

Six-Foot Seconds

By Steven Barron

happy trails

While awaiting his "come-ahead" dispatch, a south-side Bucksnot police officer, man by the name of Murtah, decided he'd step away from the line of fire for a moment or two in order to aid a widowed acquaintance with the re-folding of her coughed-up concerto but in his ardent wish to assist, negligently left his fully-loaded, .45-going-on-50 caliber service revolver unattended and in plain view on the desk of his faux pine paneled pseudo-study and it was there, where Mitch, the oh-so-cute, toddler-tyke, boy-child got hold of it, just reached up high on sweet, little tippy-top toes and with tiny kid arms and fingers fully extended, drug it off Murtah's cold, metal desk and hauled it silently back to his own dreamy room of cowboy council and the piece be so bring-down heavy and ornery and irked by the time it arrive and thoroughly mortified and humiliated at having been removed from official stand-down-duty and because its temperament already so inexorably malicious and hellishly mean and immune to the vagaries of sustained sentiment - these infernal features having been specifically engineered by those contracted to efficiently execute such assignments then infused within by forge machines and their machinating operators and maintainers over to the fire-arm factory out Route 4 – and plainly now, in no mood to indulge or pardon or extend tolerance nor level leniency or lessen recoil, let alone confer outright clemency to an inquisitive three-year old, begin a faint, kittenish purr in that small child's ear that translate in human-speak, something like, *Cool and hard Mitch, smooth and shiny, hold me like you mean it son.*

So it's *ti-yi-yippy-i-oh-ki-a* now, as Mitch, sitting splay legged on his buckaroo bunk wrap both soft child hands around the goody-woody, but still, steel butt with sight and micro-threaded barrel pointing inward, squinting youth eyes peering into a portal of heavy metal pitch and with grimy, tot fingers smiling, probing playful, trusting and unsuspecting, the curvature of trigger, thick, ponderous, cold and callous get pushed too far past *his* forward and the shooter muzzle-flash annoy, *You've meddled with the wrong inanimate object kid*, and strike out with quick-click discharge efficiency and blow a brutal blast that explode the stripling's precious skull across ten-feet of rocking horse sky with gut-slugging effect and finality and the cheerful sticky-stuck wallpaper sheets with their festive colorful depictions of dancing and lariat twirling cowboys,

along with giddy-up-go cow gals, all rosy-cheeked and smiling and ringing come-and-get-it, chuck wagon triangles, serving up baskets of piping hot biscuits and tall glasses of ice-cold buttermilk, while slappy-get-happy wranglers mend fences, shoe horses and brand cattle, get suddenly served an unordered platter of real-time crimson splatter, send everyone flying and diving for cover, instantly turn the border-boundary into a lawless and formless frontier as if the scenes themselves suddenly couldn't rightly stomach the conceit of innocence no more and in response start pissing out ugly, grim-world, jack-hammer din and horror and some supposed later, university-funded seismologists and clerical crackpots mainly, that the descending black night chaos must have originated from within the western world like stigmata of paint and print and unleash the torrent of bloodied smear as some kind of get-rich-quick promotional scheme. How else? they surmised, to explain the abrupt and negative shift in room ambiance and sudden temperature flare, when only a moment before push-pull accordionists and guitar strumming caballeros dozee-doeed, as cattle-driving, bronc-bustin' cowpokes, all booted and buckskinned, rode past on colorful prancing ponies with golden-horned saddles but now abruptly forced to duck, tuck and roll for their lives, furiously unloading Colt peacekeepers and Winchesters into opposing dimensions, and how else cry a flinty-eyed wagon master to explain the scene's sudden shift from tranquil, dreamscape contentedness to one of reinless republics flying raggedy skull-and-cross-bone flags and banners, got the hate jangling jailers with rings of rusted skeleton keys swinging at their sides, flashing forged and faded documents certifying paid-up destitution dues, don't think twice about giving the guilt and the quilt-less a solid, skull-thwack with the notched-stock of a sawed-off shotgun, when, a mere breath earlier, ear flicking, doe-eyed calves and lambs darted spiritedly about through tall grass, chasing butterflies, nipping at one another's tails and fluffy, brown cottontails hopped to-and-fro loving it all, while mama-papa cows chewed cud or nibbled bundled straw and serenading blue birdies sweetly chirped their blue-birdy tunes.

hurry sundown

But the shot-up sanctuary with savaged decor and blasted drywall, keep its mouth *shut*, disassociates, offers no complaint, resigned instead to endure all acts of foreclosure and eviction with stoic acceptance like each of the room's reduced corners done seen and lived it all before, maybe not here but somewhere equally bleak and fever stripped, equally treacherous

and horrific, got its own staff of dedicated originators and agents of pernicious misfortune.

No matter though, the room is a riot now, and come Cloudy, the family's gilded retriever and still-stitched-up-pup near mended from an early spring lightning strike, who start jumping frantically from floor-to-bed, then bed-to-boy and back again, ruff-ruff-ruffing all danger-laden, canine alarm and after a goodly number of run-ragged repeats begin sniffing and circling and licking at the awful aftermath, the blown-bone-kid-skull, broken and gone and this hacienda's conciliatory pint-sized mama, a pitch-perfect fryer of Grade A eggs and an A-Grade diffuser of domestic time-bombs, the cop's blind-to-vice, nicotine wife with brittle, stick arms and legs-of-less, her whole assembly contained and corralled by skin besmeared beyond bronze, more the hue and texture of flecking rust from some sun-baked, junkyard auto and whose chain-rattling handle got itself a vibrating, good-time, metallic sounding sweetness to it, one that zing like Maxine or Raylene but probably closer to the former, come hurrying from her kinetic kitchen, bounding up the two, three almost four at-a-time stairs before revolver reverberation even chance to subside, and down the narrow hall she fly, then into the room she rush perceiving it all before arriving, her intuited sense of devastating dread and terror leaping danger-zone-vertical from gut-to-throat, then back again, well conscious the wreck of life descending, its tasted terror, coating the tongue like some awful corpse coagulate with her the appointed palace taste-tester of its thick, lurid details, with no way to duck the detail, the dime-thin utterance she manage to muster stage an abrupt brain-body-disconnect and what get released, sure enough, a strung-together, knocked-kneed pleader, "My God, my God, not my Mitch, please God, not Mitchey, please!"

