“THE OLD FIERCE PULL OF BLOOD”: FAMILY AND THE SOUTHERN GOTHIC

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface ................................................................................................................................. iv

Abstract ............................................................................................................................... v

Introduction ......................................................................................................................... vi

William Faulkner and the Southern Gothic ................................................................. 1

Chapter One: Gothic Legacy and Family in Two of Faulkner’s Famous Short Fictions: “Barn Burning” and “A Rose For Emily” ................................................................. 9

Chapter Two: Exploring Southern Gothic Lineage: Faulkner’s Compsons in Short Fiction .............................................................................................................. 22

Flannery O’Connor and the Southern Gothic .............................................................. 39

Chapter Three: A Good Parent is Hard to Find: Lineage and The Southern Gothic in Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard To Find”, “Good Country People”, and “The Lame Shall Enter First” ............................................................... 44

References ............................................................................................................................ 62

Nobody to Blame But ......................................................................................................... 67

A Winter Day in July .......................................................................................................... 94

A Story for Stella ............................................................................................................... 116

Curriculum Vitae ............................................................................................................... 136
PREFACE

The following thesis incorporates two components: one research based and the other creative. The creative component, which consists of three short stories, exists in direct conversation with the research portion, as I seek to explore the techniques employed by my studied authors within original fiction.
ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the impact and influence of familial legacy and dysfunction on the Southern Gothic genre by focusing on short fiction written by two of the major authors of the genre: William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor. Through exploring texts such as “Barn Burning”, “A Rose for Emily”, “That Evening Sun”, “A Justice”, “A Good Man Is Hard To Find”, “Good Country People”, and “The Lame Shall Enter First”, the correlation between the gothic and family is made clear, as familial problems (due to blood inheritance or general dysfunction) often serve as the catalyst for the more well-known gothic motifs that are present in these tales, while also existing as elements of the gothic themselves. This thesis utilizes the writing theories of both Faulkner and O’Connor to evaluate the connection between the South, the gothic, and family, while also drawing upon scholarship focused on the American Gothic and the selected authors.
INTRODUCTION

William Faulkner once wrote, “Yet (Southern) art, which has no place in southern life, is almost the sum total of the Southern artist. It is his breath, blood, flesh, and all” (Faulkner “Introduction to The Sound and the Fury” 157). Faulkner’s quote presents his view on art in the South—a complex and nearly paradoxical view at that—and also makes a claim that the Southern artist cannot be separated from his region. But there is also something deeper in the words, lurking there. I would argue that these words relate directly to Faulkner’s place in the Southern Gothic genre. Faulkner suggests that there is something innately regional (Southern, in this case) in Southern art and the Southern artist. Moreover, the use of such words as “blood, flesh, and all” adds a distinctly Gothic flavor to the quote, as the idea of the “gothic” is often related to violence (blood) or erotic desire (flesh). Faulkner is often associated with the Southern Gothic genre, as Susan V. Donaldson suggests: “Faulkner has often been hailed and condemned as the founding father, oddly enough, of both Southern pastoralism and Southern Gothicism in modern literature” (Donaldson 359). While Faulkner’s texts have been studied as examples of the Southern Gothic, there has been one obvious gap in the study: the impact of family history on the gothic elements so often recognized in Faulkner’s fiction.

Faulkner’s works are not the only ones that have been seemingly neglected in this regard. The author who “contemporized the Southern Gothic” (Walsh 29), Flannery O’Connor, who claimed that in Southern literature, one had the best option to view “a small history in a universal light” (O’Connor “The Regional Writer” 58), can also be seen as utilizing family and family history throughout her gothic texts. This thesis seeks to explore and demonstrate the ways in which selected short prose by Faulkner and
O'Connor incorporate family or family legacy (be it immediate or inherited) and the ways in which these familial issues reflect not only a gothic motif themselves but also serve as a catalyst for other gothic action in the texts. For brevity’s sake, when familial legacy is directly correlated with some gothic action in a text, it will be referred to with the term “gothic turn”.¹ Through this study, it becomes obvious that not only was familial dysfunction a preeminent theme within Southern Gothic literature, it also served as a sort of basis for other, more commonly recognized, gothic elements within the narrative. These family histories and accompanying dysfunction lead to some of the most memorable parts—and the most gothic—of the stories, such as the elimination of the Grandmother and her family in O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard To Find” and the literal decay of Miss Emily Grierson in “A Rose for Emily” by Faulkner.

For our purposes, we will read the Gothic as a genre that is almost unable to separate itself from history. Gothic scholar Eric Savoy notes that the earliest American Gothic story, a 1798 novel by Charles Brockden Brown called Wieland; or the Transformation, was characterized by European influence, such as an abundance of sensationalism, but, more interestingly, it was also concerned with an obsession to return to the past as Brown focused on Puritanism and fledgling democracy; it is the latter focus on the past that survived in the genre, apparent in literature by Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe. Savoy suggests that the genre was as fluid as American thought, often reflecting preeminent concerns of the time: in Brown’s case: democracy, in later cases (post 1850s) American gothic writers sought to “rewrite history” to present a new “shadow (that)

¹ The term “gothic turn” gestures towards the idea expressed in Eric Savoy’s “Rise of American Gothic” in which he suggested that the terms “trope” and “turn” are nearly synonymous (Savoy “Rise of American Gothic” ¶3). Savoy also utilizes the term “gothic turn” (Savoy “The New Face of the Tenant” 4) to reflect moments when texts become notably gothic in his recent chapter “The New Face of the Tenant: A Theory of American Gothic”.

vii
knows the underbelly of American history” (Savoy “Rise of American Gothic” ¶10-16). Further, Savoy points out that, American Gothic allows for a “national way of reconstructing history (arising) from a homegrown verbal tradition…” (Savoy “Rise of American Gothic” ¶18). In this way, it becomes obvious that the gothic is attached to history and also to storytelling. For our purposes, the history that we are looking at is not a broad national history but rather more localized familial ones. Also, the idea of familial storytelling is an important part of the Southern gothic, because oral tradition is interwoven into the region. As Faulkner wrote, “We (Southerners) need to talk, to tell, since oratory is our heritage” (Faulkner “Introduction” 158). This idea is expounded upon by such scholars as David Minter who says, “no people is without a history but no people possesses its history unless its memory is raised to an active pitch and so becomes articulate, becomes…almost compulsively articulate” (Minter 190). In other words, history connects to articulation through language, through storytelling—written or oral. Another clear statement that demonstrates the correlation between the Gothic and history comes from Gothic scholar, Teresa Goddu: “while the gothic, as the site of excess, haunting, and ill health, threatens to resurrect a history that can never be exorcised, it also offers a way to signify against that history” (Goddu 155). Her opinion is echoed by Eric Savoy, who states that: “gothic texts return obsessively to the personal, the familial, and the national pasts to complicate…to implicate the individual in a deep morass of American desires and needs that allow for no final escape from or transcendence of them” (Savoy “Rise of American Gothic” ¶5). In other words, history is alive in Gothic texts and is also fluid. It can doom and it can save. Both Faulkner and O’Connor echoed this point. Faulkner wanted to lift his readers: “It is (the writer’s) privilege to help man
endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of …the glory of his past (Faulkner “Address upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature” 120), while O’Connor wanted to offer salvation: “an action or gesture which…would have to suggest both the world and eternity” (O’Connor “On Her Own Work” 111). Despite the authors’ more positive purposes, the Gothic is still connected to ideas such as “decay” (Momberger 23), “oppression and the sufferance of oppression” (Burns 117), and “excess, haunting, and ill health” (Goddu 155), just to name a few of the terms most commonly associated with the Southern Gothic. The ideas of Farrel O’Gorman are also pertinent here as he writes, “the fiction of horror, generally marked by supernatural or seemingly supernatural phenomena, originally featuring medieval trappings…later the haunted mansion or simply the haunted family” (O’Gorman 44). In short, family seems to have always had a place in the American Gothic, no doubt in Southern Gothic as well.

Philip Momberger writes that “…the clearest index to communal decay…is the disintegration of the basic social unit: the family” (Momberger 23). From this quote, it is obvious that the family is connected to the gothic. It seems as though this correlation is a cultural one and one experienced heavily in the South. As Faulkner scholar Arthur F. Kinney makes clear, “The American family was thus from the beginning given a kind of sacred position in our society while every relationship outside that of the dyadic, nuclear family was demoted, deemphasized, and secularized” (Kinney “Family-Centered” 87). What Kinney suggests here is that the family has always had a preeminent place in American society, and it should not come as a surprise that it has found its way into our literature. Kinney also posits that the idea of family is more obvious in the South: “Like the South he (Faulkner) himself inherited, clan was what made sense of class, race, and
gender. *Clan is what mattered most*” (Kinney “Faulkner’s Families” 200, emphasis added). For Faulkner, as a Southern Gothic writer, we may infer that family was also “what mattered most” in his Southern Gothic texts. David Minter notes, “As it turned out, moreover, it (Faulkner’s family) had become prominent just in time to witness and participate in the disappearance of the Old South as a class—and family-based society and the decline of family as an institution” (Minter 187) which suggests that Faulkner inherited a complicated idea of family as something both extremely important and extremely unclear. Family could make sense of “class, race, and gender” but was also deteriorating as a social institution.

In his essay “The Nurture of the Gothic, or How Can a Text Be Both Popular and Subversive?”, William Veeder traces the ways in which the Gothic operated in society. He expresses this sentiment:

“…I believe the gothic is, of all of fiction’s genres, the one most intensely concerned with simultaneously liberating repressed emotions and exploring foreclosed social issues, since the gothic presents most aggressively the range of outré emotions conventionally considered beyond the pale—incest, patricide, familial dysfunction, archaic rage, homoerotic desire” (Veeder 23).

Veeder’s claim seems valid; however, he stops one step short. All of the issues that he places within the gothic stem from family in some way; in fact, the first four of those five elements are directly rooted in family. Family history, the need to talk about family, or escape from familial dysfunction are elements that serve as the foundation of Southern Gothic texts. With an understanding of family and the Southern gothic, texts by Faulkner and O’Connor—and, because as Jerrold E. Hogle suggests that the Gothic “can still be...a
cultural force in America” (Hogle 14), the impact and influence of the Gothic can extend to any writer dabbling in the Southern Gothic for the last century—becomes more compelling, opening the door for a greater understanding of the genre and human nature.
“It is his (the writer’s) privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past” (Faulkner “Upon Receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature” 120).

“The rest of the United States knows next to nothing about the South. The present idea and picture which they hold of a people decadent and even obsolete through inbreeding and illiteracy—the inbreeding a result of the illiteracy and the isolation so that there is nothing else to do at night—as to be a kind of species of juvenile delinquents...is as baseless and illusory as that one a generation ago of (oh yes, we subscribed to it too) columned porticos and magnolias” (Faulkner “Letter to a Northern Editor” 88)

Few authors are as connected to the idea of Southern Gothic literature as William Faulkner. Faulkner, best known for his writings in the 1930s-1950s, is oftentimes seemingly inseparable from the tenets of the genre. As Susan V. Donaldson suggests, “Faulkner has often been hailed and condemned as the founding father, oddly enough, of both Southern pastoralism and Southern Gothicism in modern literature” (Donaldson 359) which is a statement that seems to be almost universally recognized. Because of this general view, much scholarship has focused on the Southern Gothic motifs and themes present in Faulkner’s fiction. For example, Henry L. Carrigan cites that Gothic tradition “offers powerful psychological studies of temptation and persecution involving the struggle between good and evil told against a backdrop of vast landscapes, and Faulkner’s fiction contains many of these elements” (Carrigan 96-97). As much as Faulkner is known to be Southern Gothic, he is also known for his complex and interrelated genealogies and obsession with families and family history. As Arthur F. Kinney states, “Faulkner was obsessed by genealogy. So are all of his characters. More than race, gender, or class, it is the family that defines them, haunts them, limits them…” (Kinney “Faulkner’s Families” 180). And, much like study into Faulkner’s use of the
Gothic, there has been considerable research into Faulkner’s fictional families and their relationships. But, there is evidence that scholarship has, of yet, stopped one step short and has not connected Faulkner’s use of the Southern Gothic to his families. Faulkner himself said that the South is “blood and kin and home” (Faulkner “Letter to a Northern Editor” 89). This suggests that, to Faulkner at least, the idea of being a Southerner was connected to the familial. Keeping Faulkner’s connection between the South and families in mind, it is easy to discover that there is something akin to Southern Gothic about the use of family and family history. The Gothic is attached to history and, while Faulkner’s fiction has already been connected to American history via study into race relations (Donaldson 360), Faulkner used family histories consistently in his work. Thus, Faulkner’s use of Southern Gothic and his use of family are interlocked, dovetailed into perfect unison. In Faulkner’s prose, it is not difficult to see the connections: problems of the immediate family or family legacy often serve as a catalyst for more recognizable Southern Gothic tropes, such as decay and death. This correlation is evident in Faulkner’s shorter works as well as his novels. These following two chapters will broadly demonstrate the varied connections between the Southern Gothic and Faulkner’s use of family and familial history. Two of his most famous—and often anthologized—short stories, “Barn Burning” and “A Rose For Emily”, incorporate a variety of Southern gothic motifs, such as the decay of homes and horror, but also focus on the influence of fatherhood. “That Evening Sun” and “A Justice” both feature one of Faulkner’s most written about families: the Compsons. The Compsons are also a good starting point because they clearly demonstrate the connection between the Southern Gothic and family through the tropes of decay and death. These stories also introduce the importance of
paternal legacy and fatherhood and how those themes connect to the tenets of the Southern Gothic and often serve as the catalyst for the gothic turn of the texts.

Faulkner did not write explicitly about what made his fiction Southern Gothic. However, Faulkner did write quite a bit about what it meant to be a writer in the South and how the family figured into Southern life. Faulkner’s view on writing about Southern families is expressly important because of its relation with Faulkner’s presentation of his fictional families. William Faulkner famously wrote, “Art is no part of southern life” (Faulkner “Introduction” 156). However, he did not mean that Southerners could not produce art, but that their relationship with art and its creation were complicated. Such lines from his “Introduction to The Sound and the Fury” demonstrate as much: “Only Southerners have taken horsewhips and pistols to editors about the treatment or maltreatment of their manuscript. This—the actual pistols—was in the old days, of course, we no longer succumb to the impulse. But it is still there, still within us” (Faulkner “Introduction” 158). This quote, though quite comical, actually offers a revealing, in-depth view of Faulkner’s understanding of Southern writers and their legacy. There seems to be something deeply personal and internal about being a Southern writer, something worth shooting an editor over, and, even though the South was, to quote Faulkner again, “old since dead” (Faulkner “Introduction” 157) because of rapid changes after the American Civil War, there is something that still makes Southern writing personal. For example, Faulkner also penned, “Anyway, each unconsciously writes into every line and phrase his violent despairs and rages and frustrations or his violent prophesies of still more violent hopes” and “I do not believe there lives a Southern writer who can say without lying that writing is any fun to him. Perhaps we do
not want it to be” (Faulkner “Introduction” 158, emphasis added). The use of the word “violent” seems to reflect the same sentiment as the begrudged Southern writer bringing a gun with him into the editor’s office; the word “want” suggests that there is something deeply rooted within the writer in the South which makes their work Southern. For Faulkner, it seems that there is art in the South, it is just much harder to bring forth. The artist has “figuratively speaking, taken the artist in him in one hand and his milieu in the other and thrust the one into the other like a clawing and spitting cat into a crocker sack” (Faulkner “Introduction” 158). However, while Faulkner’s word-smithery is obvious from snippets taken from his “Introduction”, it seems hard to understand how the lack of art in the South can be in the opinion of “our great provincial” (Minter 183), William Faulkner.

Faulkner’s view on art and artists becomes clearer in some of his later non-fiction works. In his “Speech of Acceptance for the Andres Bello Award: Caracas, 1961”, Faulkner wrote of the purpose of the artist:

“That is, he must strive with all the means and all the talents he possesses…to put into more lasting form than his own frail, ephemeral instant of life…what he has known firsthand during his brief period of existence: the passion and the hope, the beauty, the tragedy, the comedy of man, weak and frail but unconquerable; man who struggles and suffers and triumphs amid the conflicts of the human heart, the human condition” (Faulkner “Speech” 165).

If the purpose of the artist is to demonstrate the human condition via an exploration of life, it is conceivable that a Southern writer, living in a region torn by change and upheaval, could convincingly, albeit perhaps painfully, express the world through art. Of
the South, Faulkner said it was made by “the sense of indigenous dream of any given collection of men having something in common…which shape their economic and spiritual aspirations into cities, into pattern of house or behavior” (Faulkner “Introduction” 157). The South itself, to Faulkner, is best characterized by human interactions and beliefs building upon each other rather than physical land or buildings. In his research into Faulkner and myth, David Minter suggests that “other critics, however, have viewed critical emphasis on Faulkner as a provincial artist with jaundiced eyes, seeing in it yet another instance of the South’s vain effort to thumb its nose at the North, or, more significantly, as an unfortunate distraction” as he declares both views reductive (Minter 183-184). Faulkner himself wrote, “I have tried both courses. I have tried to escape and I have tried to indict” (Faulkner “Introduction” 158), but trying such methods—methods that it seems other scholars have equated to Faulkner’s purpose for writing—did not work for the author. Instead, Faulkner said that writers must write from “the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral or doomed…” (Faulkner “Upon Receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature” 120). Faulkner’s fiction does not attack the North nor does it seek to distract or erase a painful past for the South, rather, it seeks to present truths located in the human heart, which can include region, dreams, and family.

These truths that Faulkner argues are the only things “worth writing about, worth the agony and sweat” (Faulkner “Upon Receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature.” 119) operate in a way that connects Faulkner with creating family histories, a Gothic element, which has the power to influence other Gothic themes at work in his fiction. David Minter states that Faulkner grew up “with a strong, even inescapable, sense of family,
region, and history” and “Faulkner’s own decisive move toward the writing of great fiction coincided and interacted with his imaginative return to family and region” (Minter 182). What Minter correctly suggests is that Faulkner’s greatest fiction was derived from his own ideas of family and his own understanding of regional and familial myths. This adds another layer of beauty to Faulkner’s fiction: while exploring micro-issues rooted within the familial and regional myths that he grew up with (his own personal history), he not only created a complex web of Gothic family histories, he also demonstrated the macro-issues of human nature.

Since it is common knowledge that Faulkner was heavily influenced by his own family myths, it is important to note the connection between Faulkner’s fictional worlds and his real one. As David Minter posits, “Of all major American writers, Faulkner is the one most clearly associated in our minds with large, extended, elaborately entangled families and with a region, both as actual Mississippi and as imaginary or mythical as Yoknapatawpha” (Minter 182). While these families and Yoknapatawpha are undoubtedly fictional and a product of Faulkner’s imagination, there is also compelling evidence to suggest that these people and locales existed in Faulkner’s real life. It is commonly agreed upon that Yoknapatawpha is based on Faulkner’s own Oxford, Mississippi, but Arthur F. Kinney, who has extensively researched both Faulkner’s actual and fictional families, brings up the Chandler family as a specific example:

“The Chandlers had seven children. One Thomas Wiley Chandler, jumped to his death from a dormitory at the University of North Carolina where he was a freshman; a second, Luly May, disappeared as a young girl never to return; third, Wiley, never married, worked in a local hardware store, and died in Oxford; and a
fourth, Edwin, had, in his thirties, when Faulkner knew him, the mind of a 3-year-old” (Kinney “Faulkner’s Families” 190).

The Chandlers’ similarity with the Compson family is uncanny, and most likely not coincidental. However, Kinney also notes that the Compsons match up well with Faulkner’s own family (Kinney “Faulkner’s Families” 190). Minter also relates how Faulkner’s family “had become prominent just in time to witness and participate in the disappearance of the Old South as a class—and family-based society and the decline of the family as an institution” (Minter 187). While it may be a stretch to suggest that all of Faulkner’s families were based exactly upon real-life equivalents, it is obvious that there were existing models. Faulkner wrote, “My family has lived for generations in one small section of north Mississippi…I state this simply as credentials for the sincerity and factualness of what I will try to say” (Faulkner “Letter to a Northern Editor” 86). While this quote is from a text which seeks to provide a Northerner a glimpse of the Southern psyche, it can also be applied to his writing: Faulkner, as an Oxford native who grew up with familial and regional stories, can write about Southern families and histories with an understanding of the people he tried to create; he did not adhere to stereotypes. As A. Robert Lee notes, “Faulkner’s Dixie was infinitely more than some mere backwater of violence, grudge, religio-sexual hang-up or even the colour-line as phobia or hex” (Lee 300). In other words, while it is obvious that Faulkner was influenced by his own personal ties, he also used this legacy to present a new type of history to his readers, one that was inseparable from the Gothic due to the haunting past of the region and the decay of old social systems that Faulkner would have seen while growing up and would have

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2 Kinney suggests that Faulkner’s father shares some similarities with Mr. Compson, Faulkner himself with Quentin, and that Caddy may be based on a cousin (Kinney “Faulkner’s Families” 190). For more in-depth information on each of Faulkner’s major families, consult “Faulkner’s Families” by Arthur F. Kinney.
gathered from the oral stories told by his relatives. As Christopher J. Walsh notes, Faulkner’s most famous fiction shares the same “dark legacy” of European models of the Gothic, as his region had to undergo massive changes (Walsh 26-27). And this dark legacy is not only attached to region but also bound to family and family legacy.
CHAPTER ONE:

Gothic Legacy and Family in Two of Faulkner’s Famous Short Fictions: “Barn Burning” and “A Rose for Emily”

Perhaps aside from his novels, it seems that many students and readers of Faulkner are familiar with the short stories “Barn Burning” and “A Rose for Emily”. Both these works are undeniably Gothic in nature, but they also feature influential family groups or histories. When these stories are read through a lens that keeps the influence of family in mind, it becomes obvious that the Gothic elements of the text seem to stem from familial problems. The family and the Southern Gothic operate in tandem throughout both “Barn Burning” and “A Rose for Emily” through such Gothic motifs as decay and destruction and familial themes like paternity, lineage, and blood inheritance.

“The Old Grief of Blood”: Destructive Fatherhood and the Gothic in “Barn Burning”

One of Faulkner’s most memorable short stories is “Barn Burning”. There is no doubt of the Southern Gothic classification for this piece. As Sigrid Hanson Fowler says, Abner Snopes “is a figure of horror right out of the Southern Gothic tradition” (Fowler 426). Fowler is correct, as the descriptions of Abner within the text do portray him as a Gothic figure: “he (Sarty) could see his father against the stars but without face or depth—a shape black, flat, and bloodless as though cut from tin…the voice harsh like tin and without heat...” (Faulkner “Barn Burning” 8). There is also no doubt of the familial traits of the story. Oliver Billingslea accurately expresses what seems to be a popular critical opinion that “Barn Burning” is a story about a father and son relationship on many levels (Billingslea 287). There can be no question that the short story is heavily
steeped in the relationship between the father and son, but it is less certain of how these familial ties connect to the Southern Gothic. Through examining Sarty’s relationship with both his parents, though most notably his father, and his final decision at the end of the story, it becomes obvious that Sarty’s family experience has a distinct correlation with the Gothic turn of the piece. In other words, Sarty’s family life serves as a catalyst for the other more commonly recognized Gothic motifs that appear throughout the text. The most gothic aspect of the text is obviously the physical barn burning, but, while the destruction is gothic, the real turn of the text seems to be Sarty’s implication in the arson. His participation in the obvious destruction and his less obvious internal destruction as he has to battle with his literal blood (both what is potentially inherited from his father and his immediate familial relationships) in order to decide his actions is the most compelling gothic attribute of “Barn Burning”’s protagonist.

