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Fallen Land

Written by Patrick Flanery

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Fallen Land

Patrick Flanery



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For the grandmothers:

Ethel Marguerite Linville
who asked to be remembered as a farmer's daughter
1909–2000

&

Lucille Katherine Fey
who lost everything
1903–1985

1919



IN WHAT THE WRITER and polymath James Weldon Johnson called the 'Red Summer' of 1919, race riots swept through cities across the country, and here, in this regional city between two rivers with what was then, outside of Los Angeles, the largest urban population of blacks west of the Mississippi, the county courthouse was set ablaze by a mob of five thousand angry whites bent on lynching two black men, Boyd Pinkney and Evans Pratt. Pinkney and Pratt worked in one of the city's meatpacking warehouses and had been arrested for the assault of a twelve-year-old white girl who recanted as an adult, confessing that the men had done nothing more than say hello to her when she called out to them. The two friends were hanged from a tree outside the courthouse, their bodies skinned and burned before being thrown in the river, turned over in the wash of paddleboats and caught up on snags rising like disembodied limbs in the muddy shallows that spread out from the bank-side, festering with mosquitoes amid a weltering stench of decay.

That same day, Morgan Priest Wright, the sixty-year-old mayor and gentleman farmer who had been elected in the previous year on a reformist plank, was lynched for trying to intervene on behalf of the men, whom he and a number of local officials believed to be innocent of any crime. The courthouse was set ablaze and Wright fled in his blue Studebaker, driving out of town and taking refuge on

his farm, where he sheltered in the stone storm cellar beneath his house with the tenants who worked his land. History is silent about the exact chain of events that saw Wright and one of the farmers, twenty-five-year-old George Freeman, pulled from the cellar and hanged from a cottonwood tree next to Wright's house, which was subsequently set alight by parties unknown. Freeman was dressed in women's clothes, and the two men were tied together facing each other, left hanging after the mob retreated. Freeman's brother John and sister-in-law Lottie, who were also Wright's tenants, had been away from the farm at the time of the riots, visiting Lottie's extended family in the next county. Driving home in Wright's Model T, which he had lent them, they could see smoke from some distance and, having heard news of the riots, feared the worst. They could not have guessed that both their landlord and brother would be dead, or that the house where they had been discreetly entertained on several occasions would no longer be standing. By the time John and Lottie arrived home, Wright's house had burned to the ground while their own small bungalow, down a hill and on the edge of the farm, remained standing and untouched, save for a few broken windows. Looking up at the forty-foot cottonwood tree in which George and Mr. Wright hung dead, bodies tied together and twisting as the wind blew up into a late summer thunderstorm, John told Lottie to wait in the house with their children while he investigated.

As John walked away from the hanging tree and the ruins of the mayor's place, back down the hill toward the barn, intending to fetch a ladder so he could cut free the two bodies, he heard a thunderous whooshing sound, 'calamitous and catastrophic, an almighty cataract of noise', and felt the earth vibrate under his feet. When he turned around, the forty-foot cottonwood tree on the crest of the hill was gone, and from John's vantage, the earth appeared barren, wiped flat. It had been a traumatic return to the farm, and he

thought perhaps he was suffering from some derangement of loss. Approaching the place where the tree should have been, he began to discern a shadow of expansive darkness on the surface of the earth, as if the grass had been scorched in a perfect circle; he suspected a divine and purgative fire had taken up the tree and the two dead men together in an all-consuming blaze, an event of spontaneous combustion brought on by God. John had seen haystacks go up in flame during drought years, knew the smoldering of the compost heaps on the edge of the farm, had even heard tell of great pine trees exploding in sudden and inexplicable conflagration. But as he drew closer, he saw that the earth was not scorched at all: instead, it was gone. Where the tree had been there was a hole, a gaping cavity, and as he peered over the edge of this hole, he could make out the crown of the tree, its entire height and the men bound and hanging from it swallowed up by the earth. Freeman called out to Lottie, who came running, and the two of them stood at the edge of the hole for a long time trying to decide what to do, looking at the submerged branches of the tree and listening to the wretched peace of the farm where even the grackles and red-winged blackbirds had silenced themselves. As the wind picked up and a pocking rain began to shoot holes in the earth, striking the couple's skin so hard it stung, they decided nothing could be done until the following morning.

