

FALLING EVE

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*A play in two acts*

*Inspired by the lynching of Laura Nelson*

by

Andrew Hardaway

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### Playwright's Notes

*Falling Eve* is not historical in the sense that its rising action follows facts based on self-supporting documents. *Falling Eve* serves to unveil the demise of a pair of individuals as one of value to humanity.

To serve dramatic purpose, the character's representative of the real Nelson family were narrowed or broadened. For instance, Laura's character was sculpted into a woman distraught and stagnant by the accidental poisoning of her infant daughter, and her rocky marriage leaving her at the torrid advances of a widowed white Peace Officer.

For characters entirely made-up, two things were achieved: to offer the overwhelming sensation of black oppression in Okfuskee County, and also to stimulate pathos between Everly and the reader.

Deleted from the story is Carrie Nelson, who serves as the impetus of Everly's sorrow, and deceased at the top of the play. There are some undocumented accounts of Carrie being present in the jail cell with Laura at Okemah, or even left to die on the banks of the river as her mother and brother were hanged.

Despite artistic licensure, the reader will still find the significant foothold of one of the most tragic events in American history—the suppression of a race for the supremacy, sustainability and comfort of another—the question here is, at what cost to humanity?

In general, these characters are of my own devise, created out of the awe inherent in three photographs snapped by George H. Farnum in 1911.

### About the Playwright

Hardaway studied the acting craft at the New York Conservatory for Dramatic Art; School of Film and Television, and Adelphi University in New York.

### Script History

2008	Dramaturgy & research on the 1911 lynching of Laura and LD Nelson.
2009-May	Writing begins, using the title <i>Laura, on High</i> .
2012-August	Official Stage Reading of <i>Laura, on High</i> in San Antonio, Texas.
2014-June	Revisions and rewrites to <i>Laura, on High</i> ; retitled as <i>Falling Eve</i> .
2014-August	Stage Reading of <i>Falling Eve</i> in San Antonio, Texas

### Inspiration & Works Inherent

- “Ho, Emma, Ho”; a slave spiritual about working
- “What Little Boys’ Are Made Of”; a nursery rhyme
- Cotton and Chick Watts Blackface Minstrel Show Comedy, *Yes Sir, Mr. Bones* (1951)
- “Come Josephine in my Flying Machine”; a song about courtship, with lyrics by Alfred Bryan
- The E. W. Walker Papers, *Book of Inquisitions* (Dolph Briscoe Center (University of Texas—Austin)
- The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott Bart (“The Lady of the Lake, XIV”)
- The Poetry of Uncle Will Jesse (Boley, Oklahoma)

## Dedication

Jim L. Stanley, my grandfather  
De'Anna L. Stanley, my mother  
Joseph C. Wilson, my brother  
Dorris N. Dykes, my aunt

Evans Jarnefeldt & Ella Johnson, artists and friends

The Hardaways of Gonzales County, Texas

Ezekiel Wesley Walker (1828-1923)  
Justice of the Peace, Waelder, Gonzales County, Texas

Fronie Winkfield  
Delia Cline  
Ruby Cline  
Polion Wilson  
Ab Belton  
Wink Winkfield  
Surry Winkfield  
Henry McMicken  
Nero Kindred Jr.  
Chance Parsons Jr.  
Labittie (McVea) Parsons  
Spencer Cunningham

George H. Farnum (1883-1931)  
That Man Farnum & Wife Photography, Okemah, Oklahoma

Austin, Laura, LD & Carrie Nelson

George Looney (1877-1911)  
Deputy Sheriff, Okfuskee County, Oklahoma

## Cast of Characters

(In Order of Appearance)

<u>Everly Nelson:</u>	early-30s, Laundress
<u>Lee Armstrong:</u>	40s, Peace Officer
<u>Travis Nelson:</u>	late-30s, Everly's husband
<u>Rachel Day:</u>	30, a Teacher
<u>Tom Nelson:</u>	Everly & Travis' son
<u>Guthrie Kinger:</u>	40s, Photographer
<u>Pippa Kinger:</u>	late-30s, Guthrie's wife
<u>Nero Kindred:</u>	early-80s, a dead Farmer
<u>Duke Satterwhite:</u>	early-30s, Travis' friend
<u>Sterling Browning:</u>	40s, County Sherriff
<u>Westland Meyer:</u>	late-50s, Farmer
<u>Kemper Halliburton:</u>	40s, Justice of the Peace
<u>Isolde Blassingame:</u>	early-20s, a dead Lover
<u>Irey Threadgill:</u>	late-30s, Deputy Sherriff
<u>Ripley Rabb:</u>	late-40s, Medical Examiner's Assistant
<u>India Adam:</u>	60s, Proprietress
<u>Spencer Aesop:</u>	mid-20s, Turnkey

## Acts and Scenes

Act 1:	“Falling”	
Scene i:		“the miscount”
Scene ii:		“queen ant”
Scene iii:		“apocrypha”
Scene iv:		“minstrel show”
Scene v:		“briar patch”
Scene vi:		“verspertine”
Scene vii:		“constancy”
Act 2:	“Ever After”	
Scene i:		“practice”
Scene ii:		“the photograph”

## Time & Setting

1910, Okfuskee County, Oklahoma

[ ] = indicates overlapping dialogue

ACT 1i. the miscout

*(Light. EVERLY NELSON faces back. A moment. She fixes a calico-print dress to a clothesline. A moment. She turns front. A large and running crimson stain at her groin. A weathered wash basin near. Steam rises. EVERLY grabs herself and plummets to the ground.*

*A ceremonial gutting. EVERLY digs from deep under her dress a wad of crimson fabric. Airy like chiffon. She throws it out in front of her. She recollects quickly and replaces it "inside her". She repeats this again and again on different areas of the ground. Purposeful.*

*Gently the fabric goes into the basin. Dunked once. Twice. Three times. A moment. Then again, and again. EVERLY washes rhythmically. The water in the basin goes red.*

*A reveal. From the basin EVERLY hangs a sopping wet garment alongside the calico-print dress. Baby's clothes. Red runs down white lace. More from the basin. Not wrung. Hanged. Sound of boots. LEE ARMSTRONG steps in casually. He smokes. He sits confidently on a large stump with an ax cut into it. The ax handle protrudes between his legs.)*

ARMSTRONG.

Dried up?

*(Snap. A light. TRAVIS NELSON amid dry sorghum wheat stalks. He snaps their heads off slowly.)*

EVERLY.

Jes the weath'uh.

ARMSTRONG.

Won't fetch much ate up like *that*.

TRAVIS.

Ain't no good.

*(Crunch. Work boots press the head of a stalk slowly and deliberately into the ground.)*

ARMSTRONG.

You're alone so much.

*(RACHEL DAY. Enters. Outfitted as a school teacher. Walks between EVERLY and ARMSTRONG. On her way. Direct. Leaves into darkness.)*

Suh?  
EVERLY.

*(EVERLY squeezes water from a baby garment. All over the ground. Crunch. Then, an idea. TRAVIS drops to his hands and knees. Digs. Searches.)*

How many children?  
ARMSTRONG.

Shit. Bugs.  
TRAVIS.

*(Then TOM NELSON. Black rag doll with pink bow in tow. EVERLY hides the red stain. Easily.)*

TRAVIS (Continued).  
[Tom!] Send over yo' mammy, boy!

EVERLY.  
[Tom...]

TOM.  
(To ARMSTRONG.)  
You a'gin?

ARMSTRONG.  
Yes. *Thomas.*

TOM.  
No. Jes plain Tom.

ARMSTRONG.  
Smart ass.

TOM.  
*Jes plain Tom, since Carrie.*

*(EVERLY sits TOM to the ground. A huff. TOM faces TRAVIS. He props the rag doll.)*

TOM (Continued).  
(To the rag doll.)  
He walks in a heavy step. Trample, trample, tramp tramp—a *tramp*. Big feet trudgin' and he can't see it, but he's got shit all over his white face.

ARMSTRONG.  
Well.

*(A game of Jacks. Habit. A laugh from ARMSTRONG. Then, in the way of 'Hoe Emma Hoe'. The melody is absent, but the cadence is present.)*

TRAVIS.

(Calling.)

*Ho, Evie. Ho!*

*(A long tear. A light. A frame window. A working GUTHRIE KINGER shrouded under a large piece of black fabric. An old world camera and tripod. Patience. A rocker facing opposite. A small table. PIPPA KINGER. Several newspapers. Reading and tearing. Meticulous. After a moment, EVERLY rises to cross. A wrought iron grave marker is near. A big pile of dirt.)*

TOM.

*You turn around, dig a hole in the ground.*

PIPPA.

(Reading.)

*The boiler exploded between 2 and 3 o'clock Friday evening. All victims colored.*

ARMSTRONG.

*Say Everly, you from the country?*

EVERLY.

(Kneels. Prays.)

Texas.

TRAVIS.

(Calling.)

*Ho, Evie. Ho!*

TOM.

*You turn around, dig a hole in the ground.*

PIPPA.

(Reading.)

*The body of Fronie Winkfield was found in a hog pen where it had been blown.*

GUTHRIE.

Save that.

*(A long tear.)*

TRAVIS.

(Calling.)

*Evie, help me to pull these weeds!*

EVERLY.

(Sifts. The pile of dirt spreads.)

*You turn around, dig a hole in the ground.*

TRAVIS.

(Calling.)

*Ho, Evie. Ho!*



*(A long tear.)*

TOM.

*Evie work harder than two grown men.*

*(A long tear.)*

EVERLY.

Worked hard to bury her lil' body.

TOM.

Quiet so nobody could hear. Secret so no one could see.

TRAVIS.

Oh, it don't make no never mind!

TOM.

Less than one years-old.

PIPPA.

When found, the flesh had been—

EVERLY.

Wild hogs.

PIPPA.

Torn by the hogs from her body.

EVERLY.

Like the Winkfield girl.

*(TRAVIS runs his hand up the shaft of a wheat stalk.)*

TRAVIS.

All ate up.

GUTHRIE.

They'll want photos for a report—

*(GUTHRIE removes his shroud carefully.)*

PIPPA.

Of [the gin.]

GUTHRIE.

[The gin.]

PIPPA.

[Yes.]

GUTHRIE.

*(Shrouding himself.)*

[Yes.] Of Course.

GUTHRIE (Continued).  
(As if touching something hot.)

Ah! Ah!

*(A long tear. PIPPA stands. Crosses to GUTHRIE.)*

PIPPA.

[Well, let's see] it...

ARMSTRONG.

[Well, let's see...]

*(ARMSTRONG adjusts his crotch. PIPPA peers under the shroud. A crystal blue pool of light. NERO KINDRED. An old black man. Twisted. Lays on his back. Shot in the face. He speaks unimpeded.)*

TRAVIS.

[Get'cho mind off that!]

ARMSTRONG.

(Flips a coin.)

[Get your mind off that.] How about my trousers?

EVERLY.

Tom, run an' get Mammy them clothes!

*(TOM runs. The rag doll stays.)*

PIPPA.

Well, I'll be—is that [Nero Kindred?]

GUTHRIE.

[Nero Kindred.]

NERO.

I larned what I knows about land from de white folks. Workin' on de back side of dem houses in dey fields. An' what I knows from de white folks done get me kilt.

ARMSTRONG.

(Closer to EVERLY.)

Your people die, Everly. Every day.

*(TOM returns. A twined stack of men's trousers. Delivered to ARMSTRONG's hands. TOM returns to the rag doll and his game gleefully.)*

EVERLY.

I reckon. Yours too, Mr. A'mstrong?

ARMSTRONG.

Selma—God rest her soul.

TOM.

(To the rag doll.)

At least you ain't gotta' see Mammy carry on.

(An adjustment. EVERLY stays close.)

ARMSTRONG.

Now, I can continue to give you work. Close the gap?

(ARMSTRONG's belt is loosened. EVERLY does not look down. She grabs ARMSTRONG's trousers at the waist. Both hands. Swift. TRAVIS crosses directly to EVERLY. He has a sack slung over his shoulder.)

TRAVIS.

You spoke on Carrie today didn't you?

EVERLY.

No.

TRAVIS.

Liar.

(ARMSTRONG buckles. An Adjustment. Solid gaze. TRAVIS kisses EVERLY. TOM plays out a baptism with the rag-doll in the wash basin.)

TRAVIS.

I taste it on your lips.

TOM.

We baptized you for the good Lawd.

(Overacting.)

*"In the name of the fath'a, the son and the [holy ghost.]"*

GUTHRIE.

[Like ghosts], huh?

NERO.