William Bysshe Stein wrote that Abner Snopes “extends the lineage of the Devil into modern times” (Stein 732). Indeed, though such a claim may seem overly dramatic, it does demonstrate the Gothic nature of Abner Snopes. However, more interesting than Abner’s character is now it influences his youngest son, Sarty, or how Abner’s legacy has influenced and will later influence Sarty’s actions. One of the earliest scenes of the story finds Sarty approaching a Justice. Sarty, at first, clearly identifies with his father: “He could not see the table where the Justice sat and before which his father and his father’s enemy (our enemy he thought in despair; ounr! mine and hisn both! He’s my father!) stood....” (Faulkner “Barn Burning” 3). Sarty’s internal thought demonstrates a fierce loyalty to his father. Interestingly enough, it is this loyalty that allows for the darkest element of the text: the actual barn burning, as it seems that Sarty’s participation in the
arson—by gathering the oil and accompanying Abner—and his silence at the court proceedings is what prevent his father from being charged. The barn burning becomes the most apparent Gothic element—of senseless destruction. Throughout the story, Faulkner characterizes Sarty’s relationship with his father as the “old fierce pull of blood” (Faulkner “Barn Burning” 3), which reflects their violent relationship as well as the violent nature of Abner which manifests itself in pyromania. In fact, Abner often appeals to his blood tie with Sarty to control him. Abner tells Sarty, “‘You got to learn to stick to your own blood or you ain’t going to have any blood to stick to you” (Faulkner “Barn Burning” 8). Thus, since Sarty is part of Abner’s family he must operate on their skewed system of absolute loyalty to the father. This loyalty, this curse of blood, traps Sarty into the Gothic text. He seemingly has no other options than to obey:

“...the old blood which he had not been permitted to choose for himself, which had been bequeathed to him willy nilly and which had run for so long (and who knew where, battenning on what of outrage and savagery and lust) before it came to him. I could keep on, he thought. I could run on and on and never look back, never need to see his face again. Only I can’t. I can’t.” (Faulkner “Barn Burning” 21).

Much like how Sarty’s blood traps him in the cycle of Abner’s dissatisfaction and destruction, it also casts him as a character bound up in yet another common aspect of the Gothic: entrapment. Sarty feels trapped by his father’s blood. He seemingly understands how pointless lineage is—after all, it was given to him “willy nilly” from a dark place that he is not able to trace—but he cannot escape for many reasons, such as his loyalty and his youth.
Aside from his father, Sarty also seems heavily influenced by his mother. Sigrid Hanson Fowler stresses the importance of the fact that “She (Lennie Snopes) is not of Snopes blood” because, she argues, Sarty is mainly torn by his father’s blood (Fowler 424). Fowler is correct to stress the impact of Lennie upon her son and to note that Lennie must have some influence because she is mentioned at several key parts of the story. Fowler’s most compelling points about Lennie are that Sarty’s “more human traits” came from his mother and that “grief and despair (are) typical of Lennie Snopes” (Fowler 428, 430). While she is undoubtedly correct that Sarty did inherit some traits from Lennie, Fowler does not connect them to a very specific example within the text. Sarty seems to constantly be at war with his own blood, and this war is what allows for the gothic turn. Oftentimes, while Sarty is thinking about his father or his father’s actions, these thoughts will be coupled with “…the fear and despair and the old grief of blood” (Faulkner “Barn Burning” 5). This side of Sarty’s character, this “grief” of blood rather than the “fierce pull” of blood seems to relate directly to Lennie. The guilt that his mother must feel surfaces in Sarty when he has to lie for his father or witness his father’s deeds. This adds to the tragedy of the piece as a young boy is literally pulled in two different directions because of his legacy.

What is perhaps most intriguing to consider however, is the fraudulence of Sarty’s legacy—both his extended lineage and his immediate family. The reader recognizes that Sarty is not really one with his family unit. Sarty’s mother cannot act against her husband, and his older brother and sisters are often characterized as livestock; the brother mindlessly obeys the father and chews his tobacco like cud and the twin sisters are little more than flesh that occupies space. As Fowler says, “Sarty is capable of betraying
blood, the family, even his father” (Fowler 435), but Sarty is only able to fully escape his father after several events throughout the story. Sarty does not seem to realize that his father’s legacy, especially considering his war service, is untrue until very late in the tale. Early in the story, Faulkner discloses that Abner has his limp from a wound suffered while he was attempting to steal a horse (Faulkner “Barn Burning” 5), and later admits that Abner had fought in the Civil War for money (Faulkner “Barn Burning” 25). Obviously, Abner Snopes is not a very pleasant individual, regardless of burning barns. His murky legacy compounded with his brutal tendencies does indeed cast Abner as a Gothic villain. At the end of the piece, after Abner is most likely dead, Sarty has a brief moment to contemplate his father. “‘Father. My father,’” he thought. “‘He was brave!’” he cried suddenly, aloud but not loud, no more than a whisper: “He was! He was in the war! He was in Colonel Sartoris’ cav’ry!’” (Faulkner “Barn Burning” 24). These lines seem to suggest that Sarty is trying to convince himself via repetition that his father was a good man. However, the reader knows that Abner was not and that it is probably best for Sarty to escape from his family. Oliver Billingslea correctly posits that Sarty receives a sort of freedom from the bonds of remembering, which is why he fares better than some of Faulkner’s other characters, like the haunted Quentin Compson (Billingslea 292). Billingslea is right, though not because Sarty rejects his lineage nor because he forgets it, but rather because he seems to finally see what is true within it. He realizes that his father’s behavior is wrong, but he does not actively try to change Abner’s behavior at the end of the story, but rather becomes capable of changing his own, for example, by reporting his father to De Spain.
What holds back Sarty throughout the majority of the story is loyalty to blood, but also something else: age:

“...divulging nothing to him save the terrible handicap of being young, the light weight of his few years, just heavy enough to prevent his soaring free of the world as it seemed to be ordered but not heavy enough to keep him footed solid in it, to resist it and try to change the course of its events” (Faulkner “Barn Burning” 9).

Sarty’s youth traps him with his family for most of the story. It can be assumed that his age is one reason why he stays loyal to his father, as he cannot “resist” or “try to change” what occurs around him. Also, Sarty’s age is one component that adds to the ambiguousness of the final scene, as readers are left uncertain of what exactly Sarty will do as he begins walking again. However, there is some hope that the young protagonist will fare well because Sarty mentally grew throughout the story to escape his father and his cursed lineage.

Sarty, unlike many of Faulkner’s other characters, does escape his family and does not seem to be bound up or trapped by his Gothic past. When Sarty hears the gunshots, the repercussions of warning De Spain, it is truly one of the most complex sentences of the entire story:

“he heard the shot and an instant later, two shots, pausing now without knowing he had ceased to run, crying “Pap! Pap!”’, running again before he knew he had begun to run, stumbling, tripping over something and scrabbling up again without ceasing to run, looking backward over his shoulder at the glare as he got up, running on among the invisible trees, panting, sobbing. “Father! Father!”” (Faulkner “Barn Burning” 24)
The fast syntax keeps the reader on alert—they almost feel as breathless as Sarty. As Sarty is literally running from his past, he does not have an easy time. He falls, he looks back. He is breathless and crying. And though at the end of the story, Sarty may be able to walk forward and while “He did not look back” (Faulkner “Barn Burning” 25), he certainly remembered where he came from.

“Coquettish Decay”: Fathers, Family Names, and the Southern Gothic in “A Rose for Emily”

There is perhaps no one story that is best associated with the Southern Gothic than “A Rose for Emily”. As Christopher J. Walsh points out, the story is “frequently held up as an exemplar of the Southern Gothic tradition” (Walsh 26). On the surface, Faulkner’s story does seem to be as Southern Gothic as it can get: there is a decaying and ancient house and perverse desire located within Emily’s necrophilic relationship with Homer Baron. However, a closer reading of the story reflects that Emily’s behaviors towards both her home and her lover—the two most Gothic elements of the text—have origins within Emily’s family history, especially through the legacy of her overly controlling father.

Emily’s house seems to represent the familial discord and decay of the Griersons. Through physical descriptions of the house, the reader gets the image of a decrepit but once proud home, something of a monument to an era long past. Emily herself is described early in the text as being “a fallen monument” (Faulkner “A Rose for Emily” 119). Thus, it is not unfounded to suggest a direct correlation between Emily’s self and her home; they can serve as representations for one another. Edward Stone points out that “Equally impervious to community pressure, Miss Emily is also menaced in the
shabby majesty of her seclusion by the passing of time and by progress” (Stone 436). Emily is indeed both impervious to and trapped by history. Emily is impervious to change because of the lineage and legacy that she considers hers but is also unable to integrate into society, and so she is left behind. For example, the townsfolk express Emily’s relationship with the town: “Alive, Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town” (Faulkner “A Rose for Emily” 119). Her house remains untouched by the townsfolk because of an archaic law set in place by Colonel Sartoris, a law that “only a man of Colonel Satoris’ generation and thought could have invented...” (Faulkner “A Rose for Emily” 120). In this way, her house is a physical reminder of a bygone era both visually—as it is in a state of “coquettish decay” (Faulkner “A Rose for Emily” 119)—as well as legally as her freedom from taxes reflect laws coded by men of a much different period. Indeed, through the legal squabbles that surround the house, the reader sees how adverse to change Emily and her home truly are.

What follows is a humorous, but nonetheless pointed example:

“The next day he received two more complaints, one from a man who came in diffident deprecation. “We really must do something about it, Judge. I’d be the last one in the world to bother Miss Emily, but we’ve got to do something.” That night the Board of Aldermen met—three greybeards and one younger man, a member of the rising generation.

“It’s simple enough,” he said. “Send her word to have her place cleaned up. Give her a certain time to do it in, and if she don’t…”

“Dammit, sir,” Judge Stevens said, “will you accuse a lady to her face of smelling bad?” (Faulkner “A Rose for Emily” 122).
Certainly, the older man’s rebuke about telling a lady that she stinks is funny, but it also is a stark example of the stagnation of the entire town as the older generation proves incapable of overcoming their homage to the name of the Grierson family. There can be no real progress because of the split between generations, a split that Emily and her house physically represent. They represent the Gothic element of decay most poignantly through the influence of localized history, as they are an image of that history. As Stone suggests, Emily can be seen as a representation of “a proud and doomed but indomitable last representative of a bygone era of the South and the progress of an encroaching and usurping civilization” (Stone 437). Emily and her house cannot be disposed of—at least not until her death—no matter how many attempts at progress are made.

Much like the appearance of the house, Emily herself is an image of decay. When the men call on Emily very late in her life: “She looked bloated, like a body long submerged in motionless water, and of that pallid hue” (Faulkner “A Rose for Emily” 121). At the surface, this description fits into the mood of the Southern Gothic. Emily’s appearance is one of literal stagnation, like a body left too long in stagnant water bloats and decays, Emily, alone—save for Homer Baron’s corpse—has been left too long in her house and has rotted. Margie Burns pointedly states that “…Emily is incessantly associated with the past, with the Civil War, with the burdens of history devoid of any understanding of history” (Burns 109). In other words, Burns believes that Emily represents the worst kind of history, one that has no meaning or purpose, no lessons learned from the past, only clinging to an ideal long dead, like Sartoris’s tax break. And that is seemingly true of Emily. She does not seem to add much to the town, other than a few years of teaching china painting and being fodder for gossip. The reason for her
stagnant history is complex though and rooted in her familial history, mainly through her family name and her father’s legacy.

“We had long thought of them as a tableau, Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the back-flung front door” (Faulkner “A Rose for Emily” 123).

That is one of the few images that the townsfolk and the readers get of Emily and her father. And it may be an imagining conjured by the townsfolk because it seems overwrought with symbolism and is too iconic. This image reveals much about Emily’s character and her father’s influence. Firstly, Emily is in the background while her father is in the foreground, reflecting his power over her. Already, it is obvious, simply from their positions that Emily is in the role of the submissive daughter, already a stagnant and subordinate role. From there, it is revealed that her father is holding a horsewhip, no doubt a symbol of control and authority, already signaling that Emily’s future is most likely going to be determined by her father, by Grierson pride—in short, by her lineage. Finally, the two of them are framed by an open door, which is interesting because throughout the story, the narrator reflects on how often Emily’s door is closed and how rarely it is open; however, in this one specific instance, the door is open to the world. From this image, Emily’s relationship with her father is highlighted: her father is authoritative, assertive and blatantly aristocratic; in an unquestionable position to control seemingly all aspects of her life.

At his death, the door is kept closed throughout most of the remainder of Emily’s life, reflecting the role of her father in her stagnation; Emily is trapped by her legacy as
much as she is bound up in her decaying home. Due to her father’s authority over Emily, it is easy to assume that her stagnation was ensured because of her father’s family pride. Through his pride—which seems to be the Grierson legacy—Emily was segregated from the town as “too good” for them, kept single because of her father’s control over her suitors. Even immediately after her father’s death, Emily denies the passing for days until she is finally convinced to allow the body to be removed. The people think this is because “she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will” (Faulkner “A Rose for Emily” 124). The townsfolk mainly think of Emily’s relation to her father through his aristocratic claims of their family name, demonstrated mainly through the suitors her father denied her. This situation also reflects that Emily’s father lived in the past throughout his life—much as Emily lives hers. He regarded the Grierson name with almost a nostalgic idealism, and he held it in such high regard, that, even when the family name weakened, he still considered any suitor for Emily as unworthy of joining the Grierson stock. This example also reflects another aspect of the father’s character, that he not only controlled Emily but also obsessed over their Grierson blood, caught up in family pride. However, it becomes obvious that even the Grierson name carries with it decay and denial. It is said of Emily that “She carried her head high enough—even when we believed that she was fallen. It was as if she demanded more than ever the recognition of her dignity as the last Grierson; as if it had wanted that touch of earthiness to reaffirm her imperviousness” (Faulkner “A Rose for Emily” 125). Emily’s adherence to her name is a fallacy because there is really no power behind her name, as the town “believed that the Griersons held themselves a little too high for what they really were” (Faulkner “A Rose for Emily” 123). It is evident that Emily inherited her father’s
stubborn pride in the family name. This pride in her blood also led Emily to the gothic turn of the text, as she uses her dated social power to purchase arsenic (without providing the druggist with a reason) in order to kill Homer, because she could not have the town knowing how far she truly had fallen: to be jilted by a man, a Yankee.

What the Griersons represented was a decayed house and a skewed legacy: a monument to a past that seemed to have no recognizable meaning in the present. Emily is reduced to a Gothic spectacle because of her confining lineage. At her death, people flock to her house not to mourn her, but out of curiosity. The final image of Emily herself is as haunting as finding that grey hair on the pillow beside Homer’s corpse: “Miss Emily beneath a mass of bought flowers, with the crayon face of her father musing profoundly above the bier and the ladies sibilant and macabre” (Faulkner “A Rose for Emily” 129). Even in death, Emily cannot escape her father and his legacy. And that legacy is rendered pointless—a stagnant and decayed personal history—as the women come to bask in the Gothic nature of the scene; the men to search the house to see what they can find. In the end, it almost seems as if Emily and her house could be representative of the Southern Gothic genre itself: “Thus she passed from generation to generation—dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse” (Faulkner “A Rose for Emily” 128).

Both “Barn Burning” and “A Rose for Emily” have their roots in the Southern Gothic genre and in familial ties. In “Barn Burning”, young Sarty is forced to recognize aspects of the falseness of his legacy and escape the curse of his father’s blood. For Emily Grierson, such escape proves impossible as she and her house decay beyond salvaging. While Sarty is able to leave the Gothic nature of his family behind, the reader
does not know his fate; Emily is only able to leave her lineage behind in her death, though it seems that the Grierson name will continue to haunt her, just as the characters of Faulkner’s fictions, his Gothic families, stay with the reader long after the final page is turned.
CHAPTER TWO:
Exploring Southern Gothic Lineage: Faulkner’s Compsons in Short Fiction

The Compsons seem like a case study for how family legacy operates in Faulkner’s Southern Gothic literature. Quentin Compson, the eldest of the children, is a recurrent narrator of Faulkner’s fiction, both novels (The Sound and the Fury and Absalom! Absalom!) and short stories. Two of the short stories that Quentin narrates are “That Evening Sun” and “A Justice”. In these stories, the dysfunction of the Compson family is clearly exposed as one that is utterly Gothic in nature: the family literally decays from within and destroys itself. The family history, revealed mainly through storytelling, can also be seen as Gothic in nature as it seeks to write a new history for the family itself. In “That Evening Sun”, the Compson dysfunction is clearly exposed through tensions between the siblings, the dysfunction between the parents with each other and the children, and finally the overall lack of human emotion or understanding. The easiest gothic turn to recognize is Nancy’s obsession with her potential murder; however, the destructive dysfunction of the Compson family is also evident in the short story. “A Justice” is a short story of a different vein in that the Compson line is not dominant within the narrative, but the story does clearly demonstrate Quentin Compson’s inability to discover a lineage or past for himself, as he learns but cannot seem to relate to the story of Sam Fathers who was problematically named “Had-Two-Fathers”. What is most striking is that Sam has a dysfunctional paternal lineage which could logically lead him to a gothic fate, but he seems well adjusted to his life, while Quentin, whose past is

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3 There is, however, a real “history” of the Compson family located in the “Compson 1699-1945” Appendix that was later incorporated into editions of The Sound and the Fury. The “obituary” reads more like a piece of fiction than an appendix—cementing the idea that the Compson history is tied to storytelling. (Faulkner “Compson 1699-1945” 203).
not as violently conflicted as Sam’s, cannot find any solace or meaning in his past.
Overall, the gothic turn of the Compson family is their dysfunction and self-destruction, which comes to fruition in Faulkner’s longer works.

“Are you Scared of Father, Mother?”: The Failing Family and the Gothic in “That Evening Sun”

One of the most compelling stories that feature the Compsons is “That Evening Sun” which relates a tale from when the Compson siblings were young. While the story has been studied in terms of racial relations, it also brings forth interesting correlations between the gothic and the role of the family therein. This story features dysfunction between the siblings themselves, the skewed relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Compson and how that influences the growth of their children, and finally reveals the larger impact of an indifferent family and family history.

Philip Momberger broadly suggests that “That Evening Sun” is “the spiritual autobiography of that history’s chief interpreter, young Quentin Compson” (Momberger 20). Momberger’s statement certainly has a basis: the short story is filtered through Quentin and what he notices and does not notice creates the past of the Compsons. 4 Interestingly though, Quentin is mainly silent throughout the story which makes it seem that there is considerable psychic distance between the reader and the first person point-of-view narrator: though the reader is experiencing the story through the eyes of Quentin, they get little of his internal thought or emotional response to what occurs around him; he

4 Several scholars have cited that the beginning of “That Evening Sun” places Quentin at the age of 24—the story opens with a scene of Jefferson “fifteen years” before the events with Nancy that make up the brunt of the narrative (Faulkner “That Evening Sun” 289); since Quentin places his age at nine during the Nancy events, then (if he is narrating the opening scene) he would be 24——, several years older than he would have been at his death in The Sound and the Fury. However, this miscorrelation holds little bearing on the purpose or power of this text, so it will be ignored here.
is a passive narrator. Even though the narration is passive, nine-year-old Quentin as an observant and subtle narrator serves to illustrate the broken family dynamics of the Compsons, a family history that can end only in mutual destruction. One of the most striking elements of dysfunction is the relationship between the siblings themselves: Quentin, Caddy, and Jason (Benjy is not a character in either “That Evening Sun” or “A Justice”)\(^5\). Firstly, the children adhere to the authority of their father, which is misplaced because Mr. Compson acts only with indifference throughout the text. Their discourse with their father demonstrates their own indifference, or perhaps selfishness, towards others, notably the traumatized part-time cook, full-time laundress, Nancy.\(^6\) At the beginning of the story, Quentin, Caddy, and Jason go to fetch Nancy. Quentin is less talkative than his siblings about their father’s instructions to get Nancy, simply noting, “We would stop at the ditch, because father told us to not have anything to do with Jesus—he was a short black man, with a razor scar down his face—and we would throw rocks at Nancy’s house until she came to the door” (Faulkner “That Evening Sun” 290).

It is problematic that Quentin notes here that his father didn’t want them to interact with Jesus, because, at the end of the story, when Mr. Compson finds them at Nancy’s house, he reacts in a way that can only be characterized as indifferent to his children and his laundress. It is equally disturbing that there is such a gulf in compassion between the Compsons and their help. Obviously, Mr. Compson, and perhaps even Quentin, realizes that there is something strange about Jesus—he is deformed, a marker of the Southern

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5 Philip Momberger argues that Benjy is not present in “That Evening Sun” because Nancy fills Benjy’s role as “a moral touchstone” and victim (Momberger 25). Either way, for our purposes, Benjy’s omission is not dire.

6 There has been a great deal of scholarship which focuses on Nancy’s role within the story. Consult Philip Momberger’s article, “Faulkner’s “The Village” and “That Evening Sun”: The Tale in Context”, page 27, footnote 7 for a comprehensive summary of the various scholarship available on Nancy.
gothic—but they do not make any effort to help Nancy; it seems they only help her when it suits their convenience: they need a stable cook so they let her stay overnight. Also, it is strange to think that the siblings do not find it wrong that they are allowed to throw rocks at someone else’s house. Caddy and Jason’s early dialogue with Nancy can at best be characterized as patronizing: “‘Father says for you to come on and get breakfast,’” Caddy said. “‘Father says it’s over a half an hour now, and you’ve got to come this minute’” and “‘I bet you’re drunk,’” Jason said. “‘Father says you’re drunk. Are you drunk, Nancy?’” (Faulkner “That Evening Sun” 290). Notably, both Caddy and Jason cite their father as the authority and that covers their rudeness and makes it acceptable, at least in their minds. It appears that both Caddy and Jason have inherited their father’s prejudices towards minorities. (Also, it is important to remember that the children are talking to someone who works for them and is African American, so they have cultural prejudices—also inherited from their extended lineages—against Nancy as well). Caddy basically nags Nancy, urging her to come serve them, mentioning that she is late. Jason accuses Nancy, appropriating his father’s power to attack her on a personal level. In this way, the Compson children—Caddy and Jason, at least—are unsympathetic characters. It is this degradation of character that sets the stage for the gothic turn of the piece—the potential murder of Nancy and the haunting of Jesus.

While readers most likely find the children are unsavory in their behaviors towards Nancy, they also seem to have very little tolerance for each other. As aforementioned, Quentin rarely directly speaks or makes distinct judgments in the story, but that does not mean that his words do not reflect how he feels about his siblings, especially Jason. When the siblings go to Nancy’s house the final night, Quentin notices
that there is something strange about Nancy’s home; it is in essence a very Gothic scene. Quentin relates, “There was something about Nancy’s house; something you could smell besides Nancy and the house. Jason smelled it, even.” (Faulkner “That Evening Sun” 302). This brief line carries a lot of weight. It reflects the siblings’ relation with the Gothic turn of the text, as they go with Nancy to her house out of their own self-serving reasons. But, it also allows insight into Quentin’s relationship with Jason. The phrase “Jason smelled it, even” suggests that Quentin does not think much of Jason’s level of awareness. This could mean that Quentin believes that Jason is selfish and incapable of realizing what is going around outside of himself, but there is no textual evidence to support a direct claim. Jason is also the youngest Compson in the short story, so his general lack of awareness could be contributed to his age.

More obvious is the clash between Caddy and Jason. Most of their dialogue consists of petty squabbling with each other. Jason always tries to push against Caddy, no doubt because of the authority that Caddy tries to wield. Jason may feel that, as the child named after the father, he should have a more dominant role in their daily activities. When Jason is allowed control of the situation, he revels in that power and when that power is threatened, he lashes back with threats of his own. His selfishness is clearly expressed later in the story when, instead of worrying about Nancy’s concerns over Jesus’s potential return, Jason is only willing to stay with her in her house if she will entertain him, by telling him stories or letting him pop popcorn. “‘All right,’” Jason said. “I’ll stay a while if I can do that. Caddy can’t hold it. I’ll want to home again if Caddy holds the popper’” (Faulkner “That Evening Sun” 304). Jason’s self-centeredness could be a product of his family. Perhaps the most telling discourse within the story is the final
conversation. Nancy has been left in her cabin, her door is open, and her lantern is still lit; she is prepared for death, and whether or not her fears are founded is a moot point; she seems to need companionship. However, the Compsons leave Nancy in her house and do not look back. Instead of ruminating on Nancy, the family leaves the reader with this exchange:

“‘You’d cry,” Caddy said.

“Caddy,” father said.

“I wouldn’t” Jason said.

“Scairy cat,” Caddy said.

“Candace!” father said. (Faulkner “That Evening Sun” 309)

The dialogue is pointless. Caddy and Jason are reduced to a dysfunctional pair, almost totally self-absorbed. As Caddy teases Jason, their father’s words are barely heeded. However, at least the father gets to speak and be heard. As Philip Momberger explains, “While Caddy and Jason squabble incessantly, young Quentin is passive and almost completely silent, ignored by them and both his parents” (Momberger 23). The whole family is dysfunctional, demonstrating that such conflicts may be generational and may lead to the eventual decay and Gothic fate of the Compson family.