The next day, as rain curtained the low undulating roll of the farm, soaking the burned-out ruins of Wright's house, John and Lottie Freeman drove back into town with their children in Wright's Model T to report the deaths of brother George and the mayor. The local law enforcement, backed up by the National Guard but nonetheless overwhelmed by the events of the preceding three days in which no fewer than thirty houses in the city and surrounding area burned, were not unsympathetic to John and Lottie's predicament. With the sheriff and several deputies escorting them, they

returned to the farm where two of the lawmen, harnessed and lowered on ropes, descended into the sinkhole, climbing through the branches of the cottonwood tree, where they confirmed the presence of the bodies and the identity of the mayor. The sheriff understood that John and Lottie had nothing to do with the deaths, were in no way responsible, and that justice would never be done: it was suggested that disinterring the men from their unusual resting place would raise questions the community could not face, might never be able to answer, and would only create more tension between the races, since the spectacle of a black man and a white, tenant and landlord, bound together in death, could not easily be explained. It was agreed that the best thing for all concerned was to leave the bodies as they were, to fill the sinkhole with the smoking remains of Wright's house and soil from the adjacent fields. The deputies assisted John, and in the process of clearing the ruins of the house, discovered Wright's strongbox, jimmied it open, and found a charred but still legible last will and testament, leaving the estate in its entirety, including the farm and all its buildings, to George Freeman, and in the case of George Freeman's death, to his brother and fellow tenant John. The sheriff himself had been named as executor, and being a man who wanted nothing more than the return of peace to a city that had run away from him, he saw no point in brooking any contestation of the late mayor's stated last wishes, unorthodox as they were. And thus Poplar Farm passed, with no public announcement, into the hands of John and Lottie Freeman, the children of slaves.

The county courthouse was rebuilt in the following year. No white man stood trial for the events of the previous autumn, while on a farm to the west of the city two small slabs of granite were laid in the ground to mark the place where a tree and two men lie buried in land stark with promise and death.

Present

In this republican country, amid the fluctuating waves of our social life, somebody is always at the drowning-point.

Nathaniel Hawthorne



IT IS HER FIRST time inside the walls of a prison. Or no, that is not quite true, because when she was still teaching she visited a juvenile detention facility where some of her students had spent time. The county called it a 'Youth Center', as if it were nothing more ominous than an afterschool club for the city's underprivileged. It was located in a cluster of bland institutional buildings that included the county and Veterans Association hospitals, all faced in tan brick. She does not remember being subjected to any kind of search or having to pass through a metal detector, although in retrospect both seem probable. It no longer matters nor does she remember if she visited anyone specific, or if it was merely an opportunity to view the facility as a kind of public relations exercise for the local corrections department, making itself look good to the educators whose students might end up inside. Louise is certain she was cautioned not to speak with any of the residents she passed in the halls, solitary kids led by uniformed guards, boys avoiding the gaze of everyone around them, girls with long hair worn flopping over their eyes, children with crew cuts and buzz cuts and shaved heads looking at the walls or the floor or the ceiling, and then the other, tougher kids, who turned to stare at her in ways that were challenging and provocative and perplexingly thrilling. They looked knowledgeable in a way she knew she had not been at their age.

So yes, she has been to a detention facility before, but today is the first time she has ever been inside an adult prison, a state penitentiary, although this one is no longer an arm of the state. At some point in the last ten years it was offloaded by the budget-slashing legislature and is now a profit-making enterprise for a private corporation that specializes in corrections facilities.