Ain' ne'er b'lieve in none of dem charms people talkin' 'bout or of conjurin' neither, but I know dis much. When I came into my foh-hun'ed acra-lands he'uh the sperit sho slapped me hard. Me was a happy nigga. A *free* and *happy* nigga. Makin' place for fam'ly an' fr'ends. An' since those many ye'uh ago, ol' Westlan' Meyer tryin' take my land from me and mine. An' I fight him good hard since dat time.

TRAVIS.

Told you to leave it alone!

GUTHRIE.

Nero set the butt of the gun on a tree stump. It slipped. Shot him in the mouth.

PIPPA.

I see him.

NERO.

Muh life. Muh *life*! Say I blew'd my own head off huntin' fowl. Screamin' accident. Sayin' I restin' my gun on a stump. It a lie. A lie!

PIPPA.

(Glides away.)

When was that?

(Returns to the newspaper. She finds an article. Reads.)

Oh! Here: *Cotton pickers fled in a state of confusion when the accident occurred. The deceased was found by Westland Meyer at 5:30 PM, Tuesday, and identified as his neighbor, 84-year-old Nero Kindred. A Negro owning 400-acres.*

TOM.

Went in the dirt on a Sunday.

TRAVIS.

(To EVERLY.)

You need healin'!

(A rage. TRAVIS flips the wash basin over. Dousing TOM. The boy squeals. There is initial shock. Momentary glee.)

TOM.

Holy hell! And heav'n high!

EVERLY.

(Eyes trained on TRAVIS.)

Hush up [Tom!]

TRAVIS.

[Hush!]

PIPPA.

We'll go to the service.

(A long tear.)

GUTHRIE.

[Yes. Dear.]

PIPPA.

[That was] a God-fearing—damn good nig'ra.

NERO.

Mighty right. I 'member when freedom wuz d'clared: it betta' been a plan of Gawd cause it jes like dis, if it had'na been da right thing, it jes would'na been. I know it a good thing. But dis... dis he'uh... my life for land ain't no good thing. An' mark me, doh I be a ol' slabe from V'ginny, dat ol' Surry Winkfield—his gin—he nex'. Gawd, Lawd and angels almighty keep dem babes.

(NERO's light blinks out over him.)

ARMSTRONG.

That husband of yours... [Travis.]

EVERLY.

[Travis], it ain't been right since you been gone so much!

TOM.

Ain't been here two mont's now.

*(ARMSTRONG finds a stool. He sits. A small writing pad. Coal pencil. He notates thoughtfully. EVERLY unnerved. She shoos TOM away. He walks very slowly as if to leave.)*

EVERLY.

G'one. Clean up! It'll go hard which'a.

*(A long tear. TOM. The doll in hand.)*

PIPPA.

They ran your portraiture of Labittie and Chance Parson.

TRAVIS.

Hmph, [that boy.]

GUTHRIE.

[That boy.)

PIPPA.

What was it?

GUTHRIE.

Said it'd been bad for six months—the way he was treating Betty—getting violent, trying to make her move to the country with him.

PIPPA.

Blew the top part of her head off.

GUTHRIE.

With a single barrel.

PIPPA.

Dumb nig'ra.

*(TOM alights on ARMSTRONG. RACHEL. In a snap. Enters. A diaper rag. She's only slightly annoyed.)*

ARMSTRONG.

Those boys give you any idea what you're made of yet? Let me see that black eye.

*(TOM rubs his eye.)*

ARMSTRONG.

Well, don't rub it.

*(TOM. Turns away.)*

ARMSTRONG (Continued).

Tell me something [Tom.]

RACHEL.

[Tom], why you insist on goin' down there to Rebecca Creek—is what I'm curious about.

ARMSTRONG.

Didn't come down—got *dragged* down. Schoolboys tearin' his hide.

TOM.

And it ain't nothin' of yo' damn business neitha'.

RACHEL.

*(Whips TOM around.)*

C'mere boy.

*(Shoves a bar of soap in TOM's mouth.)*

There.

ARMSTRONG.

*(A chuckle.)*

A regular crank.

RACHEL.

Shameful.

ARMSTRONG.

Well. Go on and wipe him down.

*(RACHEL wipes TOM. Face. Arms. Hands. Neck. Behind his ears. Vigorously. Eyes piercing Armstrong.)*

ARMSTRONG (Continued).

*Snips and snails, and puppy dogs' tails. Indeed.*

*(RACHEL. Relentlessly. Wipes. Not letting up. Throughout. TOM. Gently. Resists.)*

EVERLY.

Stupi't Lee A'mstrong!

TRAVIS.

What he gotta' do with Carrie!?

EVERLY.

He made the count!

ARMSTRONG.

Tell me Tom. Whose number one?

TOM.  
(Mouth stuffed.)

Me!

EVERLY.

The census-man!

TRAVIS.

That ol' officer?

RACHEL.

Don't talk with your mouth full, Tom. Spit.

*(He does.)*

TOM.

I'm number one! Tom Nelson! I be from Texas. I goes to school. But I goin' be a sold'ja man!

RACHEL.

A clean one at that.

*(RACHEL. Indicating. An exit. A gesture. To TOM. He balks.)*

ARMSTRONG.

Two?

TRAVIS.

It get hotter than hell on nights like this.

TOM.

My Mammy. Eve Nelson. A wash lady. Makes the best poke-chops you ever had!

RACHEL.

Use your inside voice.

TOM.

But Ms. Rachel, this who we is!

ARMSTRONG.

Three.

EVERLY.

Four. There were four of us, Travis. An' that baby girl

TRAVIS.

I'm layin' out my pallet. Come lay wit' me. We can catch the breeze off the crick?

*(pause)*

Jes us. Okay?

TOM.

My daddy. Travis Nelson. Well.

*(pause)*

I really don't know what he do.

*(RACHEL smiles. Pats TOM's head. Tender.)*

TOM.

He always nev'uh come back.

RACHEL.

You happy now, Lee?

*(RACHEL leaves. A gentle roll of thunder.)*

ARMSTRONG.

Your daddy been workin' out there for the McCalls, I know.

EVERLY.

Travis. Rain.

TRAVIS.

There ain't no tryin' with you anymo' is there, woman?

*(EVERLY moves to TRAVIS. Tom stares on.)*

PIPPA.

It doesn't seem to matter which way. Good or bad. Anything outside ol' black town Boley is rotten for a black.

*(PIPPA leaves.)*

GUTHRIE.

*(Calling.)*

You an' me both. We're tied to this Pippa.

EVERLY.

They gave Chancey Parson the death penalty today.

TRAVIS.

Poor nigga.

EVERLY.

They got [counted last mon't.]

ARMSTRONG.

I [counted them last month].

EVERLY.

Betty tol' me.

TRAVIS.

Ay! Tom!

TOM.

Daddy?



TRAVIS.

I got feed for that damn cow a your'n.

TOM.

(Calling.)

Moo-cow! Carla! Daddy got you feed!

TRAVIS.

God knows she keeps starved. Be good eats if we could ever get'er fattened up. The barn, boy.

TOM.

Yesuh.

*(TOM leaves.)*

ARMSTRONG.

(Getting up to leave.)

Well. I'm due for more counts.

EVERLY.

You think they'll take Betty off the count, Travis? Since she—

*(pause)*

ARMSTRONG.

[No.]

TRAVIS.

[Nah.]

*(GUTHRIE snaps a photograph with lights to black out.)*

ii. queen ant

*(A blue morning glow. The frame window. EVERLY. All fours. Work clothes. Cleaning up inside. Red water swirled. Dabbed. Dried. TOM. At play. The dirt pile now an ant hill. A stick. Poked. The rag-doll looks on. An amber light. TRAVIS. Gone. RACHEL. On a diagonal cross she cuts between EVERLY and TOM. Dressed well. Gentle. Sweet. Watching. A great hope. Pensively. She sits on a stool. Waits.)*

TOM.

*(To himself.)*

Where you at? Well I'll be a son-of-a-bitch. They done moved out!

EVERLY.

Can I ask you a pointy question?

RACHEL.

I suppose.

EVERLY.

What in *Sam Hill* you doin' here?

TOM.

Mammy, the ants moved off the ant hill!

RACHEL.

I haven't seen your boy since the unpleasantness.

EVERLY.

Mhm. That.

TOM.

Where they go?

*(RACHEL presents paperwork.)*

RACHEL.

He has arithmetic.

EVERLY.

[I see.]

TOM.

*(Hands on hips.)*

[I seen] it, Mammy. There be zero ants in this here hill. We got zee-ro ants!

EVERLY.

He wanna' be a fightin' man. So he say. Don't reckon you need schoo' for that.

RACHEL.

Yes. I think he does mean to protect people.

TOM.  
(To the rag-doll.)

A trail.

*(TOM. Eyes to an ant trail. Followed. Out and beyond. A broad military crawl. He passes by EVERLY and RACHEL. Stops at the sorghum patch.)*

EVERLY.  
Probl'y bes' he jes stay here with his Mammy.

*(A moment. Then TOM stops. Trail gone cold. Nothing. Disappointment.)*

RACHEL.  
I know it's really not my place. However, I believe the possibilities of an educated—

*(EVERLY throws out a bent arm to RACHEL. Palm facing. Fingers spread. Immediate silence. Stillness. A flash of light. The camera. GUTHRIE adjusts a nozzle. He laughs under the shroud. DUKE SATTERWHITE. An overconfident pose. A big toothy smile. A lip smacker. Always adjusting the jacket he wears. RACHEL excuses herself.)*

GUTHRIE.  
Just a test.

*(RACHEL to TOM. She goes on bended knee. The boy sits attentively.)*

EVERLY.  
(Calling.)  
Probl'y bes' he jes stay here with his Mammy, Ms. Rachel!

DUKE.  
Got this smart jacket, you see?

GUTHRIE.  
(Very involved. All about work.)  
It *is* mighty smart.

DUKE.  
On loan from Dan Cline.

GUTHRIE.  
And just stand to the left of the rocker. Look this way?

*(DUKE. Stands. Excited.)*

RACHEL.  
Tom. No school?

Can't. TOM.

Tilt your chin down. GUTHRIE.

Why? RACHEL.

*(From afar. Knock. Knock.)*

Pardon a minute. The door. GUTHRIE.

*(GUTHRIE leaves. To darkness.)*

Gotta' fig'uh where my ants be. TOM.

They left their nest? RACHEL.

*(Knock. Knock.)*

Yes. Runned off. TOM.

Yes. Probl'y bes' he stay here with Mammy. EVERLY.

*(DUKE. A pose in the chair of his own doing.)*

I suppose the Queen died. RACHEL.

Queen? TOM.

The mother of all the ants. And when she dies— RACHEL.

GUTHRIE.  
*(Seeing DUKE.)*  
Now that's wonderful! Right there.

*(GUTHRIE repositions. The shroud. The camera. PIPPA. Enters. Stacks of newspaper.)*

PIPPA.  
You may have helped me, Guthrie. The medical examiner's office is a mad house from the deaths on the Winkfield place.

GUTHRIE.

Indeed.

*(DUKE reacts.)*

GUTHRIE (Continued).

Pippa. Duke Satterwhite. Duke. Pippa Kinger.

*(DUKE. An attempt to greet. Thwarted.)*

GUTHRIE (Continued).

No, no. Please! Sit.

*(Flash. DUKE rubs his eyes.)*

RACHEL.

When the queen dies, the ants are left sad and alone. If they stay. They too die.

*(EVERLY. Wipes along the floor more broadly. She reaches the ant hill.)*

DUKE.

Very pleased to meet'cha.

PIPPA.

Pleasuh. [Now Guthrie—]

GUTHRIE.

[Now, Pippa.] Just have a seat a minute.

*(A look from PIPPA.)*

GUTHRIE (Continued).

It's a portraiture for the colored masonic lodge.

*(DUKE turns to gloat. EVERLY. Her wipes turn to collecting dirt. Flash. Upset.)*

GUTHRIE (Continued).

No. no. That won't do. If I could have you look this way again?

*(PIPPA unfolds a newspaper. EVERLY. Smears dirt over her arms. Neck. Sides of her face.)*

EVERLY.

Yes. Probl'y bes' he jes stay here with his Mammy.

RACHEL.

They go to find a new queen.

EVERLY.

[Jes one.]

TOM.

[Jes one?]

EVERLY.

Jes one.

RACHEL.

The queen is left. Dead and buried.

TOM.

(Sadly.)

They jes leave h'uh?

RACHEL.

So the colony can survive.

EVERLY.

Jes one.

*(Flash. Flash.)*

PIPPA.