Just as striking as the dysfunction between the siblings is the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Compson and the ways in which their relationship affects their children. Arthur F. Kinney suggests that “the Compson family dynamics dwell on mothers and children—on Mrs. Compson’s maternal failings, on the substitute mothers of Damuddy, Caddy, and Dilsey—and on the failures of the father” (Kinney “Faulkner’s Families” 191). Kinney may be correct in that it seems that every member of the Compson family
can be blamed for the Gothic turn their lives will take, as each family member seems to fall into their own gothic tropes: Mr. and Mrs. Compson and their obsession with alcohol and family name, respectively, Quentin’s eventual suicide, Caddy’s erotic encounters and disappearance, and Jason’s dysfunction and estrangement with his family and family name. Though it seems that Kinney is focusing on the Compson family of *The Sound and the Fury*, this dysfunction is also clearly present within “That Evening Sun”. There is, for example, the distant relationship between the parents and their children. For the most part, the family ignores their oldest son, so the distant relationship between the parents and their offspring are most obvious through their interactions with Caddy and Jason, notably Caddy who consistently asks questions throughout the story that are simply ignored. For example, when Mr. Compson decides to walk Nancy home, this dialogue—initiated by Mrs. Compson—follows:

“‘You’ll leave these children unprotected, with that Negro about?”

“I’m going too,” Caddy said. “Let me go, Father.”

“What would he do with them, if he were unfortunate enough to have them?”

father said.” (Faulkner “That Evening Sun” 294)

This exchange demonstrates how the parents disregard Caddy’s remark. It is also notable that Caddy seems to be opposing her mother’s wishes. She declares that she will go too, but then asks her father to allow her to come. She does not ask her mother, for it is implied that the children following along would not please Mrs. Compson. This reflects that the family is already somewhat divided against itself, the children aligning themselves with either parent to get what they want. The parents basically argue in front of their children. Mrs. Compson tries to persuade Mr. Compson into staying with her
instead of taking care of Nancy; this also reflects her lack of human compassion. Mr. Compson’s wry response is also shocking. Perhaps in a way it is humorous, but there are also darker implications if Mr. Compson is at all serious about how unfortunate it is to have the Compson children around. The behaviors of the children, it is not hard to conclude, frustrate Mr. Compson. At the very least, the young Compson’s poor behavior can still be traced to the parents because they allowed their children to behave in such a manner. Any correction is brief and ineffective. Overall, much as Mr. Compson is indifferent to Nancy, it is not hard to surmise that he feels similarly towards his children; however, there is not enough textual evidence to support that the father is as uncaring towards his children as he is towards the situation of the servant at the conclusion of the text.

Later in the story, it becomes more obvious that the mother and father do not get along. Immediately following the discussion about whether or not Mr. Compson should take Nancy home, Quentin provides some insight in his parents’ relationship and how he relates to it:

“She was speaking to father. You could tell that by the way she said the name. Like she believed that all day father had been trying to think of doing the thing she wouldn’t like the most, and that she knew all the time that after a while he would think of it. I stayed quiet because father and I both knew that mother would want him to make me stay with her if she just thought of it in time. So father didn’t look at me. I was the oldest.” (Faulkner “That Evening Sun” 294).

The first thing that draws attention to itself is the stress applied to the relationship between the mother and father. Apparently, Mrs. Compson is obsessed with the idea that
Mr. Compson always tries to sabotage her and her feelings. It seems that the relationship is founded on personal tensions and an overall lack of trust. This passage also supports the idea that the children are split between the parents, with Quentin falling squarely on his father’s side of the family equation. Quentin himself seems to believe that he can and will be used by Mrs. Compson to get back at Mr. Compson: in revenge for being left, Mrs. Compson would take the oldest and less squabbling child, and it can be inferred from the passage that Quentin and his father have a sort of bond of understanding that can be silently communicated between them. On the other hand, Quentin’s narration is a subjective point of view. Quentin’s belief that his father does not look at him to help him avoid remaining at home with his mother could be Quentin projecting his feelings onto his father, and it could be that Mr. Compson does not look at his son because of the overall indifference he feels for the family. He could simply be looking away because he does not want to deal with his, for lack of a better term, nagging wife and bickering children. The text allows for both readings; the status of the narrator does not allow for a singular interpretation.

Finally, the Compson’s gothic dysfunction is evident through the implied comparison between the relationship of Mr. and Mrs. Compson with the one of Nancy and Jesus. There are several correlations drawn between the couples, such as Mrs. Compson saying, ““You’ll leave me alone, to take Nancy home?”” mother said. “Is her safety more precious to you than mine?”” (Faulkner “That Evening Sun” 293). Not only is Mrs. Compson displaying her lack of compassion towards other people, especially Nancy, but she is also asking her husband to consider her value and compare it directly
with Nancy’s. Later in the story, Mrs. Compson provokes Mr. Compson with a similar statement:

“Yet we pay taxes,” mother said. “I must wait here alone in this big house while you take a Negro woman home.”

“You know that I am not lying outside with a razor,” father said.” (Faulkner “That Evening Sun” 299).

Again, Mrs. Compson demonstrates her lack of compassion towards Nancy as she attempts to coax her husband into staying home with her. However, Mr. Compson responds to her in a way that is jarring to the reader but also serves as a summation of their relationship. Mr. Compson’s response is not affectionate; it is deliberate. His answer bears the same spirit as when he pondered what Jesus would do if he were unfortunate enough to have the Compson children. He is indifferent to Mrs. Compson’s selfish concerns. His response marks her complaint as ridiculous: unlike Nancy, Mrs. Compson is not in danger while alone at home. Mr. Compson is not capable of trying to kill her possibly because he would have to feel something about her in the first place.

While the parents are bound up in their banter, Caddy’s most pointed and important question goes unheeded and unanswered: ““Why is Nancy afraid of Jesus?”” Caddy said, “Are you afraid of father, mother?”” (Faulker “That Evening Sun” 299). This question directly connects Mr. and Mrs. Compson to Nancy and Jesus and reflects that, even though Mr. Compson is not in a ditch with a razor, their relationship is just as damaged and may bring just as much darkness to their family.

Probably the most frequently discussed aspect of “That Evening Sun” is the overall lack of compassion and understanding that the Compsons show to Nancy, which
undoubtedly leads to the gothic conclusion of the story, as Nancy is left alone in her house, door open to invite in misfortune. Indeed, the last mention of the frightened woman is: “But we could hear her, because she began just after we came up out of the ditch, the sound that was singing and not unsinging. “Who will do our washing now, Father?” I said” (Faulkner “That Evening Sun” 309), which suggests that the only concerns on for Compsons are self-serving. However, even more intriguing is the fact that “That Evening Sun” exists as part of the Compson legacy. As David Minter suggests, “He (Quentin) has grown up with more stories than we will ever know…” (Minter 198). Minter is correct; Quentin seems to be one of Faulkner’s favorite storytellers, so why is it that Quentin relates the story of Nancy to the readers? There seems to be no compelling reason, unless one considers how well this tale fits into the family legacy associated with the Compsons throughout Faulkner’s fictions. This legacy is realized in the Gothic, as it is the failed legacy which causes the downfall of the Compson family. Faulkner wrote, “We (Southerners) need to talk, to tell, since oratory is our heritage” (Faulkner “Introduction” 158), which implies that family history may be invented by telling stories—what Quentin does in the short stories he narrates. David Minter posits that history can only become history if “memory is raised to an active pitch and so becomes articulate…” (Minter 190). In other words, it seems that in Faulkner’s fiction, family history can be articulated memories or storytelling. In this way, the stories that Quentin relates become the history of the Compson family, an honest history of one small example of the human condition.

About the past, Faulkner said, “Let the past abolish the past when—and if—it can substitute something better; not us to abolish the past simply because it was” (Faulkner
“To the American Academy of Arts and Letters Upon Acceptance of the Gold Medal for Fiction, 1962” 169). In other words, the past should not be forgotten or changed unless a new or better history can be created instead. It can be assumed that this sentiment can work in reverse as well: that an individual may return to the past in order to find something better there than in the present. A recovered legacy can be a salvation. However, this seems to rarely work for Faulkner’s characters. Of Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha, Henry L. Carrigan writes, the “denizens have inherited and must cope with a legacy of poverty, racism, and violence that often threatens to disentangle and separate them from the fabric of family and place into which they have been intricately woven” (Carrigan 93). In the case of “That Evening Sun”, Quentin’s recollection of the past does not bring him comfort or any answers, but only a memory of dysfunction, a conflicted past, revealing the foundation of the Gothic turn of this narrator’s life, as he ends by drowning himself at Harvard in The Sound and the Fury. As Philip Momberger correctly notes, “Seeking a sustaining alternative to the present, Quentin ironically finds only chaos in the past” (Momberger 23). This quest for the past returns in another Faulkner short story, also narrated by Quentin: “A Justice”.

“That’s Not a Name. That’s Not Anything”: Tracing Legacy and the Gothic in “A Justice”

“A Justice” is also narrated by Quentin, though the brunt of the story is related to Quentin by Sam Fathers. The entire tale takes of the form of Sam outlining his lineage. Unlike Quentin, Sam seems capable of understanding his past; he knows the details of his lineage and seems to be able to find some identity or perhaps comfort in it. Quentin opens the story by remarking on the strange lineage of Sam Fathers, physically obvious
from his facial structure and skin tone, and notes: “He lived with the Negroes and they—the white people; the Negroes called him a blue-gum—called him a Negro. But he wasn’t a Negro. That’s what I’m going to tell about” (Faulkner “A Justice” 343).

However, in this statement, Quentin simplifies the powerful purpose of Sam’s storytelling: to establish his identity through his past and paternal lineage. As Sam begins to relate his tale to the young Quentin, he tells him that his name used to be “Had-Two-Fathers” to which Quentin replies, “‘Had-Two-Fathers?’ I said. ‘That’s not a name. That’s not anything’” (Faulkner “A Justice” 345). To Quentin, who comes from the dysfunctional Compson family, it seems impossible to have an unclear paternity. In fact, it seems that Quentin has a problem with uncertain paternity in general if one considers his reaction to Caddy’s pregnancy in The Sound and the Fury. However, to Sam Fathers, this confusion seems to be his defining feature. He does not hide the story of Doom and his father and the black man7, but rather relates it to a child to demonstrate both the importance of lineage but also the importance of learning from lineage. Sam utilizes storytelling to not only express and pass on his history—which can almost be considered a gothic convention within itself as Sam focuses on his own personal history—but also to gain knowledge from it. While Quentin seems to consider his own past as chaotic, lost in the small details of a selfish and decaying family, Sam Fathers’s past is notably problematic, but he does not seem to have the suffer Gothic fate as the Compsons, most notably Quentin. It seems that the story lends itself to the idea that Sam’s paternity is unclear, because of the black man’s obsession with his skin tone as an infant, but that

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7 This chapter focuses on the lineage presented by Sam Fathers in “A Justice” and does not reference the clearer paternity presented in other works, such as Go Down, Moses. However, for the sake of this argument, Sam Fathers’s clearer paternity is not necessary, as the ideas of drawing upon a complicated paternal lineage are still relevant.
seems to be only a literary device because Sam consistently refers to Craw-ford as “pappy” throughout the retelling and his mother’s husband as the black man. Another prominent and chaotic component of Sam’s history is the situation with Doom. Doom’s influence on the story is problematic because he is a character wrapped in mystery, murder, and the supernatural. With a Gothic flair, very similar to voodoo and black magic, Doom is able to kill both puppies and people throughout the tale with “a bullet of bread and a pinch of the salt in the gold box” (Faulkner “A Justice” 345) to demonstrate his power and maintain his influence and authority.

One of the most powerful lines in the story occurs right after Sam’s birth, as Doom speaks to the black man: “You should be proud of a fine yellow man like this,” Doom said. He looked at the new man. “I don’t see that justice can darken him any,” Doom said” (Faulkner “A Justice” 357). Doom speaks these lines to the black man, who is angry because he believes that Sam’s “pappy” impregnated his wife. However, Doom’s reasoning is what is striking here. Doom does not seek to change the past, rather he seeks to replace it with something better: he suggests that all should accept the birth of Had-Two-Fathers regardless of the paternity issues that surrounded that birth. Justice or revenge cannot change the fact that the child was born. Fathers relates his story because he probably finds some type of stability within it, a past in which people were brought to understand each other without fighting for an abstract, like justice or revenge. However, at the end of the story, when the narration again returns to Quentin as he sits in Sam

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8 Though beyond the scope of this paper, it is also interesting to consider how important lineage is to Doom. There are several distinct mentions of his bloodline, including: “Doom’s name was Ikkemotubbe then, and he was not born to be the Man because Doom’s mother’s brother was the Man, and the Man had a son of his own, as well as a brother” (Faulkner “A Justice” 346). Doom takes control of his bloodline through potentially killing off both the Man and his son, while traumatizing his brother. It is obvious that lineage is important on many levels throughout the text and is bound up in the gothic turns that take place within it.
Fathers’s room, he admits, “I was just twelve then, and to me the story did not seem to have got anywhere, to have a point or an end” (Faulkner “A Justice” 359). Instead of listening to more of Sam’s talk, Quentin obeys the call of his grandfather, a man with a much more conventional familial relationship: “…we all obeyed Grandfather, not from concern of impatience or reprimand, but because we all believed that he did fine things, that his waking life passed from one fine (if faintly grandiose) picture to another” (Faulkner “A Justice” 360). Quentin’s thoughts of his grandfather seem to relate to the eventual decay of the Compson line. The Grandfather’s existence is made up of “grandiose” images, which were probably drawn from an aristocratic and proud past; a past that the current Compsons cannot attain because it had passed on. There is a certain level of hopelessness suggested from the line above as Quentin and his family could never achieve the same type of life that their grandfather had. When presented with an actual lineage, Quentin can only say, “That was it. I was just twelve then, and I would have to wait until I had passed on and through and beyond the suspensions of twilight. Then I knew that I would know” (Faulkner “A Justice” 360). As an adult, like Sam, Quentin could perhaps understand the greater implications of Sam’s attachment to his lineage and his ability to find stability in a history, even if that history was somewhat gothic because of supernatural occurrences, deaths, and paternal confusion and mixed race. Quentin seems to be the narrator of “A Justice” because he attempts to rewrite his history, one of the functions of the Southern gothic, throughout fiction that features the Compsons, much as Sam successfully relates his history to Quentin throughout the short story. However, Quentin does not seem to have the same fate as Sam. As Arthur F. Kinney states, “Unable to locate a stable family relationship and unable to create a family
of his own, Quentin drowns himself” (Kinney “Faulkner’s Families” 192). Perhaps after death, Quentin could find some sort of consensus with his lineage of a dysfunctional, gothic family. Until then, Philip Momberger’s somber but accurate statement holds true: “Seeking a sustaining alternative to the wasteland of the present, he finds only another wasteland in the past. There is no hope of escaping the bleak terrain the reader has come to know…” (Momberger 31). However, there is a glimpse of hope in “A Justice”. If Sam Fathers could come to terms with his paternal legacy of two fathers, Quentin, as a storyteller in Faulkner’s fiction, could conceivably gain the same ability. This potential is probably the reason why Quentin exists in this story, which is mainly Sam’s—because storytelling can clarify the past and add stability to the present. In this way, storytelling operates much like the gothic in that it can create a new history that seeks to contemplate or complicate the past in order to provide for the present. Quentin Compson is not only a member of a gothic family, he also seems to be an ideal narrator for gothic tales.

Faulkner wrote,

“I decline to accept the end of man. It is easy enough to say that man is immortal simply because he will endure: that when the last ding-dong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening, that even then there will still be one more sound: that of his puny inexhaustible voice, still talking. I refuse to accept this. I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail.” (Faulkner “Upon Receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature.”“ 120).
When reading of the failings of the Compson family, one does not necessarily think of the prevailing endurance of man. However, the Gothic legacy of the Compsons does indeed reflect the potential to endure as Quentin struggles to find meaning in his past to cope with his present; he is on the quest to find a way to understand the world. This quest, which takes the form of a family history, is a means to provide the reader with a new history to learn from through storytelling. As Faulkner claimed, he wrote to demonstrate the human condition, to leave something that “itself invulnerable in the cold print…which is capable of engendering still the old deathless excitement in the heart and glands whose owners and custodians are generations from the air he breathed and anguished in…” (Faulkner “Foreword to the Faulkner Reader” 182). In short, Faulkner presented gothic legacies to create his own legacy to leave behind to his readers, so that they may read fictional pasts and to learn from, enjoy, and never forget.
FLANNERY O’CONNOR AND THE SOUTHERN GOTHIC

“When Walker Percy won the National Book Award, newsmen asked him why there were so many good Southern writers and he said, “Because we lost the War.” He didn’t mean by that simply that a lost war makes good subject matter. What he was saying was that we have had our Fall. We have gone into the modern world with an inburnt knowledge of human limitations and with a sense of mystery which could have developed in our first state of innocence—as it has not sufficiently developed in the rest of our country.”

Flannery O’Connor, “The Regional Writer”, pg. 59

“I am always having it pointed out to me that life in Georgia is not at all the way I picture it, that escaped criminals do not roam the roads exterminating families, nor Bible salesmen prowl about looking for girls with wooden legs.”


There can be no question that Flannery O’Connor’s short stories often fall under the category of Southern Gothic. Many scholars have focused their studies on the ways in which O’Connor creates Gothic elements in her stories, notably through a focus on the grotesque. However, as O’Connor clearly states in several of her essays collected in Mystery and Manners there is far more to the Southern writer than the grotesque, and there is much more to O’Connor’s writings than just violent plots and brutality. As O’Connor makes clear in her essay “The Regional Writer”, the reason why Southern fiction often focused on the underbelly of popular culture was because the South had experienced a “Fall”, because of the American Civil War. This post-lapsarian recognition should not come as a surprise since it was written by the Catholic O’Connor. However, this idea of the South as a world that has fallen suggests more interesting intersections with the Gothic than simply the horrors. The Southern Gothic nature of O’Connor’s writings are more compelling when they are explored under the assumption that familial legacy is an influencing feature. In O’Connor’s short prose, she presents
characters who struggle with familial histories and structures, which leads to the gothic
turns within the tales. Familial legacy and dysfunction dictates the choices of the
characters, their falls, and their encounters with grace. Flannery O’Connor herself wrote,
“The best American fiction has always been regional (because of) the possibility of
reading a small history in a universal light” (“Regional Writer” 58). This “small history,”
based in region, can also easily be read as family-based because of the impact of family
in Southern culture.

When one is dealing with a writer as outspoken as Flannery O’Connor, it is
inevitable to quote her view on her own writing and region. O’Connor makes the
scholars’ job easy as her essays span not only her own work but theories on writing
practice and Southern writing. Firstly, it is intriguing to note O’Connor’s view on
Southern fiction. O’Connor bluntly says, “The country that the writer is concerned with
in the most objective way is, of course, the region that most immediately surrounds him,
or simply the country, with its body of manners, that he knows well enough to employ”
(O’Connor “The Fiction Writer and His Country” 28). In short, to O’Connor, all
literature is a product of its region. It is proper to revisit the quote: “The best American
fiction has always been regional (because of) the possibility of reading a small history in
a universal light” (O’Connor “Regional Writer” 58). O’Connor seems to see regional
literature as the best mode to rewrite history, as made clear by another snippet from “The
Regional Writer”; a literary or regional identity “is not made from what passes, but from
those qualities that endure, regardless of what passes, because they are related to the truth”
(O’Connor “Regional Writer” 58). The generic understanding of history (studying what
happened in the past) is not as important as finding or presenting a type of truth of human
nature. It is in regional fiction that an author is best able to explore their region and the history of that particular place. While perhaps “being a Georgia author is a rather specious dignity, on the same order as, for the pig, being a Talmadge ham” (O’Connor “Regional Writer” 52), it is obvious that O’Connor values being a regional writer—a Southern writer—rather than simply a writer or an American writer.

In response to the declaration that American writers were not writing of the beautiful qualities of the country, O’Connor begins “to wonder at this point if there could not be some ugly correlation between our unparalleled prosperity and the stridency of these demands for a literature that shows us the joys of life” and further she wonders “if these screams for joy would be quite so piercing if joy were really more abundant in our prosperity” (O’Connor, “The Fiction Writer and His Country” 30). What O’Connor does here is throw doubt upon American idealism. This statement is doubly important when it is considered in the context of familial history and the gothic. As Eric Savoy suggests, later American (post late 19th century) gothic writings sought to “rewrite history” (Savoy “Rise of American Gothic” ¶16). In this way, it becomes clear that O’Connor’s views of the nature of writing—especially Southern writing—can already be considered to adhere to tenets of the gothic because she rewrites the common conceptions of the ideal and popularized America. Another American gothic scholar, Farrel O’Gorman, makes a claim that is almost verbatim—though not as eloquent—as O’Connor when he posits that American gothic works subvert the popular view of American “exceptionalism” and challenge the idea of American history as “progressive” (O’Gorman 45). O’Connor seems to desire to rebel from the mainstream, and she even suggests that good Southern literature will follow with her, and these ideas relate specifically to the gothic. In “The
Fiction Writer and His Country”, O’Connor suggests that Southern writing is “an image of Gothic monstrosities and the idea of a preoccupation with everything deformed and grotesque” (O’Connor “The Fiction Writer and His Country” 28), and she seems to chalk up this darkness with an “unholy” Southern “anguish” over “getting more and more like the rest of the country” and “being forced out not only of our many sins, but of our few virtues” (O’Connor “Fiction Writer” 29). What O’Connor proposes here is that the Southern gothic exists in order to break away from mainstream America and to write and rewrite about their own sins and virtues.

Perhaps when reading O’Connor’s work about mass family murders, untrustworthy ne’er-do-wells, and misunderstanding parental figures, one does not at first realize that O’Connor is using the grotesque to demonstrate virtue as well as sin. O’Connor’s explanation of the grotesque as “some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life” (O’Connor “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction” 40) seems a bit too general when she herself writes about families being wiped out on back roads. But, to O’Connor, the grotesque can be useful and it is undeniably a component of Southern Gothic writing. There are a multitude of reasons why Southern literature employs the grotesque but perhaps the simplest one is: in order to be different. As previously explored, O’Connor did not want to be part of a more generic American fiction, but she also wanted to be unique from other Southern writers. As O’Connor points out, “The presence alone of Faulkner in our midst makes a great difference in what the writer can and cannot permit himself to do. Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down” (O’Connor “Some Aspects”
45). In short, while it is important to have a regional literature, there should be minimal overlap between the writers: each would have a slightly different view of life in the South, a new history to present. Those differing ideas and representations together could form the whole of Southern literature or more specifically Southern gothic.

O’Connor was “not afraid to show the sordid slime of humanity” (Rohman 285), in fact, she used her oftentimes violent texts to demonstrate something deeper about humanity.

“With the serious writer, violence is never an end in itself. It is the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially…the man in the violent situation reveals those qualities least dispensable in his personality, those qualities which are all he will have to take into eternity with him” (O’Connor, “On Her Own Work”113-114).

O’Connor’s violence is not gratuitous; she is using it to attain an end: to demonstrate what is at the core of human nature. She is not fitting into the mainstream but subverting and rewriting it with her gothic texts. This idea of rewriting is especially poignant when it is considered in concordance with Flannery O’Connor’s families.
CHAPTER THREE

A Good Parent is Hard to Find: Lineage and the Southern Gothic in Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard To Find”, “Good Country People”, and “The Lame Shall Enter First”

In three of her pieces, spanning her two collections of short stories, “A Good Man Is Hard To Find”, “Good Country People”, and “The Lame Shall Enter First”, it becomes obvious that the characters are influenced by their family traditions and ties. Familial legacy can also be seen as a catalyst for other Gothic motifs, which usher in the gothic turn in each work. What O’Connor does in these three short stories is to demonstrate her theories of Southern gothic writing through her portrayal of relationships between characters and their family lineages. As characters negotiate through their worlds and interact with their familial connections, they pass through common gothic tropes, mostly through some form of horror or violence, and finally approach their “moment of grace” which makes “a story work” (O’Connor “On Her Own Work” 111-112).

“You’ve got good blood! I know you wouldn’t shoot a lady!”: Obsession with Lineage and the Gothic in “A Good Man Is Hard To Find”

“A Good Man Is Hard To Find” is probably Flannery O’Connor’s best known short story. Countless anthologies have chronicled the story of the Grandmother and her family’s deaths at the hands of The Misfit. From very early in the story, it is obvious that the Grandmother is obsessed with lineage and blood. The very first line of the story reflects the Grandmother’s valuing of familial connections, “The Grandmother didn’t want to go to Florida. She wanted to visit some of her connections in east Tennessee and she was seizing every chance to change Bailey’s mind” (O’Connor “A Good Man Is Hard To Find” 117). The first line instantly establishes a conflict between the Grandmother
and her son, Bailey, and positions her as a character who values her “blood”. The Grandmother’s concept of family is not limited to simply desiring to see her immediate kin but also to fully embrace, and obsess over, her lineage and the blood in her veins.