When it was built, the prison was a sandstone fortress erupting out of cornfields and pastureland and even when Louise was growing up it was on the remote edge of the southwestern suburbs, a part of town she has still never managed to explore despite spending her entire life in the area. Coming upon the prison now, she is surprised to find it surrounded by strip malls and fast food restaurants and a tall white grain elevator from the days when this was still rural land. Across the street stands a ten-million-cubic-foot white cube with COMPLETE COLD STORAGE across the top in tall scarlet letters that remain aglow twenty-four hours a day. Train tracks run past the grain elevator and prison, straight into the refrigerated warehouse.

Drinking iced tea and watching cars drive by she waits for her scheduled appointment in a Mexican restaurant across the street. The air is distorted and shimmering from the heat rising off the asphalt. Her head twitches from side to side as if cars mean more to her than freedom, but her eyes are fixed beyond the traffic to the prison yard, open for everyone to see, where inmates in khakis and white t-shirts mill around behind chain-link fencing topped with curling-ribbon coils of razor wire under the aim of nine watchtowers that mark the perimeter.

A white woman and her two adult children enter the restaurant, order their food, sit down to eat. All three are overweight, but the son, in his early twenties, struggles to fit into his plastic chair. His hands shake and he fails to look at his mother or sister. 'This must be the most tranquil restaurant ever,' he says, dipping his fried

chicken strips into a variety of hot sauces, melted cheese, and sour cream. Listening as they eat and talk, it becomes clear to Louise that the three of them have just come from the prison, where they were visiting the woman's husband, the long-absent father of the son and daughter. Across the room a table fills with penitentiary employees still wearing their badges. This is the collective purpose of the restaurant: to feed the prison staff and the families of the imprisoned. But Louise is not going to visit anyone she loves, or anyone she could ever be moved to think of as family.

Except for the stand of pines between the street and the penitentiary parking lot there are no trees for a half-mile in any direction, including the area inside the perimeter fence. As she drives into the lot a sign directs her to park only in a designated visitor's space, not to loiter in her car, and to report without delay to the guard at the entrance. A pervasive smell of flame-grilled burgers from one of the several neighboring fast food franchises clogs the air.

There has been a prison in this location since 1866, although most of the original crenellated stone structures were demolished and replaced in the 1980s with a dozen separate brick units—the same tan brick used in the building of the Youth Center and the county hospital on the other side of town. If not for the razor wire and watchtowers, the facility might be mistaken for a suburban school. Indeed, it could be the same school where Louise herself taught for more than four decades, a period that felt at times like an endless term of daily incarceration, subject to the petty whims of sadistic principals, many of whom regarded their students as no better than embryonic criminals and the teachers as overeducated guards.

When Louise phoned yesterday to confirm her appointment, the secretary in the warden's office directed her to wear long pants instead of a skirt, and explained that open-toed shoes and sleeveless

shirts were forbidden. The entrance to the penitentiary is at ground level but stairs inside lead in only one direction, down to the basement. At the end of the long subterranean corridor, decorated with vintage photographs of the prison in its early years, there is a desk and a single guard, tall and fat and smirking. He wears a nametag: Kurt D—. Checking that Louise is on the roster of approved guests for the day, Kurt retains her driver's license for the duration of the visit, provides her with a key for one of the lockers where she must abandon her jewelry and other valuables, and then stamps the inside of her left wrist with invisible ink that will show up only under an infrared scanner.

'In case there's a riot and a lockdown,' he explains. 'We'll know to let you out.'

She laughs and then realizes Kurt is not a man who jokes.

'Remove your shoes, please.'

She does as he says, and then, saying nothing further, he jerks his head to indicate the metal detector. Stepping through the gray arch she waits as Kurt runs her shoes through an X-ray machine. Although she does not set off the detector, he pats her down, fingers intruding where only doctors now touch.

'What's the worst you've seen?' she asks, raising her arms, spreading her legs apart, feeling the involuntary rush of sensation when Kurt's hand moves up her inner thigh. His palms are hot through her cotton slacks and she wonders if he is ever tempted to go too far, or if what he is doing at this moment is, in fact, too far.

