

The mentality that destroys a watershed and then panics at the threat of flood is the same mentality that gives institutionalized insult to black people and then panics at the prospect of race riots.

—Wendell Berry, “Think Little”

I will read ashes for you, if you ask me.
I will look in the fire and tell you from the gray lashes
And out of the red and black tongues and stripes,
I will tell how fire comes
And how fire runs far as the sea.

—Carl Sandburg, “Fire Pages”

SIX MEN arrive at the abandoned asylum on a late March evening. They pull the pair of moving vans into the deep bend of the horseshoe drive beyond the hemlocks, bail out of their cabs, and release the rear trailer doors. The metal shivers, rattles, and slams. Ramps drop from above both bumpers, slap the ground like heavy tongues. If the men communicate at all, it is in some crude agreement of murmur and gesture. Nothing precisely said. Just brusque sound drawn from the throat's center.

Darkness falls, but the men do not pause in their work. They strap headlamps around their skulls and carry box after box into the halls of the building. Beams of light dance and scrawl over the brick walls, the Doric columns, the pediment. At the men's bright glances, broken windows glimmer. Yet the dimensions within remained unexplored because even these men fear the stories of those mad who had been quartered there and they will not cross certain lines. The boxes and larger furnishings mount in the front hall until there is nothing more to unload.

When the trucks are emptied, they stand and smoke cigarettes, loiter with their personal kits and sleeping bags. They consider the advantage of indoors, but settle on a fire and the softest ground they can find. Even so, they keep an unofficial watch, sense the dark pull of something they will not admit. The fire never dies. It shapes itself against the living faces. They find their voices, use them as they would something they do not fully trust.

They used to drown them, one says.

Bullshit.

No, I heard the same. They took the wild ones down to the Watauga. Had a bunch of blacks down from Knoxville do their dirty work. Held them under. Was supposed to separate the ones that were truly crazy from the ones that only pretended.

Why the hell would you pretend something like that?

Because they was crazy, I guess.

You understand how little sense you make?

That's what I've heard said, is all.

None sleep, though they do zip themselves into the mummy bags

and shut their eyes for a time, let the gray dawn find them. After a breakfast of bacon and toast cooked over a Coleman camp stove, they divide their labor. Half move the boxes and furniture into the separate rooms. The others spell one another with a pair of posthole diggers, root out a place at the end of the drive fronting the gravel road. By mid-morning they accomplish their depth and assemble a metal piece twenty feet long and big around as a girl's wrist. Amid a flutter of curses, they settle the pole into the ground, pour in the sludge of hand-mixed concrete and brace it to settle. They take turns holding the staff and staring up the clean stroke of metal pointing toward the sky.

Once the pole can stand on its own they bring lumber down from the trucks, begin to nail pre-cut boards together and then paint them. After everything dries they carry the assemblage with great care and nail it to the trunk of a poplar tree. They do not hurry. They desire symmetry, precision. They desire impact.

When's he supposed to get here?

Soon, I think.

Should we put it up then?

Yeah, go ahead and run that sucker to the top.

One takes the flag and snaps it to the halyards. It balls and bunches and cracks free in the crosswind. They all look up and salute, sing their patriotic song. Above them a red-tailed hawk wars with an echelon of crows. A good omen, they decide.

Not long after, the man they wait for arrives. He is middle-aged and handsome with thin golden hair and abstracted eyes. He has not driven. He has a man for that. He has men for everything he has dreamed and conjured here in the Tennessee woods.

He beholds it all now and smiles. He smiles at the lacquered sign with its simple and pure statement. He smiles up at the red flag and its brave insignia. He has brought this here. It cannot be undone. Their words match his heart, and he smiles again as they shout with a hoarse fury that sounds like joy.

Sieg Heil.



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KYLE PETTUS WATCHED THE SLANT OF LIGHT FOR A SENSE OF CHANGED time. Winter had been a trial for much of what he grew, but he had made adjustments in accordance with the sun and now the season was coming back around. He shifted the cabbages to the rear of the greenhouse, pushed the amaryllis and larkspur to the edge of the wooden crib, pinched the petals of his primroses as he would tender fingertips. They were doing well. They were healthy. He turned on the garden hose and filled the big watering can. The stream played in the metal bottom until the waterline came up a few inches. The rest of the way it filled with a sound like a kind voice.

He heard Orlynn's Jeep grind up from the base of the cove long before she swung around the curve at the bottom of the mountain and chugged up the rest of the way. She drove on around to the side next to the toolshed and killed the engine. He saw that she wore her heavy coat though it was only a cool forty degrees that morning. Permanently cold-blooded, she'd once told him. As a timber rattler, he'd said once, and she'd laughed and it had been their unspoken joke since then.