You look very dignified Mr. Satterwhite.

*(GUTHRIE is satisfied. Comes from under the shroud.)*

DUKE.

An' only a half a country school education, ma'am. Ain't that somethin'?

TOM.

Gotta' find that new Queen.

*(RACHEL pats TOM's head. He leaves. She follows. GUTHRIE. A 'Book of Accounts'. Business. A receipt. A handshake.)*

PIPPA.

Pardon. There's more printed on the Winkfield Gin Disaster today.

*(GUTHRIE and DUKE's heads click toward PIPPA. Reading.)*

PIPPA (Continued).

*The gin plant was wrecked. The boiler was said to have been a new one and the accident is supposed to have resulted from the water getting low. The names of the dead are twenty-year-old Fronie Winkfield, Delia Cline, Ruby Cline and Polion Wilson—all twelve years of age. The wounded are Ab Belton, Wink Winkfield and Henry McMicken.*

*(Softly. Knodding.)*

*Ain't that the sad truth.*

GUTHRIE.

Henry McMicken!?

PIPPA.

(Continuing.)

*McMicken was a white man and was put in charge of the gin. It is said Belton and Winkfield will die. McMicken is to live. The gin was destroyed and the boiler landed 100 yards away.*

DUKE.

There's arbor service for Miss Fronie Winkfield and the Cline girls this eve' I know.

PIPPA.

Yes. God be with them.

DUKE.

[Amen.]

GUTHRIE.

[In His] grace.

DUKE.

Damned shame. And ol' Nero Kindred's home-goin' be at the Big Olive church next day.

PIPPA.

Mmm. Yes. I regarded him well. An industrious man who scorned a trifling, low down act—it's a shame what's happened—

GUTHRIE.

What's been *done*.

DUKE.

How a Mason an' ex-serviceman gonna shoot his own head off?

GUTHRIE.

Easy when you cross your neighbor.

PIPPA.

(Appalled.)

Hush, Guthrie!

*(And with that DUKE leaves into darkness. A long moment. PIPPA. Quickly, moves to unstring newspaper. GUTHRIE goes to his camera. Long tear. The pool of light dies on their action.)*

iii. apocrypha

*(EVERLY. Fetal position. Eyes closed. ARMSTRONG. A casual swagger. He chews a corn cob pipe. He wears officer britches. A thin, cotton-ribbed undershirt, suspenders. Cowboy hat. Showing off. He grabs the back of a beat up metal chair. He sits.)*

TRAVIS.

Hi-ho nigga!

DUKE.

Shhh. Boy.

*(DUKE slinks over to TRAVIS. A big laugh. Old friends. A brotherhood.)*

TRAVIS.

You backward nigga.

DUKE.

Jes hush.

*(TRAVIS. A bottle of hooch from near.)*

TRAVIS.

This *some gig* for a dumb ass like you.

DUKE.

He hepin pass me for my interview with the colored-Masons.

TRAVIS.

You forget Meyer's as white as the sheets he shits on.

DUKE.

Ah hell.

TRAVIS.

Jes keep it in yo'head, work'n over here *or not*, ol' Westlan' Meyer expec' that white-privilege ass a'his to be kissed.

*(A drink.)*

Though guess you ain't so bad as big mou'f Nero Kindred done got his'self with a head shot out the back. The Big dummy. Shoulda' shut up and do what e'ry nigga who knows what's good fo'him do.

ARMSTRONG.

You look about as miserable as Selma did. Like that.

DUKE.

Ain't no thang tho'.

*(The two friends. Throw back hooch. Cards.)*



ARMSTRONG.  
(Unlaces his boots.)

[My feet hurt,] Everly.

DUKE.

Mmm. [My feet hurt.]

ARMSTRONG.

Well?

DUKE.

Past'a gave those dead babes wings to heav'n tonight.

TRAVIS.

Good to hear'dat. The big cemetery?

DUKE.

Nah, Surry Winkfield put'em in at his place. Don't know why you ain't go no'mo—

TRAVIS.

Who? To ch'uch?

ARMSTRONG.

[You heard me?]

DUKE.

[You heard me.]

EVERLY.

[Too much pain.]

TRAVIS.

[Too much pain.]

ARMSTRONG.

You listen now. [You can't fill the hole.]

DUKE.

[You can't fill the hole] usin' somethin' else.

ARMSTRONG.

[You can't walk away from the] hurt.

DUKE.

[You can't walk away from the] faith.

TRAVIS.

Shut up.

ARMSTRONG.

Walking away doesn't exist. In walking away you just find whatever patch of dirt you can, to fill the hole. But you're still tainted. Still dirty.

ARMSTRONG (Continued).  
(A moment. Big feet. Propped. He waits and smiles.)

My dogs then?

*(EVERLY. Almost lifeless. ARMSTRONG. Directly.)*

ARMSTRONG.  
Everly. Get up off the God-damned ground.  
(Exasperated.)

Why I come to you, I don't know.

*(ARMSTRONG muscles EVERLY into his arms.)*

TRAVIS.  
I'll take up my faith with the good'Lawd if need be. Anyhow, I hate all that hush-arbor chantin' and hollerin'.

DUKE.  
We jes worried 'bout'cha family—

TRAVIS.  
Wi't all do respe'k Mister Satterwhite you and your'n can go to hell for what you think you know about me and mine since we been up and gone from the Big ol' Olive Chu'ch this small while, for what we *choose* to do and what you *think* we do liable to get you into some trouble in yo' big ol' God-fearin' black brains.  
(pause)  
An' whose the nigga got you evangelizin' to me? Past'a?

DUKE.  
You got a God-shaped hole. Even the worst of us niggas need God—even if it's in a little cup.

TRAVIS.  
Bett'a drink 'for I decide it's bett'a to leave.

ARMSTRONG.  
By God. I could have any young pickaninny nigger-bitch. You know that.

*(ARMSTRONG rocks EVERLY. Then sways. EVERLY is almost dead weight. Her arms loose. Head tilted back. Her face reads pain. She's exhausted. Quiet tears roll. An attempt to hold on. A "danse-macabre".)*

ARMSTRONG (Continued).  
Come on. There now. Selma always said dancing made things better. Especially with a pretty gal. And I guess you are on the better side of pretty, ain't you? Watch your feet. There you go

TRAVIS.  
The hell past'a know anyhow? Maybe he ought'a lose his load in a couple prostitutes down in Boley—got his britches on and so far up his ass.

*(TRAVIS pulls his pants high. Saunters about. A "monkey in a circus". ARMSTRONG. Dances with EVERLY. Sings. Upbeat.)*

ARMSTRONG

*Oh! Say! Let us fly, dear  
Where, kid? To the sky, dear  
Oh you flying machine  
Jump in, Miss Josephine*

*(TRAVIS begins to clap in rhythm with ARMSTRONG.)*

ARMSTRONG.

*Come Josephine in my flying machine  
Going up she goes! Up she goes!*

*(A sudden stop. ARMSTRONG. Licks a hanky. Wipes EVERLY's face. She stops him. Walks away.)*

ARMSTRONG (Continued).

You stop all that shit. Crying.

*(EVERLY wrings her hands. Vacantly. Moves to the stump.  
Sits.)*

TRAVIS.

Trash—jes po'black trash with no idea—that's all past'a seein'. Only in need of mo'money fuh his chu'ch.

EVERLY.

Two o'clock. Where you at Travis?

ARMSTRONG.

You expect him?

*(A dog barks. ARMSTRONG relaxes into the metal chair.  
Trained on EVERLY. Then.)*

EVERLY.

Digg'a!

*(Claps at a bush-not-there.)*

That you Digg'a? Ya get on ya ol' mutt! Get on!

TRAVIS.

You ever get that mulatto bitch over in Welty?

DUKE.

Nah.

TRAVIS.

*(Joking.)*

Young with big tits and a thick ass. *You better not.*

ARMSTRONG.

It's only that emaciated excuse of a heifer rustlin' in the brush yonder.

*(EVERLY shakes her head 'no'.)*

DUKE.

I gotta' be upright now.

TRAVIS.

(Puffing up.)

Why? 'cause you goin' be a Mason? What good you really think those boys do?

*(A bark. Close. TRAVIS and DUKE react. TRAVIS stands. Looks.)*

EVERLY.

Get off the chain I guess?

ARMSTRONG.

Smoke?

*(ARMSTRONG produces tobacco. Fills his pipe. He smokes. Then EVERLY takes a drag. The distance. A bark.)*

TRAVIS.

(Attention in the distance.)

[Thought Meyer kep' his mutt in his yard at night!]

ARMSTRONG.

[Thought Meyer kept his mutt in his yard at night?]

EVERLY.

(A long puff.)

Mhm.

DUKE.

Keep quiet. You tryin' get [caught?]

ARMSTRONG.

[Caught] myself a smokin' woman, huh?

EVERLY.

Ain't caught nothin'.

(Handing the pipe back.)

Is' lost all flav'a.

TRAVIS.

Black ain't nev'a goin' be in with'a good ol' boys.

DUKE.

Ain't tryin' to be.

TRAVIS.

You workin' out here.

DUKE.

He pays right fine and upfront.

TRAVIS.

(Sniggers.)

Bullshit.

DUKE.

He really don't hire jes *any* nigga.

TRAVIS.

Nope. Hires dumb niggas. Dumb niggas who got lots a land, and thinks they's smart.

ARMSTRONG.

A nigger in their right mind ain't keen on white folks. No. I guess not.

(Big feet propped up.)

Everly?

*(EVERLY. She kneads the soles of ARMSTRONG's feet. She's done this before.)*

ARMSTRONG (Continued).

But you ain't like the rest.

DUKE.

(Spits)

*That Man King'a and Wife* in Boleytown—him and his lady a'ight—they got my pich'a took!

TRAVIS.

Yea, yea, ol' Whitey always taken somethin'. I know. Out there sellin' photographs of your good and dead niece, Fronie Winkfield—

*(From his pocket. TRAVIS throws a smattering of postcards at DUKE.)*

DUKE.

Why, these postcards. Travis, postcards?

TRAVIS.

Mhm. They sellin' yo' shit, nigga. And why it gotta' be dead black folk? Why? I tell you. All you is to them is money in they bank. The shim-sham they broke our knecks down in Texas fuh, the same shim sham they break it fuh up here. You work fuh they bank. You die fuh they bank. Ain't no Guthrie King'a and *his* bett'a than Westlan' Meyer—they jes gotta' fig'a out wha'choo got first. So to whitey, a smart nigga put on his stupi't smile and muss up his nappy roots—jes as my daddy and granddaddy did'fo me—and shut up.

(Drinks.)

S'why I stay low and takes what I can. This place ain't no better than Tex's an' what we left it fuh.

*(TRAVIS. Swirls his bottle. A bark. Closer. ALL react.)*

EVERLY.

Sounds close.

DUKE.

Anyhow, I got my courtin' eyes on Isolde Blassingame—and when she see I'm in the Masons—when she see I'm upright—

TRAVIS.

(Takes DUKE's hooch bottle.)

Ah hell nah. Now you talkin' 'bout courtin' cross-eyed bitches!?

DUKE.

(Wrestling the hooch.)

Ain't *ol' lady*-Blassingame, dummy! Talkin' bout her granddaughter come from Texas two mont's back.

TRAVIS.

Leave it be. Upright—an' sittin' low out here throwin' back homemade hooch?

*(TRAVIS. A blaring laugh. EVERLY moves. A basket of clothes. A moment. She folds a shirt. Slow.)*

TRAVIS (Continued).

Two—ain't no granddaughter uh'Isolde Blassingame tryin' to get caught up with the likes uh'you, nigga. You jes a dog in a fancy coat tryin' to get a hump.

DUKE.

(A light hit.)

Said courtin' eyes foo'!

TRAVIS.

Dukie—boy. Niggas' like a sparrow—attracted to pretty things and always takin' what ain't his. You know any high-class Blassingame-girl gonna marry up with a Cline-boy. Ain't no sense in tryin' to change what's been gospel. Been that way since back home in Texas.

DUKE.

What abou'choo? Been gone damn near two mont's. What flap you layin' pipe in?

TRAVIS.

Why you fig'a to ask me that?

DUKE.

You to Juliet McCall? 'Cause ain't no fence take two mont's Travis.

TRAVIS.

Ah. Go on [which'a.]

DUKE.

[Hell.] I know Eve ain't been holed-up since Carrie.

*(A slip of the tongue. Hooch-talk. DUKE is right. TRAVIS knows it, but throws his bottle at DUKE. A catch.)*

TRAVIS.