Straight-faced and unwilling to engage, refusing to smile or make eye contact, he grunts at her question: he has been trained to do his job, to read from a script, not to extemporize. It is possible that questions absent from his script do not register for him as words with meaning, but rather as extraneous noise. 'Turn around, please,' he sings, 'hands remain at shoulder height, arms extended, feet apart.'

'Alcohol? Weapons? Steel files? Do people still think you can escape from a prison with a file?'

Her teeth find the meat of her bottom lip and spasms warp her hands when she notices a sign warning her that *jokes about escape, bombs, or any criminal activities are inappropriate in a prison environment and may be treated as genuine threats*.

'Put one foot up here at a time.' Kurt points to a machine that looks like a scale imprinted with the outline of a man's dress shoe. Louise extends her left foot, which is dwarfed by the printed outline, and watches as the platform lights up and vibrates for a moment. 'Now the next one—not yet—okay now.' She changes feet, feels the pulse again. 'I guess your feet are clear but I'm gonna wand you one more time.' He picks up the metal-detecting baton, passing it around her body while rattling off a list of prohibitions, warning Louise that she may be searched at any point during the visit and that if she does *not abide by any of the rules heretofore explained and any others that might not have been explained but which nonetheless hold forth*, her visit *may be terminated immediately and without warning*, her personal possessions returned, and her person escorted off the premises and banned from re-entry to the facility *until formal security review by the prison administrators, which will take not less than two weeks*.

Kurt returns Louise's shoes and another guard appears down a second set of stairs. Unlike Kurt, he does not wear a nametag, but introduces himself as Dave.

'I'll be taking you up to secure-side, Mrs. Washington, and escorting you to the interview room,' Dave says.

Upstairs, they approach two sets of bullet-proof glass doors adjacent to the Master Control Room, where a wall of green and red lights indicates which doors are open and which closed across the entire penitentiary. A guard in the Control Room sees them and

opens the first of the glass doors. Louise and Dave step inside, wait for two other prison staff to join them, and the door closes. Several seconds elapse before the second door opens, allowing them into the secure portion of the prison where Dave leads Louise down the hall past a cage holding a dozen men, newly arrived, waiting to be processed, to be issued their ankle bracelets and identification cards with bar codes and photos, to spend time in the Diagnostic Evaluation Center where they will be assessed and assigned to a cell block. Waiting for their diagnosis, the new men all look terrified.

Dave turns a corner and shows Louise into the room where the interview will take place. The walls are white concrete block, the trim around the doors royal blue, and across one wall are half a dozen blue-curtained bays that would look at home in a hospital emergency room, but which in this context make Louise feel uneasy, as if the space might be used for sudden triage. A dispenser filled with hand sanitizer is mounted on the opposite wall, and in the middle of the room are two molded plastic chairs on either side of a white plastic table.

Louise sits in one of the chairs, waiting for Dave to return with the prisoner. Alone in the room she feels a flash of panic as she realizes where she has brought herself. It is not because of the proximity to all these dangerous men, although perhaps that is an underlying or ancillary fear: of what men like that are capable of doing, the harms and violations they have committed, that they are still able and liable to commit in this facility shut away from public view, where, for all she knows, even the guards are in on the act. Rather, it is because she fears that in bringing herself inside these bland walls she risks being mistaken for a criminal herself, daring the system to conclude that some error has been made in allowing her liberty and now, as she has in effect turned herself over to the authorities, permitting the prison to process her for the span of a few hours, to

judge her likelihood to break the laws of the penitentiary itself, they will see in Louise a criminal quality she has not herself recognized, and after identifying this intrinsic, previously unrecognized flaw, they may lock her away from the rest of society, flush her into their own private septic system, return her to earth. Once, not that many years ago, she broke a law, risking her liberty, and escaped only through the intervention of a man who can no longer assist her. Perhaps, she worries, some record remains of her transgression.

