momma look at him like he was a sinner, but in his eyes, that was better than listening to hellfire and brimstone every Sunday. To tell the truth though, he hadn't ever really believed. He put God and Jesus and Moses and the whole lot of them in the same category as fairies and ghosts. But church was close by and lots of people found peace there. Maybe he could too.

The church wasn't much to look at. White paint flaked off the wood and several windows had been cracked. The churchyard was overgrown, and Bahia grass left tiny black seeds all over his pant legs. He bent down and knocked them off as he walked up the front steps. All the doors were locked.

He tried to pray anyway. It didn't work. *I can't go back. I just can't go back.*

He found a good flat spot near the back of the churchyard. His feet stood firmly on fallen pine needles, and he put the butt of the rifle on the ground between his legs. He didn't need to look through the sights. He felt the cold of the barrel under his chin and rested on it just a second.

He wasn't afraid, but he didn't want to die alone. He waited until he heard a truck coming. The sound was all the company he needed. He took a couple of deep breaths, pushed down on the trigger, and the rifle fired.

## Regret

Harlan Biggs had just rounded the curve coming back to the spot where he had seen Ernest a little while earlier. Maybe he would send the message to Louis through him. *You work for me now, or your brother goes back up river. This time he won't get out so easy.* Nothing like having other people do your bidding.

As soon as he rounded the curve near the church, he saw the body jump back from the barrel. The gun stood on its own for just a second, and even though the truck was still moving, Harlan swore he could hear the gun hit Ernest's chest as it fell toward the ground.

His first thought was: *Dammit Ernest. You stupid son of a bitch!*

He turned the truck around and drove back to town. This time to the sheriff's office. He knew his demons would come find him now. The hunter now the hunted.

Harlan delivered the news but didn't stick around to spread it. By the time Louis and Claude had found out, he was already home, sitting in his rocking chair, staring into the ashes of yesterday's fire.

## **A Lost Brother**

Claude closed the doors to the shop as soon as he heard. He went and got Johnny from the barbershop and they went to the farm together to tell Louis that Ernest was dead. The three men piled into Claude's pickup.

What happened?

Shot himself.

What happened?

Shot himself.

Shot himself.

Shot himself.

Ernest is dead.

Shot himself.

The first thing they saw when they got to the church was Ernest's feet. His heels rested on the bed of pine needles, toes pointing to the sky, his back rested in wet clay, what was left of his head disappeared in brush that fenced in the cemetery.

Louis jumped out of the truck and ran to him.

He put his ear to Ernest's heart. There was nothing. He began to cry, and turning, pushed himself up, his hands resting on Ernest's chest. Louis sat back on his heels as his knees sank in the wet clay.

*Damn you Ernest.*

*Dammit.*

He looked up from his brother. It was as if it was the first time he ever saw the old white church, the sky above it, the ground it sat on, or the graveyard behind it.

Louis found a note in Ernest's shirt pocket:

*This is as close to God as I was ever going to get.*

*At least now you won't have to move me very far.*

*I just couldn't go back.*

*I'm sorry.*

*Love,*

***ERNEST***

After Ernest died, Claude didn't have much use for Harlan's anymore. The brothers had their suspicions that Harlan had something to do with Ernest's death. It may have been the first time either brother realized what Harlan was capable of.

Louis wanted to warn Claude. Threaten him even. That if he kept going to Harlan's card games, Ernest wasn't going to be the only one in a casket. But he didn't have to. Louis stared over the top of Ernest's casket and saw the sorrow and pain in his brother's eyes.

There was a twinkle of anger in his own.

## A Hunt

Louis stepped onto the wooden porch. He was alone. His rifle, a little rusty around the bolts, was slung with a leather strap across his chest. The barrel of the gun brushed the back of his neck, somehow colder than the winter this morning.

It was still dark out. The boards on the porch drooped under Louis' boots. He wore his faded Liberty overalls, his thick camouflage jacket, and army issue, green winter hat. He had no idea where the hat came from.

The sun wouldn't be up for two hours. He looked down. His feet sank a little in the sandy road they used for hauling logs and firewood from the forest.