All these years yo'boy and I still never get used to the shit that comes ouch'yo mouth.  
(Throws cards.)

TRAVIS (Continued).

Ain't had a wife. Ain't really had a home. An' only come into land fo' the good graces of ol'man Winkfield who took you in.

DUKE.

(Scrambling. Collecting Cards.)

Travis—

TRAVIS.

I know you breed boy! Jes fallin' on a bunch of fat bitches who can't get up off they back. Laid out. All sloppy. *Isolde Blassingame*. Christ. You don't know. Not wife, not home, not chi'ren. None of it. Tryin' to be upright. Preachin' yo'self-righteous trash. Jes anoth'a self-servin' nigga. Like Nero Kindred and his bein' Mason and his big fo'hun'ed acr'a farm. Like Surry Winkfield and his gin and his broom shop. Isn't it jes. So. Glorious? Til' everythin' you works fuh *blows up* in yo'face or get *blown in* yo'face.

(pause)

Can't even keep my shit alive. Not no'mo. How do that happen? It's like somethin' bad got in the ground—

(To himself.)

An' I gotta' fig'a out how to keep from feelin' sorry for myself.

DUKE.

But if you would jes—

TRAVIS.

Nah. Shut up. This ain't witchcraft.

(Calmer. Darker.)

That dumb nigga Chancey Parson saw those vultures circlin'—fig'a'd out what he got. Big ol' house in Boley. Little tool shop makin' him scratch. Six months he screamin' at Betty to listen. Tryin' to explain they too high and they hunted. An' the bitch won't listen.

Ain't *listenin'*. I say he was right puttin' a bullet in her mouth. Jes a damn dirty shame it s'while she cradlin' that newborn babe a'hers. Seein' that shit. No. You don't know. Don't wanna know. Blind like they all is.

(More to himself.)

And feedin' you that colored-Mason shit to keep yo'ass shut up.

(*TRAVIS. Drinks. DUKE. Stares.*)

ARMSTRONG.

It won't be all work if you tell me something.

(Nothing.)

Tell me something to make up for when you used to just stare at me as I walked by—you just wash, scrub, wring and dry.

(*Then TOM. Half sleep. Plays with his belly button. Rag-doll in tow. EVERLY rises immediately. An attempt to conceal ARMSTRONG. No faltering. He peers from behind EVERLY. A grimace.*)

TOM.

Daddy on McCall's place?

EVERLY.

Workin' barbed wire fence, you know.

ARMSTRONG.

Your Mammy's just guessing boy.

TOM.

(Kicks at the ground.)

Trample, trample—a *tramp*. Big feet trudgin' and he can't see it, but he's got shit all over his face.

EVERLY.

Hush. Go inside.

ARMSTRONG.

No. Come here Tom.

*(TOM approaches ARMSTRONG.)*

ARMSTRONG.

You a... a dandy?

TOM.

Mammy?

EVERLY.

Please... the boy should be in bed.

ARMSTRONG.

That doll.

(pause)

You tote that thing everywhere.

EVERLY.

Inside Tom. I got wash.

TOM.

(Complies.)

Always his clothes.

(Under his breath.)

You ain't his costumed-dog of a wife!

*(An explosion. ARMSTRONG lurches at TOM. Rips him around. The rag doll falls. ARMSTRONG. Raises his hand to strike. A wince.)*

EVERLY.

No!

ARMSTRONG.

My wife is dead and buried boy.



TOM.

I know.

*(A big push. TOM trips. Falls.)*

ARMSTRONG.

I see you, boy. I see you when you think no one else sees you.

EVERLY.

Boys...

ARMSTRONG.

Go get your game of Jacks, *son*.

*(The rag-doll remains. Tom leaves.)*

ARMSTRONG (Continued).

See you nurse his black eye?

EVERLY.

Mhm.

ARMSTRONG.

Rather unpleasant.

*(Rises. Slowly. Brushes his knees. Casual.)*

Shameful the way you allow him to carry that around. I've seen his school teacher: Rachel Day.

EVERLY.

You *seen* h'uh?

*(EVERLY. Plucks the doll up. A sweet embrace. "Mother and child".)*

ARMSTRONG.

*(Huffs. Looks around.)*

A regular trash hole. And you're just a stray bitch weaning pups.

*(Laughs.)*

Memories of what was and what could have been suckin' hard.

*(pause)*

It was the poison—for the rats, that did it. Hmm?

*(EVERLY. Eyes lock on ARMSTRONG. TOM returns. Then. Jacks. ARMSTRONG plays. It is like two children. An understanding. A bond.)*

EVERLY.

*(Plunges into a reverie.)*

I set traps—enough to kill an army.

TOM.

Now you!

EVERLY.

I woke to a rat crawlin' over her—and me in the bed.

ARMSTRONG.

Now you get up and throw yourself in a fit on a dirt pile.

TOM.

Now let me try!

EVERLY.

I didn't see. Her. I. Washed her body in the water spigot. She. Played. In.

ARMSTRONG.

And buried yourself with her.

EVERLY.

[He shall deliver us.]

TRAVIS.

[He shall deliver us.] They say.

EVERLY.

Her eyes. Open. Milky. White. And the smell. The sound. I heard her little body workin'—  
gurglin'. Goo spillin' from her mouth.

ARMSTRONG.

And Travis gone.

TOM.

Always [gone.]

EVERLY.

[Gone] so much.

TRAVIS.

Lovin' Eve is like tryin' to hold on to too much buckshot in one hand.

TOM.

Gotta get all the Jack-knobs in yo' hand, suh!

EVERLY.

Real quiet like I got a blanket. Wrapped her. Set her near me while I dug up the ground by the  
big tree yonda. No one saw. No Travis. No Tom.

*(TOM. Whispers in ARMSTRONG's ear.)*

ARMSTRONG.

*(To EVERLY.)*

He eaves drops from behind the screen door.

TOM.

*(To ARMSTRONG.)*

I jes don't say nothin'.

TRAVIS.

Eve's in a dead sleep—a no-dream sleep.

EVERLY.

It was a Tuesday when those things dragged her out the earth. I worked so hard to clean it all up. But every time I look down I see this burnt red trail in the ground.

TOM.

An' now I got my *Carrie-doll*.

(*EVERLY. Spies a broom. She grabs it. She sweeps. Rhythm. A cadence.*)

TRAVIS.

See, McCall's got herself a cook.

DUKE.

Elsie Alexand'a. I know h'uh.

TRAVIS.

Yea. If anyone think I be dickin', it'd be wet off her.

EVERLY.

I don't blame him.

TOM.

That sure is stupi't Mammy.

ARMSTRONG.

I guess playing in a little dirt never hurt anyone?

TOM.

Hurtin' her.

DUKE.

You always liked yo'women.

TRAVIS.

Nah. I got a *woman*.

TOM.

Stupi't to sweep dirt.

TRAVIS.

Tha's all. Havin' *women* is *sweepin' dirt*. Guess, it feel good to roll 'round in the mud like a pig. But it's jes t'cool ya'self off til you can get yo' col' drink a'water. Guess you ain't so stupi't for tryin' to find yo'self a *woman*.

EVERLY.

If ya gonna have dirt, may as well have clean dirt.

TRAVIS.

Now. I don't lie. Everly's turn tepid.

DUKE.  
But you keep her on?

TOM.  
She stupi't.

EVERLY.  
And carryin' 'round this raggedy ol' doll ain't? With yo'busted and black eye.

*(ARMSTRONG handles the rag-doll.)*

TOM.  
Dirt ain't never goin' be clean. Dirt's dirty! That's why it's called dirt.

TRAVIS.  
You know I wear my dirt on the outside.

ARMSTRONG.  
You'll let him go on this way, huh?

EVERLY.  
He can go poop or somethin'.

TOM.  
She'll yap her big fish lips at me 'til she go purple. But never a switch.

*(TOM. Collects his game. He leaves.)*

ARMSTRONG.  
He needs a beating.

*(No response. ARMSTRONG crosses to EVERLY.)*

TRAVIS.  
Oh. Dukie. Dukie. Dukie. Don't you be worryin' yo' high-class mind with how I philosophize foo'.

ARMSTRONG.  
Woman? Is your brain rot?

EVERLY.  
Leave him be.

TRAVIS.  
I gotta' piss.

*(TRAVIS leaves. DUKE. Considers. Fluffs his jacket. TRAVIS pees.)*

DUKE.  
*(Suddenly.)*  
Gah'damn! That hooch do make you wanna' piss somethin' fierce!

*(He goes. Light fades over him. ARMSTRONG. Takes the rag-doll. EVERLY. In thought. Her chin on the end of the broom. ARMSTRONG. Takes a few coins from his pant pocket.*

He'll wonder where it went. EVERLY.

For your time. ARMSTRONG.

Three? EVERLY.

I sold my pig. ARMSTRONG.

Ain't sure how to feel— EVERLY.

Better. ARMSTRONG.

But— EVERLY.

ARMSTRONG.  
Don't insult me. Tom's been hammering you for chops woman. Can't shut up about it.

*(ARMSTRONG leaves.)*

iv. minstrel show

*(A phonograph plays a light vaudeville tune. ARMSTRONG. Applies blackface. In the way of 'Cotton Watts'. He "cakewalks" and reclines against the stump. Pulls a straw-hat over his face. He rests one knee along the other. One foot toward the sky. Bopping. Chews wheat. GUTHRIE emcees. He coaxes an imaginary audience to applaud and laugh throughout. PIPPA. Smiles. Sits next to the phonograph. Listens. RACHEL. Puts streaks of black on her face. Big red lips. A dowdy wig. She prepares to play. A role. Elated. The emotional quality of each caricature is extreme. Disturbing. EVERLY walks in brusquely. Billowing sheets. White. Ethereal. Wind. Laundry. Clothespins. Wash basin of soap water. Outside. Day. Rich. Bright. Airy. Stark and false.)*

GUTHRIE.

And for the especial amusement of the people, I give you the celebrated blackface minstrel comedy: *Burnt Cork, Muss and All Agog!*

*(Applause.)*

Pippa?

PIPPA.

*(Rims the bell of the phonograph with her fingers.)*

Of course, Mr. Kinger.

*(PIPPA. Increases the volume on the phonograph.)*

GUTHRIE.

*(Clapping a slate.)*

Action!

EVERLY.

I'mo bust yo' head, Lee A'mstrong! You wake up foo'!

*(Audience laughter. EVERLY. The wash basin. Washboard. Clear water. RACHEL. Crosses. Quickly. Carries an apron.)*

RACHEL/ELSIE.

Hello, Mammy!

EVERLY.

Well, Ms. Elsie Alexand'a!

RACHEL/ELSIE.

Now that ain't no way to keep a man—or wash dem' clothes.

EVERLY.

Wha'choo you mean?

RACHEL/ELSIE.

You ain't got no rhythm. Or whatever rhythm you had, you done lost.

*(Audience laughter.)*

EVERLY.

Rhythm?

*(To ARMSTRONG.)*

And why don't you jes get a job 'stead'a sittin' there bein' a nobody?

ARMSTRONG.

I almost had me a job this mornin'.

RACHEL/ELSIE.

Lem'me show you rhythm.

*(RACHEL. The attention of ARMSTRONG. Giddy. She turns her rear toward him. He ties the apron round her waist. She shakes a bit. A slap. Her rump. A jump and giggle. It is obvious what ARMSTRONG wants. Audience laughter. RACHEL crosses to the other side of EVERLY.)*

RACHEL/ELSIE (Continued).

Show you how to keep a man.

*(A series of pseudo-seductive rhythms and gyrations with her body. Scrubbing. Bouncing. An attempt to entice EVERLY to join. Audience laughter. EVERLY. Hands on hips. RACHEL hums at a moderate volume. The vaudeville tune. Performs a brief jig.)*

RACHEL/ELSIE (Continued).

*Jes'a wash. Scrub. Ring. Dry. Jes'a wash-scrub-ring-and-dry. C'mon Eve. Keep'im workin' on you. Jes'a wash. Scrub. Ring. Dry. Jes'a wash-scrub-ring-and-dry!*

ARMSTRONG.

She's too lazy an' lost fuh all'at!

EVERLY.

Mhm. You broke-ass nigga. An' where'd you almost get a job?

ARMSTRONG.

Well, as a Pullman-porter at the rail yards out'a Boley.

EVERLY.

Lawd! In the sleepin' cars?

RACHEL/ELSIE.

In the sleepin' cars. With the pretty women, Mammy. Helps him keep his rhythm since you ain't kep' your'n.

*(Audience laughter.)*

ARMSTRONG.

You suck the life right out'a me.