Just as she is reaching a peak of panic and thinking of calling the guards to let her out, to cancel the meeting, Dave returns with Paul. Louise reminds herself why she has come: not for herself, but for him, as an act of altruism. It is not an unconsidered position.

His hair, cut shorter than when she last saw him at the trial, is a close thicket of straight dark spikes flashed with gold streaks, the color of a homebrew prison process, glinting even under the deadening effect of the fluorescent lights that hang from the ceiling.

'So here you are,' Paul says, sitting down in the other plastic chair.

'Here I am,' Louise says, speaking over him.

'To be honest, I didn't believe you'd come.' She watches him flex his hands against the table. The guard, Dave, stands at the door, clearing his throat in what sounds like a warning to Paul before glancing at Louise, offering a corresponding gaze of reassurance and, she thinks, warning as well—not to get too comfortable in this room that is as white and windowless and unbreachable as a bank vault. Dave, however, is not going anywhere. It is his job, no less his duty, to protect her from harm, from this man who has committed such a catalog of harms.

Circumstances and environment being what they are, Paul appears for the most part no different than he did in the past. His face, the muscled curvature of his torso, the landscape of his veins

make her shiver and push her chair away from the table, closer to the wall with the dispenser of hand sanitizer. She feels certain that if he wanted to Paul could catch her before she even knew she needed to escape, catch her and kill her before Dave could move his own large body across the room. Paul is big enough and strong enough that he could pick her up in both arms and carry her off, an unholy pietà. An old verse runs through her mind: *And the women conceiving brought forth giants*. The hard planar chest stretching his white t-shirt, the arms bulging from their sleeves seem less parts of an animal form than a system of gears and pistons, hard components moving only in one way because of the nature of their design and manufacture, elements built for a single purpose and not readily adapted to any space other than that which they were meant to occupy, a space he has now lost, which he cannot ever regain. Freedom is finished. He will never again be free, never released, not unless the country collapses into chaos. A diamond-cut file will not liberate him. It would take the bombs of revolution or apocalypse itself to free him from this prison, and for that Louise cannot help feeling grateful.

For years his face has appeared in her dreams, screaming and grimacing. As if from a nervous tic or too much time spent in the dark, his eyes, large and round, the color of Arctic seawater, rove and squint. He must have been in solitary confinement. It would not be surprising to discover he is a prisoner prone to fighting with other inmates or assaulting guards, the leader of brigades of men bent on escape or on nothing more elaborate than dominating the space in which they have been confined. But the skin under his eyes, across the cheekbones, although naturally olive, is an unhealthy shade of brown, a tan so deep that much of his face must be precancerous, pores swollen and popping like goose bumps. Inmates spend most of their waking hours outside under the sun, even in winter.

At first they have nothing to say to each other and she struggles to move her tongue.

'I came, Mr. Krovik. Here I am, just like you asked in your letter. So—'

His feet drum the floor, two rubber mallets in motion, and then all at once they fall still as the echo of pounding thunders around the room. In other circumstances he could be mistaken for a department store mannequin or an animatronic model in an amusement park diorama of early man. The features are primitive, with a heavy crudeness in the brow and jaw and cheekbones that is just less than human.

Even if he no longer has full control over his appearance, he looks and smells clean. His eyes are clear, so like other eyes she now knows, irises a fine transparent glaze, crackling with iron oxide. When he adjusts his hands, searching for a position closer to comfort, the veins stand out as if he has been flayed alive. This small movement triggers a series of twitches that contort the left side of his face and brow, rolling back over his scalp until they cascade down his spine, making the whole body shake for a moment before once again falling so still that he looks lifeless but for the spasm that pulses down his arm, bringing to life the tattoo on his biceps of a bird struck through the chest with an arrow. *Cock Robin* it says in cursive lettering under the dying bird. He looks down at his arm as though the twitching belongs to someone else, or as if the bird were an illumination that might escape from its vellum.

'I really never imagined you'd come see me,' he says.

'No, I bet you didn't. And to be frank, neither did I.'