...but the massed assault of fact and force is accelerating now, streaming in from all directions, mightily blown from civil defense air-raid sirens, military bugle barrels and the insistent sounding, *extra-extra-read-all-about*, *mouths* of raw-throated, newsboy baritones, sweeping low over wood and field, skimming the heights of homes, phone poles and electrical lines; plazas and strip malls; zooming past banks, churches and pennant fluttering car dealerships; motels and gas stations, laundries and liquor stores; through parks, cemeteries, a dilapidated city zoo; up and around top-ten A.M. radio countdowns and evangelical liftoffs; rifling chests and chunks of blunted memory, crashing the doors of grade schools, beauty shops, hardware stores and family owned eateries, in through the front then rocketing out their rears into trash-stink alleys, snarling and tearing for the target, driving one woman's dread forward, *this* pair of dark eyes flashing the oncoming corners, unmitigated panic ploughing bone and

sinew and when the inevitable occur, with all appeals exhausted and her fired-alive senses plunged headlong into the realm of violent collapse and undisputed hand-raised ruin, obliging her to confront dead-on the revolver's signature scrawl posted across the wall, while simultaneously beholding the tiny, motionless form, her sweet, little Mitchie, brains blown to kingdom come, young blood sponging slowly into a deep-space area rug, she go shrieking-fucking nuts, careening insanely into deep-blind-hysteria, screaming horror-stricken bloody murder, while in her own near-ear she forced to bear the buck-passing, cop-out of a formless, piss-poor, district deity countering corrosively with some insipid, chickenshit, line like, "Honestly mam, me and my assistants, or should I say, *My assistants and I*, thought today was election day, so we didn't bother setting the alarms," or more curtly perhaps, "Engine trouble lady, old heap threw a rod outside Geneva – lucky we got here at all," - well Christ almighty friend, if the entirety of that home don't instantly catch the doomsday fever, start to shudder and shake because the *world* done spit out virtue and purity and goodness, expelling logic and commonsense, say, "Hey pal, I'll inventory exactly what I please around here," while proceeding to systematically purge all reason and rightness, choosing instead to wrap its vulgarly, corrupted mind around disorder and derangement, embracing disharmony and championing wreckage, though oddly, courteous enough to caution with, "Stand back boys and prepare to be mismanaged," as it slam-hammer a railroad spike through dreamy, nighty-night, sleep-tight sweetness, irrevocably fracturing the mannerly and well-ordered lives of the heretofore, unsuspecting residents of 2612 Niskey Lake Drive.

abandon ship!

So off crawl the sunny-side of life, stunned and disoriented, shaking with disbelief as to how suddenly and with no apparent warning things had come to this and on the way out it pass the great, solid wall-of-wail on its way in, a rising, swell of sound like storm-whipped wind speeding across undulating prairie, gathering force as it bend along, engulfing and uprooting all in its path 'til howl turn to rail-twisting roar; blow down all *this* land's ice-cream parlors and candy stands, kissing booths and good-time arcades; disorienting guests, visitors and residents alike, sending all rushing frantically up and down the green-belted block demanding someone's, "don't know whose," immediate resignation and the few who do manage to keep their wits about them speak in learned straight lines, calling for body scans and x-rays, insisting on supervised re-

counts and revisions, imploring the invisible as to, “additional options and recourse,” when the legs beneath fable get knocked out from under, receive instead, the sign and symbol-less telepathic cry from a docket of stony-edged silence intoning, “Nay! None! Nada! Absolutely nothing!”

Thus, with no satisfactory reconciliation deemed likely, foundation stone and mortar begin a mad, pack-up scramble, throwing random belongings into a vacating valise but do its decompress much too speedily, hitting the surface all too quickly, precipitating a slew of bursting nitrogen bubbles, go “pop”...“pop”...“pop,” cause the clay-baked brick to rupture and crumble and supporting steel to flex dangerously, then snap like dry twig arithmetic simultaneously exploding framed glass, launching shards of jagged pane in all directions. *Ten thousand gallons of gale* howl through at once. Time implodes; life affirming precepts perish like ship-wrecked sailors. Evacuation routes are cut off; suddenly, the code of contention supersedes all preexisting conventions of communication. A yard goat packed with dynamite trips the armed alarm system and the domicile’s entirety commences a stampeding, mutinous dismantle.

Attachment hardware is the first to bail: nuts and nails; hooks, rivets, bolts and brackets send up frantic smoke signals, the scene like some kind of gone-wrong composite sketch where one forlorn outpost relays the dubious details to a second, the second to a third, the third to a fourth and so on and so forth, until each logs its own version of the fragged distorter, then forced to abide the common, vain complaint, “hey man, that don’t *mean* nothing like me,” consequently causing every hard-luck device that serve to hang the whole together and fortify the structure’s existence to initiate a frenzied, yank-pull-come-undone, in order to beat a posthaste retreat. “Going back to Dullsville,” they cry on the way out. “Things a whole lot simpler there...conscientious screw do its god damn job, be left the hell alone!”

Cabinetry crashes to a floor rising to meet it halfway; hinges pull support from cupboards and swinging doors. Connections are broken. Un-muzzled panic ensues, as lacquer, all colors, stage a greedy, speed-peel from trim and wall. Curtains and carpet make quick assessment of mood and tone, then jerk loose, leaving stunned tacks, padding, rings and rods to fend for themselves. Electric bulbs explode like Carolina firecrackers, hear them firing off through the interior. Sections of dry wall level wood-splintering jujitsu kicks through adjacent studs and paneling and in a sonic second, everything within that home glimpse the dream-leveling doom descending, cause information to flame insane like igniting combustibles sparking room-to-room, upstairs-to-down, basement-to—attic-to-roof and the pine-planked floors and spackled

ceiling instantaneously agree there's little hope and even less of value left here for anyone or anything, then start bawling cruel surrender in pile-drive, rave-up fashion prompting shingle and gutter to break free and flee into the maniacal sky, sweeping a terrified roofing crew along for the ride, and the self-contained fury housed within those walls just tear through the skull of the world with *who cares what you think* disposition, inundating mind, will and conviction, eviscerating faith and order.