"Hey, kid," she called, held up a paper bag with damp swatches of grease. "I took care of biscuits for us. I'll only charge you a ten percent delivery fee."

“Take it on up to the house. I’ll water this row and see you up there in a minute.”

Though Kyle gave her a good five minutes to make it up from the greenhouses, he overtook her short of the front porch. She’d had to rest at the top of the wooden steps embedded in the hillside. Hip going bad. Eighty-five at the end of the month, and still she insisted on coming out to work with him, just as she had his mother and father since they’d bought the property fifty-two years before. All his life Orlynn had been out here, nursing the greenery that would supply other people’s gardens. He had thought of telling her to sell the camper she kept on the Doe River, to come up and stay in the spare bedroom of the main house, but he knew she would have refused. She wanted no charity, only the promise of work and to help things grow.

“You go on up. I’ll be there in a minute,” she told him. “I’m just testing gravity. Making sure the earth is still willing to grab hold of me.”

“All right. You want a coffee, don’t you?”

“Does the Pope crap in the woods?”

“I don’t know. If I see a Catholic grizzly bear I’ll ask.”

He went up and ground some fresh beans, poured some well water into the back of the Mr. Coffee, and watched it wheeze and spit into the carafe. By the time it had filled Orlynn had made it to the front door, put her rear in the big Queen Anne chair in the front room next to the wood-burning stove. She didn’t bother unbuttoning her parka, though her forehead was already slick with sweat. He handed over her coffee.

It wasn’t difficult to see that some mornings were harder on her than others. Clear to him that the only thing worse than dragging herself out of bed to a full day working amid the rows was the prospect of doing nothing at all. She was about as tough as anyone he’d ever known. So he wouldn’t ever tell her what she couldn’t do, that she needed to stay back. He couldn’t ever imagine himself being that cruel.

After they’d kicked around the house eating breakfast and letting it settle, they went back down to the greenhouse and began loading the truck with what they would take to the midweek farmers

market. The sun was well up from behind the top ridge, so the mild day would grow warmer, likely draw a decent crowd. They needed it. The winter had always been leaner than he would have liked, but for the last couple of years he had noticed several brown patches where people had kept winter gardens in the past. Many of the older people in the Warlick community were aging into assisted-living facilities and their inherited land was going untenanted or else being taken over by younger kin with more of a mind for selling than making their own lives here. He guessed that his forty years made him one of the youngest still holding on, though that didn't bother him particularly. He had enough to keep him busy.

He cranked the Tacoma and fed the gas until the engine skipped past its cold chatter and achieved full throat.

"Let's get while the getting's good," Orlynnne said, slapped the dash like a hind end.

The parking brake popped and they rolled downhill.

Once they were off the mountain, the road followed the Doe River for close to a mile, the steep bank pitched like the edge of the world. Kyle always took the bends slow, knowing many Carter County drunks had met an abrupt end in those narrow turns. But once he made the asphalt he opened things up, pushed down through the quick switchbacks that carried them over the southern shoulders of Towheaded Mountain until they could turn for the highway headed toward Elizabethton.

They stopped at a Valero gas station before they got out of Warlick to buy some bottled water and to break a large bill for the sake of change to keep in the cash box. The clerk tried to sell them some lottery tickets but Kyle said he'd had enough experience throwing money away and he saw no reason to make the government rich in the process. The clerk, a man no younger than Cain, said that was a hell of a way for a county commissioner to talk, and Kyle said, "Ain't it though," and smiled as he let the front door swat shut behind him.

It was only another five minutes up the road before they reached the dusty side lot where the other members of the market had arrived and thrown up their tents. He and Orlynnne waved and said hello to the few others sticking it out through the winter months,

mostly retirees and their underemployed relations, though there were a couple of hippie girls down from a Watauga County co-op with their organic wares. Honey and jams mostly. Kyle liked to watch them work, especially when it was warm enough for shorts and tank tops. Orlynnne had noticed his particular attention to these girls who were indecently young and had done her best to ruin it for him when she'd decided they were lesbians, called them "the Sapphic sweethearts" in a whisper so loud that they could hear her from across the parking lot, which caused them to giggle.

Orlynnne braced up the tent poles while Kyle ran the guylines and hammered the stakes into the ground with a rubber mallet. Once it was set and held well in the crosswind, he brought out a pair of long tables with folding legs and leveled them with wood chips he kept in the truck bed for that purpose. Ten minutes later they had all the potted plants down on the ground and the lettuce and flowers spread out on the tables. What little remained they placed on the dropped tailgate of the Tacoma, then sat in their camp chairs and drank their waters and waited.