His twitching slows, intervals of stillness expanding until the bird is frozen again on the surface of the skin, the arc of its wing matching the curve of muscle, which flutters with sudden purpose as he pulls himself up against the table.

'I guess we used to be neighbors, though, sort of. Didn't we? Friends, even.'

'No. I don't think so,' Louise says. 'We weren't really neighbors, and we certainly weren't friends.'

Although Paul's story made national news, after her appearance at his trial Louise found herself avoiding all the media coverage, refusing requests to be interviewed; every time she saw his face she turned away from the gaze of a man she did not wish to remember. She never could have imagined that he would contact her, an acquaintance only, hardly a neighbor, nothing like a friend. If she knows anything certain about Paul it is that he never liked her.

The letter came to her in pencil on blue-lined white school paper. Paul's handwriting was in block capitals and, like the houses he built, the letters were out of proportion, the strokes too long, the bars and arms too short, the words stretched along the vertical axis. Although his writing was tidy she could not suppress the feeling that there was something sinister about the exclusive use of capitals.

DEAR MRS. WASHINGTON,
I KNOW I HAVE NO RIGHT TO EXPECT A REPLY BUT I THOUGHT I WOULD GIVE IT A TRY. I DON'T HAVE MANY VISITORS AND I WONDERED IF I COULD PERSUADE YOU TO COME SEE ME. I DON'T HAVE ANYTHING TO OFFER YOU, AND MAYBE THIS IS A SELFISH REQUEST, BUT GIVEN THE WAY THINGS ARE GOING IT WOULD BE NICE TO SEE A FAMILIAR FACE, EVEN YOURS.
SINCERELY,
YOUR FORMER NEIGHBOR, PAUL (KROVIK)
P.S. I AM ALSO WRITING BECAUSE I COULD USE A FRIEND RIGHT NOW.

The letter took Louise so much by surprise that, after reading it the first time, she put it aside, looking at it from time to time where it lay on the desk in the room she now occupies in a house that is not hers. She wondered at first if the letter was genuine or some kind of forgery. The return address was the state penitentiary and the zip code on the postmark corresponded. When she passed the desk in the morning or late at night, the paper seemed to emit an odor that reminded her of gunpowder, dried cornstalks, and manure.

It took her weeks to decide to visit. Reservations aside, she found herself intrigued by the possibility that Paul could think of her as a friend (in fact, against all her instincts, she was moved by the suggestion), while being unsettled and alarmed that he might have ulterior motives, or that any avowal of friendship was only a way to seduce her into helping him. The lighter notes of gunpowder attached to the letter faded, and those of decay mellowed, sweetened, grew as fertile-smelling as good compost.

Louise knows she has nothing to fear from Paul at the moment since the guard remains just inside the door and two cameras monitor the room from opposite corners of the ceiling. When Paul slides to one end of the table, she can hear the camera behind her shift, reframing and focusing on his new position. It is unclear whether sound is also being recorded.

'You know what the hand sanitizer is for?' he asks, nodding at the dispenser. 'It's for when they have to do a body cavity search.' He cocks his head in the direction of the curtained bays and glances over at Dave, who grins. 'They wear gloves but they still clean themselves afterward. Just to see you today, I had to be strip-searched. Every time I get a visitor, I have to take everything off, put my arms out at my side, lean over, cough, spread my ass, let them finger me if they think they have cause. And after this interview is over, they do it all again. I say to them, come on, just let me do the visit naked,

it'll save a lot of time.' He raises an eyebrow as if he expects some kind of response: laughter or disgust. Louise looks at Dave, but his face goes blank, hands tucked into his armpits.

'I didn't realize,' she says, wondering if Paul wants her to thank him, if he believes that he is somehow doing her a favor by initiating this meeting.

'You know, I guess you're right.' His eyes jerk up to the camera. 'I guess we weren't even neighbors, not really.'