Appliances and vibrating, feel-good gadgets shift allegiance, rapidly click on and off like personality disorders. All other electronic items able to get mitt to switch quickly follow suit and the acrid air miscarries with drag-strip smoke and burn and quickly fills with fucking whack, sending short-circuited bodily discharge running down stairs and over slab foundation. Light switches confuse function, begin a feverish twitching action inducing hi-fi-stereo and rabbit-eared TV to self-medicate, then detonate, sending the vacating vacuum careening crazily about, while babbling some gibberish about putting its affairs in order, like, "Where's that blasted, disability-policy of mine?"

And the kitchen, that ostensibly reliable repository and all-embracing haven for warmth, love, compassion and kindness abruptly shuts down its concession, announcing via a beet-faced, rod-puppet dubbed Mr. Turpentine by its manipulator, "That's it ladies and gentlemen, the galley is now closed." Simultaneously, the pearl white oven, long suspected deranged and certainly as maladjusted as any cop club or handgun, ignites gas jets attempting to end it all, to burn down the whole, miserable affair in a final, desperate move to get out from under. Two-bucks been tossed on the table start sloshing kerosene all around say, "We're with you man, let's torch this cocksucker," then go looking for a spark of their own.

Pots and pans boot out sauce, soup and stew; plates and saucers, cups, glasses and goblets begin flying about the room shattering against walls and fixtures. Broiler, cooker and kettle claim emergency, factory-recall, ship out via troop carrier, singing, *You'll never get rich/ by digging a ditch*, effectively canceling suck-up supper plans with the town's douche bag, Chief of Police. Knives excise the bindings of a thawing pot-roast, which breathlessly acknowledge, "Thanks boys, I owe ya'll big-time," then makes a mad dash toward the void.

Car magazines zoom through the rooms looking for the interstate, accidentally run down a *Ladies Home Journal* and the latest, *McCall's*. A stack of old gun digests, string up a banner that read, *So Long Joey*, say, "It's the best we could manage given such short notice," then stage a reflexive lock-n'-load, resolved to shoot themselves clear should untenable

circumstance conspire.

Yard games and sporting goods rush up from the basement. “What’s happening here, what’s the plan?” shout out a croquet mallet as the entire set, balls and all, push forcefully past. Garden and shop tools follow as a terrific gas blast rocks the clocks on the walls. Choking smoke and other disorienting romantic spew sing hallelu. The crack-up is in full swing now. Assorted saws, hatchets and axes got the hero hang-up spring into control roles attempting to clear paths through the mounting wreckage. Rake, hoe, pick and shovel joined by hammers, wrenches and screwdrivers fly forward into the breach. A pair of displaced silk pajamas, pragmatically insist on being correctly creased and neatly packed within the next fleeing garment bag that happens by, adding, “I don’t intend going out like this, and that’s all there is too it.”

Medicine cabinets empty entire contents. Pills, tablets and capsules leap free, skittering crazily across tile floors. Soul hardened prescription medications follow suit, hot on their heels. Assorted syrups and rinses run onto counters and down drains. It’s every treatment for itself now and within these failed and fear-fraught rooms, all bureaus, closets and dressers commence a full-throttle pitch-out. Chest and night stand drawers fire forward at supersonic speed, some colliding in mid-air; others sent crashing into walls, closet doors and vanity. Award citations and accreditations, a beer company barometer, each hung with leveled cop precision, vibrate free. Fastened shelving fails, toppling framed photographs, potted plants and everything else occupying space. A fish bowl spills and a last gasp fish-flop ensue. Mirrors go blank, cease to reflect; entire wardrobes are evicted on the spot and every manner of garment along with towels and washcloths, linen, quilts and blankets begin tearing about in frantic disarray. The pandemonium escalates as trousers, slacks and pedal-pushers, every variation of pant possible, drop to bent knees, or at least attempted bent knees, in a mass act of contrition; jackets, coats and sweaters; shirts, skirts blouses and dresses; brassieres, girdles, cotton boxers and utilitarian panties fly insanely about, the long sleeves of those so equipped, clutched forward in fierce, beseeching prayer and all the belts and scarves and ties, as well as socks, hosiery, and handkerchiefs, lunge furiously in all directions trying to strangle the occurring oblivion, or at the very least, tighten a tourniquet ‘round the proceedings to slow-flow and the ruthlessly ambitious jewelry, the narcissistic rings and necklaces, the self-aggrandizing bracelets and earrings plus assorted metal loops and hoops that hang, pin or clip as well as other like-minded collectibles, a music box with beveled glass, several porcelain figurines, sets

of sell-out silver, avaricious crystal and fine china - all unanimously agree to set aside personal goals, aspirations and philosophical differences, at least temporarily, and to whore it up good, cheap and proper, do whatever it take, no reasonable offer refused in order to bribe Time, the fates, God or gods, whoever or whatever, if only they or them or he or she or it will step forward and somehow rewind or reroute the discourteous doings been rained through these rooms to cross-town, revised-intention-reinvention center. Even the worthless, sentimental baubles, fribbles and gewgaws determine to shoulder a proper portion of the load, step forward with swinish pitch-in passion offering to dig ditches for all the piss-stink-lies, as well as other amassed acts of ignorance, negligence and downright stupidity to hide in. "Just tell us where and how deep to dig, boss." One particularly cloying trinket, some kind of rattlin' wrist accessory, real ass-lick, go-getter type decide to take it up a notch say, "Bound me to the bone of a leper friend, I can stand it if he can."

my other car is an ashcan

And from his eternally reserved corner table at the Gayoso Cafe, *Death*, ever the fierce independent; blurred, vague and amorphous like expired warranty, don't answer to nothing or no one, he being largely unaffiliated with any of the big-time conglomerates, small ones too for that matter, and also rumored to be privately funded like the Icecapades or public radio, pauses to take special note of the incident's peculiar styling, *his peculiar styling*, the entirety being his personal handiwork and silently affirms the achievement and is visibly moved, near tears in fact, by its grinding, myopic precision, its practiced, yet relentless pursuit of anti-logic and poor taste, its delivery and dispensation of soul-burying-no-sentimentality-in-sight burden, its dissonant music of clang and clatter the bitterest imaginable, but still...still with the recurrent creep-in feeling, that he can never get things quite vicious or twisted enough to really suit his vision, but *perhaps*, he think, *perhaps tomorrow will be different*, and as the reflective interlude appear set to conclude, all previously closeted shoes; the boots and loafers, the mules, slides and flats, the sling-back pumps and wingtips, his and her sets of bedroom slippers, a pair of genuine Injun moccasins purchased in a Gatlinburg souvenir shop, the kid sneakers and five-and-dime flip-flops, come charging riotously past carrying sundry bags, boxes and booze bottles, waving take-back receipts, yelling, "We been gypped, god damn it!" then pour headlong through the home-turned-horror's, blown back door, leaping over or sidestepping the razed brick and rubble and

them can afford fare or ticket make the main road where they catch cabs, buses, trolleys or rickshaws to anywhere-other-than-here destinations, while them that can't thumb rides with big-bellied, bulbous-nosed traveling salesman driving old Bonneville's or Chevy Impalas, or else hook-up with their dull-eyed, imbecilic wives or paramours or some other lunk-headed lookout bound for fish-fry futures and downtown department store, fifteen-hour sales.