He knew where he was going.

The logging road was 8 feet wide and nearly divided the property in half. It stopped at the edge of the bluff, but the property itself continued down into the hollow, across a large creek and then over the other side for another half mile or so. Fence posts marked where his land stopped and the next man's started.

Louis didn't make a sound as he walked. He held his hand out in front of his face and could barely see the darkness. Every now and then he would see a twig last second and stretch his front leg forward as if he was launching himself over a small stream. His face cold and his nose ran.

He stopped short of the bluff and turned into the woods. He had a ladder leaning against an old oak tree where he had built a small platform to sit and look down into the creek bed. No matter how dry the summer, water always flowed in the creek. Deer always drank from it.

The water in the stream was as clear as could be. The bed was sand. The clean water bubbled out of an underground stream a few miles north of where he sat.

He settled in and sat his rifle in his lap. For the first time since leaving the house, he smelled the morning. The air was calm and fresh. It stayed that way through the first light of the morning.

The first sound came after he looked through his sights. The hammer crack echoed through the forest. The remaining leaves shivered as the doe fell on the bank of the stream. He closed his eyes. He hated watching the end. He hated himself then and hated being all alone.

The deer was still breathing when he reached the bottom of the hollow. He put his ear next to the doe's chest. He looked around and wrapped his right arm over the top of the deer and squeezed. Nobody, no one, no thing, nothing wants to die alone. He waited until the chest stopped rising and falling, then he pulled away.

Louis wept.

He sat back on his heels and breathed out heavy, short convulsive breaths. The only thing he could see clearly was the smoke from his breath.

## Afterword: An Attempt at Discovering My Poetics

How we write?

What we write?

Why we write?

These three questions have embedded themselves in my mind these past 2 years. Living with them is like living with a non-life threatening (well maybe life threatening) tumor. I know they are there, but I don't know the full extent, and I don't understand why they won't leave.

How do I write? Very literally with a pen and paper first. Always. The tactile nature of pen to paper seems to turn on a part of my brain that a computer simply can't. Plus, there is something about the look of it—scribbled cursive, barely legible, filling a legal pad or composition notebook. Sometimes words are marked through or blacked out completely. Notes are written in different colors or in the margins, and text is often paired with poorly drawn doodles. In a way, it doesn't even matter what the words say—this is art—this is a visual aesthetic.

With regard to my thesis project, my “how?” revolves around looking at old family photographs—finding clues that give me insight as to the people in the photographs' way of life. I look at the photos for Barthes' *stadium*. What can I see in these photographs that gives me some indication of social status, financial success or failure, hardships, jobs, relationships, housing environments.

My “how?” transitions into something much more abstract that is closer to Barthes' *punctum*. What thing(s) speak to me about each particular image? What is worth writing about? Exploring further? Sometimes the obvious isn't as obvious as I think.

I look into the eyes of my ancestors—great grandparents, grandparents, great aunts and uncles. I—someone who has never been very good at reading people or picking up on obvious

social cues—examine the images closely, over and over again—until I feel that nothing about or from the photograph escapes my attention.

These clues or perceptions help inform incomplete oral histories and stories I've been told from memory. They fill gaps. They put me in a place and time so different from my own. My mother and my aunt, older cousins, all have different ideas and perceptions about some of the events in this book. But memories can be faulty or hyperbolized. Some memories are more detailed than others, some more accurate, some people's memories freer or more willing to be shared than others.

I feel I know these people in the photographs by now. Knowing them intimately, albeit in my mind, I feel I write through their likenesses. This was an important step in my process. I needed to somehow feel their approval, and the best way to do that was to get to know them through their photographs. The photos gave me insight into their personal lives and their personalities. I felt I could look at facial expressions of them and of the people around them.

If I hadn't spent time with the dead and writing about their images, looking them in the eyes, conversing with them, I wouldn't feel right about taking certain creative liberties regardless of changing their names in my manuscript.

The "how" ultimately leads to the "why".