RACHEL/ELSIE.

A regul'a dapper-Dan.

ARMSTRONG.

The man says'for he could help me in the situation he had to put me through an examination.

EVERLY.

A civil service examination?

RACHEL/ELSIE.

Oh. Mr. A'mstrong done his civil service. I can *test-i-fy*!

*(Audience laughter.)*

ARMSTRONG.

Sat me in a room and asked me—

EVERLY.

What he ask you?

ARMSTRONG.

To smile.

RACHEL/ELSIE.

Job of "miles of smiles." In a hot. New. Suit.

EVERLY.

Well, yo' smile's as crooked as yo' pinky!

*(Audience laughter.)*

RACHEL/ELSIE.

Now. Now. Don't knock his poke! It lays on thick.

ARMSTRONG.

It's a *job*.

RACHEL/ELSIE.

And so out to the fence lines he go. A romantic. Nights under stars. Maybe gettin' slopped like a pig. With no real responsibilities. Ain't take much to do that odd-man's work. Keep yo'self down to the ground.

EVERLY.

No. It ain't good work no how.

RACHEL/ELSIE.

I'll teach you a trick, Mammy. You want to try this scrub?

ARMSTRONG.

She'll rub her knuckles down like that, Elsie.



*(Audience laughter.)*

RACHEL/ELSIE.

Lee. How much you goin' pay me for this, I hope?

ARMSTRONG.

Well, let's see now. I'll pay you you're worth.

RACHEL/ELSIE.

No sir. I gotta get some money.

*(Audience laughter.)*

ARMSTRONG.

I gath'a she can't be taught. Hell, I can't be taught!

RACHEL/ELSIE.

Well, a schoo' mast'a ain't no good if you ain't tryin' to learn. I be gettin' on if I don't be needed he'uh. You keep a'holda your lady-bone til then, boy!

*(RACHEL. A shimmy. Hoists her skirt. A dance in a circle. Calamitous. A show. Audience applause. A flourish of movements. PIPPA increases the volume of the phonograph. RACHEL. Draws a circle round EVERLY. Silly. An exit to darkness. Flash. Flash and lights out on GUTHRIE. The vaudeville tune clips off. Quiet.)*

v. briar patch

*(ARMSTRONG. A stool. EVERLY closes in on him. His head. Her abdomen. Then her apron. The water. His face. Washed. Black face. Gone. Gingerly. Softly.)*

EVERLY.

My mind. It's so tired. From thinkin'.

ARMSTRONG.

That feels nice, Eve.

*(Melting. Briefly. His lips. Her palm.)*

Always touchin' you. [I need that.]

EVERLY.

[I need that.]

*(An admission. It's too much. ARMSTRONG leaves. A long moment. EVERLY. Eyes stare still. Then TRAVIS. Out of breath. Pouring sweat.)*

TRAVIS.

Had to run that damn dog out'a here! You know it!

EVERLY.

You wanna' eat? I got corn meal.

TRAVIS.

*(A rag. Toweling.)*

Mhm. Ye.

*(A dog bark. A sudden blast of gunfire. TRAVIS and EVERLY jump. DUKE falls. Breathless, sweating and hard to the ground. A bloodied nose.)*

DUKE.

I think I broke my nose, Travis!

*(A man's voice booming. Close.)*

DUKE.

Ah, [shit!]

TRAVIS.

[Shit!]

*(EVERLY scrambles to render help. TRAVIS grabs a rifle. DUKE flees. To darkness. A moment. EVERLY. An attempt to follow. Thwarted. A gun blast. A man hollering from off. Then STERLING BROWNING. County Sheriff. Smart. Rigid. Imposing. Insistent. Debonair. From behind the Nelson-couple. Big breath.)*

EVERLY.

Travis, nah!

STERLING.

Relax your arms or come to blows!

*(A hesitant compliance. TRAVIS straightens. WESTLAND MEYER. A corn-fed and tall farmer. Red-faced. Red-haired. Sweaty. Short of breath.)*

WESTLAND.

Where is [he!?!]

STERLING.

[Quiet] [Meyer!]

EVERLY.

[Who], suh?

STERLING.

Duke Satterwhite.

WESTLAND.

You know my hand, [woman!]

STERLING.

[Westlan'!] Hush!

*(Then Justice of the Peace. KEMPER HALLIBURTON. Tall. Gentle in the face. Crystal blue eyes. Self-assured. Blatant. Hard of breath. Efficient. Always half-composed. A thinker.)*

STERLING.

This is J.P. Halliburton. Sheriff Sterling Browning. And I guess you know Westlan' Meyer?

EVERLY.

Yes. Suh.

KEMPER.

There's trouble.

*(WESTLAND advances on TRAVIS. Faces him, inches from his face. STERLING faces EVERLY. The couple. Pressed back to back.)*

WESTLAND.

Nip on my fence. And stolen hooch. You know anythin' boy?

*(STERLING. Looks at EVERLY quizzically. The couple shake their heads. In unison.)*

STERLING.

There ain't no time for any *coonerie*.

WESTLAND.

Let's try a biscuit. Hmm? See about gettin' what we want.

*(WESTLAND takes a large silver coin. Places it in TRAVIS's mouth, softly. The inside of his cheek.)*

STERLING.

Your names?

*(Another coin.)*

EVERLY.

Everly Nelson—an' my man Travis.

*(Another coin.)*

STERLING.

[What do you know of Satterwhite?]

WESTLAND.

[What do you know of Satterwhite?] C'mon boy.

*(Another coin.)*

EVERLY.

My man say, say he was tol' Duke Satterwhite sat up and drank his'self stupid on Mistuh Meyer's drink he keeps in his horse barn.

WESTLAND.

Atta'boy.

*(Another coin.)*

TRAVIS.

*(Somehow clearly.)*

I can't breathe.

*(Another coin.)*

WESTLAND.

And did he *runned* off on the property behind you?

STERLING.

Who stays on the property behind you?

*(Another coin.)*

EVERLY.

Marshall Smith. Then Lee A'mstrong's place. Right near the chu'ch. After the break in the trees.

BROWNING.

Big Olive?

KEMPER.  
(To STERLING.)

The colored church.

WESTLAND.  
(Leaving.)

Eat shit coon.

STERLING.

Likely to head for the trains.

*(WESTLAND leaves.)*

STERLING (Continued).

I'll finish here and police down the county road in the wagon. Try and head him off at Olive.

*(KEMPER leaves. TRAVIS. Frustrated. A mute.)*

STERLING (Continued).

You ask for Sterling Browning in Boley if you see that man. Or you see Lee Armstrong.

EVERLY.

Fine, suh.

*(STERLING leaves. The darkness. A long moment. TRAVIS. Turns. To Leave.)*

EVERLY (Continued).

Now you goin' on?

*(Nothing.)*

Tryin' to hunt down that foo'friend a'yours, or goin' back to yo' whore?

*(TRAVIS. Stops. Turns to her.)*

EVERLY (Continued).

Which is it?

*(pause)*

I asked which is it!? You chasin' after *The Trash* or *The Whore*?

*(TRAVIS dismisses her.)*

TOM.

*(In darkness.)*

Did I spell it correct?

EVERLY.

I know she followed you up from Waco.

*(An orange light. Shadows of trees. Cast. TOM. Cross-legged. The ground. Feverishly working. A handheld chalkboard. Chalk. RACHEL. A stool. A look. Counselor. Teacher.)*

RACHEL.  
What?

TOM.  
Did I spell it correct?

RACHEL.  
(Rubs his head.)  
Yes. You. Did.

*(TOM. Aggressively. Erases the board with his hand. Rewrites. Carefully. Still sloppy. RACHEL. Cups her throat. Disbelief.)*

RACHEL.  
Do you know what these words mean?

TOM.  
Sure'do. They's loose women who make it with any man.

*(TRAVIS. The coins from his mouth. He wipes them with a handkerchief. EVERLY. Taken. Shuts up. He twists and ties up the handkerchief. The coins. Jingle. He hands EVERLY the bundle.)*

TRAVIS.  
G'one on like you do. With yo'Lee A'mstrong. With yo'touchin' and his po'vidin' so nice and ya'lls strokin' and talkin' so pretty-like. Don't think I don't know. He's a worm tryin' to eat the rot out'a you woman. At least I wear my dirt on the outside. You always known that.  
(pause)  
Don't even smile no'mo. Killed yo'self. 'Spose it's jes as well. Go to yo'tramp tonight.

*(Lights isolate. RACHEL and TOM.)*

TOM.  
Jezebel.  
(Writing.)

J-E-Z-E-B-E-L.

(Reading.)  
Eve Nelson has the Jezebel-spirit; *she who engages in immorality, idolatry, and unrepentant sin.*

RACHEL.  
That's enough for today, Tom.

*(RACHEL. Escorts TOM off. Lights fade.)*

vi. vespertine

*(A dim light. EVERLY. Nearly nude. Reclines. Lifeless. In a chair. Near a long table. A Paris-green gown hangs near. TRAVIS. Cradling his head. Walks. Stumbles. Slow. Slumps to the ground. He lays out on his stomach. Head toward EVERLY. Rocks back on his knees. Inaudible pain. Down again. He slides. Serpentine toward EVERLY. Her feet. His hands. A gentle pull. He collects Everly. Slow. To the ground TRAVIS lays his pelvis into hers. No response. It's too much for him. A quick movement. Travis spins away. Emotionally crushed. EVERLY's head, torso—lifeless. A moment. Then effortlessly EVERLY swings away from him. ARMSTRONG. A chair.)*

ARMSTRONG.

Everly. I've drawn your water.

*(No response. TRAVIS stumbles off.)*

ARMSTRONG (Continued).

I know you hear me. You can forget everything else now. You've been allotted to me.

*(A flash of light. Lights out over ARMSTRONG and EVERLY. A flash of light. Strong moonlight. Tree branches. A clearing from a thicket. Railroad tracks. The scene of a crime. STERLING BROWNING moves. Frequently. Deciphering a puzzle. Working out plausibility. KEMPER HALLIBURTON mostly nauseated. WESTLAND MEYER angry and accusatory. Separate. Looking off. Peace Officer IREY THREADGILL. Paces. GUTHRIE. A handheld camera.)*

KEMPER.

[God,] almighty.

STERLING.

[God,] a'mercy.

WESTLAND.

Dumb niggers.

IREY.

This section?

STERLING.

S'what ol' Cecil said. Crossed here.

KEMPER.

A shoe.

WESTLAND.

And shell casing.

STERLING.

Cecil said Dan Cline took the [shot].

WESTLAND.

[Shot] Satterwhite in the ass.

IREY.

But he didn't get a read on which nigger jumped on the train.

GUTHRIE.

Justice, there's plenty meat on the tracks over here.

IREY.

Must be all blow-back.

STERLING.

(Deciphering.)

Dan Cline gave chase.

GUTHRIE.

This way.

STERLING.

One of the men slipped out his shoe. Runnin' opposite the locomotive.

WESTLAND.

A shot?

IREY.

A jump?

STERLING.

And somebody kissed the train.

KEMPER.

All on Cecil's account.

GUTHRIE.

(Takes a picture.)

Leg over yonder, sir.

IREY.

You got enough light on that Guthrie?

(KEMPER. A sighting. A coat. Picks it up.)

GUTHRIE.

Harvest moon.

IREY.

Cline's jacket there?



STERLING.  
No damage.

IREY.  
Good for Cline's sake.

WESTLAND.  
Who knows what other kind'a shit he's rollin' in.

STERLING.  
He'll be 'round.

IREY.  
He'll have to make a statement if he wants his property back.

WESTLAND.  
Any money?

IREY.  
Nothin' inside.

KEMPER.  
(Something fowl.)  
The smell just hangs in the air. Stifling.

WESTLAND.  
(Joking to IREY.)  
Ah c'mon *City*.

*(STERLING. Leaves. Searching.)*

GUTHRIE.  
May be something distinguishable on the eastbound side? To firm up your identity?

STERLING.  
(From off.)  
Right then.

GUTHRIE.  
(To IREY.)  
I took a portraiture. Of Satterwhite. Not but. Three days ago. In that very jacket.

KEMPER.  
I'll confiscate that for my report.

STERLING.  
(From off.)  
Ah, Kemp. IreY. Over here. Head torn clean off. Would you look at that?

WESTLAND.  
I'm gonna kick it.

IREY.  
(Trying to hold back WESTLAND.)

Leave it alone.

*(WESTLAND. Leaves. Toward STERLING.)*

IREY.  
Son-of-a-bitch.

KEMPER.  
I might need some fresh air.