"Adios amigos," calls *Death* laconically to the routed mass. "See you all later a little further on-up-the-line," and as if on cue, a sudden, accompanying swell of orchestral soundtrack like the moment just about ripe for final credits to roll and this flick to fold, send splintered bone and head-drip goo 'round heart-break bend, triggering a flood of broke-heart tears at what been left-at-the-step and for being forced now from the only home ever known.

"We wanna go back be Mitch again," sound their mournful plaint, "like lost text, get restored to original boy," but of course this can't occur, not even upon the page for breath-thieving grief is only just begun and the downstairs furniture been fretting its own action decision, decide plain old, warp-to-slump, go-down-with-the-ship resignation the best way to go, so hutch, sofa and lounge; desk, chairs, coffee table and tables got no coffee at all plus all other assembled pieces too numerous to name, but still got a respectable leg to stand on drag out the time-tested, world-weary and forlorn victim's lament; pull it on with suicidal resolve, croaking, "We're too old and feeble to begin again...my lumbago, this, my arthritis-colitis-bursitis, that...I'm outta blood-pressure medicine,"..."Porter's stool is full of gravel," and concurrently, with this litany of rationale having worn wearisomely thin, a lone, chipped tea cup stained with superior aptitude and possessing a moral excellence beyond reproach, as well as a finely honed sense of socio-cultural responsibility, begin circulating a petition calling for something or someone to trip the escape clause, ("Your honor, it was my client's understanding...") thereby forever expunging the moment and its accompanying events and furthermore, as stated explicitly and in no uncertain terms within the document's fine print, demanding the destruction of all pistol factories and the patent protected dyes and tooling held within and for an immediate and mandatory disembarreling to begin, not only of this particular *piece*, but all in existence, including each manufacturer's aggregate of unsold inventory as well, and so none could complain after the fact of being left in the lurch career wise, also proposed an ambitious *reskilling* program, whose expense was to be borne solely by the industry, and make compulsory the reformatting and retraining not only of former firearms, but all manner of side-kick ordinance as well, maybe teach the lot tap dancing or arc welding or perhaps to become

adjutants or administrators or copy writers or mechanics, maybe even first rate paperweights not out of the question if their heft be conducive to the task, and that during the transition interim for them projectiles already been pushed into the pipeline, develop various sure-fire, stop-gap measures designed to distract, lock-down or cancel altogether their departures; for instance, perhaps offer *this incident's* thug-duo time-off for decent behavior, while securing them a waterscape bungalow somewhere sickly rich, or maybe a bench seat in a chapel-of-ease or the Common Pleas Courthouse in Cape Girardeau be more realistic options, then promote the six-shooter to, "just sit in holster" duty, or else crown it "King-of-Holster," and appoint its bullet-accomplice supervisor of a bunch of other bullets, chambered or otherwise, make them servants or vassals or whatever the hell they're called and should any or all of these measures prove unsatisfactory, to completely rewire firearm time back to dreamy-womb-floating-watery-bliss and begin again.

curtains for the kid

...but the signatures, see, they just gonna have to wait, cos out front, the baby-ambulance begin arriving along with a half-dozen additional emergency rescue vehicles, multiple sirens wailing their public-announce ten miles out and that very ambulance, plus all the other speedy responders repeat their brake screeching pull-up like it a mandated "redo 'til you get it right," routine, and every six-foot second becomes a heart-halting re-arrive, where each take another turn at altering the outcome, but lamentably, none of these sods got the goods or gods to conjure themselves a suitable, alternative no matter how hard they try because with this style head-shot mister, there's really no need for anyone to hurry or arrive at all, nor to notify or copy any other department but of course that don't keep the vain and the vested from giving it their after-the-fact, impoverished all, as evidenced by the W.B.A.'s willful dispatch of old Nance Headley, "best cut man in the business," and a gifted healer as well. Man could close cuts from a corner with the round still in progress. Done it once for the Pyramid Kid during the savage-seventh of a Garden title fight against the number one contender at the time, "Battling" Jim O'Shaughnessy. Seems the Kid was doing a fancy, bob 'n weave thing, coming in low and breezy, all loosey-goosey, when *J* blasted him sideways with a vicious right-cross to the brow. Staggered him good, it did. Opened a huge gash over Pyramid's right eye, sent blood splashing in all directions. Sure 'nuff looked like curtains for the Kid, but old Nance focused down hard

from his ringside station and willed that cut-shut its fucking mouth, and it did too, in front of a major network feed and the capacity Gotham crowd. Stunned everyone, it did, and powerful stuff by any man's measure. The Kid credited Nance with saving his title, then went on to become one of the greatest cruiserweights of all time. Historical fact this, and thoroughly chronicled in all the respected fight journals, periodicals and newsletters of the day. *Boxing Digest* and *Ring* both devoted entire issues to the man's methods. Even his critics got to admit, fellow's got the head of a Hindu and a sagaciousness sure as death and taxes, allows him to take everything in stride, regardless.