Lindsey Michael Banco defines the gothic as a genre that is obsessed with excess, strange experiences, and obsession (Banco 63). The Grandmother is obsessed, and her obsession with her family serves as the catalyst for the gothic turn within the text.

The Grandmother fully embraces a regional history that seems to be abandoned by the other characters and perhaps even O’Connor herself. For example, the Grandmother says, “‘I wouldn’t talk about my native state that way…In my time,” said the grandmother, folding her thin veined fingers, “children were more respectful of their native states and their parents and everything else. People did right then.’” (O’Connor “Good Man” 119). O’Connor places this line right before the Grandmother makes a racist comment that seems to make her grandchildren uncomfortable. It seems, as Rodney Stenning Edgecombe suggests, “The grandmother is the exemplar of all moral and social deficiencies of the old South, and she tries to freeze its racial and social inequalities in a pictorial frame…” (Edgecombe 69). Another example of the Grandmother’s obsession with her own lineage is the famous quote, “In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was lady” (O’Connor “Good Man” 118). This line does a lot of work in the text. It foreshadows that the family will be in an accident and also brings up the possibility of their demise—a possibility that becomes an actuality by the end of the story—which in turn adds to the horror that makes this piece considered a standout representative of the Southern gothic. Besides its connection to the horror of the Southern gothic, this statement also establishes
the Grandmother’s warped perception of the value of lineage. It does not concern her that she could be found dead on the side of the road, rather she focuses on what people would think of her as they passed her corpse. They wouldn’t see a dead body, but a fallen lady, a representation of some ideal past and that is what any passerby should acknowledge, according to the Grandmother. In short, the Grandmother’s self-history is wrong because it is founded on false ideals of her overvaluation of her own lineage. Her image and status as a “lady” clouds her reality and memory, resulting in her implication in the dysfunction and later destruction of her family. O’Connor further demonstrates this when she allows the Grandmother to become obsessed with viewing the old plantation house. The family is literally thrown off course by the Grandmother as she remembers the house from the past. Her nostalgic obsession leads her to lie to her grandchildren to encourage them to pressure Bailey to drive there. However, even the Grandmother’s internal obsession is misplaced: the house is in Tennessee, not Georgia, and the family gets in an accident.

It is after the accident that the story picks up its pace, and that the ideas of family become more attached to the gothic as the horror of the scene unfolds. As Rodney Stenning Edgecombe makes clear, O’Connor creates believable horror through, “embed(ing)...statutory horrors in a matrix of ordinariness” (Edgecombe 68). What started as a family vacation turns into a family bloodbath. It is also, not coincidentally, in the latter half of the piece, in which the Grandmother faces The Misfit while her family is executed in the woods behind her, that her obsession with lineage becomes even more obvious, especially in her relationship with her son, Bailey. So far, all the Grandmother really notes about her son are their differences. “He didn’t have a naturally sunny
disposition like she did and trips made him nervous” (O’Connor “Good Man” 121). In short, the Grandmother does not seem able to understand her son; she can only reference him in comparisons to herself. Readers most likely sympathize with Bailey because they are not allowed to get into his mindset but can only see him through the biased lens of the narrator. Considering their fate by the end of the text, it is interesting to consider that the Grandmother notes that trips make Bailey nervous, while she states her unaffectedness. However, after the encounter with The Misfit, the relationship between Bailey and his mother becomes even more strained. After the accident, “the grandmother was curled up under the dashboard, hoping she was injured so that Bailey’s wrath would not come down on her all at once. The horrible thought she had had before the accident was that the house she had remembered so vividly was not in Georgia but in Tennessee” (O’Connor “Good Man” 125). Again, it is the Grandmother’s misremembering that seals the fate of the family—her faulty reconstructing of lineage—but there is also a representation of immediate familial dysfunction, a gothic motif in itself. The Grandmother is afraid of what her son may do to her. In this way, it almost seems that Bailey has denied his lineage or devalued it so much so that he would be willing to harm his mother. That is not surprising, considering the Grandmother’s obsession with her nostalgic reminiscences. The idea that Bailey may indeed be capable of hurting his mother is further demonstrated during the family’s conversation with The Misfit. “Bailey turned his head sharply and said something to his mother that shocked even the children. The old lady began to cry and The Misfit reddened” (O’Connor “Good Man” 127). O’Connor never reveals what it was that Bailey said, but given the reaction of the characters, the reader may assume that it was rather horrible, something a son should
never say to his mother. However, in the face of tragedy, as Bailey and the grandson, John Wesley, are taken back to the woods, the Grandmother does seem to finally acknowledge her maternal role, which she seems to be becoming conscious of as the gothic turn of the text comes to the forefront. The Grandmother cries out, “Bailey boy!” (O’Connor “Good Man” 128). But her screams do not reach her son, because it is time for her to face The Misfit, alone.

The discourse between the Grandmother and The Misfit has been heavily studied by other scholars. Even O’Connor herself felt that she needed to weigh in on the interpretation of the conversation that ends the piece. Chad Rohman suggests what seems to be a common opinion: “(the Grandmother’s) murder is an indictment of the Grandmother’s monstrous hypocrisy, not The Misfit’s malevolence” (Rohman 285). Rohman’s opinion seems well-founded, supported by the text, as evidenced by one of the concluding lines: “‘She would have been a good woman,’ The Misfit said, ‘it if had been somebody to shoot her every minute of her life’” (O’Connor “Good Man” 133). On this scene, O’Connor herself writes,

The Grandmother is at last alone, facing The Misfit. Her head clears for an instant and she realizes, even in her limited way, that she is responsible for the man before her and joined to him by the ties of kinship which have their roots deep in the mystery she had been merely prattling about so far. And at this point, she does the right thing, she makes the right gesture (O’Connor “On Her Own Work” 111-112).

What O’Connor chooses to focus on is the Grandmother’s approach to grace, the redemptive act that will end the story. The mystery that she cites is religion. However,
O’Connor also stressed mystery’s ties to kinship or familial bonds. The gothic elements of this text, the horror and the mystery, are directly related to kin ties. In the text, the prominence of lineage is apparent in the language of both the Grandmother and The Misfit. In The Grandmother’s case, her pleas are based on her blood and appeals to his blood. She cries, “‘You don’t look a bit like you have common blood. I know you must come from nice people!’” and “‘You’ve got good blood! I know you wouldn’t shoot a lady! I know you come from nice people!’” (O’Connor “Good Man” 127, 132). The Grandmother ultimately fails to sway The Misfit, however, because her pleas are unfounded. Her understanding of her own lineage is skewed: she may be a “lady” by blood but that concept is based upon false and outdated ideals. The Misfit also makes it clear that the Grandmother’s lineage is basically worthless: “Lady…there never was a body that give the undertaker a tip” (O’Connor “Good Man” 132). In the face of death—or a murderer—lineage doesn’t equate to much because it is not one of the character essentials that O’Connor suggests can follow people to the afterlife (O’Connor “On Her Own Work” 113-114). A broadened positive lineage of doing good works and the like are more powerful to O’Connor than a limited and restricted one of an old woman obsessed with her blood legacy.

The Misfit proves the faultiness of the Grandmother’s logic in another way as well. To The Misfit, lineage served as a catalyst for his murderous behaviors. Unlike the Grandmother, who focuses on an idealized past, The Misfit seems to seek to forget his blood ties though he admits that they are a source of obsession for him. “‘My daddy said I was a different breed of dog from my brothers and sisters. ‘You know,’” Daddy said, “it’s some that can live their whole life out without asking about it and it’s others has to
know why it is, and this boy is one of the latters”” (O’Connor “Good Man” 128-129). In short, it can be assumed that The Misfit’s progression through life was directly related to his relationship with his family and perhaps his desire to discover why he was different from them. This is not to say that The Misfit has a better understanding of lineage than the Grandmother, but their theories and ends are different. While the Grandmother obsessively and incessantly holds on to an idealized past, The Misfit actively rewrites his, following one of the purposes of the gothic—the rewriting of history. This is apparent when The Misfit begins to discuss his crimes with his victims. He notes that he was charged with patricide, but he denies that it happened (O’Connor “Good Man” 130). In short, he is writing his own history. He says, ““I call myself The Misfit,” he said, “because I can’t make what all I done wrong fit with all I gone through in punishment”” (O’Connor “Good Man” 131). The Misfit names himself, and he rewrites his legacy, his crimes, and his punishments.

But The Misfit is not the narrator of “A Good Man Is Hard To Find”, and he doesn’t have a redemptive moment at the end of the text.9 This moment is key to O’Connor’s work and its connection to the gothic. In her essay “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction”, O’Connor writes, “The reader of today looks for this motion (a restoration at the end of the story), and rightly so, but what he has forgotten is the cost of it” (O’Connor “Some Aspects” 48, emphasis added). What O’Connor means is that readers seem to want a happy ending without realizing all the work that must go

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9 The reason why The Misfit does not have a moment of grace within the short story seems to be simply because he is not the protagonist, but there is definitely some potential for The Misfit to change. O’Connor wrote about this in “On Her Own Work”:

“I don’t want to equate the Misfit with the devil. I prefer to think that, however unlikely this may seem, the old lady’s gesture, like the mustard-seed, will grow to be a great crow-filled tree in the Misfit’s heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become. But that’s another story” (O’Connor “On Her Own Work” 112-113).
into attaining one and the unrealistic nature of a happy ending. O’Connor’s gothic stories provide endings that allow for redemption, though not necessarily in this world, the ending the reader may want. O’Connor notes that she received a letter from a Californian woman about one of her stories; “…it seems her heart had not been lifted up by anything of mine she had read. I think that if her heart had been in the right place, it would have been lifted up” (O’Connor “Some Aspects” 48). In “A Good Man Is Hard To Find” this heart-lifting moment is tied to family. “She (the Grandmother) saw the man’s face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, “Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!”” (O’Connor “Good Man” 132), and she reaches towards The Misfit. Of course, this does not mean that The Misfit is the Grandmother’s child, and Chad Rohman was right to point out that The Misfit may be considered Bailey’s double because “by the story’s end…(he) is wearing the deceased son’s ugly yellow shirt” (Rohman 285). However, literal “blood” ties are not important here. The Grandmother reaches out to comfort The Misfit—a gesture that ends in her shooting—but it is a correct gesture. The Grandmother demonstrates a true familial relationship: a mother comforting a child, the family finally—if only for a moment—functions correctly even though Bailey and his family are dead in the woods and the Grandmother is about to join them. The Grandmother is not obsessed with her fake lineage. At that moment, the Grandmother’s history is rewritten in true gothic flair as the Grandmother does die on the side of the road, not looking like a lady but “in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child’s and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky” (O’Connor “Good Man” 132).

“Her legal name was Hulga”: Denial of Lineage and the Gothic in “Good Country People”
Much as The Misfit names himself to change his lineage, Joy changes herself to Hulga to sever her familial ties with her mother in “Good Country People”. However, Hulga’s creation story is a bit more complex than The Misfit’s, and her denial of her lineage eventually brings about the gothic turn in the text: Manley Pointer, the Bible salesman, stealing her wooden leg. This instance is gothic in nature because it seems to correlate well with the gothic motif of eroticism, and it also has some elements of horror for Hulga herself, because, personally, Hulga seems to equate much of her identity with her wooden leg and when it is detached and stolen, Hulga reacts in mental horror as her thoughts race and she panics, almost as if part of her was killed. However, there is another similarity between the function of family legacy in “Good Country People” and “A Good Man Is Hard To Find” which also warrants a few words. Much like how the Grandmother was obsessed with her own socially determined and nostalgically colored view of her personal and regional lineage, Mrs. Hopewell also seems blinded by misplaced faith in lineage. This blindness also contributes to the deteriorating relationship between her and her daughter and the gothic turn of the text. Mrs. Hopewell is obsessed with the idea of “good country people”—a distinction that may not exist. The term “good county people” is clouded by of the examples the reader is given throughout the text. Firstly, there are the Freemans. “Mrs. Hopewell liked to tell people that Glynese and Carramae were two of the finest girls she knew and that Mrs. Freeman was a lady and that she was never ashamed to take her anywhere or introduce her to anybody they might meet” (O’Connor “Good Country People” 272). In short, the term becomes a sort of justification for the people that Mrs. Hopewell keeps around and represents her own definition of a good person. However, it is obvious that Hopewell’s words are not
without caveat: “The reason for her keeping them so long was that they were not trash. They were good country people” (O’Connor “Good Country” 272). Hopewell is almost too insistent upon the Freemans’ qualities, especially given what the reader knows of their behavior. Through Hulga’s gaze, the reader finds out that Mrs. Freeman “would stand with one elbow on top of the refrigerator and look down on them, or she would stand by the gas heater, lifting the back of her skirt slightly” (O’Connor “Good Country” 273). Mrs. Freeman is also “the nosiest woman ever to walk the earth” (O’Connor “Good Country” 272). Obviously, Mrs. Freeman is not characterized as an ideal “good country person”, but Mrs. Hopewell seems to have to use that label justify the people with which she surrounds herself and to establish a false but positive identity for herself, as a “good country” person. But it is not the trust in Mrs. Freeman that gets Mrs. Hopewell and her daughter in trouble, rather it is Mrs. Hopewell’s mislabeling of Manley Pointer. It is notable that Pointer gives his full family lineage in a long chunk of a paragraph right before Mrs. Hopewell decides that he must be a “good country person” (O’Connor “Good Country” 280). This mislabeling proves Mrs. Hopewell’s naivety and her obsession with good lineage, but Hulga’s misreading of Pointer costs her leg.

While Mrs. Hopewell is perhaps like the Grandmother, Hulga is more like The Misfit. While Hulga is physically deformed, her personality, like The Misfit’s, is more in question. Hulga’s main association with lineage is her denial of it, her quest to rewrite herself. Unfortunately for Hulga, her desire to destroy her lineage is not based on good intentions but rather almost as a vendetta against her mother. “Then she gone and had the beautiful name, Joy, changed without telling her mother until after she had done it. Her legal name was Hulga” (O’Connor “Good Country” 274). Further, Hulga sees the name
change as “her highest creative act” (O’Connor “Good Country” 275). In this way, it becomes obvious that Hulga changed her name to push against her mother, her lineage, and her past. Indeed, Hulga would be justified in this, considering that she is missing a leg and her mother is naïve and snobbish; her life seems one of stagnation and general misery. For instance, Mrs. Hopewell bemoans Hulga by refusing to accept her because “…every year she grew less like other people and more like herself—bloated, rude, and squint-eyed” (O’Connor “Good Country” 276). Mrs. Hopewell cannot break out of her own social prejudices to try to understand her daughter but rather dislikes her for who she has grown to be—growth that is partially Mrs. Hopewell’s fault since she is the parent. Interestingly, Susanna Gilbert connects Flannery O’Connor’s fictional families with her real one and notes that “conceivably O’Connor herself found relief from dependence from her own mother…expressing repressed rage in the fantasy of fiction” (Gilbert 120).¹⁰ But O’Connor is not Hulga. While perhaps O’Connor explored her own feelings of her family fictionally in her short stories, Hulga’s actions exist within the reality of “Good Country People”. Hulga changed her name and her behavior to spite her mother, and this dysfunction leads to the gothic turn, as Hulga loses her wooden leg in a moment of gothic eroticism and horror. Because of her cruelty and uncompromising attitude towards her mother and Manley Pointer and her attempts to manipulate and destroy the beliefs of the other characters, it is Hulga who must change at the end of the story, who must face her moment of “grace”, to use O’Connor’s term, or as Chad Rohman poignantly puts it, “Ravished, reduced, and embarrassed, the one-legged monster is one

¹⁰ Susanna Gilbert’s article, ““Blood Don’t Lie”: The Diseased Family in Flannery O’Connor’s Everything That Rises Must Converge.” Provides an interesting insight on the biographical connections O’Connor may have had with the families in her short story collections. The main point of Gilbert’s article is to explore the impact of lupus on O’Connor’s text, but there is a definite focus on the family within the essay.
step closer to becoming Joy” (Rohman 284). Hulga does seem to become a gothic monster in her quest to manipulate her mother and crush the Bible salesmen, and it is her denial of her family that leads her to those actions, the name change and the denial of her lineage through her dysfunctional relationship with her mother. What happens at the end of “Good Country People” is in a very different vein from “A Good Man Is Hard To Find”; there is clearly some hope at the end of the story: Hulga has learned the limits of her ability to rewrite herself and has found a reason to change. Without her wooden leg and equipped with her newfound knowledge that “good country people” may not exist in the way her and her mother supposed and that everyone holds their own beliefs and pasts, Hulga finds herself at a loss of words and thought. As the final line of the story suggests, nothing is as simple as it seems.

“The jungle of shadows around the child thickened”: Erasure of Lineage and the Gothic in “The Lame Shall Enter First”

“The Lame Shall Enter First” is a short story in Flannery O’Connor’s posthumous volume of short stories, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. Its inclusion in a different collection of prose is not the only difference between the story and “A Good Man Is Hard To Find” and “Good Country People” because it deals with a relationship between a widowed, single father, his young son, and another boy who is integrated into the family. This story’s protagonist, Sheppard, brings about the gothic turn of the text by erasing the lineage of his son—the memory of his mother—and then abandoning his own child. While Tony Magistrale is right to say that ““The Lame Shall Enter First” enlarges into a parable condemning Sheppard’s worldview and narrowness of spirit” (Magistrale 113), the story also focuses a lot on parent/child relationships. Several scholars have explored the role of family within O’Connor’s work and have arrived at such conclusions as “The
writer’s widows and widowers are steely, independent types who somehow manage to hold their homes and farms together, but often at the expense of understanding and aiding in the development of their children” (Magistrale 111) and “mothers are resented but fathers misjudge and destroy” (Gilbert 124). The quote from Susanna Gilbert can bring up a comparison between “Good Country People” and “The Lame Shall Enter First”.

Mrs. Hopewell and Hulga may not understand or accept one another but they do not have physical altercations, they simply resent each other. Sheppard misjudges both Johnson and Norton’s characters, and this causes the destruction of his son. Thus, the difference between the role of mothers and fathers as posited by Gilbert are supported. The conclusions drawn by scholars are compelling but they seem to stop one step short: the family tensions within the texts lead directly to what makes them part of the Southern gothic tradition. And it is perhaps easiest to see this correlation in “The Lame Shall Enter First”.

Many of Sheppard’s misconceptions of the character of both Norton and Johnson are based on his ideas of family. At the beginning of the story, Sheppard describes Johnson to Norton in terms seeped in familial language: “‘You’ve never been taught anything but the truth. Your daddy gives you everything you need and want. You don’t have a grandfather who beats you. And your mother is not in the state penitentiary’” (O’Connor “The Lame Shall Enter First” 447). Norton’s response to this is, of course, to cry and vomit up his breakfast: his mother is dead, far worse than in prison. But, Sheppard proves incapable of understanding that, instead claiming the child’s mourning is nothing but selfishness: “‘If you stop thinking about yourself and think what you can do for somebody else,’ Sheppard said, “then you’ll stop missing your mother’”
Tony Magistrale correctly posits, “In her tales the inability to cohabit with, and demonstrate affection for, a blood-relative is the primary indication of a selfish and mean-spirited temperament” (Magistrale 112). Sheppard’s inability to understand his son reflects his internal conflicts over the death of his wife. These conflicts are because Sheppard has seemingly tried to erase his wife from existence. For example, the reader finds out that the only time Sheppard punishes Norton is when he complains after he “realized that Johnson was going to sleep in his mother’s bed” (O’Connor “The Lame” 460). Sheppard attempts to belittle familial connections in order to fuel his personal desire of bettering someone else—he replaces his biological son with Johnson, whose suffering attracted Sheppard because he felt that Johnson’s ability to, to quote the cliché, “rise from the ashes” of his ruined past is more worthwhile than trying to understand and comfort his mourning son. As Sheppard despairs, “What was wasted on Norton would cause Johnson to flourish” (O’Connor “The Lame” 452), demonstrating that he is almost erasing his entire family in order to create a new one with Johnson. While he believes that Johnson has promise and is truly a good child, it is obvious from the text that Johnson is not. When Johnson first meets Norton, he says, “You’re his kid all right…You got the same stupid face’” (O’Connor “The Lame” 454).

Perhaps one of the most tragic elements of “The Lame Shall Enter First” is Sheppard’s foolish embracing of Johnson. As Sheppard seems to deny the memory of his wife, he also actively seeks to replace his son. He says, “Johnson had a capacity for real response and had been deprived of everything from birth; Norton was average or below and had had every advantage” (O’Connor “The Lame” 449). Johnson, however, is comfortable with his status as a criminal. Since Johnson is confident in his lineage, he is
able to control Sheppard throughout the latter parts of the story. Perhaps one of the most memorable examples occurs when, in order to appease Johnson and maintain his trust, Sheppard ignores Norton one night. Norton beckons for his father to come into his room, but Sheppard, knowing that Johnson watches or listens to him from the room across the hall, does not heed his child. Norton is alone, as he is through much of the text, “The child sat for some time looking at the spot where his father had stood. Finally his gaze became aimless and he lay back down” (O’Connor “The Lame” 469). Sheppard’s desire to better Johnson intellectually and socially through offering lodging, books, a telescope, and an orthopedic shoe leads to several skewed relationships as Sheppard basically invites dysfunction—in this case, an exemplar of Gothic grotesqueness—into his house and family. Firstly, there is the parent/child relationship between Sheppard and Johnson, with Johnson as the parent and Sheppard as the child. Defeated by Johnson, Sheppard is forced to simply wish for Johnson to choose to leave of his own accord. The other relationship is only briefly mentioned in the text, but deserves some study: the brotherly relationship between Johnson and Norton.

Near the end of the story, Johnson and Norton develop a sort of bond. It can be inferred that this bond is mainly an aggressive move on Johnson’s part to attack Sheppard through the manipulation of his son. However, it is obvious that Norton does find some solace in the older boy. Johnson introduces Norton to religion, which seems to bring comfort to the child. As they read the Bible together, Sheppard notes, “Johnson’s finger moved under the lines they were reading. The elder brother and the younger” (O’Connor “The Lame” 475). However, since this relationship is also skewed, founded on disingenuous circumstances, it is no surprise that it ends poorly for Norton. Much like in
O’Connor’s other gothic texts, the main gothic trope of the piece, in this case Norton’s suicide, is based upon a strain on familial ties.

Through Sheppard’s figurative erasure of his wife and Johnson’s introduction of Christian ideas of the afterlife, Norton becomes obsessed with his mother, the other half of his blood lineage. Perhaps this is best represented by one of the most haunting moments of the text. Johnson has left the house but Sheppard feels that he will return. He goes upstairs to make sure Norton has gone to bed, but instead finds him at the telescope he had bought for Johnson. In response to his entrance, the following dialogue occurs:

“I’ve found her!” he said breathlessly.

“Found who?” Sheppard said.

“Mamma!”

Sheppard steadied himself in the doorway. The jungle of shadows around the child thickened. (“The Lame” 478).

That is the last time Sheppard sees his child alive.

The real tragedy of the text is that O’Connor allows Sheppard his moment of grace only to have it fall short. After realizing that Johnson is not the ideal child he wanted, Sheppard finally understands himself and his motives: “His heart constricted with a repulsion for himself so clear and intense that he gasped for breath...He had ignored his own child to feed his vision of himself” (O’Connor “The Lame” 481), and he subsequently decides that “He would make everything up to him (Norton). He would never let him suffer again. He would be mother and father. He jumped up and ran to his room, to kiss him, to tell him that he loved him, that he would never fail him again”
O’Connor “The Lame” 482). Sheppard comes to terms with his own flaws and realizes the need for his family, the need to rebuild his family, the importance of family ties and lineage. However, when Sheppard reaches Norton’s room, he is not there, rather he finds him hanging above the fallen telescope. The gothic turn, Norton’s suicide, still occurs even though Sheppard comes to terms with himself and his family. However, in O’Connor’s opinion, the story is still a success: Sheppard realized his wrongs and made the right gesture: going to comfort his son and re-forge his family; the problem is, he simply came a little too late.

Flannery O’Connor said:

When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs that you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures

(O’Connor “Fiction Writer” 34).