WESTLAND.  
(From off.)  
That's a busted up head alright!

GUTHRIE.  
If you'll bring it out of the brush, I can photograph it.

WESTLAND.  
(From off.)  
Ain't much for a face, huh!

STERLING.  
(From off.)  
Looks like it's gone through a meat grinder.

WESTLAND.  
(From off.)  
Body just exploded, popped the suckers head right off.

*(KEMPER. Shakes his head. STERLING and WESTLAND  
stumble back on.)*

STERLING.  
Watch the poison ivy, Westlan'!

*(WESTLAND. Trips. Falls.)*

WESTLAND.  
A shit! Well. Good. God Damn it!

STERLING.  
That's what you get.

*(A moment. Sterling squats. Pensive. Rolls his fingers together.)*

IREY.  
You got that look Sterlin'.

WESTLAND.  
What look?

KEMPER.

Conflicted.

STERLING.

Hmph. What do we know about these country niggers?

IREY.

Ah. Cline's a regular tight-wad. And known to. Disturb worship out near. Big Olive. Been to court on it. Several times. But real smart. Knows the law.

WESTLAND.

Why don't you sit down? You look like you're going to pass out, Judge.

*(KEMPER. Waves at WESTLAND. He will be fine.)*

IREY.

And Duke's riff-raff. Adopted son of ol' man Winkfield, so he's got a lot of land.

WESTLAND.

It's a large portion on one side of mine. But it don't yield. Pretty naïve.

STERLING.

Tell me. Westlan'. You say Satterwhite's close to the Nelson-fella?

WESTLAND.

*(Squatting on a stump.)*

All I know is til Nero Kindred shot himself and I hired him, Satterwhite used t'dick around on the McCall place—all buddied up with Nelson. An' Nelson's been rentin' on my brother's piece these last three years.

IREY.

Come up on the gravy-train seeking their *opportunities*.

*(STERLING. Espies a small, gold stud earring. No back.)*

WESTLAND.

Ain't no black really found any, other than Surry Winkfield who put all the niggers to work in the gin for his own sake.

STERLING.

*(Holds the stud up to the light.)*

It's not a man.

WESTLAND.

[Huh?]

IREY.

*(Crossing to STERLING.)*

[Sir?]

STERLING.

This *isn't* a man.

*(PIPPA enters. Dressed to work. Prepared. To investigate. Followed by RIPLEY RABB. Short. Piggish. Smoking. A waddle. An assistant. He commences to work. Gathering fragments of the human remains from off. PIPPA points intermittently. Guiding him to check areas. Bagging and setting them rapidly throughout. An expert.)*

PIPPA.

Okay boys. Enough loitering about. Where's his body?

WESTLAND.

*(Pointing.)*

Over there. There. And the head, in the underbrush over there.

PIPPA.

His *head*?

STERLING.

*(Foisting the stud into PIPPA's view.)*

Tell me what this is.

PIPPA.

Looks to be a woman's gold stud earring.

*(Closer.)*

Is that blood?

IREY.

Seems so.

PIPPA.

I'm sorry, who is this?

*(A pool of crystal blue light. Dim. A black figure. Face up. Eyes vacant. Wounded. Beaten. It is ISOLDE BLASSINGAME. She speaks unimpeded.)*

ISOLDE.

I ain't ever seen her from that up close before and didn't know what it was when she kissed me. But she was loud. Takin' the tracks home like we do. And all a sudden, outa know wheres, there he is. He says to me to get up on him right there. An' I did. I was so high. I get up like I'm told. Jes like a bawdy-house girl. For him.

STERLING.

The engineer witnessed Duke Satterwhite and Dan Cline—no woman.

PIPPA.

Oh-my-lands, Satterwhite?

GUTHRIE.

Only just inducted into the Mason society.

IREY.

The *colored*-Masons? Boy I tell you, I don't know what these niggers think they got comin' to 'em.

*(They all laugh. GUTHRIE and PIPPA grimace.)*

WESTLAND.

Attracted to shiny things and always takin' what ain't theirs.

ISOLDE.

In a few minutes Duke tol' me to get down and turned me over. And there was Dan Cline.

*(A big breath.)*

It ain't easy breaking with gospel. As soon as I stood straight I got a funny feelin'. Where I s'pose it was fun an' games, I seen a look in Dan's eyes. I knows somehow what was happenin'. But I jes stood there deaf.

PIPPA.

Have the trains been stopped?

IREY.

Ordered a half hour ago.

PIPPA.

Very well.

STERLING.

*(Leaving with IREY.)*

We'll shop the remains and the ear-stud around Big Olive til Satterwhite and Cline turn up.

*(WESTLAND and GUTHRIE leave. WESTLAND murmurs something derogatory. A laugh. PIPPA rolls her eyes. Meets RIPLEY. Gloves. A black bag. She crosses. Leaves in the direction of STERLING. Rustling. The head. Covered. Concealed. Bagged. PIPPA returns. The bag to the ground. Eerie.)*

PIPPA.

Come on and get your photograph Guthrie.

*(She holds the bag up. Open. KEMPER. Looks. Covers his mouth with a handkerchief. Repulsed. GUTHRIE. Returns. A flash.)*

ISOLDE.

In Dan's eye I seen a flash. The way his brows squeezed togeth'a. Narrowed and hooded the beads of his eyes. It was the force in his body that last I felt. And sure as my heart burst, the last I saw was my man—jumpin' clear up ten feet on a passin' train cart and that Dan Cline chasin' fast—the whole of the world spinnin', an' my head open like an orange blossom.

KEMPER.

Can't imagine the thought as it happened.



ARMSTRONG.

Amen.

*(EVERLY. Crosses. The other end of the table. Sits opposite ARMSTRONG. He smiles.)*

KEMPER.

*The victim's body was badly exploded, disfigured so that she could not be identified until her head was found by Sherriff Sterling Browning and taken for positive identification by several persons who saw the head.*

ARMSTRONG.

Well done.

KEMPER.

*I find no evidence or cause to Fort Smith & Western or blame the railroad officials of the death or killing of Isolde Blassingame, aged 24 years-eleven months.*

*(KEMPER blows out the candle. EVERLY drinks. ARMSTRONG rises.)*

EVERLY.

Damn her. Damn her. Damn her.

ARMSTRONG.

Let it go. She's dead. Not you.

EVERLY.

The same to you.

ARMSTRONG.

Why don't you leave?

EVERLY.

Can't leave.

ARMSTRONG.

Then watch your mouth. One thing Selma had down pat.

EVERLY.

*(Rises.)*

Where's Tom?

ARMSTRONG.

In the back room. He's earned his rest tonight, so he can stay.

*(EVERLY sits. ARMSTRONG. A look of pity.)*

ARMSTRONG (Continued).

He's actually got quite the right hook. It'll keep those kids from chewin' on him.

EVERLY.

You taught him well.

ARMSTRONG.

So. You stay here all day tomorrow. I have work for you. Sheets. And I'll see Tom off to school. Nothin' worse than a stupid nigger, anyhow. And I'll see Rachel Day. Speak with her about keepin' an eye on him. So. If a couple punches need to be laid, ol' Tom can get 'em out first.

EVERLY.

(A faint smile.)

A'right.

(A moment.)

ARMSTRONG.

You sleepy?

EVERLY.

(Shakes her head.)

Drunk.

ARMSTRONG.

Ain't that nice?

EVERLY.

For a change.

(A moment.)

ARMSTRONG.

You know I would never touch you unless—

EVERLY.

I know it.

(A moment.)

ARMSTRONG.

You look as good.

EVERLY.

It. Feels nice.

ARMSTRONG.

You wear it well. Filled out in the bust. Was always the type of man who liked that.

EVERLY.

Never worn nothin' felt so fancy.

ARMSTRONG.

She loved gowns.

EVERLY.

Yes.



ARMSTRONG.

Wore them like medals.

EVERLY.

S'why black folk hated her 'round here.

ARMSTRONG.

You didn't.

*(She drinks. Audible gulps.)*

EVERLY.

I knew where she came from. She wasn't like us. Had no *ideal* like us. And you brought her here. You fool.

*(Giggles.)*

You white. Trash. Tramp.

ARMSTRONG.

*(A drink.)*

And a god damned mouth on her like you too. Fiery. Made right for a hose.

*(A moment.)*

They shut her up.

*(pause)*

EVERLY.

They did.

*(A moment. ARMSTRONG breathes. Eyes water.)*

ARMSTRONG.

And I'd string you all up if I could.

*(pause)*

Can you breathe any better?

*(He walks to her. His hand. Large. Leathery. She kisses the palm. He holds her cheek.)*

ARMSTRONG (Continued).

God. You look so good.

*(He feels her.)*

EVERLY.

*(Repulsed.)*

No. Lee.

*(ARMSTRONG. Pulls himself from the table. He leaves. Offended. Lights fade.)*

vii. constancy

*(Down lights. A long table. Chairs. EVERLY and TRAVIS sit at the heads. WESTLAND and IREY on the long ends. KEMPER. Sits next to WESTLAND. Writing throughout. He gulps water, no ice. All are seen. WESTLAND and IREY drink and play cards. WESTLAND is intoxicated, but holds his liquor well. TRAVIS. A puppet. Stares across to EVERLY. She is mostly still. In thought.)*

WESTLAND.

It's all a part of the game.

*(TOM walks on.)*

TOM.

I found'em.

*(TOM plops cutters. Next to EVERLY. She slides them across the table toward TRAVIS.)*

TOM (Continued).

Carla's gone.

EVERLY.

She's been *replaced*.

WESTLAND.

Boys like you got a lot to learn. But you young. It'll come.

IREY.

Always wondered about you.

*(Nonchalantly. WESTLAND takes a handkerchief. Coins.)*

WESTLAND.

You see this?

IREY.

Sure.

*(WESTLAND. Jingles the sac of coins.)*

WESTLAND.

This is like—

*(Gets more serious.)*

Niggers go stupid over this—like *cola*. You ever seen what that shit do?

IREY.

Some ways.

WESTLAND.

You take this...

(Opens the handkerchief.)

You find a dumb nigger. A *sad nigger*. *Sad-nigger* done lost his way. *Sad-nigger* out of hope. *Sad-nigger* who ain't tryin' *too* damn hard. And you feed him.

(Takes a coin and flips it in his fingers.)

You feed him. *Just enough*. So *Sad-nigger* keep comin' back.

(He places the coin inside Travis's mouth.)

One day. *Sad-nigger* starts to look around. Sees *Smart-nigger* who gets himself a big house and a little tool shop... or wears a fancy coat, owns some land and can put a bitch on is arm...

(*Another coin.*)

IREY.

(Smiling.)

Or build up a gin?

WESTLAND.

(Knods.)

*Or build up a gin.*

IREY.

I'll be damned.

WESTLAND.

*Sad-nigger* thinks "*What—Smart-nigger think he better than me? Nah. He's soft.*"

(*Another coin.*)

He broods. Starts to hate. And whether alone. Or he's able to conscript other sad niggers. He begins to self-destruct. To lie, cheat, thug and steal. And that's what's happened here.

IREY.

You speak somethin' fierce.

(*WESTLAND laughs. Another coin.*)

TOM.

Carla's bones are rotted, sunk down in a trash hole. Creek side. I seen it.

WESTLAND.

And let a man like Armstrong jump stupid over some *sad-nigger-bitch*. You see 'cause without their women they cannot reproduce. And over time that will help to break down the race. And that *is* eradication.

(*ARMSTRONG steps in. Behind EVERLY. IREY clears his throat. Topic ended.*)

WESTLAND (Continued).

So I did see him clear. That Nelson-man. With my own two eyeballs. Call my roan heifer. Yonder. From my place to his. Tied a rope 'round her neck and lead her off.

(*WESTLAND slaps TRAVIS on the back. The coins disperse.*)

TRAVIS.  
Take your single-shot. Tom. Go. Call the cow.

EVERLY.  
No. Travis. Don't. I ain't like him—

TRAVIS.  
Listen. He got to sometime. 'Sides, I teach him well.  
(pause)  
One thing I did right. *Right?*

EVERLY.  
When times was good.

TRAVIS.  
Go on wit'cha. Tom. Get'r in the barn.

TOM.  
(Calling out.)  
Carla! C'mere cow!

*(Cow bell tinkles.)*

EVERLY.  
Ain't Carla.

TOM.  
C'mon cow!

WESTLAND.  
I'm gonna file a suit. And a grievance.

TOM.  
Shoot. Daddy. She walkin' up so quick. Like she wants it.

ARMSTRONG.  
Grievance?