Guy got a rock solid rep like that, who could blame the concerned and the curious for musing that maybe, just maybe old Nance might be able to replicate another of his late-round miracles...so here he come, the legendary Nance Headley climbing gingerly down from a shiny red hook-and-ladder; crag-faced, back hunched with limbs gnarled gloriously arthritic; signature black skull cap pulled tight over a domed head and all the assembled eyes focused his way as an urgent-care greeter, guy in a translucent, yellow rain slicker and knee-high gaiters, look like he just come from a river baptism, guides Nance through the debris field, ("Watch your step there, sir...") that served formally as yard and garden, stepping cautiously over crumbled brick and broken glass and into the home, carefully negotiating a route up the timorously, teetering stair case, crawling over internal wreckage, feeling warily along the hallway, and in due course entering the child's chamber where he take one look at Mitchy's blown form and irritably ask, "Why you people waste my time with this?...Get the morgue on the line, that's what's necessary here."

misery weather

Then come the jackbooted, leather-creaking cops, who roar up in black and white, Galaxy 500's, blue hell-lights flashing and *Return to Sender* blasting from unit radios. *Woman in a window paints the panes black*, as Murtaf too, races to the scene leaping the street, sprinting across dead, brown lawn with the kid coroner not far behind, and who, upon winded-arrival, manages to Murtaf, "Hey...here...hold this tight mister," then immediately begins cordoning off the site with a thick, wide roll of yellow tragedy-tape, while Murtaf grips the extended end, routing it yardbird style, over and under and sideways, down, encircling what little remain of the transmuted foundation, as well as a downed dogwood, some uprooted shrubbery, assorted boy

toys, besieged and axel bent, as well as the front and rear bumpers of a late model Buick sedan been backed into the drive, thereby forming an oddball perimeter of sorts, while several of Murtah's cop confidants gather 'round him to break the dreadful news, then fall awkwardly into a thick-headed, ham-fisted failed-before-it's-begun, comfort spiel, which, like the carnie magician, saw-a-woman-in-two routine only work if man, box, saw and woman are same-page, simpatico but even then, the odds for success are beyond long, and these cops obviously got no idea about saws or boxes and least of all women, leaving Murtah to confront his own wretched image as best he can, while they step away, huddling now in grave collaboration as to the need for a body, chalk outline, that is to say given the existing circumstance, is one entirely necessary, which of course it really isn't, not in this instance, because honestly, where the hell that outline gonna travel, anyway? Trace around the tiny torso, true, the legs and arms, of course, ditto for the soft and creamy white hands and tiny fingers, but then there's the matter of the wall to deal with, that present a real dilemma cos that's Mitch too, half his head's pinned to it, so theoretically, to do things proper, the line got to visit there as well, wiggle up and around the slow crawling stain, pause to squirm and reframe, record points of view, take measurements and make notations then eventually make its way back to the floor, 'round and 'round some more, look like a map of an anonymous land got no carved-out states, built up cities or towns or transportation terminals, no rivers or lakes or canals, no parks, pools or ponds, nor any other attractions or amusements, just wasted landscape and hollow frontier...*but the cops are cautious, see*, so they go ahead and sketch one anyway due to various departmental codes, rules and regulations plus they got the chalk with them, fresh white sticks, all neat and powdery new, so probably best to use, and besides, no one's in the mood to risk being written up for response negligence or some other impropriety, for fear it wind up on the performance record, louse-up their big-chance to make tough-guy detective or fat-ass desk sergeant.

As for Mitch's young-son-soul, well, it hadn't stuck around to see what kind of handy-work a team of puzzle-piecing neurosurgeons might attempt, departure naturally having occurred in the immediate, no-spoken-farewell-flash of ballistic impact.

So the small fractured form that once bound the boy, the exploded remnant of faceless-crumpled-limb torso, get sheet wrapped, bagged and zipped by slack-jawed subcontractors, corner-market bag boys actually, got the re-stock, feather-dusters jammed in rear pockets, then placed upon a gurney and rolled away by two apologetic alcoholics dressed in a mule costume, spouting big-book gibberish from each end, yet somehow manage to secure the kid-corpse

inside the baby-ambulance and pretty speedily get it delivered to the kid-mortician who got mercurochrome eyes from binging daydream fever, and although ably assisted by the kid-embalmer, can barely raise rent, let alone the dead and just prior to the memorial commencement, which, by the way couldn't take place until nine days later due to a seasonal glut of additional death and misery-weather, in addition to just plain old poor timing on the procréateurs part, since the incident occurred on a week day and most of the local connections either had to rearrange schedules or make special provisions to get off work to attend the services and out-of-town mourners the same, in addition to putting away leftovers, booking air flights or finalizing other long distance travel and lodging arrangements – in a town abound with crummy ministers, the crummiest of them all stepped forward wearing a rain-soaked trench coat and asked the sorrow stricken with dead-pan sincerity, “What all the furor about here, folks?” then added with solemn, theistic certitude, “God’s will be done...that’ll be five hundred dollars...a check will be fine.”

And across the land, all was continued hysteria lashed to the twin-spines of woe and despair, whipped along by deep grief and rage and rising interest rates until finally, the Fed intervened, said, “enough already with the gongs and masks,” initiating the emergence of an incipient numbness as disgruntled calendar days up and called it quits, replaced by clumsy, sullen blocks of frozen grey-time hosting steady surges of bare wire voltage which began issuing delinquency fines and charging psychic tolls and with career advisors holding their collective breath, the off-duty, kid-coroner stepped out onto a thin limb and issued a singular proclamation pronouncing everyone and everything dead-on-arrival and many of the *left-living* wished they weren’t and were never the same, although few complained or challenged the judgment, just bore it all upright and soldiered on like boulder rolling, he-man heavyweights understanding little and asking for less, until finally the wheels come off their belief systems, roads feeding them to the ditch and in a blazing moment of soul lashing illumination it became case-closed clear to them that the universe offered no quarter nor had zero order or reason to it, occurrences being instead more like random hands dealt in blindfolded card games that most had minimal interest contesting in the first place and because this was all primarily so, they reasoned, there would in turn be no dark-eyed astrologers or feng shui witchdoctors or pumpkin-carving cosmetologists waiting in the wings to reconnect the lost dots of night sky constellations charting them safe passage home and in addition, word come down from the plate-faced, Czar of Batteryville that their tattered Texaco road maps as well as all their

collected spoken and scribbled directions had been burned alive, so naturally no assistance from big oil and gas, nor would there ever be enough brain-numbing agendas or Oneida slam dancers or doctors or lawyers or healers or mourners and merchants of melancholy or city planners to set things straight again in a world gone thoroughly wrong; no broken gauge clergy groomed and gassed with pesticidal conviction, no-built-to-the-hilt, two-bit, hill-billed poets, past tense or present, modern or otherwise, no shingle-swinging family counselors or state-licensed therapists, no family or friends or acquaintances, no liquor, wine or beer distributors or phone manning interns from suicide hotline clinics, no Buddha bribe, no Krishna coat consciousness, no jailed Jesus escape card, no broke kid repair kit - no nothing, that could sufficiently stitch up, re-attach or glue back the catastrophic dissolve of their devastated lives, thereby compelling the census bureau to reconsider its scheduled tally of tears cried, any attempt at numeration and summation now being judged a colossal waste of time by the director, "and besides, we got no budget for them kind of boondoggles."