Writers like Roland Barthes, Michael Ondaatje, Selah Saterstrom, and WG Sebald all influenced my interests and desires. They all use photographs in their work. They make the photographs work for them in a way that I had never seen before. They had me thinking, *I want that! These pictures deserve that! These people deserve that! These people deserve to be characters.* Their influence was more than just their use of photographs. It had a good deal to do with motivation and ambition and making me realize something like this is possible.

I think part of why I want to write through the images involves transparency in the process. I want the entire project to feel real, to feel like it's coming from an authentic place, a natural place and not somewhere forced.

I think I want to write about this to establish some sort of relationship with my grandfather Louis. I'm not sure I know if that's even relevant. For some reason I feel pulled. I feel I have to. There has been no second guessing. It just feels like something I have to do, and the professional quality of the end product isn't as important as the experience itself. In short, I'm doing it to find some truth about who I am.

I've always said I want to be considered Southern, but on my own terms. I don't want to shy away from southern stereotypes, but sometimes push them to the forefront and challenge what the reader might expect while still making it believable. I think it's important that pride and ignorance don't always go hand in hand, and racism, sexism, bigotry, and ignorance don't have a place anywhere, not even the South. Southern people can have substance, caring attitudes, and lives filled with love too.

Family is an important component of the southern way of life. I want to write through and around these images because I'm fascinated and proud, for the most part, of the way these people lived their lives—some of them were fearless!

This idea of family leads to the final question of my poetics: what I write. This component and ethics of my writing both have been integral parts of my process and have caused a great deal of internal turmoil and struggle.

When I began to think about ways in which style meets content and the two live cohesively as one, I instantly think of Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*. The ways in which Ondaatje uses image and text in conversation with each other is something I

really wanted to have in my work. But this is much harder than he makes it look, and I'm not Michael Ondaatje.

Additionally, until I started thinking about this as a process and had a conversation with Jeanne Heuving about my plan and goals, I hadn't truly considered how much more difficult it would be to write about family versus a much more mythicized character. My initial reaction was one where I thought I could do this, no problem. Ondaatje was the one with the disadvantage because the people he wrote about were famous people. Other things had been written about them. He would've been the one that would have the more difficult time. I was wrong.

Sometimes when I write something that isn't the most flattering example of my family, I think about my mother and what her reaction might be were she ever to read this. I think of my cousins who told story after story from their childhoods—how reading certain pages, paragraphs, sentences, lines, even individual words would make them feel.

Constantly, I battle these thoughts that in many ways stifle creativity. I think, changing names of these individuals isn't enough because the photographs of the people, some of whom are still alive or at least their children and grandchildren, are still there. How can I write about these people I care about? And even though I've been encouraged and supported by people like Rebecca Brown to keep writing these things and not worry what people think, it's still a concern I find hard to shake.

I guess in some ways this willingness to not forsake family, regardless of how close you are to them or how much you want to do something, value that keeps creeping into my life, keeps reminding me of my roots, keeps telling me that it is a part of me and I can't get rid of it. Sometimes the work simply hits too close to home.

In the same light, however, some of the moments that feel too close, too real, too personal, are the moments where I feel connected to certain characters and events. These are the moments I

feel stuck between two rocks—one ethical, one creative. But for me, for this, I have to be selfish and let the creative win.

I feel many aspects of my poetics remain unanswered. I hope that my poetics is something of growth. I hope that my poetics never becomes so firmly grounded in one thing that I am unwilling to change and adapt and see new ways to think about writing. Because if you were somehow able to show me my work from now two years ago, I wouldn't believe it was mine.

With all this said, and the open acknowledgment that thinking about craft makes me a better writer, I can't help but feel a little dissonance in sheer principle behind the idea of labeling our poetics at all. We read all these great books that break down barriers of genre and writing, experiment with forms, try to create something that no one has ever seen before, then only to tell why we did it, how we did it, and what exactly it is that we did.

So for me and my process, I think that exploring theory behind why I write kind of takes a backseat to the process itself and somehow mainly lurks in the subliminal context of my creative work without me really having to expound on it. I hope this is the case because when theory becomes my primary concern and figuring out why I am doing something versus just being thankful that I'm doing it—I think writing will lose its excitement. That may be the point where I put down the pen.

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