A good flurry of tourists began to stop by after the first hour. They wanted the flowers mostly, talked about how they desired something natural to carry home as a genuine part of their Appalachian driving tour. He smiled and listened to them, gave directions, advised the best spots for snapping scenic overlook pictures, took their money. Orlynnne stepped in and told stories to those who looked like they were after a little bit of local color. It was a good and established rhythm and by midday a substantial portion of what they'd hauled off the side of the mountain was gone. Kyle told Orlynnne to watch things while he walked across the road to buy them a barbeque lunch.

When he came back holding a handful of hot paper sacks, he saw a county sheriff's deputy standing there talking with Orlynnne. The big SUV's engine was still running. What had been hunger in his stomach turned to something else.

"Hey, deputy. What can we do for you all?"

"You ever heard of a cell phone? We've been trying to get ahold of you half the morning," the deputy said. His broad face was mottled pink and he had a look in his eyes like he'd suffered an unfair

accusation. Given what Kyle knew about the man the deputy worked for, there was a good chance of that having been the case.

"I must have come off and forgot it. You've turned over the right rock and found me."

"Come on, dang it. I've got orders to pick you up. Sheriff said."

"I hope I don't need a lawyer."

"No, you don't need a dang lawyer. It's Old Man Pickens. Sheriff needs you to talk the old son of a gun down. And I mean quick, too."

Kyle told Orlynn to pack up what was left, to get the girls to help her take the tent down and drive everything back home, that he'd have the deputy bring him back when he was done.

"You sure about that, kid? I'm not too trusting of the po-lease," she asked, grinned wide when she saw that the deputy heard her and didn't appear pleased.

"Yeah, you go on. This one's a good old boy. Ain't you?"

"Can we get on, please?"

"Yeah, we can get on."

Kyle went around the SUV and got into the passenger's seat. He didn't have time to buckle his seat belt before the deputy spun them around and bounced onto the highway, accelerating as fast as he could.

"You care to explain any of this?"

"I don't imagine I'll need to. Anyhow, Sheriff told me not to spoil the surprise."

"The surprise?"

"His word, not mine."

Kyle let his curiosity ride. At the speed they were going it wouldn't take long to get out to the Pickens place and see what breed of trouble the old man had crossed. He and Gerald Pickens were the only two Democrats who sat on the county commission, and the general consensus among the other serving government officials was that only Kyle had an insight into the old man's ravings. Whenever some touch of the inscrutable lit in Gerald's brain, Kyle was consulted in order to determine the cause.

A couple of minutes past the turnoff for Hampton they took the only road leading into the hollow. Not far up the way they

could see deputy cruisers pulled off to the side of the road. A bit farther on and they saw a potbellied man wearing aviator sunglasses and a Kevlar vest with Velcro straps dangling loose. When he saw the approaching vehicle he clapped a Stetson on his bald head and waved them forward.

“Well, if it isn’t Christ Almighty himself,” Sheriff Holston crowed. “Glad to see you could make it up, Commissioner Pettus. I truly am.”

“You going to tell me what the damn fool has gotten to or do you plan on window-dressing in front of your deputy a few more minutes?”

“Yeah, I’ll let you know all right. Get out and follow me up here a little bit. Tyler, reach out your second-chance vest from the back. As much as I’d like to see a straight Republican commission, I’d prefer it not to come at the wrong end of a Remington.”

Kyle and the deputy stepped out and went around to the rear of the SUV. The vest was as floppy and oversized as the one the sheriff wore, though it seemed distinctly more ineffective around Kyle’s slender frame. He tugged the straps as far as they would go, then went on with the sheriff until they made the bend of the road where they could see a beige Lincoln town car settled on a pair of flat back tires. Its back windshield was shattered, though he could see a trio of men remained seated inside. They were talking and smoking cigarettes.

The sheriff pointed, said, “Now those boys were backing out of that driveway there when your libtard buddy across the way sniped out one of their tires from his front porch. Bam. Didn’t say a god-damn thing, just opened fire like he was back in the Mekong rice paddies. When the driver got out to see what the hell was going on, bam, a second shot half a foot in front of him. He dove right back inside and shut the door. Then a third shot, took out the other tire and one more in the glass. That one must have been for shits and giggles because they didn’t even try anything after the third shot. That was about two hours ago. Here’s the best part, though. It wasn’t any of them boys being shot at that called the law. It was that tar sunk sonofabitch setting up there on his porch! Called dispatch, said he had a bunch of damn wild dogs that needed us to pick up and take in or he’d start wasting ’em. Wasting ’em, he said, like he’d been watching Dirty Harry movies since daybreak. Now

dispatch didn't know how to make heads nor tails of what he was saying, but they figured they didn't want to have sanitation come out and scrape somebody's house pets that had gotten out of their fences off the side of the road. So they sent Shirley from animal control out and this is what she seen, a damn bloodbath waiting to happen. She talked to them boys to find out what was going on and when they told her she tried to go and talk to Pickens, but he told her the only man he would talk to was you. Said you were the only one who would understand what was on his mind. Since then we've been in what the news media likes to call containment. Until we could get your happy ass up here, that is."