operators are standing by

And it came to pass that the tenderness and security of kid-jacket-innocence were stoned and run off like rain-soaked stray dogs, oil streaked coats shadow bound for a life of less and so too the mutts of the world scattered directionless like embittered mistresses, destined for dust, and the sum total of the principals' accumulated remembrances vanished as well, turned out by a congress of officials from the territorial, Remembrance Center because the recollection engine's *warmth-wiring, or more specifically*, its central temp gauge, plus as further inspection revealed, a handful of affiliated public scales and meters in addition to other assorted support mechanisms and attempted medium's of measure crucial for insuring the full impact of these sorts of affective connections had worn badly over the years and especially so during the most recent past, thereby rendering the system incapable of handling even the most rudimentary transmittals, yet when queried directly by the *vanquished* as to reasons for the dynamo's seemingly sudden deterioration, as well as current information on, or relating to viable relocation options, irrevocable eviction having been sprung suddenly and without warning, were told by a foppish, low-level functionary played by rising soap star, Neal Patrick Doherty, "I don't know and I don't care," which activated counter commentary from one of the more meticulous and precision driven engrams, who suggested, "Well, how's about we down-grade the family debt to

junk status then send in a financial analyst to negotiate one of them blend-extend agreements you hear so much about these days, that way everyone get to have their cake and eat it too? What you think about that, pal?”

But alas, it was all *no-go*, so an orderly file-out was arranged, overseen by a stern-steep stranger train down from Harper’s Ferry, who decreed scents and events and the myriad memories and emotions and reflections evoked be the first to go, but not before each received a severance package, which was rumored to be quite extraordinary and generous in content and of course strictly confidential, so much so, that none within earshot could be made privy the specifics, including the recipients.

Flash forward...forty-eight hours later...Jasper County pre-dawn and the early August air is thickened aplenty with oppressive humidity. Same stranger standing on the banks of the muddy Oconee; heavy boots firmly planted in the soft clay soil; shirt sleeves pushed past the elbows; a seeping moisture beads on brow, neck and beyond. Stands of pine and poplar shield river from road. Dense tangles of vine and bramble fill-in the white space. Wisps of vapor drift languidly over the water’s placid surface. A Cottonmouth slips silently into the murky flow, disappears downstream. Man’s a dozen or so pages reading into a self-scripted listing of scheduled departures, his voice a near-toneless construct of disconnect and indifference; a steady hand marks a hard, dark line through each dismissal, as noted; a filigreed railroader’s watch parked in pocket assures an orderly timetable is maintained...“*and farewell to parks and pigeons, to leash laws and ladders and ladles and letters licked sideways; farewell to rancor and razor wire and electrified fences, to silver wigs and weaves and falls and mucked-on, young girl mascara; to hoop skirts and saddle oxfords and pew bound hymns gone blind; farewell to small towns and public pools, to widows and widowers and kindred graves swept clean; to pane blown windows and broken connection and to one note manifestos and cold, grey stone mausoleums; goodbye old-oak main streets, falsified ID’s and sagging lines of power; so long to stilted water-towers, jilted lovers and grassy public squares; farewell to grease fires and grifters, to fry cooks and flap-jack cafe’s and to thousand word essays, fun-house distortions and tide-rising destruction; farewell the blue suits and boots and blazers cut for commerce, to bird shit memorials and bribes and lost tribe museums; goodbye to duplicitous, gasbag corporate officers; to Polly want a cracker, arcane alphabets, scorched skilletts and ass-lick, lead-ins like, “Well Ed, you know the essential element that makes this outfit number one is...; farewell protection racquets, to ubiquitous haircuts, salt-marsh wading birds and data incinerators fired*

hotter-than-a-lab-hazard; farewell the frug and locomotion-mashed potatoes, to Hitsville, U.S.A. and to nowhere rail depots and destinations drowned in the roar and rumble of ghost-trains sounding through the night; so long Latin and satin and general rules of thumb; to hangnails and bottom land hollows and gallows and nausea in a jar; to gang-planks and time cards, and to sugar pie honey bun, the passively hung and all else that hangs unresolved; bon voyage snow and static and low expectation and to slim signals and analog antenna too timid and spineless to demand just due; goodbye deception and the steamy hiss of piss and pricks; to fat lips and artificial hips and to ink-spill-color-runs and blown knees and belatedly posted mystery fees grown so frail and feeble can't recall intent nor the original notice of announce; farewell claustrophobic attics and cold-shoulder credos; to insufficient insulation, weak warmth, transplanted livers and five-alarm fires; so long electric light glitter and fire-fly flicker and to all things celestial and eternal and all things extinguished in the black-shit night; farewell to ropes and pulleys and failed invention; to varmint traps and snares and exploding fourth's and fifth's of drunken Julys; farewell the great American pastime, to big-show pipe dreams, bonus babies and fire-balling aces; to crafty lefties, coiled sidewinders and barnstorming mercenaries; to junk tossing journeymen, chin music and chaw chewing, muscle-bound galoots; so long the agents of bluff and scuff and spit, to vintage ball fields and solid cracks of bat on ball and to late inning rallies and base-clearing triples; farewell to spreading shadow and misery massed on the corners; to the suicide squeeze and the palace of death and to curses of the goat and George Herman too; farewell the commissioner's of brown ink, to new-hires and county fairs, to last stand carnivals and rickety and crazed, roller-coast-and-cup freak shows; adios wind bitten drifters and teen-killers; to the wiry and the witless, the ruthless and the rootless, allies all, for the long haul home; to bell-banging strongmen and the swallows of sword and fire; to blindfolded knife throwers and their bladed arsenals of assault and to the milk-pale, raven haired assistants meld the whole mess together for a buck and loose change; farewell calliope sounds and cash-on-demand; to seamless transitions, random selection and ventriloquist dummies carved out of wood; to Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy and to Mortimer Snerd, Chase and Sanborn, Boola-Boola and twenty-three skidoo; farewell cautionary tales and garish midways and to those sense startling smells of tasty transgression, all, peanut, popcorn and Cracker Jack swindle; so long the sweet relief of sticky pink cotton candy, to hard cocks and wet cunts and to lost socks, boxed lunches and played hunches; farewell upper respiratory ailments and circumstantial evidence; to spotted owls and flying squirrels and to toll *roads* and toll *bridges*