That was one of her justifications for the use of violence in her texts. One cannot deny that O’Connor created many startling figures throughout her work, from a man who exterminates families on back roads to a Bible salesman who steals wooden legs and even a father so blinded by his own selfishness that he cannot see the path to destruction he is on. O’Connor uses the gothic to create memorable stories but moreover to demonstrate something innate in human nature: the capacity for redemption or grace and the traits that a person really has when stripped down to nothing. While it is easy to see O’Connor’s use of the gothic through her horror, it is more compelling to consider the more subtle
ways O’Connor’s work lends itself to the gothic. As a genre seeped in history, the gothic allows for history to be rewritten, and O’Connor’s texts are filled with characters who try to manipulate and change their lineages—their family histories—in order to get what they want. Very rarely do these attempts succeed, family seems rather to be an obstacle that must be dealt with before a character can find grace, be that by the end of a gun barrel, in a barn, or in the lens of a telescope. For O’Connor, lineage and the gothic are undeniably linked.
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Lela heard a gunshot. She dropped the box of candies she carried, and it skidded away from her on the ice. The gunshot should not have surprised her, after all, the men of Germantown hunted rabbits in the woods all the time; the snow—at least seven inches with a thin coating of ice—should have been much more surprising.

Gunshots were commonplace in Germantown, North Carolina, but heavy snow was not. The gunshot’s ring faded from the air. “Someone will eat rabbit tonight,” Lela said, watching her breath puff out with each syllable. She knelt to pick up the box of candies. They were apple jelly candies that Lela had special ordered from Sharp Top, Virginia. They were a present for Quince and Louise Pickett and their siblings and mother and father. The box had the words “Merry Christmas, 1929” imprinted on the lid, and the words were flanked by holly leaves. Lela dusted some snow from the box’s lid. She knew that Louise liked apples, and Quince liked sweets because sugar was usually too expensive for the Picketts to afford. Lela had found that out a few months back, when Quince didn’t get a cake for his fifteenth birthday; when Lela also found out that she shared the same birthday month as her boyfriend. Lela planned on unwrapping the first apple jelly herself and pressing it into Quince’s lips until he opened his mouth.

She smiled at the thought and started walking towards the house again, being careful with her footing in the snow. The path to the Pickett Place was fairly long, winding through fallow land that was awaiting the spring tobacco planting, and in the snow, Lela felt like she was going slowly. She was ready to mount the crooked porch steps and knock on the front door. She would say “Merry Christmas” to whoever opened
the door, and they—and hopefully it would be Quince—would say how delighted they were at her surprise.

The house appeared at the end of the pathway, plastered to a dark grey sky that threatened more snow. The house was small—built around 1820—and only had three rooms on two floors: two rooms upstairs and one big room downstairs. The downstairs area was split into different sections by sparse furniture: a kitchen area with the wood stove, a round table, and Reggie Pickett and his wife’s bed with the baby’s crib beside it. In the snow, the house looked different, like it was slanted, dark. Lela thought that it must have been because of the snow drifts. Her stomach felt strangely tight, like she was hungry, but she wasn’t hungry. Lela had to grasp the step’s railing because her feet felt unsteady. She held out her hand to knock on the front door, but her foot slipped, and she slammed her palms into the door to steady herself. She looked down; there was a slush of blood on the porch.

Lela stared at the red. *There shouldn’t be blood on the porch, she thought.* Unless, Reggie, the patriarch of the family, had brought home some rabbits to be skinned. Maybe he did it on the porch, and he spilled a little blood while he drained the carcass. The puddle was not very big and more round than splattered. From the slush, Lela looked up into the front window—one of only four that lined the bottom floor of the house. Though the window fogged from her breath, she saw something on the floor by the door, hardly visible. It was a drooped head, like someone was sitting in front of the door, leaned back against the wall and partially against the window. Lela recognized the brown, streaked with grey, hair pulled back into a tight bun as Mrs. Pickett. *Why is she on the floor?* Lela pressed her palms into the chilled glass to get closer to the window, to
the scene within. The two youngest Pickett boys—the fourth and fifth out of six children that made up the Pickett household—were sitting at the table, eating what looked like grits from bowls. The crib rocked in the corner of the room.

Reggie Pickett stood in the middle of the room with a shotgun. He pointed it at Louise’s stomach. Louise had her back to her father—facing the stone mantle, but her shoulders moved as if she was sobbing. Both of their backs were towards Lela. She could hear muffled words through the thick glass, but she couldn’t make them out. *What is happening?* Lela pressed her ear to the glass. She heard Reggie say, “It’ll be better over there.”

Louise reached out towards the fireplace poker. Reggie steadied his gun. Lela jerked her ear from the glass, she tried to look away, but she heard the shot and saw Louise’s body pitch forward, falling, slamming her chin into the mantle before she dropped to the floor. She was still on the floor, except for her fingertips, which twitched slightly. Slowly, blood formed around her.

Lela heard herself screaming before she realized she was. She covered her mouth. She said, “I’m dreaming.” Then she said, “God, Quince.” She didn’t see him. He usually sat by the window, the sun coloring the gold that ran through his brown hair, and whittled wooden animals for his little sisters. He’d once made Lela a wooden version of her dog, and she kept it on her nightstand, stroking its head each night before she went to sleep.

*I need to run. I need to get away. I need*—Lela took a step back from the window. Her heel caught a piece of wood from the pile, and she fell backwards off of the porch. The snow soaked into her back, through the wool of her coat. She could feel the
cold against the back of her legs; her stockings must have ripped. The sky was grey and cloudy, and there were some snowflakes in the air, not falling but blowing in the breeze. Lela heard the door open. She held still. It had to be Reggie coming out. She wondered if he’d seen her at the window, falling off the porch. If Reggie didn’t look down, if he only scanned the horizon, the path back to Germantown, then he wouldn’t see her. Then she could get up and run back to Germantown and—

She heard, “Miss Jones.” Reggie looked down at her from the porch. He held his gun at his side. His thick dark hair was slicked back so his broad forehead, thinly lined with wrinkles and furrowed, was visible as he looked at her. “What are you doing here?”

Lela swallowed. She had almost forgotten entirely about the apple jelly candies. She thought she had dropped the box again, but she didn’t know where. She didn’t open her mouth. *There is nothing to say,* she thought. *What can I say?* “Mr. Pickett, what are you doing?”

Reggie smashed the butt of his rifle into the porch floor, making a dull thud, before he raised it and readied his shotgun, angling it down towards her. He didn’t respond.

Lela got to her feet and ran. She slipped on snow and nearly fell, but she caught herself. She could feel her gloves tear against the ice. She could see her breath puffing out in front of her; her throat felt scratched and tight. Ahead of her was the Pickett’s path, lined by tall pine trees that were doubled over by the weight of the snow on their branches, and beyond that was the road through Germantown.
If she could make it to the road, then she could make it home. Then Reggie wouldn’t catch her, and he wouldn’t shoot her. And she wouldn’t be like Louise bleeding on the floor with her teeth by the fireplace. Lela felt her foot plunge through a thick snowdrift, and she fell. She tried to steady herself, but her hands sunk into the snow too. There was snow on her face. It was cold and sharp, stabbing her, so she closed her eyes. *I’m dead.* She didn’t want to cry because she knew that the tears would freeze her face to the ice. She squeezed her eyes closed tighter to try to get her pulse to slow. She felt like her heart would explode from her chest; she thought that it would be better to die quick of a heart attack than to get shot. She thought of how Louise’s back seemed to burst open, how she recoiled and hit the mantle. Lela felt something cold press into her side and then force her onto her back. Above her everything was grey, clouds pressed tight together so no sky was visible.

Reggie pointed his gun at her face. “What are you doing here?”

Lela cleared her throat but it felt like her spit got caught on the way down. She couldn’t speak. She wanted to say, “I was here to spend Christmas with Louise and Quince.”

He was quiet for a while. His gun steady at Lela’s forehead. His eyebrows moved up and down on his brow, like he was thinking of something that he couldn’t quite put into words. His mouth moved, though no sound came out. Finally, he said, “You don’t deserve this.”

Lela felt her eyes widen, and she realized that she had been crying because she could feel the chill tear trails on her cheeks. Somehow, those words that should have brought salvation felt like Reggie had just spat tobacco in her face.
Reggie lowered his gun. “Just like Quince.”

“Quince!” Lela pushed herself up on her elbows. Her face was hot and cold at the same time, and she figured that, had she been able to look into a mirror, her skin would have been marbled, bright red and pale white. “Where is he?”

“Should’ve figured you’d be this way.” Reggie put his shotgun against Lela’s collarbone and pushed her back down. “Don’t you tell him. Don’t you tell anyone.” He retracted his gun and tucked it beneath his armpit. “I have work to do.” Reggie turned.

Lela shot up and grabbed the tail of Reggie’s thin coat. The material felt threadbare even through her thick gloves. She used the momentum to get to her feet. She shook his coat. “What have you done? Why?” *What am I doing? I should get out of here. I should run and not look back. He has a gun. But, I can’t.* But Lela kept jerking the coat up and down. She felt the tears on her face and a burning that seemed sit between her skin and muscles.

Reggie turned towards her. Their eyes met for an instant. Reggie’s eyes were dim and indifferent. He raised his right hand and slapped her, hard, across the face, in one smooth motion, similar to how one would smack a mosquito from the air.

Lela grabbed a fistful of Reggie’s coat before she fell back into the snow, tearing out one of the thin pockets. She felt a piece of paper in her hand.

Reggie looked down at her and spit, aiming it to land beside her face. He walked away without speaking, without looking back.

The ground made her body numb, but Lela could feel herself shaking. She didn’t move until the crunching of Reggie’s boots faded away. She heard three more gunshots—the two boys and the baby, she thought—but none of them made her flinch.
She clutched the material from Reggie’s pocket in her left hand. She opened it slowly and the black material seemed to deteriorate in her palm. But a piece of paper was left. It said, *Nobody to blame but* and then there was a smudged line right where Lela’s thumb had rested when she grabbed it. Whatever word had been there had been obscured. Lela figured that the smudge must’ve been an “I”. *Nobody to blame but I*. She crumbled the note a little and slid it in her pocket. She could feel it there as she stood up. It seemed to press into her side, cold and hot at the same time, so cold as to be scalding.

Her feet felt unsteady in her boots. Her head felt light and heavy, and she thought that if she took a step she would vomit. Her face was still wet, but there was a stickiness there too. Lela touched her face and realized that Reggie had busted her lip when he smacked her. “I want to go home,” she said aloud, but not loud, to the air. Her knees shook.

Her hands were cold so she slid them into her pockets. She felt Reggie’s note. *Nobody to blame but* and the smudge. The paper crumpled beneath her fingers as if it was old; Lela had smudged the final word; she tried to remember what the mark looked like. She remembered what Reggie had said, “You don’t deserve this” and “Just like Quince.” And she felt her skin burn again. Part of her wanted to go find Reggie and grab and shake him again. Another part of her wanted to go home.

*It could be Q*, she thought as she walked, going slowly so her knees wouldn’t buckle beneath her weight. She remembered that one humid August afternoon, barely even four months ago, as she watched Louise bake a cake in the woodstove, Quince burst into the house with Reggie leaning on him heavily. Blood dripped from Reggie’s face, falling like red tears in between his fingers as he cradled his head. Louise dropped the
pan of raw cake batter on the floor and went to her father. She asked what had happened, but her voice was so fast and high pitched that Lela could barely understand what she said.

Quince helped Reggie sit. Reggie let his head fall to the table. Quince said, “There was an accident.”

Lela didn’t move from the table though Reggie was across from her. His hands lay next to his head. He was making fists and loosening them over and over again.

Quince said that they were working in the tobacco shed, hammering some boards into the ceiling. They were sharing the ladder, and Quince lost his balance and let a plank drop on his father’s head.

Louise said that they should take Reggie to the doctor in Reynolds.

Reggie slammed one of his fists onto the table. Lela jumped. Reggie said, without lifting his head, “No.” After he said that one word, he looked up at Lela and Quince, who stood behind her, his hands on the back of her chair. Reggie’s glare seemed to burn through Lela’s face. Burn through her and into Quince. Lela couldn’t read Reggie; he was all hard eyes and blood and clenched teeth.

Quince said, “It was an accident.” His voice was even.

On her porch, Lela wiped the blood from her lip and the tears from her face. She remembered Reggie told her that she couldn’t tell anyone. Not even Mom and Dad. Not even Quince. She wondered what Quince would do when he got back to his home, where he was in the first place. Lela closed her eyes and steadied herself by gripping one of the columns that lined her large porch. The porch swing had a thin layer of ice on it and in
the chains. The ice shined between each link like small mirrors. She couldn’t think of what could happen if Quince had gone back. She couldn’t think of Reggie aiming his gun at Quince’s face, blasting until he was nothing but a mangled mess of arms and legs and a torso, all red from blood. Lela felt something rise in her throat, and she slid across the porch to the side before she vomited into the bushes.

“Lela, that you?” Lela’s mother’s voice came from the other side of the door. Lela couldn’t risk her coming out on the porch, so she wiped her mouth and walked into the foyer; her mother welcomed her, while still mixing dough in a bowl. The family hound, James K. Polk, trotted in from the sitting room and plopped down with a sigh at Lela’s feet. Her mother stepped around the dog. “Did they like the candy?” Her apron was caked with flour.

“What?” Lela asked. Then she remembered the box of apple jelly candies. She wondered where she’d dropped them. “Oh, I dropped them.” She began to unbutton her coat. Though the buttons were large and round, she couldn’t quite get her fingers to coax them undone. After a moment of fiddling, Lela dropped her hands back to her sides and kept her coat on. She thought it was cold anyway.

The door creaked and Lela’s father stepped in behind her. He blew into his hands. He must have forgotten his gloves. His brow was furrowed. “There is a smell in the bushes.”

Lela’s mother handed her the bowl and told her to stir as she helped her husband out of his thick, wool coat. Lela stirred; her stomach wrenched, and she felt that if she looked into the bowl of pale dough, she would vomit again.
“Lela, you are spilling the dough.” Her mother snatched the bowl away from her, and Lela found herself holding the spoon, still going through the motion of stirring. “Are you unwell?”

Lela shook her head; she didn’t trust herself to form words.

There was a knock at the door and suddenly Lela felt extremely strange about all three of them standing in the foyer. As her father opened the front door, her mother slipped into the kitchen, snatching back the spoon from Lela.

August Pickett, Louise and Quince’s cousin, stepped in. He took off his wool hat and held it with his tattered gloves. His face was flushed as if he’d been running.

“Pardon. I know it’s Christmas. But...” August’s shoulders quivered.

Lela knew that he knew. He seemed very calm about it all, though. But, Lela did notice that his fingernails were freshly torn, and his face was extremely pale. When he spoke, his bottom lip quivered slightly.

August said that he and his father, Reggie’s brother, Marlow, had gone up to the house to check on the family because the little girls were supposed to come trim their tree. He said that when they got there everyone was dead, and Reggie was gone. August lowered his face as his nose and eyes started dripping. He said that Quince had gone to the store, so he wasn’t there. August was going to get the county sheriff. His father was with the family and had asked for help. “To find Uncle Reggie,” August said. His shoulders heaved up and down, and his breaths were short.

Lela could hear her mother shifting in the kitchen, as if trying to sound busy but also trying to listen. When she looked up, her father was looking back at her. It was hard to read his face. “Go to your room,” he said. He put his hand on her shoulder and gave it
a squeeze. It wasn’t reassuring, the grip was limp. But, Lela obeyed and went up to her room, the dog following behind her.

Upstairs, Lela heard her father promise that he would go out to the Pickett Place, and she heard the front door close. Then, she heard her mother say, “Good lord. Lela was going out there today.”

“Thank God she didn’t.”

She heard the door creak open and then click closed. Lela threw herself horizontally across her bed with her legs dangling towards the floor. It was hot in her coat. She tried to undo the buttons, but her fingers couldn’t manage the motions.

She thought about the last time she’d been out to the Pickett Place. It had been the week before, on a Wednesday. Reggie had come in with a couple rabbits tied together by their hind legs. He’d already gutted them, so their bellies were split and dripped a little blood on the floorboards as he crossed the room. He threw the rabbits on the table, right over the cards Lela, Quince, and Louise were playing poker with. Reggie didn’t look at them as he washed his hands in the basin. “Louise, get those set for stew.”

Louise carefully placed her cards down on the table, avoiding the blood that leaked from the rabbits. “Pa, can I do it in a bit?”

“No, that’s the Devil’s game anyway.” Reggie dried his hands off on his pants.

“We aren’t gambling with money.” Lela moved the deck of cards away from the rabbits. She locked eyes with one of them. The rabbit’s eyes were wide and its mouth was open as if it were still screeching. “It’s all in good fun.” She tried to keep her voice even. She could feel her face flush.
“Lela’s right.” Quince stood up, positioning himself between Lela and his father.

“It’s too early to start supper.”

Reggie crossed the room and stood in front of his son. Quince was a little taller than Reggie, but he was also narrower. As a child, Lela heard that Quince had had several bouts with scarlet fever, which left him pale and thin—unlike his father who was tanned and with muscles rippling in his bare arms. Reggie laughed a little, though it almost sounded more like a cough. “Would you say that if she wasn’t behind you?”

Lela couldn’t see Quince’s face, but she noticed that he straightened his back, becoming even taller than his father. His fists tightened and loosened at his sides. He didn’t speak, so Lela stood up beside him. She weaved her fingers into his hand while his fist was unclenched. “He would.”

Reggie laughed again.

Lela had the urge to smack Reggie across the mouth.

Quince squeezed Lela’s hand. “I would.”

“Get on home, little Miss Jones.” Reggie waved his hand. “I’ve had bout enough of you.”

Louise had begun to work on the rabbits. She stirred the stock deliberately and had fired the woodstove. The whole house smelled like smoke. Louise wasn’t watching the pot as she stirred; her eyes were on her father, brother, and Lela. A little of the stock fell from the pot and sizzled on the wooden floor.

“There is tobacco that needs hanging, boy.” Reggie joined Louise in the kitchen area of the room. He smirked. “Good day, Miss Jones.” He put his forefinger and thumb against his temple and closed his eyes for a second.
“I’ll walk you out,” Quince said. He pulled Lela with him out the door and onto the porch. The fallow fields were barren but shined golden in the setting sun. “You can make it home all right?”

“You shouldn’t let him be that way.” Lela let go of Quince’s hand and put her foot down onto the top step.

“You don’t know him like we do.”

“My daddy would never be like that.”

Quince stepped towards her and kissed her cheek. She’d only recently allowed him to do that—to kiss her softly. They were still young; she didn’t think it proper for them to dote too much. “Have a good night, Lela.”

Lela’s legs numb from hanging off her bed. She wondered how long she’d been laying there. The sun seemed high in her window, casting shadows throughout her room of her dresser, poster bed, and nightstand. The wooden version of James K. Polk seemed covered by darkness. Lela reached out and took the dog. She pressed it into her heart. *Nobody to blame but.* The note was still in her pocket, and Lela had sweated through her coat. Lela got up and closed her curtains. She locked her door. In her boots and coat, with the dog still pressed into her chest, Lela curled up on top of her bed on a quilt that her grandmother had made her years ago. *Why would Reggie do that?* Lela’s face felt hot as she thought of Reggie and the gun, the evenness of his voice and the way he smacked her across the face. She closed her eyes and tried not to think about it.

She must have slept because when she opened her eyes again, the sun was lower, peeking over the windowsill. Droplets dripped from the eaves above the window. The
snow was melting. Lela got up and went to the window, touching the cool glass. Her window overlooked the only road through Germantown. That road was lined by Jefferson’s General Store, three churches (Baptist, Methodist, and Episcopalian—though Lela’s family didn’t attend any of them), and several houses, mostly white with grey shutters, and modestly built. The road was gravel and had dirt roads of varying girth and length shooting off from the main drag. Lela could see the dirt road that led to the Pickett place from the side window on the bottom floor, but from her window on the third floor, Lela could only see the road. It was usually empty, occupied only by a few Model-Ts or couples moseying at the edges, heads pushed together as if they were whispering to one another. But there were no couples that morning. Only cars. Big, black cars that grinded down the gravel beneath their shiny tires.

Lela heard her parents talking downstairs. Her father said that Reggie had shot himself, and the Pickett Place was a mess. The sheriff had come but only to shake his head, click his teeth, and say that there was nothing he could do. Marlow, Reggie’s brother, had grabbed the sheriff and asked for something, anything to tell his family. The sheriff had said that there was nothing to say. Quince had been upset when he got to his house. Marlow had decided that Quince should stay with the Jeffertons because he didn’t have enough money to care for his nephew. Her father had heard that Marlow had bought a large tombstone and had it rush ordered. “But why rush a stone,” her father said, “while there is a living body suffering right there with you?”

Her mother said that Mrs. Brow, the wife of the undertaker, had come that morning while her father was out talking to some of the men in the cars—who were reporters from all over North Carolina, with some from Virginia and even a couple from
Colorado. Lela’s mother said that Mrs. Brow said, in whispers over a cup of coffee and day old sugar cake, that all the reporters were coming because the whole story was going to be national news. National news, she’d said, can you imagine? Germantown, in the news!

“The funeral will be tomorrow,” her father said.

Lela fell back on her bed and picked back up the wooden dog. The real James K. whimpered by the door. He scratched it a little, barely making a sound.

“And Lela?” Her mother asked. “We should talk to her.”

Her father didn’t respond.

Lela opened her bedroom door, and James K. dashed out and down the stairs. Lela heard the kitchen door open and knew the dog had been let out into the yard. She finally managed to get out of her coat, and she peeled off her dress. It was a plaid, wool dress that cinched in at the waist, and she’d hemmed it to fall less than an inch below her knees. She thought Quince would’ve liked the dress. He would’ve flushed at the sight of her knees, but she knew he would’ve liked it.

She made her way downstairs, finding her parents in the parlor. She greeted them both, though her smile felt strangely on her face.

“How are you?” Her mother asked as Lela sat on the loveseat. James K. came back into the house, his paws moist and chilled.

“I’m fine.” Lela folded her hands in her lap. “What happened yesterday?”

Her father handed her the local paper, the Reynolds Reader. On the front page was the article about Christmas: Local Farmer Slays Family Then Self. People had taken pictures of the house. Quince’s uncle, Marlow, had charged them quarters. The one road
through Germantown was choked on people and cars. The article said that Marlow had invited all the out-of-town onlookers and newsmen and the rest of Germantown to the funeral, which would be held on the 27th. Lela gripped the newspaper and crumpled it until her father took it away from her.

Lela didn’t know much of Marlow, and she didn’t see him often. The first time she met him, he’d been working his chewing tobacco, roughly mashing it between his teeth so that it made a smacking noise. Marlow had a wad of bills in his hand, bound together by a piece of twine and stood in front of Reggie. They were all in the living space: Lela sat beside Quince as he whittled a wooden version of her dog, and Louise knitted on her other side. It had been in November, about six weeks before Christmas, and it was chill, so there was a fire going.

Lela remembered that Marlow leaned against the wall; he was a slight man and wore a hat even in the house. His voice was low, as if he hadn’t wanted the younger ones to hear. “Brother, we all were hit by the Granville Wilt. ‘Cept you.”

Reggie lit a cigarette and placed it between his lips, almost gently. He made a grunt.

“How’d you avoid it?”

Again, the grunt. Reggie took a drag of his cigarette and blew the smoke into a circle that rose about his brother’s head like a halo before snapping in half and dissipating.

Marlow pressed the money into the front of Reggie’s stained cotton shirt. “I’ll pay you this for a mite of your crop. It’s at a discount, but we got to eat.”

Reggie put his open palm against the cash and pushed it back to Marlow. “I don’t want your money, Brother,”
“Reggie, we’ll starve.”

“Marlow,” Reggie said, suddenly loud. “You’d best get on. That crop is ours.”

Marlow said Reggie’s name again.

Reggie blew another smoke ring.

Marlow said, “You have no trouble feeding that little rich girl all day. You could at least help your kin.” Lela watched as Marlow Pickett stomped out of the house. He slammed the door behind him so hard that one of the narrow planks along the bottom fell onto the floor. Lela flinched.

Reggie looked over at them. “Louise, get on with dinner. Quince, out to the shed to hang some leaves before sunset. And Miss Jones, get along.” He waved his hand slowly, and then he brought it up to his face and rested his forehead in his palm.

Louise got up and put on her apron. She pulled a skinned rabbit from the icebox. “I was hoping that Lela could stay for dinner.”

“No.”

“It wouldn’t be no trouble.”

“I said no.” Reggie slammed his fist into the wall. “Why aren’t you moving?”

Louise put on a pot to boil the rabbit. Quince stood up. “Lela is staying for dinner.”

