ANDRE MIFTARAJ

B♭

THE SOUNDS AND EVOCATIONS of my father's music are among my oldest memories. He was a folk music hobbyist and he began teaching me to play guitar when I was very young. He wrote only a handful of songs in his life but it is true that they were melodic and original. The words were fresh and sincere, the melodies were entirely innate to the content of the song, and the two together were earthy and true. The songs were structurally simple and rarely consisted of more than three chords but left themselves open to the loveliest of melodies. In fact when my father found that a melody he had invented required more than the typical three-chord accompaniment it was sometimes a struggle for him to find the fourth chord and a big payoff in relief when he did. It was a mystery that all music could be conjured from just seven notes, and while he was conversant in the medium he was painfully aware that he was not musically eloquent. But he knew what he liked and he had to insist that counted for something.

He liked Woody Guthrie and Hank Williams and by the time I was six years old we were sitting together in the old chairs around the kitchen table playing guitar and singing *This Land is Your Land* and *I'm so Lonesome I Could Cry*. My older brother played harmonica and my sister and mother sang harmony but the pride in my father's eye was for me. In my tender and inchoate consciousness this was a given and it was similarly understood in the family. It was only in later years, during the hard labor of the soul that seems to be part of the dirty work of living that no one escapes, certainly no artist, that I became a bystander

to my own life and had the perspective to witness what were the collective assumptions of our family and interrogate them about their origins and authority, about the tacit bargaining and treaty signing that went on under the table, the negotiation and commerce of familial love. Love has its vanquished the same as war, and the curse of being favored is that there is restitution to be made and forgiveness to be begged. But when the heart and soul are new to earth and still securely in the cradle of their mission much is taken for granted, and I never questioned my position as heir and prodigal and chosen one.

It was my father's dream to be a famous singer. But in the neighborhoods where I grew up the obstacles to success and celebrity were only too well known.

My talent blushed and came forward. It was a great moment for me when I was first able to play along with my father and harmonize on those songs that had been with me since the crib. At eight years old I could play guitar as well as my father and at ten far better. We made a noise as a family that we knew was special and we raised our voices loud. We played my father's songs along with all the other songs and always sooner or later my father would say, "Play the river song, Ricky," and he would sing his favorite composition while I finger-picked accompaniment.

A voice can be so large it frightens. My father shut his eyes and leaned his head slightly to one side and when he sang the sound filled the house like a dangerous thing.

> *The mule is bent and lame*
> *It carried me from Tulsa yesterday*
> *Daddy's dead and gone, we laid him in the ground*

It was my father's dream to be a famous singer. But in the neighborhoods where I grew up the obstacles to success and celebrity were only too well known, and the personal means to overcome these obstacles, which my father imagined would quite naturally emerge over time, never manifested. The maturation of his soul, which in his imaginings came as suddenly and naturally as a windfall and imbued him with a new spark and spirit, confounded instead and he turned to a devout and regimented religiosity to squeeze the dark water from his soul and win God's favor. He went to church on Sunday, he went down on his knee at night, he read the admonitions of Saint Paul. But pray as he

might, the world that came to our home through the television and radio remained exotic and remote and as impenetrable as a jungle in a foreign land and he remained always an unrealized artist.

The fields have all gone brown
The sun is like a devil in the sky
The rain won't fall and the river won't rise

We all come from lineages we scarcely know that recede back into history to vanishing points beyond our vision. And surely all the bibles that have ever been are as full of psalms as the one we know; and the number of chants and the voices that have dispatched them to God's ear, been body to those musical souls, is beyond comprehension. As heirs to the forward thrust of humanity the depth of our bequeathal is unutterable to the point of a sacred and pregnant persecution. What is possessed in the human voice is all the reverberation of the human heart and the human heart is very old, its pain is very deep, and its joy even deeper.