and fool's gold and to called cabs and curtain calls and failed transmissions; farewell the hot-wax car wash, to sex in parked cars and to sex in waxed parked cars; goodbye to hung juries and Madison handslings, to double and triple features and third party lenders; farewell the twistable knobs of tint and contrast and three channel TV; to vertical and horizontal hold and to down the dial attitude; to sum strumming visionaries and chiming twelve strings; to slashing power cords, bashed and burned Strats and Fenders and to stacks of Marshall's pushed past ten; so long stone porch twilight and heat lightning, to *gone haywire* and broken spells; to broken collar bones and will and wall switches and to same day service and the self-imposed frenzy of making ends meet; farewell fetid rivers and streams and all manner of mire and filth; to bulk postal rates, rebated orgasms and tough-talk lingo; to dead-end trails and downed timber and to sawmills, junk mail and unpaid utility bills; bid adieu the memories wished for and those thought forgotten; to the illusory land of something quieter, something calmer, something *anything* other than this; goodbye to gasoline and kerosene, to oil burning clunkers and roads with no bend; farewell the noxious swell of heaven and hell that hang like plague and quarantine; to medicine balls and medicine shows and to shivs and shills and magic elixirs; so long to hellhounds and genital herpes; to steep grades and anchors and anthems that lift as they drag; farewell to shrilling factory whistles, hot showers and the dry cleaning king's, gratuitous lake; to ratcheting levers and plastic flowers and once bountiful buckets of cuddled tenderness; farewell the smell of dewy, cut grass on new Spring mornings and to the sudden, somehow-surge of wide-eyed optimism it rarely fail to renew; farewell the nostril flare of warm, roasted nuts, burning leaves and Fall's blessed chill - nostalgic, elegiac, all jazz and bittersweet remembrance; later, lizard-lazed and overrated summer days; arrivederci the Big Muddy, exploratory surgery and frill-pills swallowed against the will; to rheumatoid arthritis, all night binges and squeaking hinges; to rot-gut remedies and failed chemistry, to small dogs and worn cogs and to old maids, stretched chains and mercy killings; farewell to roiling skies bursting with badges and warrants and personal reprisal; to fine print and thirst and first and final editions; goodbye the lawless invisible; farewell all language and drummed-up rules of punctuation, to conspiring commas, colons and semi-colons; to whistle blowing hyphens and bracket racquets, split infinitives and onomatopoeia; so long York and Sacagawea; farewell drug bust brother and shadow-life sister, to corduroy and border wars and bounced checks and balanced bankbooks and to pH balance and the unbalanced too, whoever they are, wherever they reside; farewell burrowing rodents, tiny bugs and buzzing insects, to liable and slander, fully and partially vested

interests and to unreliable narrators; so long the seamless transition and to canes and crutches and walkers and other multifarious props of bone-flesh surrender; to city zoos and abracadabra, the bitter mouse trap and lost souls and subscriptions expired, then renewed; good-bye yer big-fish grandma baking immortal pies in her clomp-clomp, stroke-broke, coarse and creaking black leather grandma boots and to tough-luck, doughboy grandpas piss the pandemic blues then get gunned or gassed or both at the Battle of the Marne; farewell to phone sex and phone booths, to ticket booths, voting booths and John Wilkes Booth and to Brunswick Stew and Iron Lung Lou and his rope-choked, no-hope, hope chest; sayonara cedar-pine recollections and the smoky burn of orphaned Octobers; farewell the frigid and star-charged night sky, to mountain meadows bleeding autumnal reds and yellows and gold and to icy streams where moose and caribou cross; farewell tangerine moons, the Wichita lineman and Brazil 66; good-bye extortion, petty thievery and cold-blooded murder; so long the corporate yawn and boredom drip, to smoldering judo robes, bringing in the sheaves and rambling justifications; farewell to form and fracture and fusion and mid-town bars and cars with running boards; to emerald green Packard's and black Lincoln's and riggers clocking triple-time; to union dues and spit on the wire, to quick wit and worry and jury duty; goodbye bolts of multihued fabric and barricaded ignorance, to pale blue Easter bonnets, Christs on crosses and twenty-miles to the gallon; farewell crop rotation and soul corruption, to savaged psyches and toxic bother and all the run-aground sensations of self-worth and well-being; good riddance gaseous swamps and bogs and sunken treasures; to character references, torn tendons and malcontents; to worthless blood relations and their monstrosities of guilt and to consumer come-ons proclaim one free with twelve, no payments or interest due 'til the end of time; farewell hearth blazing warmth slipped through an always-and-forever-locket, to rents and sublets, leases and landlords, to filthy blinds and rotting curtains, to ratty carpet and broke-down-knob-less appliances; farewell the dust of days, to lightning rods and lightning strikes, to storm and surge and beauty stripped bare; to the tidal flood of faces like endless armies on the march, transmitting the full-on-famine of total collapse; goodbye fifty-years of virus and vinegar, to tables of content and the table edge on fire; to dialysis and hog slaughter and cauliflower and slender goblets of red-wine-time and to skull searing illuminants and cold, dark, mystery eyes; good-bye to late-fees and loose-change, to goose bumps and lost songs and lost keys, to lost love and lost causes; au revoir the lost and found..." and so on and so forth for the next seven days and nights the file-out continued, as the discarded pages accumulated, with each departure enjoined to renounce all recourse to recall, and sad to say,