Kyle went up a few more paces until he could see Gerald sitting behind his porch rail with a scoped 7 mm Magnum. At his right hand a cup of coffee and between his teeth a brier pipe. Kyle couldn't be sure, but it looked like he was wearing a bathrobe over his clothes and his PROUD VIETNAM VETERAN ball cap.

"What if I decline?" he asked the sheriff, though by then Holston had turned back the way he had come and was headed out of the direct line of sight. Kyle recited a few epithets to his back before he went on up the hill.

"Who goes there?" Gerald hollered down.

"I imagine you can see me just fine through that scope you've got trained on me, Gerald. I'd be obliged if you took those crosshairs off my chest."

"Crosshairs ain't on your chest, anyhow. They on your head."

Kyle could tell the old man was enjoying himself. Still, he went on.

Two of Gerald's goats met him on the way up. Molly and Malone, he believed their names were. Each cocked a yellow alien eye at him, stamped a hoof. Malone then bounded into the higher brush like the banished wood spirit he was. Molly, the one with white socks, bleated as she dropped a quick chain of turds before clattering up the steps and peering out from beneath the porch railing. Her nose twitched at him like she smelled something bad in the wind.

Gerald was known to leave the front and back doors of his cabin open all through the course of a day so that his pet goats could come and go as they pleased. He had told Kyle once that he

preferred their company to most others who would have had business darkening his door. When Kyle had asked what he did if one of them took a shit indoors the old man told him that he only had to worry about it once. That a butcher knife and a crock pot made short work of any recidivists.

“Hey, Gerald.”

“Howdy.”

“You care to explain the events of the morning?”

“I’d say you probably have a good idea of it already.”

“It’s not looking too good for you from what I’ve heard so far.”

“You been listening to the wrong end of a gassy hog then.”

Kyle sighed, eased his weight onto the porch rail, tried to get within reach of the deer rifle as casually as he could.

“You can’t shoot at people, Gerald.”

“People he calls them. This is what he comes up here to tell me.”

“It’s not civil.”

“Wolf is at the very door and he tells me to kowtow.”

“The wolf, huh?”

“You step in there to the front door and get that pair of bird-watchers on top of the mantel. You look over yonder and tell me what you’d call it then.”

“If I do will you put that damn gun up?”

He mulled this over.

“I’m open to the possibility,” he said.

Kyle went in and got the Otasco binoculars from above the fireplace, came back and glassed the neighboring front.

“All I see is three boys who are likely wearing loaded britches.”

“Look on further back. Up there in front of the old asylum.”

Kyle searched through the shaded distance and was about to set the field glasses aside when a slim languid movement of red slipped across a bright hole of sunlight. The breeze played at the edges of the flag before it fluttered and flung out to its complete length. He saw the swastika.

“Do you see it?”

“Yeah, I see it.”

He placed the binoculars on the porch rail.

“Will you hand me that rifle now, Gerald?”

“That’s all you’ve got to say?”

“What the hell else do you want me to say? You’ve got some rednecks taking up residence across the road from you? That’s hardly breaking news. You know how many Confederate battle flags I passed coming out to market this morning?”

“But these are Nazis! This isn’t some broke-down sonofabitch who likes to play dress up and yell ‘Shiloh, bloody Shiloh.’ Can’t you see the difference?”

“Only thing I see right now is an old man about to spend the rest of his commissioner term in the county courthouse jail unless he hands over his hardware. Now unload that goddamn thing and give it to me so I can do my best to keep you out of more trouble than you’re already in.”

Gerald sat there glaring for the better part of a minute, plumes of pipe smoke floating up around his head like vapor cusses. Reluctantly he worked the bolt, kicked out three fully jacketed brass rounds that thunked and rolled across the porch floorboards. Molly came over, sniffed at each one before she popped her heels in the air and danced briskly away, disappeared somewhere inside the cabin.

“Go get whatever you need to get done before we leave. I don’t think you’ll be back here today.”

The old man stood, removed his pipe, spat.

“Let’s get on. These animals can see to themselves.”

Kyle folded the rifle under his arm with the muzzle pointed at the ground and walked down with Gerald at his right shoulder. When they got to the edge of the road he called out that he had the gun and the old man was coming of his own volition. The deputies appeared from behind their positions of cover and concealment behind oak trees and cruiser doors. Sheriff Holston came forward and idly unholstered his service revolver. Finding it an odd and awkward piece in his hand, he just as idly returned it and waved them on with his empty hand, told them to hurry up and get the old sonofabitch into the back of his patrol car before somebody ended up properly shot and killed.