WESTLAND.  
It's no good livin' next to nasty.

*(WESTLAND. Pulls a cigar from his shirt pocket.)*

TRAVIS.  
I's sorry. I can't clean it up.

ARMSTRONG.  
It's all so messy. The fool just wants somethin' sweet to come home to in the in-betweens.

IREY.  
'Bout the same it was. Between you and yours—ain't that right Lee? What I hear.

ARMSTRONG.

You wily son-of-a-bitch.

WESTLAND.

Hey! Hey! Hey, now. Let him alone. We all know about your black Parisian-pussy-cat. With all due respect, Lee. We all know. And. Uh. Irey there. Well. We know no white man had anythin' to do with it.

(Puffs his cigar.)

Ain't shamin' you. What's a little playtime with the colored-girls, anyhow? We all got that in common.

(Drinks a big gulp.)

Right. Down. To ol' India Adam's bawdy-house of Boley. On the sneak.

(pause)

Say. Lee. You marry Selma? I mean. In ol' Pari'? They allow that sorta thing?

ARMSTRONG.

(Dryly.)

Ain't been to a bawdy-house, Westlan'.

WESTLAND.

Indeed.

EVERLY.

Ain't clean.

TRAVIS.

[Did you hear me?]

WESTLAND.

[Did you hear me?]

EVERLY.

[I did.]

ARMSTRONG.

[I did.]

(WESTLAND laughs heartily. Followed by IREY.)

WESTLAND.

Well then. I shan't pry. Have more drink Lee. We can't get to know one another if *I can't get to know you.*

(ARMSTRONG. Turns to thought. WESTLAND. A shrug.)

EVERLY.

It don't redeem you none to take what ain't yours and think you helpin' here.

ARMSTRONG.

A mess.

(ARMSTRONG. Big swigs of whiskey. Throughout.)

TOM.

Mammy. Daddy providin' right fine here with this cow.

EVERLY.

[Stolen cow.]

ARMSTRONG.

[Stolen cow.]

EVERLY.

And for what point, boy?

TOM.

So we can eat right fine.

EVERLY.

Doin' right fine on meal and rice.

TOM.

Ain't care for no damn meal and rice, day in and day out, Mammy.

EVERLY.

You hush up yo' trash talk!

TRAVIS.

Go on now Tom. Right between the eyes-like.

*(TOM leaves. Calls to Carla.)*

TRAVIS.

[You got a strange way about you.]

EVERLY.

[You got a strange way about you.] I smell the women under your sweat when you come home.

TRAVIS.

That white dog you feed found my bone and took it. I smell him.

*(A blunt crack of gunfire. The shuddering of a cow. A thud.)*

KEMPER.

*(Writing.)*

*To-wit, one roan-colored heifer of 20 months belonging to Westland D. Meyer.*

TRAVIS.

I never agreed to be a nigga that dreamt big. Ain't a Duke Satterwhite or born to greatness like Nero Kindred. That'll get you good and dead. Like all them dead babes blasted out that gin. And they parents and they kith and kin who try. So hard. To give. And give. Jes forgot. Forgot. How to be small. And get on. To stop fightin'. For somethin'. They could never have. You stole my manhood.

ARMSTRONG.

Buried the bone.

TRAVIS.

Everythin' dead and buried.

*(Sterling saunters on.)*

STERLING.

Done Kemp?

KEMPER.

Your warrant to search. Sir.

*(The document. Handed. Carefully. To IREY.)*

STERLING.

My posse?

*(IREY. WESTLAND. Rise.)*

STERLING (Continued).

Lee?

*(ARMSTRONG. Drinks.)*

KEMPER.

*(Leaving.)*

It's his jurisdiction. He'll go.

IREY.

He's drunk.

WESTLAND.

So drunk he's sober.

STERLING.

Right then.

*(IREY moves toward TRAVIS. The warrant. Given. TRAVIS fumbles. EVERLY rises.)*

STERLING (Continued).

Everyone should remain calm.

IREY.

We'll need to search the house.

TRAVIS.

Can't read this. Su'h.

STERLING.

Go'on then IreY. Lee. Go with him.

EVERLY.  
(To ARMSTRONG.)

Suh?

*(EVERLY tries to follow IREY. STERLING grabs her left arm. Viciously. Forces it behind her back.)*

TRAVIS.

Please. Suh. Please?

STERLING.

Hush.

WESTLAND.

Don't make this worse for yourself nigger.

STERLING.

Not either of you.

*(TRAVIS. Shuts up. WESTLAND. Yanks the warrant from TRAVIS's hands.)*

ARMSTRONG.  
(Leaving.)

Where's your boy?

EVERLY.

Out.

TRAVIS.

At the barn.

*(ARMSTRONG. Vanishes to darkness. A long pause. Pensive. Silent. Watching.)*

WESTLAND.

Can't. Read? Sorry nigger. Says here! You stole my roan-heifer, boy. On account of you cuttin' my fence.

*(Immediately. IREY. TOM's single-shot in his hands. Throws TOM onto the ground. The force. Leaves him wincing.)*

TRAVIS.

Now, you ain't gotta throw my boy!

*(A lunge. ARMSTRONG. Bolts on. Catches TRAVIS. Brings him to his knees. RACHEL crosses on in a hustle. ARMSTRONG holds him in a crouched position. His head down.)*

RACHEL.

Come off the ground Tom. Leave the boys alone. Back to your school work.



TOM.

I ain't need no brains to be a God-damned sold'ja. I can take 'em!

RACHEL.

Tom Nelson!

TOM.

Good Lawd ain't gave me much, I know.

RACHEL.

It just takes you longer.

TOM.

I'll get my swings in on those kids. Like I'm fightin' in a big war.

RACHEL.

What will you fight for?

*(TOM. Eyebrows cinched. Screwed up face.)*

RACHEL (Continued).

That's what I thought. You're just sittin' there? Fine. I'll be in the school house.

*(RACHEL. Leaves.)*

IREY.

The boy's got the cow's carcass buried under the hay in the barn.

TRAVIS.

It was my doin'. Leave'm be.

*(TOM grabs the six shooter from ARMSTRONG's holster. Rapid. Fires on STERLING.)*

ARMSTRONG.

[Tom!]

TRAVIS.

[Tommy!]

*(IREY yanks the gun from TOM. TRAVIS. Wrestles ARMSTRONG. EVERLY. Thrown by STERLING. STERLING draws his weapon. Points. Too weak. TOM Attacks IREY. TOM bites at IREY's hands. IREY slaps EVERLY who's managed to get up. She goes to the ground. WESTLAND lurches. Pulls TRAVIS. Off.)*

IREY.

Get'm out'a here!

*(ARMSTRONG rips EVERLY away. She beats against him. He is not phased.)*

TRAVIS.

Everly! Everly!

*(WESTLAND smashes TRAVIS in the face.)*

IREY.

Leave the boy! Help me get Sterlin'!

STERLING.

*(Shot.)*

I. Need. Water. [Wes—Irey! Ah!]

EVERLY.

[Die! Die. Let it all die!]

WESTLAND.

[Hell to pay! Hell to pay!] God Almighty, there will be hell—to—pay!

*(WESTLAND. Manhandles TRAVIS. A yelp.)*

EVERLY.

The 'Chester Tom! The Winchest'a. Inside!

*(TOM attempts to run. IREY kicks TOM across the face.)*

ARMSTRONG.

*(Checking TOM.)*

Grab Sterlin'! The boys gone out cold.

*(IREY. WESTLAND. Pull STERLING off. ARMSTRONG. EVERLY. Together. The tone changes. Drastic.)*

ARMSTRONG (Continued).

Everly. Oh God, Everly.

EVERLY.

Oh, God. Please, Jesus!

*(ARMSTRONG. Whispers 'Be quiet!' over and over. EVERLY. Whimpers.)*

ARMSTRONG.

I need you Eve.

EVERLY.

Lee. No. Ain't right.

ARMSTRONG.

You look so good. You feel so good. I can feel your heart. Poundin' so fast.

EVERLY.

We can't play. Not this way.

ARMSTRONG.

I take you away from your place. Bathe you. Clothe you. Feed you. Teach your boy. Now. Open up yourself to me. I need that.

EVERLY.

Please.

ARMSTRONG.

Touch me better than no other woman.

*(EVERLY. Hands. Push hard against ARMSTRONG's hips.)*

ARMSTRONG (Continued).

You do work harder than two grown men.

*(His body grinds against her pelvis. Subtle.)*

EVERLY.

We gotta go. I should go. Tom. Me. We gotta go.

ARMSTRONG.

You got my wash tomorrow.

*(A kiss. He tries to move her. A sharp movement. An attempt to release herself. ARMSTRONG. Stops her. A struggle. A grunt. Moan. Then shock. He takes her head hard. A fit of passion. Slams it against the ground.)*

ARMSTRONG (Continued).

No!

*(EVERLY. In and out of consciousness. ARMSTRONG rises.)*

ARMSTRONG (Continued).

Now. Touch me. Eve.

*(EVERLY. Tries to reach up for assistance. Her hand. His waist belt. It's an accident. She doesn't know.)*

ARMSTRONG (Continued).

I want you. So bad.

*(ARMSTRONG. One hand holds her hand. The other hand. His waist belt. Unbuckled. EVERLY. Near faint. As a rag doll. He gets down over her body. Signals. All misread.)*

*(Blackout.)*

*(End of Act)*

ACT 2

i. practice

*(Pools of light. Two nooses. Strung high. Still and ominous. Two heavy wooden chairs beneath. EVERLY NELSON. Wearing her calico-print dress. Moves to climb a chair and noose herself. INDIA ADAM looks on. Several blankets. Surrounding her. She likes to primp her hair. LEE ARMSTRONG walks in.)*

ARMSTRONG.

What are you doing?

INDIA.

She ain't got long to stay here.

ARMSTRONG.

(To INDIA.)

You looney!

*(ARMSTRONG. Quickly. Pulls EVERLY back from the chair. And noose. Immediately. She is dead weight. In his arms.)*

ARMSTRONG.

Everly. Why?

INDIA.

To make it easier.

ARMSTRONG.

What?

INDIA.

You know Sterlin' Brownin' will die. Suh.

ARMSTRONG.

What do you know?

INDIA.

Well. S'pose, nobody knows nothin'.

ARMSTRONG.

You need the crazy house.

INDIA.

Do I?

ARMSTRONG.

I say.

INDIA.

I've come from there. I mean. My sportin' house. Where you good-ol'-boys likes to play.

ARMSTRONG.

You. You're India Adam.

INDIA.

As I live and breathe. Forty days left here. Then back to wheelin' and dealin'. But. *If* Sterlin' Brownin' dies. There will be hell. Hell to pay. For her. And her boy. I tell you. She's in a dead sleep. Bes' leave her be.

KEMPER.

(From Off.)

*On account of the guilty plea to the charge of grand larceny, this court hereby sentences Travis Nelson to two years at the state prison. As for the lady Nelson and her son. They are to remain at the prison at Okemah under county authority.*

INDIA.

Mmm. *My. My. My. My. My.* What a tangled web we weave.

ARMSTRONG.

Quiet. I can't hear.

(*ARMSTRONG. Leaves EVERLY. As if listening.*)

INDIA.

This poor colored girl in this little uncolored town.

(*A gavel. Bangs.*)

INDIA (Continued).

Mhm. Sittin' here on such lovely sloping ground.

(*IREY THEADGILL. Saunters in.*)

IREY.

You figure. She's crackers, yet? Never figured a bawdy mistress a poetess.

ARMSTRONG.

No.

INDIA.

These words belong to Uncle Will Jesse. Livin' right fine in Boley. On Cedar and First. Such a pretty little house that you'd ever chance to meet.

IREY.

You certainly keep things colorful around here, don't you, you old bag?

ARMSTRONG.

What's this about the Nelsons?

IREY.

Nothing but Negro deviants.

ARMSTRONG.

They've put boy in the men's cell?

INDIA.

Yes. Tried with his Mammy. But he bites. Eats at their hands. Ask Irey there.

IREY.

Yes. It's about true.

INDIA.

Bit at those big. White. Hands. Didn't he?

(A snigger.)

Not quite the same as what he's used to at the sportin' house.

ARMSTRONG.

Who's the turnkey tonight?

IREY.

Fella named Aesop.

INDIA.

I know of his older brother.

IREY.

Hey, would you shut up?

INDIA.

I know about all ya'll.

IREY.

(A huff.)

Whore.

INDIA.

*Coon-ass.*

IREY.

To hell with you.

*(He leaves. India. A big smile.)*

INDIA.