Reggie spun around to face Quince. “What did you say?”

Quince cleared his throat and straightened his back. Lela moved closer to his side. He said, “You heard me.”

“Get a switch.”
Quince didn’t move. He reached over and took Lela’s hand. His palms were sweating though the house was cold.

Lela felt herself smile so she lowered her face so that Reggie wouldn’t see. But, she thought that Reggie had seen because she heard him start fiddling with his belt buckle. She looked up as Reggie took of his belt and gripped it. “Marlow is always wrong, ‘cept about you, Miss Jones.” He snapped the belt. It was of a cheap leather but its sound still echoed in the air.

“Pa, please,” said Louise.

“Shut up.” Reggie snapped the belt again. “Get on, Miss Jones. You don’t want to see this.”

“You wouldn’t.” Lela stepped forward a little, but Quince held her back. She wasn’t sure what she was going to do, but she was going to do something.

Quince whispered, “You should go.”

Lela shook her head and gripped his hand tighter. “He’ll—”

“I know.” Quince smiled. “You’re worth it.”

Lela didn’t see Quince until the funeral. Marlow wanted to have the funeral outside, along the main drag, so that everyone could be there. Even though it was still cold, the snow had begun to melt, leaving puddles in the road and thick, icy slush on the sides. Not one of the three churches in Germantown could have housed all the people and the seven white caskets that sat out in the middle of the street. Seven because the infant had been placed with her mother, to save the cost of one more casket.
Nobody to Blame but, it could be “M” for Marlow. The brother who had bought pine caskets and had put two bodies in one to scrimp quarters. But Lela couldn’t think of why, when alive, Reggie would blame his brother—for anything other than money—; she was ready to get back to her house. Her hands were cold.

The caskets were opened. People walked by. They arched their backs and wrinkled their noses as if they were looking for bullet holes. They wouldn’t find any though, because Lela’s father told her that all the injuries were to the back or the middles, though Lela knew that the undertaker had had to work on Louise’s face; her jaw was probably broken, her chin bruised and scraped.

Lela saw Quince go by the caskets. His arm was pinned into Marlow’s. He did not look at the bodies. His free hand was in a fist and squeezed so tight that it was red and white. There was a flash, and Lela noticed that some people were taking a picture with the caskets. They leaned in closer and closer to the bodies as if to make certain that they were in the shot.

After the casket viewing, the line of people continued walking on until they reached Brow Cemetery. There was a large hole in the ground, flanked by stacks of snow, and there was a massive headstone. It had all the names of the family on it. Reggie’s name was at the very top, under his name were everyone else’s much smaller and harder to read. Lela remembered how Reggie had told her that she didn’t deserve a bullet. She didn’t think he was worth a headstone. But, she tried to keep her face straight and serious.

A group of solemn men, some of which Lela recognized from town, others she could not place, carried the caskets and helped to settle them into the mass grave. Mr. Brow said a few words before he started throwing dirt on the caskets, and the groups of
people slowly wandered away. Marlow said something to Quince, Lela picked out the words, “Fencing. It’ll be done right,” before Marlow loosely hugged his nephew. August and his sister also embraced Quince, though Quince didn’t touch them. When they left, Quince was alone beside the headstone, the Jeffersons letting him have some time before taking him back to their store.

Lela’s father told her to go to him; she did.

Lela observed Quince, quietly. He wore a suit; Lela noticed that his vest buttons were out of order. She thought about reaching out and righting them, but Quince took a step forward. He knelt and grabbed a fistful of blackened, muddy slush from one of the stacks and shoved it into the crevices of Reggie’s name at the top of the headstone. He kept smearing the snow until the name was illegible. The men kept throwing dirt on the caskets; none of them spoke.

Quince looked at Lela, his eyes were dark, and his face was pale except for his cheeks which were flushed by the cold. “That all right?”

“Y…yes.” Lela tried a little smile. It felt dead on her lips.

Quince tucked his hands into his pockets. “It’s cold.”

“I’m sorry.” Her fingers were so numb that she almost didn’t feel Reggie’s note as it scraped across her knuckles. She wasn’t sure if she was sorry about the cold, or the headstone, or that there was a note in her pocket with words and a smudge.

Nobody to blame but and the smudge she’d made. If she hadn’t made the smudge, then she could have known why Reggie said: You don’t deserve this. Just like Quince. Don’t you tell him. Lela put her hand over her mouth. Her stomach felt like it was climbing her throat, trying to get out. Her knees felt weak and she fell to them, suddenly
feeling hot tears on her face. Quince stooped beside her and put his arms around her. She heard her parents run towards them. Quince kept saying her name and “Are you all right?” over and over until the words melded together so that Lela couldn’t understand them, but she nodded like she did.

Finally, she steadied enough to meet Quince’s eyes. They were lined with grey though nearly black at the corners. She knew he hadn’t been sleeping, and Lela knew that her eyes must have matched. She wrapped her arms around him, anchoring herself into his back. *I should be the one comforting him.* She knew that his back was probably lined by narrow scars from all the times Reggie had taken his belt or a switch to him. *Nobody to blame but I, Reggie.*

*It had to be Reggie’s fault.* Lela said again, “I’m sorry.”

As Sunday had dawned and all of Germantown filed into their respective churches, the streets were still crowded from out-of-towners who’d come for the Pickett funeral. The cars and people didn’t seem to know what to do with themselves and the empty streets. From her porch, Lela saw most of them going to and from the general store. And then, she saw Marlow Pickett in his truck. He had handwritten signs in the back, and his son in the front. Marlow got out and began to stick the signs out along the roadside. Lela read them: “Come to the Pickett Place: Sight of an American Tragedy” and “You’re Almost There, Take the Next Left” or “Get Your Quarters Ready”.

Lela thought about calling out to Marlow, asking him what he was doing. But, it was interesting to watch as he moved about, barking out orders to his son, similar to how Reggie would order around Quince, as he hammered in the signs. He finally seemed to
notice Lela out on the porch, and he came up to her. He nodded his head. “Morning, Miss Jones.”

Lela didn’t bother with the formalities; he was on her porch, uninvited. “What are you doing, Marlow?”

He chewed harder on his tobacco. Though his crop had been bad, he still seemed to have enough to keep him chewing. “Where’s your daddy?”

“Reading the paper.” Lela smiled a little, though her face felt tight. She thought that she might cry again, so she slid her hands into her coat’s pockets and held Reggie’s note. She wondered if she would smudge anymore of the letters of the note. Would it eventually read Nobody to blame? Then, would that mean that there was no one to blame? Lela shook her head at the thought, though perhaps Marlow thought the gesture was for him.

“Ladies shouldn’t be out on their porches alone.”

“Grown Christian men should be in church, not hammering signs.”

The clock in the foyer chimed for 11:30. The services were ending. Lela could see several groups of people exit the churches and start in the streets. They saw the signs. Lela heard their voices:

They said Reggie had done it for all kinds of reasons. “Reggie was possessed by the Devil.” “Reggie was the Devil. He should have gone to church more.” “He was an odd fellow.” “It might be best that he’s dead. If only he hadn’t taken those children with him.” “His wife could have been nagging him too much.” “It’s hard raising such a large family with so little money.” “He must have been jealous of his brother, Marlow. Marlow made more money last year, but Reggie made more this year.” “Louise was a
growing girl.” “And Quince?” “Why would he kill everyone else but leave Quince? He’s a good boy. He looks so lost now.” “Bless his heart.” “You think it’s cause he’s involved with that Jones girl?”

Marlow dismounted the porch without saying goodbye. Lela heard him talking to folks of Germantown. Lela heard him say that he was opening up the house. He was charging admission, but it was worth it. He’d use the money to make sure that Reggie and his family were always remembered. He also wanted to add on a room to his own house, he said.

Lela stopped listening to them. She turned away; the porch swing groaned under her. She remembered Reggie saying, “You don’t deserve this.” It was hard to think that it had only been four days. The Picketts were barely in the ground, and the people were already talking. The smudge on the letter could be “G” for “Germantown” as if Reggie could have known of all the couples and the people walking down the road, passing out “bless their hearts” like handkerchiefs at a funeral while inching closer to visit the Pickett Place, to get a look at bloody floor and Louise’s teeth in the fireplace. Lela tucked her hands into her coat’s pockets. Reggie’s note felt warm against her frigid fingertips. She thought about taking it out and reading it, but she heard a creak on the steps and looked up.

Quince sat beside her on the porch swing. He watched the people passing by. “They’re going to the house? I’ve heard them talking.”

“I believe so.” Lela studied him. Quince had always been tall and light, but now he looked even more so. Mr. Jefferson had given him some hand-me-down clothes that were too large and too short for him. The dropped hems seemed frayed and helpless to
cover the tops of his shoes. He also wore a pocket watch; its chain was clearly visible and gold-plated. Lela had seen the watch before, tucked into the case of Quince’s pillow, but she’d never seen him wear it. It belonged to his mother’s grandfather who fought for the Union. She’d heard that the family had disowned him after that, though Mrs. Pickett reminisced about him fondly. Reggie had ordered, or so Quince said, that the pocket watch be buried outside somewhere or else it could bring the family bad luck for embracing the black sheep. But, Mrs. Pickett had given it to Quince and now he wore it. Perhaps the greatest change in Quince was the glasses. The Jeffersons had bought them for him after they realized that he couldn’t read the labels of the cans they gave him to stock. Reggie had apparently said that glasses weren’t needed out in the fields, so he had never invested in any. They were cheap glasses with thin metal frames that were in squat ovals. Lela thought that he didn’t look like Reggie’s Quince anymore and that relieved her a little. Sometimes she wondered if she looked any different. To fill the silence, she asked, “Why do you think he did it?” She did really want to know what Quince thought though. She wondered if she heard what he felt if she’d be able to show him the note and the smudge. *He won’t say. He doesn’t know.*

Quince shook his head. “I don’t know. Don’t ask that.”

Lela smiled a little. She still knew what he would say even before he said it.

Quince asked, “Do you think this is my fault?”

“No. Why?” Lela edged closer to him, their shoulders almost touched. The porch swing swung once, lazily.

Quince reached up and gripped one of the chains that kept the swing suspended from the porch. “I didn’t mean it.”
For a moment, Lela felt confused and her face was hot and fluid, like it was when Reggie poked his gun into the small of her back. It was like she could feel that cold metal still there, pressing with more force, inching her forward in her seat. But, then Lela remembered the summer afternoon when Quince had brought Reggie into the house with the head injury. How Reggie had stared at her and Quince, and how he said his head had been pounding ever since. “The board was an accident.”

“I wasn’t careful.” His knuckles were marbled red and white against the chain. “It could be my fault.”

Lela didn’t understand why Quince said that. She thought that Quince should think that it was Reggie’s fault. “Guilt doesn’t work like that.” Lela wound her fingers around Quince’s other hand, which rested on the seat between them.

“That don’t mean a thing.”

“Hear, if Reggie blamed you for anything, you’d be the one dead.” Lela thought her voice sounded strained, like the words squeezed between her lips. She remembered Reggie say “You don’t deserve this” and “Just like Quince”. She couldn’t tell Quince, even if she hadn’t promised Reggie—And really, she thought, Why keep my word to a dead man?—because she couldn’t tell him: “I reason that your daddy thought that you weren’t worth killing, Quince. Just like me.”

“Lela, my p—Reggie didn’t even think I was worth a bullet.”

Lela stood up without thinking. She found herself on her feet and facing Quince and her mouth was open but she didn’t know what to say. She thought about slapping him across the face, but her brain had enough manners to tell her arm not to move. She had hated how the words sounded as he said them, so definite against the still air, in the
same listless tone as Reggie had said, “You don’t deserve this”. And Lela realized that it
wasn’t Quince that she wanted to hit but Reggie. She wanted to hit Reggie in the
stomach, doubling him over. Lela finally said, “You shouldn’t think about why he did it.
If you ever say anything like that again, Quincy Pickett, then I will never speak to you
again.”

He stayed on the swing. “What am I supposed to talk like then?”

“I don’t know. Lord, Quince, I don’t know.”

He angled his face up towards her and his glasses caught the sun so she couldn’t
see his eyes. He stood, and Lela kept her ground so they pressed into each other, close,
so close as to be sharing breaths.

But, he reached out and put his hands on her elbows, just on them, there was no
pressure. “We’ll figure something, won’t we?”

She didn’t look up at his face. “We will. We will.” She slid her hands into her
coat pockets. She gripped the note and moved towards the edge of the porch, over to the
same bushes she’d vomited in on Christmas. There was puddle beside the bushes, fed by
the overflowing gutter as the snow continued to melt. With her back to Quince, Lela
looked at the paper. She read the words over and over. *It has to be Reggie’s fault.* She
crushed the letter between her fingers, slicing the side of one, a narrow cut that quickly
filled with blood. She did not want to remember the house and the sound of a gunshot in
the still, snowy air, and the feeling of Reggie’s gun on her back and his hand on his face,
and the money Marlow made as he sat on the porch, smoking, and saying every once and
a while how much he missed his brother, Germantown and their whisperings, Quince
staring in the distance, and Reggie with a shotgun saying “You don’t deserve this.” She
had bled a little bit on the note, a speck of her blood merged with the smudge and it looked like an I or a Q or a G or an M, *Or an L*, she thought. *An L for Lela.* She thought of the indifference as he slapped her, the cold of his shotgun. But Lela shook her head. *It has to be Reggie’s fault. All his fault.*

And Lela dropped the note into the puddle, into the muddy water. The paper corrupted and sank. She looked back to Quince and took his arm, a bit too roughly because he looked at her so fast that his glasses slid down his nose, and Lela could see that his eyes were dark and lined from crying. He didn’t say anything and neither did she as they turned towards the road, the line of people widening, their voices reaching a higher pitch, buzzing in the air.
A Winter Day in July

It was a sticky July, but no one wanted to sleep with the windows open because they knew the mosquitoes would buzz in and suck their blood. Last summer, Quince heard that one of the farmhands had gotten some disease from a mosquito bite; he had a high fever but still tended the cows, guided them to graze on particular grass, and charted what they ate and if that changed their milk production or growth. The man had died while writing “Today, Milton ate...” Quince had noticed that no one had bothered to finish the man’s entry, though he wasn’t sure if it was to honor his memory in some odd way or if it was because none of the other farmhands cared. The Willows had paid for their workers’ funeral and had had his body sent back to Germany for burial.

Regardless of mosquito bites, Quince didn’t want to sleep with the windows open because he thought it would only make things hotter and still. On the ground floor of the estate, Cherry Willow, every night the maid opened all the windows and set in the screens, letting in the humid breeze which just seemed to make the walls suffer; wallpaper peeled, wood paneling swelled.

So, Quince slept on top of his covers, wearing his everyday clothes, though he did leave his top button of his shirt undone. He slept with his hands lying on flat on his stomach, and he could feel it gurgle beneath his fingers, digesting a large meal. He ate with the Willows. Though he worked for them too, he wasn’t like the others—the maid and housekeepers, the farmhands who watched cows or planted corn while whispering in heavy European or Deep Southern accents—he was an apprentice to Mr. Theodosius Willow, a man who made his money in hardy plants—a staple for any farmer trying to make a buck after the Crash—and large, strong cows who made calcium rich milk and
thick, marbled steaks. When asked how he got the job, Quince had to say, “Well, I’m seeing a girl, and her pa is a friend of Mr. Willow.” And he would watch whoever he’d spoken to as their faces changed from admiration to pity to jealousy, as they decided that he was there mostly on charity.

He’d often tell Lela about the contorting faces and the jealousy, breathless, over the phone. She’d respond, “It’s not charity, Quince.”

And he’d say, “Then what is it?”

“It’s not charity.”

He’d pause and press his lips closer to the receiver. “It is.”

“It’s not, because you deserve it. My daddy thinks so, Mr. Theo thinks so—”

“You think so.”

She’d be quiet for a bit, and then, without fail, as if it had been scripted for her, say, “Do you love me?”

“Of course.”

“Then it’s not charity, least for you.”

There was always another pause. Quince could hear Lela breathing into her phone, and he liked to think that she had her mouth close to it, that if he focused on her breaths hard enough that he would catch a whiff of the mint that she chewed every morning. Finally, he’d say, “What are you going to do today?”

After that, they had normal conversations about what each of them did during the days of the summer before they were to start college—at separate colleges. Lela’s stories were always about what she read in the papers or what she and her mother bought in town. Quince’s were always about how he either watched Stella, the nine-year old
mistress of Cherry Willow, or helped the farmhands. Stella always seemed to enjoy his company; the farmhands did not.

Every day, it seemed like Quince had a different story for Lela. He’d wake up and find a note on the outside of his door that read, in Theo’s sloping hand, “To Do” and a list followed.

On a particularly sticky day in that July, Quince’s list read: “1) Watch Stella. I’ll be in the greenhouse; mother is out shopping. 2) Read the almanac for tomorrow’s moon. I want to plant at night. 3) Receive painting from Mr. La Rouche. 4) Help hands watch Margaret—her calf will be soon.” Quince folded the note and slid it into his front pocket; he buttoned up his collar. He had put the 1932 almanac on his nightstand the evening before, so he took it and left his room, pulling the door closed behind him so gently that it made no noise. The clock in the hall called out ten times.

Around noon, there came a sound like metal violently embracing from the road to Reedsville. The sound reminded Quince of the time when Stella’s father wasn’t paying attention and drove his tractor into the metal wall of its shed and partially broke through the other side, the rest of the tractor hugged tight in the gap.

Quince had been sitting out in the garden with Stella, reading the Old Farmer’s Almanac 1932 and glancing every now and then to watch her stack pebbles on top of one another as she perched on the moss by the flowerbed with the dog on her lap, but at the metallic sound, Stella turned towards the road; her terrier, White Paws, stood up in her lap and barked only once. One little yap that seemed more to announce that he was conscious of the noise, rather than that he was prepared to defend his mistress.
After White Paws barked, Stella cleared her throat, but she didn’t say anything.

“Sounded like a car accident.” Quince stood up and balanced on his tip-toes to see over the six foot stone wall. He wondered what cars had been involved. He wondered if anyone was dead. He’d had enough dead bodies. Because of Christmas three years ago when he saw eight. Eight bodies—his father, mother, two brothers, and four sisters—laid out in seven different coffins because the undertaker decided to put the baby with their mother to save money. White coffins and people stood around them and looked down in them and murmured and whispered the words: *Reggie Pickett went crazy and killed his family.* Quince had been fifteen and couldn’t do anything to stop the murmurs and whispers. Quince didn’t want to remember it, and he didn’t want other people to talk about it. So, he tried to never think about death, and he tried to keep his past as far from his present as possible. But, it was still there, lingering, and made Quince say, “I wonder if anyone is dead.”

But both of them knew that it was unlikely that there had been a car accident at all. Very few cars drove on the road, only those that carried people to and from Cherry Willow. Very few people ever came to Cherry Willow because, Quince had heard, there were rumors that the Willow family was somewhat crazy and kept the house locked tight. That wasn’t true. The gate was kept closed, and Mr. Willow insisted on running out personally to see who wanted to enter. He would climb to the top of the bell tower that rose up from the gate and ring the bell at the approach of a car. Stella said that it was all for fun; said she liked the loud but hollow sound the bell made when they had visitors. “No one could be dead.” Stella said in a stern way and crossed her thin arms over her chest.
By this time, they could hear some of the servants of Cherry Willow heading out towards the road. Many of them were European—most had been picked up years ago by Mr. Willow while he was overseas, and they had decided to work for him in his large but strange house—and spoke in quick, foreign-sounding sentences, which neither Stella nor Quince could understand. They could pick up on inflections of the voices: Quince thought they were panicked. The road was a good distance from the house and the gardens so when the servants crossed under the main gate, their voices faded into the surrounding noises of animals and the leaves in the humid and slight North Carolina breeze. Once the servants were out of earshot, it was almost as if nothing had happened. A pair of bluebirds passed overhead and lit in one of the cherry willow trees, chirping as if joking with one another. Quince barely noticed them because he was still looking towards the road. “Something is wrong. Hear?”

Stella placed her hands by her ears and squinted, as if narrowing her eyes would somehow help her hear. Everything seemed extremely quiet; there were no birds, not even a leaf rustled in the breeze. Then, there was a sound like a low moan. At first, it seemed similar to one of the cows, but then it was obviously not a moan; it was a human sob, coupled with muffled words, fast-paced, frantic.

*Someone is dead.* Quince bit his bottom lip. There had been a car accident, and someone was dead. He decided that Stella should not hear or see anything. Because it would be too much for her to see or hear anything and she would want to close her eyes, Quince knew, to get the image out of her head, but it wouldn’t work. Just as it hadn’t worked for him for three years. And he couldn’t let that happen to her. He offered her
his hand and smiled as genuinely as he could. “We should head inside. Dinner is probably ready.”

Stella didn’t even glance at Quince’s open palm. She kept her eyes directed towards the road, but she brought her hands down, away from her ears.

The voices were growing louder, more frantic.

Quince decided that Stella should not be outside because she could learn what had happened. *Stella cannot be here*, Quince thought, *Stella cannot know*. He took her arm a bit too roughly.

Stella picked up her dog and handed him to Quince, so quickly that Quince could not deny him. The dog looked up at him and wagged a little, with his tongue hanging out the side of his mouth. Stella rubbed her hand over the dog’s head before she turned around, slowly. And then she dashed towards the gate.

Quince shifted the dog—who let out a low growl when forced from his arms—but wasn’t able to catch Stella before she slipped through the wrought iron door and onto the path towards the road. He followed her at a jog. It was downhill, and even though her legs were short, Stella was fast and had a head start. The path was made of loose stones; it was pretty, but hard to run on, and Quince was afraid that he or Stella would slip, though if Stella fell, at least he’d have a good excuse to bring her into the house. So, Quince was always a least a yard behind Stella, whose skirt blew up in a circle around her legs, like it was a mushroom cap. Her short, dark hair was caught in the wind and blown sideways.

They passed by the lily pond. A koi lifted its mouth out of the water and sucked air for a moment, trying to catch mosquitoes or the low flying June bugs that hummed
around in aimless circles as if they only lived to buzz at everything that moved—and some things that didn’t—and get eaten by hornets and fish. When Quince looked away from the pond and back in front of him, he noticed that Stella had stopped running. She stood in the middle of the path, edging one of the stones with the toe of her Mary Janes. He stopped beside her. He noticed that he was out of breath, more so than she was, and he could feel his pocket watch clicking out seconds and he thought his heard beat at least twice between each. His palms were sweaty. His glasses fogged at the edges. He began, “Stella—”

“What do you think is down there?”

He didn’t know how to answer. He put his hand on her shoulder. “We should get back to the house.”

“No.” Stella took a step forward. She was almost to where the path opened into a courtyard and then the gate and then the driveway and then the road. The driveway was very short. If Stella could pass the gate, she’d view the road. On the road, Quince didn’t know what she would see. But, he didn’t want her to see it. “What is down there?” She looked back at him, her blue eyes flashed. Her bottom lip quivered a little when she spoke.

Quince took her hand before he realized what he was doing. He started walking forward. She looked up at him; he felt he had to say, “Just a peek.”

“Really?”

“We’ll step out of the gate. We’ll see if everything is all right.” He hoped that it would be all right. There would be no one dead on the road, Quince repeated. His heart still beat faster than his watch.
From the gate, they saw a car. It was a black car, somewhat new because of its shining paint, and it looked all right from the back. They couldn’t see the front because it was smashed into a tree. There was smoke coming from somewhere near what had been the front of the car. The windshield was in chunks, some large and jagged and others barely visible save their glint in the sun. There was a red smudge across the dirt of the side of the road. A few yards in front of the car stood the servants; their backs towards Stella and Quince. They seemed to be blocking something with the semi-circle of their bodies.

Stella squeezed Quince’s hand tightly, so tightly that his knuckles popped. Her whole body seemed to stiffen, her back arched like a hissing cat. “Stella, you well?”

She said, “Uh huh.” But she didn’t look at him. “Quince, is that blood?”

“Reckon so.” Quince kept his voice even.

“Oh.”

The group of servants broke up. A few went over the car, others towards the house, and one remained—the maid—with something that could have been a human body. It was large and torn, mangled. It looked like a black suit had been put on a side of raw beef. But there was a human head, and Quince recognized its broad face. “La Rouche.”

“Mr. La Rouche?” Stella tugged on Quince’s arm. “That’s Mr. La Rouche?”

“Quincy Pickett!” It was a voice with a heavy South Carolinian accent. Barnabus, a farmhand, approached them. “Why is Miss Stella here?”