left with no alternative other than to depart their assigned quarters forever and likewise, the notions of order and reason and sympathy and safety, of homegrown, pop-pie-prosperity and overall feelings of general contentment, transmuted into grim, threadbare realities and parted as well, and were subsequently replaced by the resounding, “*all right, let’s get organized here,*” ferocity of cold-sister poison and syringe hovering blight, and just like that *brother*, in a fragmented flash of free-falling, non-time; every war ever fought; every conflict, every battle, every skirmish, every sally, sortie and strike; every fray, clash, and collision was reduced to the size of a bitter, caustic pill and swallowed down by the Bucksnot cop and it erupted within him like dueling flame-throwers on a high-noon Main Street littered with face blown clocks; like the oblivion blast of ten-thousand, scatterguns, like Nagasaki air caught fire, and the collective whole of this blitzkrieg onslaught of fiery self-hatred and annihilation tore through his bushwhacked being consuming him in a vaporizing wipeout and instantly, Officer Murtah ceased coaching the leagues of youth, walked off the miscellaneous mounds and diamonds, abandoned the Christ almighty and consigned his vacant, pitiless soul to a hellish void, where obsessive-disruptive freaks and certified lunatics swallowed hot dimes and howled and snarled and tore at scraps of tossed-out-time and one day, the besieged officer just pitched aside his harpoons and prayer flags and lay-down his shortchanged frame, in a freshly dug December grave; cold, steady drizzle coming down with none of his own around; soaked soil mounded to the side by a cemetery digging crew of element-burned indigents, and the man’s hair thinned and whitened then dropped away and bleak, scavenging winds whipped across the stark landscape and scored his stricken face so deep with cruel, broken lines that leeches like memory, while also sorely testing even the most devout observers, and later, this whole body of circumstance with all its sad, tragic and grisly incomprehensibilities and ill-conceived revelation was reassessed and revised, then physically forced, like the shoving of a fat man through the eye of a needle, or, as occurred in this instance, further crushed, contoured and repainted, then refinished into a sense making whole and subsequently, resurrected within the *Question Claire Column* of the *Bucksnot Journal-Constitution’s, Consistent Living Section* in order to sooth, calm and assuage the local citizenry’s mounting trepidation of next-world ineptitude or, in some cases, the speculative fright of maybe no next-world-existence at all (Yikes!) because couldn’t no academy trained astronomers or authorized controllers or ground-game technicians seem to raise any kind of *out-there* signal, and furthermore, it was also acknowledged and agreed upon by the county’s most prominent ice chomping archivists and hair-splitting manipulators, as well

as the town's top code breakers and service vendors, that if the actual presence of tragic misfortune was going to be tolerated and accommodated, albeit begrudgingly, at the very least it would have to be amenable to reshaping if and when the need arose into something the general public could, to some degree, stomach, sans the ball-busting physical and psychic resistance. "Ya got that, do ya!"

little kill

And not long after the tamp-down, dirt dance 'round Murtah's grave concluded, Maxine split the land-locked scene as well, except she manage a walk-no-talk departure, her own fathomless sorrow having metastasized into little *g*, god-faith-fate revulsion shot through with bitter self-loathing, neither from which could she ever imagine anything approaching relief let alone outright liberation, so one morning earlier than the cock's crow, she wearily packed up her few blunted belongings and headed back to Little Kill, Mississippi where it had all begun some thirty-eight years prior and there she forswore roll call and saluting and also refrained from eating and bathing as well as all other acts of personal hygiene and self-care and compulsively began reading tales of the modern crime until seventeen of her teeth - count 'em,(she did) - *seventeen*, rotted beyond repair and had to be surgically removed over a three-month period by an edgy, one-armed, oral surgeon named Jimmy Octane, who likened the high cost of Novocaine and numbness to extortion, and therefore in direct conflict with the professional ethnics he'd been forsworn to uphold, so in protest, refused to support the industries trafficking them, yet still insisted on operating exclusively with pliers, files and chisel plus assorted pieces of doll house furniture, these latter devices designed primarily as jaw props and partials, and just prior to an extraction would firmly brace a muddy boot against the patient's chest for leverage, and then, at the moment of uprooting, like a skeet shooter, shout out, "*pull!*"

At best, Maxine's slumber was fitful with every dream recalled a recurring torment. Horrible nightmares drummed terror through a narrowing skull, "like the sky's spitting daggers," was how she put it to her rag-hag sister, so in desperation, she took to sleeping with a woodcutter's axe clutched tight to chest hoping to halt the haunt and although later, after having received a modest tax refund on her Federal, she claimed to feel somewhat better overall, she really didn't. How could she?

Some months later at a Saturday morning yard sale, Maxine unloaded all remaining

corporeal reminders of the lost child including his collections of miniature soldiers and metal trucks, along with his little red jacket, waist cut and twin-zippered with reversible spontaneity, while also attempting to pawn herself off to local farm-folk as ready-to-roll Kansas scarecrow but got no takers, (“Christ almighty lady, we just tryin’ to scare the crows, not give ‘em heart attacks.”) and later, at the urging of various church busy bodies and local backbiting, parasitical, know-it-alls and with assistance from the aforementioned, sibling, burned all of Mitch’s photographs, as well as those of she and Murtaugh and their respective families in a largely symbolic, backyard, farewell ritual hoping to somehow obliterate the whole god dammed galaxy of unremitting memories and joint-warping anguish, but alas, the horrific histories could not be expunged, they having previously and surreptitiously, aligned themselves with the twisted, unpredictable whims of remembrance and recollection, who somehow, through loan of coded tongues, hand gestures and passwords, always managed to find a way back in, usually via concealed side, back or trapdoor panel.

No, the scenes and the dead-on details attached would never release, they never could, instead, slotted to replay in her head over and over with an unnerving resonance like screeching lab-monkeys, tearing out burning clumps of owned fur and so coping counselors and mood-affecting psychiatrists were brought in to advise, “*my dear, there are a million things not to choose from,*” and then made the bold and highly audacious decision to drag her recall with great Proustian nets hoping to gather all the anguish and shame and sadness, the crushing guilt, angst and remorse into a single, fenced location and to dispose of it, perhaps dump it into someone else’s ocean or better yet, stash it in the garage of Miss Atomic Bomb, but unfortunately this initially promising, latter solution failed, went haywire in the home stretch, when the Reno beauty put the kibosh on the storage proposal, (“I know what I said, but I’ve since changed my mind.”) so Maxine’s final days became like rain-stained vacation with each a tent-leak-bring-down that left her standing around in bone-chilling downpours with no fire or stew for warmth, her cold-war shiver giving way finally, to case-closed, double-barrel pneumonia, and on death’s bed her final world-weary words uttered in the general vicinity of the assisted living attendant and surviving sister were, “*I’m burning with fever...and I have no passport.*”