All it takes is shakin' the tree a bit. An'a nigga is sure to fall out.

ARMSTRONG.

Tell her. I. I'm around.

INDIA.

She *can't* see you. She's got. To get. Ready.

(pause)

I could have one of my girls meet you.

ARMSTRONG.

Ain't want a bawdy house girl.

*(Light shifts.)*

ii. the photograph

*(SPENCER AESOP. Breezes in. Keys jangle. Very young. Very Tall. Sweet. Green. Coming into his own. A bowl of meal. Glass of water. No ice. INDIA. Stares at EVERLY. EVERLY. Returns the stare. IREY. Cowboy hat over his face. His legs crossed over a large desk. Chairs. Near. Vacant.)*

INDIA.

Haven't you heard? She's not eating.

SPENCER.

You won't eat tonight?

EVERLY.

You open up this door and beat me. Rotten. Like that other man done?

SPENCER.

Who?

INDIA.

She's dreamin'. Ain't know up from down, crisscross from sideways.

SPENCER.

You'll starve.

EVERLY.

Give it to her.

INDIA.

Oh. No. I'm watchin' my fig'a.

*(SPENCER removes. To the desk. A light. A cell. TOM. A dress. Pink bows. He seems hollow. Quiet. Lost. ARMSTRONG crosses to IREY. He Stirs.)*

ARMSTRONG.

Now, why in the hell you got him in that?

IREY.

All we could find.

ARMSTRONG.

*All you could find?*

TOM.

Got lots of marks. Lee. Too. Many. Marks.

IREY.

Figured he was fightin' a war when he woke up. Westlan' and I. Well. He was. Like an animal. Tore himself out of his clothes. Just wailin' on us. Scratchin' on us. He's got a strong right hook. But. To this jail it was.

TOM.

They split the inside of my lip.

ARMSTRONG.

Hush Tom.

IREY.

All this about the time you. Revived the Negress.

*(ARMSTRONG peers closer.)*

IREY (Continued).

Now. He put the bows in his hair.

ARMSTRONG.

Has his mother—

IREY.

No. They ain't seen each other. First. Will be at the trial. Sterlin' collapsed yesterday. [Dead.]

ARMSTRONG.

[Dead.]

EVERLY.

[Dead.]

INDIA.

[Dead.] No need for a trial 'round here. Not here. Not now.

EVERLY.

They'll come at night.

INDIA.

You may be able to. Uh. Get in a couple good words 'for they gag you.

EVERLY.

A couple of scratches.

INDIA.

Right. Right. It's what the papers will write. 'Fore they say they bind your hands with hemp rope. You know they like [hemp rope].

EVERLY.

[Hemp rope.]

IREY.

You'll have to stop. Coming down here Lee. It's a mess.

ARMSTRONG.

I see.

IREY.

No. There's really nothin' else to see. She's a stray. He's a stray.



INDIA.

Have you thought about what I told you?

EVERLY.

Yes.

INDIA.

Will you cut yourself? Down there. To keep them at bay?

*(EVERLY. Rips her dress. Again and again.)*

EVERLY.

*(Whispers.)*

I could try.

*(ARMSTRONG. A stool. Sits slowly. A pipe. A gaze off. Disbelief. IREY. Rises. Turns. Leaves. Light fades on TOM.)*

IREY.

Leave you to it boy.

SPENCER.

Yes sir.

EVERLY.

How'bout my boy?

INDIA.

They'll do things for him. I've seen anything from takin' toes. Fingers. All keep-sakes. 25-cent here. 10-cent there. The big souvenir will be the emasculation. When the—

EVERLY.

I know of it.

INDIA.

That's the usual way. Hell. They even put on a *roast*. When they feelin' extra nasty. It makes a great thrill.

SPENCER.

I could never witness a thing like that.

INDIA.

Well. You are *young* and *dumb*. But *white*.

SPENCER.

I've heard of the audiences.

INDIA.

Oh yes. In droves. But they could care less. How you got there.

*(EVERLY. Rises. An orange glow. She looks. Out. In awe. It starts intense. Almost abrasive. Fades throughout.)*

EVERLY.

I see. A light.

INDIA.

They don't care who you is. What you is. They've merely come for the final act. To pin you. In a moment.

EVERLY.

A burning light.

*(SPENCER. Turns in his chair. Looks)*

INDIA.

The burning light of Christ. Child. The ol' *Crann Tara*.

EVERLY.

A signal.

SPENCER.

A warning.

EVERLY.

The fiery cross.

INDIA.

Yes.  
*Fast as the fatal symbol flies,  
In arms the huts and hamlets rise.*

*(EVERLY. Moves. Quickly. Scrambles. To the wooden chair. She takes a moment. Breathes. She stands on the chair. Touches the noose, variously. Dismounts. Again. Again. And again. Throughout.)*

INDIA (Continued).

*Thy banks shall echo sounds of fear!  
The rocks, thy bosky thickets,  
sleep so stilly on thy bosom, deep.  
The larks blythe carol from the cloud,  
seems for the scene too gaily loud.*

*(WESTLAND MEYER and IREY. Enter. WESTLAND. A gun. EVERLY. Stands. Sudden calm.)*

IREY.

Howdy, Spence.

*(SPENCER. The chair. Tied. Ceremoniously. A saddle string strung through his mouth.)*

IREY (Continued).

When we leave...

(pause)

IREY (Continued).

You are to hobble. Across the street to Moon's Restaurant. Tell him what we've done.

WESTLAND.

Of course, you won't be able to speak for about 15 minutes with your mouth so tight-like.

IREY.

Just think. We're creating for you your first big thrill.

INDIA.

Pay close attention, Aesop.

WESTLAND.

Black. Necks. Stretched over the North Canadian River.

IREY.

That'll be west of here. By six miles. Off the Old Schoolton Bridge.

*(SPENCER nods. Fearfully.)*

WESTLAND.

You shan't use our names now. Yeah, boy?

*(The gun to SPENCER's temple. He winces. Trigger pulled. A click. Big eyes. The men laugh. INDIA laughs. Then. A light. PIPPA KINGER sits. Opposite TRAVIS NELSON. A barred window between. IREY turns away. He loads his gun.)*

PIPPA.

Do you have any next of kin to claim the bodies?

TRAVIS.

No.

INDIA.

Miss Eve. This is how they do it. See they got Aesop all tied up. Now you. And. You go with God.

IREY.

Shut up India.

*(The men cross. EVERLY. Pulled up. Suddenly a proper tone.)*

IREY (Continued).

Watch your step, please.

*(EVERLY. Steps up on the wooden chair.)*

WESTLAND.

Your hands please Mademoiselle?

EVERLY.

No.

INDIA.

Remember. A scratch.

WESTLAND.

Very well. I'll take it.

*(WESTLAND. Gives his face to EVERLY. Braces himself. A scratch. Blunt. No reaction. Another. Nothing. It's a joke. Another. She's desperate. A whimper. IREY motions for her to stop.)*

WESTLAND.

Well. She's declawed herself somehow. Just gentle. Little paws.

IREY.

Proceed then.

INDIA.

Shameful.

IREY.

The tow sack.

EVERLY.

No please. Suh. I have to see my boy.

IREY.

This is highly unorthodox, but I *am* a Christian.

*(TOM. Pants. White shirt. Walks on. Slowly. Hands bound behind his back. Tow sack over his head. He staggers. There is pain at his groin. Blood.)*

PIPPA.

I managed to locate a Nelson family living in a county west of here. From Texas. From Waco. An elderly couple. David and Rhoda?

TRAVIS.

No. Ma'am. That's...

*(IREY and WESTLAND. Stand TOM atop the second chair.)*

TRAVIS (Continued).

They're of no relation.

PIPPA.

But. I—

TRAVIS.

Stop. Please.

PIPPA.

Mr. Nelson—

Let it be. TRAVIS.

Then. Might we— PIPPA.

Let it *be*. TRAVIS.

*(Light fades on TRAVIS. PIPPA crosses. A boat. GUTHRIE. A camera. PIPPA rows.)*

Can I see him? Eye to eye? EVERLY.

Why yes. Surely. Wes'. What say you? IREY.

Well. He can't hardly speak. WESTLAND.

Beat him pretty bad. IREY.

He's about full of alcohol that one. WESTLAND.

He won't feel a thing. EVERLY.

But he will recognize you. WESTLAND.

An eye for an eye. Times two. INDIA.

*(TOM's tow sack is removed. TOM. Tears. He looks at her.)*

I. Can't. Breathe. TOM.

*(Mother and son. A moment.)*

Oh. My Tommy. Thank you for stickin' up for yo' Mammy, boy. EVERLY.

*(IREY and WESTLAND kick the chairs. EVERLY and TOM hang. A long moment. A resonance. Bodies lifeless. IREY and WESTLAND vanish. SPENCER frees himself. Slowly. He looks on. He changes. INDIA looks on. Unchanged. SPENCER. Exits. GUTHRIE. PIPPA. And ARMSTRONG. With the bodies. INDIA fades in the background.)*

Just beyond this bend.

GUTHRIE.

I see it.

PIPPA.

There.

GUTHRIE.

I see them.

PIPPA.

Water's as smooth as glass.

GUTHRIE.

A mill pond really.

PIPPA.

(She stops rowing.)

Your camera.

(A moment.)

ARMSTRONG.  
Current picks up the closer you get.

(GUTHRIE and PIPPA. Heads click to ARMSTRONG.  
Smoking. He looks up.)

ARMSTRONG (Continued).  
I know. I tried going out there.

PIPPA.  
I do declare! Mr. Armstrong.

ARMSTRONG.  
At first you're just waiting for her to reach out and grab her boy. But then you realize the distance is so great. And then. You think. You might. Could catch her. Catch them. Until you realize she's not falling.

PIPPA.  
No. I suspect she's not.

ARMSTRONG.  
I got my huntin' knife here. Was sent to. Cut'em down. But.

(GUTHRIE raises his camera. Snap. Snap. This seems to upset  
ARMSTRONG.)

ARMSTRONG (Continued).  
I saw this little nigger-boy takin' his cow to water. He looked up. At them. Screamed. Just screamed 'they gave them the rope', 'the rope', 'the rope'!

Yes. That's how we heard.

PIPPA.

Hmph. Deception.

ARMSTRONG.

Pardon?

PIPPA.

Deception. You. Create deception with that thing. Don't you?

ARMSTRONG.

Do I?

GUTHRIE.

Deception?

PIPPA.

Or Illusions.

ARMSTRONG.

Pictures.

GUTHRIE.

Photographs.

PIPPA.

Portraits.

ARMSTRONG.

*Art* really.

GUTHRIE.

Certainly *reality*.

PIPPA.

Yes. Pictures of all sorts.

GUTHRIE.

Of the people. *For* the people.

PIPPA.

And I don't suppose you have some alternative point? If you do. I'd like to hear it.

GUTHRIE.

You have a strange fascination. For this sort of thing don't you? Pictures. Of the dead.

ARMSTRONG.

There's need for accurate reporting here. And with the advent of optics—

GUTHRIE.

ARMSTRONG.

I find the exploitation most difficult to understand: my Selma, Kindred, the Winkfield girl, Labittie Parson; and most recently the railroad incident, and now what you see hangin' before you. It's a rather private affair don't you think?

PIPPA.

These *accidents* are made *public*. And as you are familiar with my work, Mr. Armstrong, this is surely all in a days' work for Guthrie.

*(PIPPA tries to row. GUTHRIE stops her.)*

GUTHRIE.

What are you on about?

ARMSTRONG.

These are not subjects under normal viewin' conditions.

GUTHRIE.

Forgive me, Mr. Armstrong. Without darkness there is no light. And who are you to decide—

PIPPA.

Guthrie's been *sent* to take photographs.

ARMSTRONG.

Yes. And me to cut'em down.

GUTHRIE.

It is a *job*.

ARMSTRONG.

*'The raged Negro mother and boy hanged by a mob for shootin' a sheriff'*. Guthrie, that's all your picture will ever say. A simple deception. No better than the glassy water it's bein' reflected by. You can't tilt it, touch it or turn it. See it from another side. How they turn. When the sun changes its angle. What you bring the people is the story they *want* to see. And you root that in a God damn news report.

*(pause)*

*They have all lost reality to play a part in one we've built on our own.*

*(pause)*

We all bear guilt in the illusion.

*(GUTHRIE. Snap. Snap. ARMSTRONG and PIPPA. Look on. ARMSTRONG plays with his knife. Then the sounds of shuttering cameras. Flashes. Increase in volume and frequency. As the light dies.)*

*(Black out.)*

*(Curtain.)*