There was a bad blood there, between Barnabus and Quince, though Quince could not remember when it started or why. He knew that Barnabus was only a little older than
him but already had a small family back in Charlestown that he worked to raise. He’d heard that Barnabus’s children—two daughters—lived with his parents because his wife died of scarlet fever. Barnabus was a tall man with a sloping frame; his fingertips almost seemed to drag the ground because of his lean; he had an easy smile. He was good with animals, able to coax even the most colicky cow into giving milk, while Quince, when he was assigned to the dairy, could barely eke out any. Quince remembered that their first encounter had begun positively, until Quince had mentioned his family. Barnabus’s mouth had dropped open and the point of his tongue pressed into his bottom lip. “Your daddy did that?”

Quince had nodded. “He did.”

“You must be mistaken. No daddy would do that to their children.”

“I know what happened.”

“If he was that bad, what do that make you?”

Quince had lost his breath for a moment before he said, “I can’t say.”

“I can, boy. You’re a murderer’s son.”

Quince knew that it must be hard for someone like Barnabus—who had so much depending on him—to meet someone like Quince, who had nothing in his name but was given an apprenticeship, a college education, and only had to work the fields a few days of the week. At least Barnabus knew that Mr. Willow had worked for his wealth, Quince was being handed his, all because his family was dead. After that, anytime any of the other farmhands or workers made a comment about Quince, he would hear Barnabus murmur, “He is nothing but a murderer’s son”.

102
In the still air, with La Rouche’s car still smoking behind him, Barnabus stomped over to Quince, shaking his head and his hands in unison. “What are you doing here? Why is Miss Stella here?”

Stella still stared at La Rouche. “Mr. La Rouche?”

Quince looked at Stella to the body and then to Barnabus. He felt that his cheeks were warm and his chest felt empty. His pocket watch kept rhythm even though it felt like his heart lagged behind. He didn’t know why he’d brought Stella there. He wanted to hit himself. He swallowed. “I...I...”

“What happened?” Stella didn’t seem to realize the conversation going on around her. “What?”

Barnabus put his hands on Stella’s shoulders, wrinkling the bows on the straps of her cotton dress. “Nothing, Miss Stella. Now, go up to the house.”

“She shouldn’t see this..” Quince said, suddenly, though he knew that he had wanted to say it a while ago.

“I agree. Get away. Get..” Barnabus ordered, though he didn’t have the authority to do so. He let go of Stella and nodded a little bow in her direction.

Quince offered Stella his hand. “Come on, now.”

“Mr. La Rouche,” Stella looked up at Quince; her eyes spilled tears. “He’s dead.” She took Quince’s hand.

“That he is.”

They started back up the path to the house. Quince hadn’t thought of it, but the visit with La Rouche had made his skin crawl. He’d tried to forget it while he read about moon cycles and crop notes in the almanac, and he was sure that Stella hadn’t noticed
anything was different about the visit. He knew that Stella knew La Rouche as a family friend, or as she said, “I always called him the man who had a pillow face when I was littler.” La Rouche did have a chubby face and three chins. Quince knew that he must be quite rich to afford those chins. La Rouche was a New Orleans native who dealt in art and connections with several galleries in Europe, even though he only owned a small gallery in Reedsville. He was a man whose skill was friendship rather than in business or dealing; people simply dealt with him because they liked him and his Southern hospitality and way of saying the right words at the right time. To Stella, he always smiled when he walked through the house and called her, “Little Miss Stella” and lifted his hat.

Mr. La Rouche had come to Cherry Willow to deliver a painting around eleven thirty in the morning. The art was by a local artist and was named “Winter at Cherry Willow”. The fountain out in front of the house had frozen over and icicles dropped down from the eaves. The sky was grey, and the brushstrokes seemed to threaten snow. The cherry willow trees that flanked the house were without leaves, but the ice suggested that the branches drooped heavily with blue-white blossoms.

Stella looked at the painting and reached out as if to touch the snowy sky. Mr. La Rouche locked his fingers around Stella’s hand. “Do not touch. You will leave fingerprints.”

Stella drew back her hand and pouted.

Quince looked at the painting and pushed his glasses up on his nose. “It’s pretty.” He thought that the clouds above the house were a little too thick. It never snowed that
much in Reedsville. And around him, the July heat seemed to lick at the canvas, threatening to peel the paint. The painting did not fit into the house that was so hot, cooled only by the slight breeze drifting through the window screens.

Stella directed her pout towards Quince. “It’s radiant. Those clouds look like they are bursting with snow. I could poke them and snow would come out and land on my tongue, and I could eat the winter.”

“Maybe,” Quince said as he pushed his glasses up on his nose, again. He didn’t see any beauty in the clouds or the promise of snow. Winter brought death: of trees, of crops, and of people. Snow blanketed everything with white but underneath that pure top layer was gray and dirt. Stepping in the snow, shooting through the flimsy white layer and right into the muck below; there was nothing beautiful in it. But, when Quince looked down into Stella’s bright eyes, he had to say, “Of course. It’s beautiful. The snow.” And he had to smile and the smile didn’t even seem that awkward to his lips.

But perhaps it did look strange because La Rouche said, “This young man doesn’t like winter.” He slapped Quince on the back.

Quince didn’t like La Rouche or his big face, body, and voice. La Rouche treated Quince like a servant or oftentimes, worse, as a child. La Rouche knew that Quince did not come from money, and the man somehow connected poverty with stupidity. At the start of the summer, Quince, then freshly at Cherry Willow, with glasses hanging off his face sideways, struggled with a trunk that bore little more than its own weight—his clothing and belongings inside amounted to no more than two sets of clothes, a whittling knife, and a pair of nice black shoes that had been polished so heavily that the scuffs at the heels were almost invisible. La Rouche had been on the front porch with a glass of
lemonade. He and his glass were both beaded and dripping with sweat. La Rouche had watched him for a few moments before saying, “A bit small for a farmhand, aren’t you? One kick from a cow and you’ll be down.”

Quince had replied through ragged breaths, “I’m apprenticing for business this summer. Working the books.”

La Rouche’s triple chins had turned a shade of purple. He hadn’t said another word and he headed into the house, leaving Quince to struggle up the steps with the trunk.

Quince felt he had to reply; La Rouche still had his hand on his back. “I don’t like winter. It’s too cold.”

“Truly, truly.” La Rouche took his hand from Quince’s back with a flourish of his wrist. La Rouche spun around on his heels.

Quince stepped away from La Rouche. What does that mean? It was true that he remembered the feeling of snow beneath his knees as he stumbled onto the porch of his house, as he tried to open the door, but instead just pushed it into the body of his mother who was propped against the doorframe, quietly bleeding on the crooked floorboards from a shot gun wound to her stomach. But, as La Rouche turned, Quince caught a whiff of alcohol on the man’s breath. He’s drunk, and Quince almost felt relieved. La Rouche wasn’t speaking sense because he was drunk. He could easily get Stella out of the room and get someone else to escort La Rouche away. Quince looked towards the wine cabinet—which was full of imported wines since Prohibition—and noticed a glass and barely empty bottle. Not really enough to make a man of La Rouche’s girth tipsy.

Quince opened his mouth to ask La Rouche about the glass and bottle when La Rouche
grabbed Stella’s waist, hoisted her into the air, and twirled about the room. La Rouche laughed and smiled. Stella laughed, softly. She was too old to be twirled around a room. Quince saw that Stella’s fingers trembled as they gripped La Rouche’s shoulders.

Quince thought then that maybe La Rouche had drank to celebrate the sale of “Winter at Cherry Willow”. Quince knew that, despite all his airs and his well-fed frame, La Rouche had been hit hard by the Stock Market Crash and had probably been struggling during the almost three years since. When Quince was watching his family be buried, La Rouche was digging bills out from underneath his mattress and flinging them at his wife because they were worthless but all they had; the rest spoiled in the market.

La Rouche put Stella down, suddenly. He cleared his throat. “Where will your father hang this painting, little Miss Stella?”

Stella straightened out her dress and ran her fingers through her hair. She said, “Probably over the mantle in the south parlor.”

“Shall we take it there, then?” La Rouche stuck his thumbs under the lapels of his vest and pulled the material, making his chest seem bigger. “Quincy, could you carry the picture? Ensure that you don’t touch the canvas.”

Quince took the picture by its gilded frame, and he debated on pressing his fingertips over the snow-tinged clouds, though he did not. In a light, submissive voice, Quince said, “Yes, sir.”

Stella led the little group across the house to the south parlor. Sometimes her father called it the Greek Room because it held various artifacts and general knick-knacks from the Willows’ travels through Eastern Europe. The far, focal wall featured a fireplace, decorated with Byzantium tiles. A bust of Empress Theodora peered down from
the mantle; her empty eyes seemed to be judging the heavy mahogany furniture and the China teacups that lined the coffee table, waiting for use, almost looking like small soldiers eager to wage war. One wall was all windows, overlooking one of the many gardens that surrounded the house. The entrance to the room was flanked by square columns that bore the same tiles as the fireplace. A model of a trireme, that was about as long as Stella was tall, stood in one corner. Stella had said that she liked to imagine that there were countless tiny men in the ship, manning the oars, and at night they sailed through the blue curtains that framed the large windows; the ship could not have travelled outside because the windows were locked from the inside, a caution her mother had insisted upon as soon as Stella had been able to stand, to ensure that she could never go outside alone, even though she’d only step into a walled garden. Along with the curtains, tapestries hung from the walls, depicting all sorts of Greek mythic figures, and there were giant pots decorated with the Muses and the Fates and heroes facing all sorts of beasts. In the farthest corner, between the fireplace and the windows, hung portraits of Stella and her family and a blueprint sketch of the house, drawn by her father in 1925, two years before the house would be finished. Above that, there was an empty space. Stella pointed. “There.”

Quince crossed the room and propped the picture in the corner, not minding that the frame tilted awkwardly against the wall. He thought the winter scene would be out of place amidst the Greek, but he didn’t say so, he’d already bothered Stella by not liking the painting. He didn’t want to counter her again.

“Seems like an odd placement.” La Rouche crossed his arms over his thick chest. Despite his earlier speech about fingerprints, he dragged his fingers along the tiles of one
of the entry columns. “Out of place amongst the greats. How miniature your home seems when placed beside an urn depicting Zeus.”

Stella looked at Mr. La Rouche. Her house and the pictures of it were much more important than the dusty bric-a-brac that filled the room and lined the walls.

Quince looked at the painting he’d just propped against the wall. He didn’t notice La Rouche’s gaze or Stella’s pleading look. When he finally moved, it was only to push his glasses back up. He cleared his throat but still did not speak or look at Stella. La Rouche was right: the pictures of the Willows were small compared to heroes and beasts. But when Quince thought of his room and bed and the coins that he found on his nightstand every other week and the food on the table, La Rouche seemed wrong.

La Rouche clapped his hands together. “I should be off. It will be dark soon. I hate driving in the dark.” Then, he placed his hand on Quince’s shoulder and seemed not to notice how Quince flinched at the touch. La Rouche said, “Driving in the dark is so dangerous. A deer could jump out in front of you. I would rather control the details of when I go. Don’t you agree?”

Quince thought he sounded drunk, but not the sort of typical drunkenness. When Quince’s father was drunk, he’d have a lispy rasp of a voice. But there was something else in La Rouche’s tone, a sort of thickness in the pitch, like something was boiling up inside him, bubbling up between his syllables. It was the same voice Quince’s father had used Christmas morning, 1929, when he’d said, “Get on boy” to usher Quince out the door and to the store to buy dried fruit for a Christmas cake that would never be eaten.
Quince remembered, as he tugged open the gate to the side garden where the dog was still, though now he was curled up, asleep, that La Rouche had left with a tip of his hat. And the sound of the crash had jarred the air not long afterwards.

Stella sat back down on the mossy stones by the flowerbed. She nudged a pebble along the ground with her fingertip. Her face was pale, framed by her dark hair. “What will I tell Daddy?”

Quince shrugged, but then he realized that she wasn’t looking at him. “The truth.”

“Won’t you get in trouble? I did it, but won’t you get in trouble? Barnabus said you’d get in trouble.”

“It’ll be all right.” Quince hoped he sounded convincing. “I won’t get too much—”

The gate creaked open. Barnabus stepped in. He was wiping his hands on his pants. “You make poor decisions because of your daddy.” Barnabus crossed his arms and leaned back against the garden gate. “You aren’t anything more than a murderer’s son. Dragging a little girl to that accident. I’m sorry, Miss Stella. I’ll tell your daddy what Quince did.”

Stella shook her head. “I don’t see why. I can do it.”

“I reckon he was just drawn to a sight so similar to what he was raised on.” It was like Quince could see Barnabus’s mind work. He must’ve thought: I’ll get Quince in trouble, he’ll be sent back home and won’t get anything. He doesn’t deserve anything. He’s nothing but his daddy’s boy, and crazy can run in blood. “He’s getting ideas for what he’d want to do himself. That’s why he came to the accident.”

“Barnabus, I was the one who wanted to run down there. It wasn’t Quince.”
“Miss Stella, hush.” And now Barnabus was ordering Stella. Stella, who took Quince’s hands so gently and smiled at him and when he had to watch her, reminded him of his sisters. Who cocked her head to one side when she talked about something serious. Who was the only child of two parents who were rarely around and lived in a big house that seemed to swallow her up, unless she sat in one of the walled gardens, where she was safe. But outside, she wasn’t safe. She saw a dead man, a dead man that she knew. And it was Quince’s fault for not stopping her. Maybe Barnabus was right: maybe Quince had been drawn to the accident. Maybe he was the same as his father. *But I can’t be. I can’t.*

His pocket watch pounded the seconds.

He heard Barnabus’s words again: *A sight so similar to what he was raised on.* *He’s getting ideas for what he’d want to do himself. That’s why.*

Quince took off his glasses and handed them to Stella.

It seemed like no one: Stella, Barnabus, or Quince expected what happened next. Quince punched Barnabus in the face, causing him to retreat a few steps and spit red.

Quince realized that his last rational thought had probably been when he handed his glasses to Stella. The frames and lenses were too expensive to break. The punch seemed to take most of the strength from his right arm, and his knuckles hurt. Barnabus staggered towards Quince. This time, his hands were to his face, protecting his bloody, unsmiling mouth. *I don’t know how to fight,* raced across Quince’s panicked mind, and he closed his eyes, almost involuntarily. His father had never taught him how to fight, never really taught him anything. All his father had done was to leave Quince behind without a reason why. Quince had stopped asking himself why his father hadn’t killed him. It wasn’t as simple as why La Rouche had driven his car into a tree, and it wasn’t as
simple as why Barnabus and the other farmhands snickered about Quince behind his back. Barnabus had to be wrong: Quince didn’t think like his father, that’s why he couldn’t understand his father.

Quince opened his eyes in time to see Barnabus lower his head; his mouth was all bloody and his jaw clenched so much that his face seemed to twitch. Stella began, “Quin—”

Then, Quince felt Barnabus ram into him and slam him into the bricks of the garden’s wall. He felt Barnabus punch him in the stomach a few times. Barnabus was silent except for a light grunting sound he made as he moved his fists. Barnabus was not smiling; his teeth were clenched, shockingly white against the blood framing his lips. Then Quince felt him hit his face; he felt the warmth of liquid around his temple, around his eye, and he was glad that he took off his glasses. The thought of the glasses made him think of Stella. He heard her screaming. And, for a moment, he wondered why she was screaming, but then he remembered he knew, so he closed his eyes.

The clock in the hall struck five. Stella’s parents were still out. Quince sat on the sofa in the Greek Room, his legs flung across the cushions so he was almost lying down. Stella sat across from him, perched on the coffee table, scooted so close to the edge so that she wasn’t near the tea cups that still stood in file. She held a wrapped steak to Quince’s left eye and her breaths were still unsteady, her cheeks slightly damp from crying. Quince didn’t remember what had happened after Barnabus hit him in the face.

But Stella said she did. She said that a few of the other servants, wandering back up from the road, heard Stella’s screaming and ran into the garden. They had pulled
Barnabus from Quince, and Stella had told him that he slid down the wall until he sat upon the ground and his head drooped so much that Stella had thought for a moment that his neck had been broken. She’d said all this in a hurried and small voice, and she held his hand, running her small fingers over his swollen knuckles. Quince thought about Stella’s screams and felt a void in his stomach. Her face, as she peered at him from her seat on the table, was nearly identical to the pencil portrait of her on the wall: like she was looking but not looking. He wanted to see her smile. He hadn’t wanted her to see La Rouche or the accident, but she had. And she saw the fight. Quince suddenly became aware of the silence between them. He thought he needed to speak. He cleared his throat.

“What will you tell your pa?”

“What will you tell your pa?”

“The truth. He’ll correct Barnabus. He shouldn’t have said what he did. When he said—”

“It doesn’t mean that I should’ve hit him.” Quince was surprised by the volume of his own voice. But, he couldn’t let Stella say what Barnabus had said. He could not hear it again. Without his glasses on, Stella and the room seemed blurry, like he was looking into the room from outside in a blizzard, snowflakes smashing and melting into the window, making everything seem like it was fluctuating. It made his head hurt. It made him remember being by his family’s gravestone. Those eight names carved there, blurred by lazy snowflakes that weren’t falling but being blown in a chilled breeze. He could barely make out his father’s name at the top of the stone because of the flakes, and he remembered feeling fine with it because it was like the name was not there.

“But Daddy will fix it.”
Quince knew that Mr. Willow wouldn’t be able to fix it. There was no way for him to fix it. La Rouche was dead, and Barnabus needed his job and Mr. Willow was too kind to fire him or Quince. Mr. Willow would hang the picture “Winter at Cherry Willow” up where Stella wanted it, say a few words to Barnabus and Quince, and take steps to ensure the two would not work together again. Quince reached out to lift his glasses from where they sat on the coffee table. “Did you eat dinner? You must be hungry.”

“I didn’t eat. I thought we’d have supper soon. I asked for a big one. I knew you’d be hungry.” Stella helped Quince get his glasses to sit straight on his swollen face. “Everything will be okay.”

“I’m going to call Lela before we eat then. You get cleaned up. Thank you, Stella.” He put his hand on the side of her face.

As Stella left the room, Quince took the phone and dialed. “Good evening, Jones residence.” It was Lela’s maid.

Quince asked if he could speak to Miss Jones, and when he heard Lela’s greeting, he said, “Lela.”

“What, Quince?” There was a slight tremor through her voice.

A slight breeze came in through the window screens and “Winter at Cherry Willow” tilted forward before smashing its fingerprinted frame onto the floorboards, right in front of the mantle, and under Empress Theodora’s gaze. “Can you hold on?” Quince put the phone back and rose from the couch, surprised at the stiffness of his legs. He tilted the picture back up. The house in the snow, the icicle eaves, and the blue leaves; it was the same Cherry Willow that seemed to smolder in the July heat. It was just covered
in the snow. Nowhere in the painting was the family themselves, just the house and the snow. Stella was right; her family was important enough to be with the greats, and Quince wondered if the painting would really fit in the corner, underneath the pencil portrait and the hand-drawn blueprint. It was just a house covered in snow, what mattered was inside. He remembered Barnabus’s words, his unsmiling mouth, *A sight so similar to what he was raised on. He’s getting ideas for what he’d want to do himself. That’s why.* Quince dragged his fingertips over the clouds in the painting, wondering if they would feel cool. He didn’t feel anything; not even the heat from the window.

When Quince picked back up the phone, Lela asked, “You okay?”

“Yeah.” He pressed his mouth close to the receiver and hoped she was doing the same.

“What did you do today?”

There was an empty feeling in his throat, and it felt like his heartbeat pounded in his stomach. His pocket watch matched its pace. “Nothing.”
A Story for Stella

When Stella Willow asked Quince for a story, a good story close to his heart, he knew he had to find one for her. After she asked, after she looked up at him and put one of her tiny hands on her heart, Quince said, “I’d need to have more time.”

Stella smiled. “Take as much time as you need.”

“Thank you.” He turned to his car.

“Quince, Lela told me that I could come see where you grew up next weekend.” Stella said it in a sort of breathless way, like she was afraid Quince would interrupt her.

“Did she now?”

“Yes. And, wouldn’t that be a good story?”

Quince hadn’t looked back at Stella, and he kept his back to her still. “Don’t you already know what happened?”

“I do. But not from you.”

Quince responded, “We’ll see next weekend.”

When Quince left Cherry Willow Plantation and could no longer see Stella waving from the gate, he took a quick breath that then eased out between his teeth in a hiss.

Quince Pickett figured that two full gas cans should be enough, but he went ahead and filled up a third one in case. If he headed out for the Pickett Place, he wanted to make sure he had enough gas, but he didn’t want to waste any money. He carried two of the gas cans underneath his arms, supporting their dirt coated bottoms with his palms. He scooted the third across the general store’s floor with the toe of his boot. Careful not to
slosh out any of the clear liquid, Quince placed the two cans he carried on the counter and then knelt to pick up the third. He heard Mr. Tom Jefferson pause as he rang up the items, and Quince kept down for a little while longer, waiting for Mr. Jefferson to move the other cans out of the way. When Quince finally put the last can on the counter, he kept his face down. His thin-rimmed glasses skitted down his nose, but he didn’t right them in case the movement prompted Mr. Jefferson to say something. Quince bit his bottom lip, hoping that Mr. Jefferson would simply ask for the money, hand Quince back some change, and ask if he needed any help loading the cans out to Lela’s car. Thinking of the car—the nearly new 1937 Ford that he had made sure to park far from the road, the curb, the trees and the gas tanks out front of the general store—made Quince think of its owner, Miss Lela Jones. Though Lela always said the car was his, Quince knew very well that Mr. Jones had bought that car and only allowed Quince to drive it because he was worried about Lela riding in Quince’s old 1926 Ford pickup. Quince also knew very well that he’d never be able to afford such a car, not for a long while at least, not until he did something with the college education Mr. Jones paid for—which Quince figured had been done in Lela’s best interest as well—, not until he was finally able to buy an engagement ring for Lela, and not until he actually determined what it was that he wanted to do with his life.

“Quince, son, what are you planning to do with all this gas?” Mr. Jefferson’s voice made Quince look up.

“I’m working out at Cherry Willow this weekend.” Quince figured he should continue because Mr. Jefferson didn’t speak, “Things have been hard on Mrs. Pearl and Stella since Mr. Willow passed. I need to tend some of their fields.” It was true
too. Quince did have some fields to trim, fields that had remained fallow for years, even before Mr. Theo Willow died, because the Willows were rich enough and smart enough to make money from drawings on paper rather than hanging out tobacco leaves or maintaining crops. The work at Cherry Willow would be short and simple, and most of his time would be spent inside, behaving like a visitor at the estate rather than as a worker. He had worked with the Willows one summer because Mr. Jones had arranged for him to balance books and help out around the property when needed. Somehow, even now, Quince still liked to help out the Willows; it was almost like repayment.

"I know that land out there is big, but this much gas?" Mr. Jefferson had still not said the cost. He hadn’t even rung up the last can.

“I might need some for the car, too. Reedsville is a ways off.” Quince clenched his left fist but kept his right loose, ready to hand over the money in his pocket, money that Lela had given him.

Mr. Jefferson sighed, finally putting in the price of the last can. His cash register chimed and the cost popped up in the top glass. Quince paid; Mr. Jefferson didn’t say anything as he put the cash in the register’s drawer and then handed back a few quarters as change. He caught Quince’s hand though, as the quarters changed palms, and looked the young man in the eyes. “You don’t plan on going home this weekend, do you?”

*Home* was not a word Quince kept close to his brain. He’d lived at the Jefferson’s for a while, right after his family had died, at Cherry Willow for the summer before college, at a college dorm room for four years at the Jones’s expense, at the Jones’s as an assistant to Mr. Jones, and then on and off at Cherry Willow since Mr. Willow’s death helping out and keeping the widow and her daughter company. Home was not that small,
two floor plank house that sat on the edge of Germantown, though he’d lived there for the fifteen years of his life. That house held the blood and ghosts of his four sisters, two brothers, and mother; that house was simply the place where Quince’s father had killed the rest of the family before killing himself in their woods. That house held stories too horrible for Quince to ever tell. “No, sir. I’m not going home.” And it wasn’t a lie because Quince really didn’t consider that place a home. ”Thank you, Mr. Jefferson. You have a pleasant afternoon.”

Quince told everyone that he barely remembered Christmas day of 1929, even though only nine years had passed. He knew what had happened but details were blurred.