'I'd be curious to know what it was I did to make you so angry, Mr. Krovik. Why did you hate me?' She wants to say, *You are the agent of my destruction, Paul Krovik, and you have no right to be so glib. After everything that's passed between us, all the ways you worked to destroy my world, your tone offends me.*

Paul throws back his head and laughs, as though he cannot begin to count the number of ways Louise inspired his hate. '*Whoo*. What *didn't* you do, Mrs. Washington?' He sounds cocky and defensive, a kid still testing the boundaries. It is an attitude she remembers from countless boys she taught in the past, a quality that never failed to put her on guard. If he did not look so composed, if it was not clear that any hatred is now long spent, Louise would be out the door and running down the hall. Paul swallows his laughter and makes a strange warbling grunt, as if he knows it would be safer to leave the hills of hate between them unexplored. 'Never mind all that, though. Because, you know, it's really, really nice to see you here now.'

As his eyes blur wet and sultry in an almost feminine way, he fumbles the air across the table, his thin fingers, white nails cut in straight blunt lines, clawing at the empty space between them. She has never seen anyone make a movement like this, as though he is blind and has no sense that the hands he wants to grasp are within easy reach, just below his own. Louise understands that he wants her to take his fingers, to turn this interview into something like a

conjugal visit under the eyes of the guard and the fisheye lenses of the prison's security cameras. She leans back in her chair, and then, almost losing control of her body, begins to extend one hand to Paul until, regaining sense at the last moment, she pulls it back. No part of her wants to touch him. She needs to get out of this white room and back into sunlight and open space, where visible distance is measurable in units greater than feet, where she can think with clarity, remember her purpose in the world, put her feet on earth instead of concrete. It was a mistake to visit him. There is nothing he can say that will change what he has done.

LOUISE LEAVES THE prison feeling sick, her body shaking, eyes flowing. Watching her pass out of their jurisdiction, Dave and Kurt act as though she is the funniest thing they have seen in weeks, this old woman in tears. She drives northwest, skirting the city, until she finds herself in front of a house with a sharp gable and contorted verge boards, the lace border on a starch-stiffened napkin. Despite what she might wish, this house has put down roots in her brain: she wakes to see its gable twisting, the porch fattening, the windows blinking. Under the moon and a clear sky the house stands still, the whole neighborhood frozen in hot vapors. She hears the buzzing that is now always audible, a noise that might only be cicadas, although she knows it is not: there is nothing natural about the drone.

The house is just off the extension of Poplar Road, the main east–west thoroughfare through the city and a forty-minute drive to the old downtown that has been regenerated in phases over the last decade, the warehouses turned into lofts, derelict buildings razed and replaced with parks. Nonetheless, some neighborhoods that were genteel a decade earlier have seen their houses turned into rental properties, the porches sagging and gutters filling up with leaves that are never cleared to make way for the snowmelt in spring

and the torrents of rain that come at unpredictable intervals in the warm months. Out here, on the western fringe of the city, everything remains new. Anything that ages is torn down to make way for shiny replacements.

Downstairs the lights are off, curtains closed, the windows dark and reflective. On the second and third floors there is light and movement; the curtains are open, the people who live inside forgetting that someone might be watching. She pulls the car into the driveway, gets out, and shuts the door without making a noise.

It is nearly nine o'clock and the neighboring houses are dark except for the small red pulse of light on each of their alarm boxes. She looks through the window in the front door and sees light seeping down the stairs from the second floor, shadows moving, someone standing still and then in motion again. Feet come down the stairs. Louise ducks behind one of the half-dozen plantation rocking chairs on the porch, listening as the body inside approaches the door. She edges into deeper shadow as the door opens for an instant and then slams shut. Somewhere a window is open.

'It wasn't locked! You said you locked it!'

'I said I couldn't remember.'

'Anyone could have come in. This isn't the 1950s!'

This is the place she has brought herself at last, the place where she now must remain. She sits in one of the rocking chairs, looking out at the other houses, blurring her vision so the structures begin to dissolve, giving way to the black mass of trees in the distance, the dim western glow as the earth spins itself again into darkness.