He remembered waking up, excited. He was never excited on Christmas because his family couldn’t really afford to have presents. But, that year had been different; his father, Reggie, had made more money off of crops than they expected due to a blight that hit all the other tobacco farmers in Germantown. It was different, too, because Lela was going to visit and have lunch and then go walking through the woods. And it had snowed. It hardly ever snowed much in Germantown, but that morning, the ground had been covered by at least seven inches of light powder with an ice crust.

He remembered eating bread for breakfast and watching his older sister, Louise, mix up a Christmas cake. She ran out of dried fruit—cranberries or raisins—and would not finish her cake without them. His mother, Helen, was in the kitchen too, kneading fresh bread dough. She smiled softly and hummed, and there was flour smeared across her forehead. Helen asked Reggie if he’d run out to Jefferson’s General store in
Germantown to get some fruit for Louise. Reggie said he didn’t feel like it, he had a headache—a common complaint for him—and suggested that Quince go instead.

Quince remembered his father pressing some coins into his palm and staring at him with eyes that seemed to burn. Quince didn’t pause then to consider his father’s wildfire eyes. He went to town. He bought the fruit. He came home.

_Around noon on December 25, 1929, Reggie Pickett shot his two young daughters in the back and then bludgeoned them to death with loose wood from the floorboards of his tobacco shed before heading inside his house and shooting his wife, eldest daughter, two young sons, and infant to death. Then, he went outside to a small wooded area on his farm where he took his own life._ Quince Pickett could recite every word of every newspaper article about the murders from every paper in North Carolina, though he often didn’t repeat the one or two sentences that usually lingered near the end of the articles: _The sole survivor being the fifteen year old son, Quincy Pickett, who was in nearby Germantown at the time._ He remembered all of the photographs, too. The seven white caskets all in a row, people in black hats leaning in towards the coffins to ensure that they were in the frame of the photo, the massive gravestone jutting from the snowy ground of the shared grave, cars lined up behind the hearse. Quince recognized himself in the pictures but he didn’t remember any of them being taken. He’d pieced together the story of that Christmas afterwards from newspaper articles and word of mouth and rumors. There were so many rumors passing through Germantown, and every time Quince walked by gossipers, their voices dropped to whispers though Quince knew from their sideways glances that they were still talking about him.
They were talking because, Quince knew, he was not “Quince Pickett” anymore. Not Reggie and Helen’s too skinny son, not Louise’s quiet little brother. He was “the sole survivor,” the pale figure tucked into the background of photographs, the afterthought in newspaper articles. It seemed that all people did was feel sorry for him and whisper “Bless his little heart” to his face, as if their murmurs would somehow guarantee their place in Heaven. Behind his back, he was gossip fodder, reminding them of potential scandal and definite murder. As soon as Quince turned around, he knew they spoke of him with poisoned tongues. Because he wasn’t a person to them anymore, he was a story.

In a way, he understood why they told the story over and over. Germantown’s citizens had very few things they could claim. They had a small creek, called Buffalo Creek, though there was no proof that buffalo ever grazed there. The ground was fertile enough to support cotton and tobacco and corn, and cows and pigs and goats moseyed through fields. Germantown had a post office and a general store that sold gas, and it used to be the county seat of Tulip County before Kingsville was established at the turn of the century. After 1929, Germantown became an attraction. Signs on the sides of roads read: Come see the Pickett Place, a site of American tragedy and You’d Almost There, Have your Quarters Ready. A few days after Christmas 1929, Marlow Pickett, Quince’s uncle, fenced in Reggie’s property. The following Sunday he opened the house up to the public, bloodstains and all. He charged admission to walk through the house; he gave tours. Quince went to live with the Jefferson’s who owned the general store in Germantown and were family friends. He heard people come through to buy snacks or gas or the booze that Mrs. Jefferson sold out of the basement, all talking about what they
saw at the Pickett Place. He heard so many stories about the house, his house. But he wasn’t a part of them.

Quince pushed the thoughts of the house and Christmas back as he guided the car into Lela’s driveway and parked in front of her house. It was yellow, recently painted, and the shutters were a royal blue. Every other house in Germantown was white or brown with grey or white porches and wrought iron or white wicker furniture. Lela’s house was also the only one to have a porch swing. Two cars, both 1937 models, sat in the gravel driveway. Quince got out of the car and rolled the window down one-fourth of the way so that cool air could circulate through the vehicle and Lela would be comfortable when she got in. He closed the door carefully so that it didn’t make a sound except for a click.

Lela Jones sat on the porch swing with her right leg crossed over her left knee so that her pale calves showed under her dotted blue dress. Her shoes, white pumps, sprawled beside her feet as if she’d kicked them off. When Quince mounted the porch steps, Lela folded the magazine she had been reading over her knee. She didn’t wave, and she didn’t smile. “Do you know who was *Time*’s man of year for 1938? Adolf Hitler. This just came today; that’s more than two months late.” She slapped the back of her hand against the magazine. “And I say that their choice is a poor one. That man seems only trouble.”

Quince sat beside her on the swing, tilting them both back a little. “Hello to you too, Lela.” He didn’t know much about Hitler, only what he’d learned about Depressions and global economies in business magazines. Lela and her daddy liked to be current,
though, so Quince tried his best to keep up. “I think the reasoning is to pick someone really influential. You have to admit he’s influential.”

“T’ve heard that Mrs. Pearl offered you a piece of Mr. Willow’s estate.” Lela let the magazine slip from her knee. It fell open to a picture of a swastika. “I suppose you ought to take it.”

Quince sighed. He should’ve figured that Mrs. Pearl Willow would have written to Lela’s father. Mr. Willow, as death approached him, said that he would allow Quince a small sum of money at his death. “To start over fresh, my boy,” Theo Willow had said between spit-filled coughs. At the time, Quince had asked if he could think about it. Theo agreed, died before hearing an answer, and the idea had not made it into the will. But the widow said that the offer still stood, and she said that Quince was welcomed to board with them. Stella Willow had told him that she’d like to have him as a brother; she’d never had one before. Quince knew Mrs. Pearl wanted him around to help, and it would be steady work and far away from the people who stared at him with cold eyes. “I was going to talk to you about it this weekend. I hate Mrs. Pearl already told your father about it.”

“The letter arrived yesterday. Don’t worry; I knew you’d ask me.” Lela put her hand on Quince’s knee and squeezed it, gently. “You should take it. There is more than enough room in Cherry Willow for Mrs. Pearl, Stella, you, and, eventually, me.”

Quince put his hand over hers. He suddenly felt guilty that he didn’t have enough money to be properly engaged, to buy a ring. He cradled her fingers within his.

“Have you talked to your uncle about it? He’s only trouble. He’ll do something underhanded.” She lowered her head and her gaze fell onto the open Time. “He’ll ask
for money or a house or something ridiculous. He’ll tell you that you owe him. He’ll take everything.”

“I haven’t talked to Uncle. I thought I’d do it this weekend. I heard tell that you promised Stella a trip to Germantown.”

A slight flush of pink dashed across Lela’s cheeks. “Well, I was only humoring her. We don’t have to. I know it makes you—”

“Why don’t we head over to Cherry Willow now?” Quince removed Lela’s hand from his knee and then pulled her up as he stood. Carefully, Lela stepped back into her shoes, but she left the magazine on the porch floor. Lela’s cheeks were still colored, and she didn’t say anything. Her bags were in the foyer; Quince poked his head in and then reached around to get them. Quince carried the bags and followed Lela to the car and, after putting her bags in the back with the gas cans, he helped her into the passenger seat. As Quince settled in the driver’s seat, Lela put her hand back on his knee. Lela could drive, but she didn’t like it as much as Quince did. And, she couldn’t use the pedals when she wore her pumps so she’d drive barefoot and then people would talk about seeing her ruby painted toenails as she slipped back into her shoes at her destination. But, Lela apparently felt she had to help Quince when he drove. Whenever he went too fast—and he always did—she’d squeeze his knee until her knuckles popped. Her other hand would grip the bottom of the seat.

Lela glanced out the back glass as Quince backed up. “Why are there three gas cans in the back of your car?”
“I have a lot of work to do out at Cherry Willow.” Quince stomped the accelerator. Lela squeezed his knee and let out a quick breath between her teeth. She didn’t speak for the rest of the trip.

The entranceway of Cherry Willow was made of earth colored stones. There was an iron gate at one end and a bell tower at the other. The bell tower bore a message of greeting, though Quince couldn’t remember the words and, since Theo Willow’s death, no one had cleaned the sign so it was illegible. Quince pulled on the gate’s handle, but it was locked. He’d left the gas cans in the car.

“A moment! One moment!” Stella Willow was visible through the windows as she ran up the bell tower steps. “Let me ring the bell.”

Lela rolled her eyes, and Quince smiled. Theo Willow had always insisted that all guests be welcomed in by the bell, even if those same guests had to wait for Cherry Willow’s master to get up the steps to ring it. Quince figured that Lela rolled her eyes when she heard the bell at Cherry Willow because she had had to wait for the ringing ever since she was younger because her father and Mr. Willow had met in college and had been close.

The bell had a deep tone that seemed to echo off the air. Its sound still reverberated through the March wind as Stella opened the gate. She was nearly thirteen but small for her age. She was smart, using words that Quince didn’t know, but she had the odd habit of peering into the eyes of whoever she was speaking with and tilting her head to the left. When she looked at him that way, Quince felt like he was saying something ridiculous or he had a spider on his face. But he liked that feeling. It
reminded him of how he felt when he ate a piece of his sister’s fresh cake. Stella nodded towards Quince and hugged Lela. “What are we going to do this weekend?”

“Go to Germantown,” Quince said before Lela could even open her mouth.

Stella smiled and laced one of her arms in with Quince’s and her other with Lela’s.

They trudged up the steep hill to Cherry Willow, quietly. The cherry trees were beginning to bud and their pollen hung thick in the March air. A few koi skitted back and forth in one of the Willow’s fishponds. When they arrived at the stone front of the house, Quince noticed that the swimming pool and fountain were still drained. He promised himself he’d remember to fill them up so later he’d be able to say that he really had done work out at Cherry Willow.

Inside, the house smelled like everything. Cookies, cakes, dust, mold, sweat, and sweet all mixed in the cacophonous air. The hardwood floors moaned under their footsteps. A few “hellos!” erupted from various sections of the house, though Quince did not know exactly where they came from or who spoke. He was sure one was Mrs. Pearl. He imagined she was probably in the sitting room, snuggled in a large chair, with a book and a cocker spaniel in her lap. Stella led them up the stairs and to their normal rooms. When he was a guest, Quince always had the Jade Room. It was a small room filled with furniture from the East. His favorite part of the room was a scroll that hung on the wall. It was covered in Asian characters that he could not read, but somehow the thick black strokes gave him comfort. The room beside the Jade Room was the French Room which was completely furnished with items from France. Lela always had that room when she visited, and she visited often, since her father and Mr. Willow had been great friends. It was large and everything in the room was cream and gold, and, at least in Quince’s
opinion, unmemorable. But the room was larger than the Jade Room and was reserved for special guests and family friends.

As Quince sat his bags—that permanently lived in the backseat of his car—on the red silk coverlet of the bed, Stella skipped in carrying a small chest. She placed it, delicately on the floor and then sat on her knees beside it. Quince joined her. “What’s this?”

Stella opened the chest. It was stuffed full of phonograph cylinders and gramophone records. “I found these up in the attic. Dad recorded all sorts of stories on these. One is about his adventures in China.” She met Quince’s eyes and cupped her hands over her mouth. “He said the doorknobs here aren’t real jade but just painted quartz. He never wanted to tell Mom though.”

“Oh, that’s fascinating.” Quince leaned forward a little, though he could no longer meet Stella’s eager gaze. Quartz doorknobs did not seem, to him, worth all the excitement or recordings.

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“Do you think you could record your story today? You must have thought of so many stories. Or maybe after we go to Germantown?”

Quince shook his head. “No, not yet.” He thought for a moment about Christmas of 1929, but quickly blinked to force the images away. “I haven’t done much in my life, you know. Mostly folks helping me, finding me work, like your dad and Mr. Jones, providing.” Or taking, Quince thought as his mind drifted towards his uncle. Then Quince remembered the gas cans.

Quince watched Stella poke some of the cylinders with her fingertips; she was gentle, treating them like something precious. He really did want to tell her a story.
They seemed so important to her as she held them. He imagined her sitting in the attic, listening to her father’s voice drone on about nothing that could concern her—trivialities like doorknobs—and she listened and tilted her head because it was her father’s voice. She had loved him; Quince thought that it must feel wonderful to hear him. Quince wished he could hear her mother or Louise but never his father. “We should head out.” Quince put his hand on Stella’s shoulder.

She turned and smiled at him, tilting her head.

Marlow kept the Pickett Place though he still lived where he always had, down the road a bit, but Quince thought he needed to ask him before he headed to the house, especially since the house was only open to the public on Sundays and it was a Friday. He wondered what his uncle would say. Uncle Marlow used to live in a small house. It had been white with two floors, five rooms, a crooked porch, and an even more crooked outhouse. After the money generated by the tours of the Pickett Place, Marlow added more rooms to his home and fixed all the slanting boards. He attached a new outhouse to the back. Though the house was large, only Marlow and his daughter, Estelle, lived there. His only son had been shipped up North to a sanitarium after he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. Marlow had contacted Quince very rarely in the past nine years, but he did sent a letter when the son left, asking for prayers and perhaps any money Quince could spare. Quince didn’t respond to the letter, and he didn’t send any money.

When he knocked on Marlow’s door, Quince swallowed hard and did not look over his shoulder at Lela and Stella in the car. Lela was probably looking out the window, her arms crossed over her chest. He knew Stella was smiling and studying all the trees
and thinking of what the Pickett Place would look like. He wondered if one day he’d be recorded in a story remembered by Stella. If she would go home that evening and record, “Today, Quince took me to his house. It was an ugly and slanty thing that shouldn’t exist anymore.”

The door opened slowly but didn’t creak. Estelle poked her head out. Her hair was long and braided, and a diamond engagement ring glistened on her finger as she clenched the door. “Cousin. How’re you?” Her voice was flat. She looked over at Lela’s car and clicked her teeth.

Quince touched the door and felt Estelle jerk it back a little. “I’m fine. I need to speak with Uncle.”

Estelle shrugged and sauntered back into the house. Quince saw that she plopped down on a heavy sofa beside a young man, who Quince guessed was her fiancé.

Marlow met Quince on the porch, not bothering to invite him inside. After a polite greeting through a smile of tobacco stained teeth, Marlow sat in one of the wicker chairs and asked Quince what was on his mind.

“Miss Stella Willow would like to see the house today.”

“Tour’s only open on Sunday.” Marlow took a bit of snuff from a tin in his shirt pocket. He slipped it between his teeth and cheek.

“Uncle, speaking fairly, I think the house should be mine.” Quince swallowed but his spit felt lodged in his throat. He could feel his face warm, and his glasses fogged up at the edges.

“I think I might give it to Estelle for her wedding. She needs a place. We might fix it up a mite first, though.”
“It’s my house.” The word my tasted sour in Quince’s mouth; he didn’t want to claim the house. He wanted it to go away. He didn’t want Estelle to paint it white, put up grey shutters. He didn’t want her to straighten out the porch and buy wicker furniture for it. He didn’t want her inviting ladies over to drink coffee and play cards. He didn’t want her children to someday be running through the house, playing with dolls and wagons over the floorboards where his mother, brothers, and sisters died. It was too horrible a thought.

“I think it’d be a fine wedding gift for your cousin, son.” Marlow spat off the side of his porch.

Quince clenched his fists and then loosened them. He thought of the gas cans sitting in the floorboard beside Stella’s bare legs and tiny feet. He wondered if she looked at them and pondered why they were there. He didn’t think about Lela; he didn’t want to consider if she knew what he thought, if she knew what he might do. Quince cleared his throat. “You’re right. The house would be a fine gift to Estelle. For all you’ve both done for me.”

Marlow smiled, openmouthed. His tongue was nearly black. He reached in his pocket and drew out a cigarette. He handed it to Quince. “That’s my boy. Come back for the tour on Sunday.”

It was dry and warm on Saturday night. The heat sent everyone in Cherry Willow to retire early. Quince reclined on his bed, feeling the hot wind drift in from his window. He had his hands folded over his stomach, his fingers interlaced. They twitched every time he took a breath.
It wasn’t the house, or his uncle, or the people of Germantown who held him back; it wasn’t the murders. Quince had figured this out when he started thinking about a story he’d like to tell to Stella. “It’s me.” The house stood there as a reminder, his uncle had taken everything left behind by his family, the Germantown locals scoffed and gossiped, and Quince had never done a thing about it. He did what he was told, he went where he was ordered, and he took what he was given. He realized he hadn’t decided something for himself, for a long time. Ever since he decided that his arms were too tired of holding some roofing planks above his father’s head as they repaired the tobacco shed. He let the load drop, slightly, figuring his father would catch it, but he didn’t. After that blow to his head, his father had always had headaches, had always complained, and had always looked at him with eyes that were dim but bright at the same time. Quince figured that not killing him was a way for Reggie to punish him, and he felt like all of Germantown thought that too.

They were right. After the murders, Quince had bounced from place to place, job to job, depending on others and doing what others wanted of him. He went to college because Lela had wanted him to and Mr. Jones had paid for it. He apprenticed at Cherry Willow because Mr. Jones had suggested it. The car he drove, the houses he lived in, all belonged to someone else.

The gas cans were Quince’s idea, and he decided that he would use them, at least two of them. As the warm wind settled and his pocket watch read midnight, Quince slipped out of the window and out to Lela’s car. He patted the gas cans before he started the car and eased out of the driveway. The roads were quiet and all but abandoned. The
fields he passed were empty of crops and farmers, though a few scarecrows still stood
sentry under the stars. And Quince sped.

A little after one, Quince pulled into a dirt drive he knew well. He stopped the car
at his old house. He took out two of the gas cans, leaving the third for actual work at
Cherry Willow, and left them by the car as he went to pick the lock of the fence that
Marlow had erected around the house. After the gate swung open, screaming on its rusty
hinges, Quince brought in the gas cans. He left one by the gate and took one with him up
to the house. He poured some around the crooked slats of the front porch. Inside, he
dribbled gas over the floor. There were pinkish stains on the floorboards and paper labels
rested in certain spots. They marked places where people died and bore names and
pictures. Quince didn’t pause to study them; he doused them in gas. In the kitchen area,
Quince opened the woodstove and removed the raw loaf of Christmas bread. He knew it
wasn’t the bread his mother had been making that morning. Marlow had thrown that out
years ago, but kept putting new bread into the stove every few weeks. Quince had heard
that Marlow told spectators that the bread was the original, and it remained untainted
because of the ghosts that still wandered around the house. Quince didn’t go upstairs
where he’d slept with his brothers in a room across from where his sisters slept.

Over the mantle hung the family portrait, taken only weeks before Christmas.
Quince put the pan of raw dough on the floor and pulled down the picture from its silver
nail. No one smiled in the photograph except Reggie. Quince dug his fingernails into the
thick paper until he was able to rip off his father’s face. His nails bled a little, and
Quince wiped them on his pants before tucking the portrait under his arm, and he
crumpled up his father’s face and slid it into his pocket. He picked back up the bread pan.
With the house saturated, Quince spent the remainder of the gas on the land
surrounding him, the tobacco barn where his little sisters died, and the trees that
witnessed Reggie shoot himself. Both cans empty, Quince threw them back over the
fence. He pulled a match from a book in his back pocket along with his father’s torn out
face. He lit the crumpled mass of paper and chucked it towards the house.

At first, nothing happened. Quince felt like he couldn’t catch a breath and the hot
wind seemed to completely stop. Nothing moved. Even the stars seemed to stop shining.
And then the fire started, slowly at first, and finally gained strength until the house
moaned and heaved, as if it was dying.

Quince sat on the hood of the car, propped the portrait beside him, and dug out
some of the bread with his fingertips. He took a bite. It tasted of dead yeast and dirt, but
Quince managed to swallow. Though he felt it try to bubble up his throat, he kept it
down. Then, as the roof of the house collapsed in on itself, he lit the cigarette Uncle
Marlow gave him with the only other match in his book. He took a drag as the grass and
trees crackled with flames.

Marlow would not do anything about the house, Quince was sure. He probably
had insurance on it and would get money. That could be Estelle’s wedding gift: money
seeped in a horrible story. Quince decided he would tell Mrs. Pearl that he wanted to
work with her and have the sum that Mr. Theo left. He’d use it to buy Lela an
engagement ring. And afterwards he’d tell the story to Stella. It would be a fine story,
full of tragedy and self-discovery, and a happy ending. Quince took another drag from
the cigarette before he threw it towards the flames, got back in the car, and wondered
why his stomach felt tight and empty, why it felt like someone was squeezing the backs
of his eyes, and why he felt an ache resting between his teeth. He closed his eyes and
clenched his teeth and wondered if the story really was close to his heart.

Quince slid into the *French Room* and settled on top of the sheets as Lela stirred
beneath them. He didn’t say anything. He still had the portrait tucked under his arm. He
heard her take a breath. She sighed. “I reason you will take Mr. Willow’s offer then.”

“Yes,” Quince said, though he knew that Lela really didn’t expect an answer. He
figured she already knew exactly what happened. He knew he smelt of a burning house.

“But why did you bring that picture back?” Lela shifted over on her back and
looked at him. Her eyes were focused, not tired. She reached up and took the frame and
angled it towards her. She took a quick breath that then eased out between her teeth. She
touched the portrait, tracing the lines of Quince’s face. Suddenly, Lela lost her color and
shadows settled beneath her eyes. She turned back and tucked her face into her pillow.

“You should’ve left it there. Let it burn.”

“It’s a story.” Quince let the portrait slip partially to the floor as he put one hand
on Lela’s shoulder. She seemed to cringe under his touch, but he thought it was because
his hands smelled like smoke and were lined with soot. “For Stella.” Knowing the
portrait was by him, feeling its frame with his fingertips, Quince felt a slight throb in his
heart.

“Quince.” Lela turned over again and met his eyes. She opened her mouth but
didn’t speak. Lela swallowed and ran the tip of her tongue over her upper teeth. “You
can forget it all, then. It’s over.” Her voice sounded light, like when she read newspaper
articles out loud to him to get his opinion, a voice without conviction; she was reciting something she did not mean.

“Yes.” Quince removed his hand from the edge of the portrait frame and placed it on Lela’s other shoulder. He could see his fingers trembling.

“Go to bed.” Lela pulled the covers tight around her head. “Good night.”

Quince left her room, closing the door soundlessly behind him. But, he didn’t go to the Jade Room. He climbed up to the attic. The room was large and mostly empty, except for some mismatched knick-knacks. A broken tea set on an end table that had one slanted leg, a mirror with a spider-web crack in the upper corner. A desk faced a window that was draped in heavy black curtains. On the desk, Quince saw several boxes of notes, photographs, and phonograph cylinders. He wondered how many stories Stella had, how many she’d listened to, how many she remembered, and why she wanted his so badly. Quince didn’t touch the boxes. Instead, he slid the portrait he still held, between the desk and the wall, but he heard a rip when it was in halfway. He pulled it back out; there was a slender tear across his own face, right across his eyes. Quince pushed his glasses up on his nose and then licked his fingers. He tried to press the gnash closed. There was still a line across his face, but he pushed the portrait behind the desk again, this time angling it so it wouldn’t catch and tear again.

With the portrait behind the desk and out of side, Quince put his hands in his pockets and leaned back against the desk, imagining that he was smashing the portrait further into the folds of the heavy curtains, farther into the wall. He glanced over at one of the boxes. He thought that he would ask Stella in the morning, “Can you tell me a story, Stella?”
CURRICULUM VITAE

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EDUCATION

Salem College, Winston-Salem, NC
Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing, English, and History- May 2012
GPA: 3.9
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HONORS AND ACTIVITIES

• Salem College Sigma Tau Delta (English Honors Society): Secretary (2010-2011, 2011-2012)
• Salem College Pi Gamma Mu (Social Sciences Honors Society)
• Salem College Alpha Lambda Delta (First Year Honors Society)
• Salem College Omicron Delta Kappa (Sophomore/Junior Honor Society)
• Salem College Mortar Board
• Salem College Dean’s List (2008-2012)
• Salem College Off Campus Association: Vice-President (2010-2011, 2011-2012)
• Salem College Junior Marshall (2011)
• Salem College Honors Graduate
• Incunabula: Salem College Literary Magazine judge (2010-2011)
• Incunabula: Salem College Literary Magazine Co-Event Manager (2011-2012)
• Salem College President’s Prize in History (2011)
• Salem College Lovin History Prize (2012)
• Wake Forest University Graduate Assistantship (2012-2014)