The river won't rise, the river won't rise
There's nothing for my cup, the wells have all gone dry
The river won't rise, the river won't rise
The rain won't fall and the river won't rise

BACK THEN MY FATHER WAS the assistant manager of the Wayside bowling alley on Outer Drive in Hull. His family had come to Detroit from Kentucky when he was a boy and his father worked on the line at the Ford River Rouge plant. The stories my father told about his childhood had about them a wistful melancholy for the waning days of an era of feuds and tent revivals. There was the implication that he had been baptized in the cultural waters of a society that no longer existed, some separate sphere of legend and grail of which he was the only remaining representative. No one knew what he knew; no one had been where he had been. Even his own siblings he treated as though they had come from some common place. He knew right from wrong and he had an acute sense of his privileges. He counted his wife and children among his possessions and this element of ownership was part and parcel of love and not at all incompatible with it. He knew himself to be a just man, a flawless reasoner and arbiter of common sense, an impartial judge.

The Sunday services and the scripture readings had their counterpoint in the bowling alley where my father had acquaintanceships with a diverse crowd of people. There was the obvious assortment of restaurant workers, an alcoholic public defender who drank in the Wayside

bar, salesmen, drivers of meat trucks, auto workers and the odd hooker who it was felt was particularly victimized by fate but had maintained her dignity despite circumstances. Even a notorious gang leader named Ferris Johnson. My father was gregarious and witty but opinionated and not without enemies. He lent money within his means on a regular basis.

They had two things in common, these people in my father's circle—they thrived on their own legends and they drank. My father included. They cast themselves at the center of morality tales in which their heroism was the common theme. Sometimes this heroism was evidenced by their confronting some perpetrator, sometimes by the admission that they had done somebody wrong and then made amends for that wrongdoing through public apologies and bestowment of expensive liquor or something else precious. They were ritualistic in a very shaggy way and like most people they did what they could to get along, often at cross purposes with their happiness.

Now the tacit racial propriety was no longer respected and an outlaw mentality took its place.

Sometimes in the summer when school was out and my father was working afternoons I was allowed to sit up late at the lunch counter or in the bar while he balanced the till at the end of his shift. This was just a couple years after the riots and summer nights were still laced with a trace of menace, as though the violence had ripped a seam in the garment of civility through which some dangerous potion seeped and ever since there was the detectable presence of something atmospheric and predatory spicing the air. Black people had begun to patronize the bar at the Wayside, crossing the threshold either with a kind of solitary defiance, parking themselves conspicuously at the bar with a sullenness that prohibited social intercourse or spilling through the doorway in groups loose with laughter, surrounding tables in the middle of the place like divinely appointed repo men conspiring to take the place back. Before the riots they would only have entered in a deferential way to buy cigarettes or change a dollar but now the tacit racial propriety that had governed interactions along the border of Outer Drive was no longer respected and an outlaw mentality took its place. I remembered the common gunfire and the glow of fire in the night sky just over there, the National Guard on street corners and the armored vehicles in Cadillac Square, how the seeds of insecurity were sown throughout our lives so pervasively that every breeze on the skin made the hair on the back of your neck stand up. Living had become a patently unsafe endeavor for all.

In my father's little kingdom there was ritual of his own devising and for his own glory and he made use of his captive audience every weekend to showcase his talent and, less so, mine. Any time he wrote a new song he would tell one of his cronies about it and they told the rest and on Saturday night they took turns making respectful overtures.

"When are we gonna hear that new one, Ed?" Decker the public defender would say.

"Not right now boys, I'm busy." And he hustled off to the other end of the establishment to troubleshoot a defective pinsetter or fry burgers for an absent cook.

"Come on, Ed, gimme something from down home," one of his cousins said. "The shit I'm hearin' on the radio these days I might as well pour concrete plugs for my ears and stop 'em up for good."

"I got my hands full here, Buddy." He barked out orders at the waitresses, threw out a drunk who had gone sliding down one of the lanes like a ballplayer stealing home.

As the night wore on he paused from time to time with an elbow on the bar and said, "I tell you what Decker, it's like a little miracle every time one of these songs comes out of me. It's like I don't even know where they come from. This new one I got has got a melody that might put all the other ones to shame."

"I sure admire that," Decker said. "You got talent, Ed. Now me I've been to school and I may know a lot but when it comes to the creative realm—well I don't have a creative bone in my body."

"This one'll get you," my father said. "I guarantee it."

"I definitely can't wait to hear it. But you know, whenever you're ready. I know you're busy."

"Sonny, get Decker a refill here! The man's glass has been empty half the night."

Decker looked at me and said, "Your daddy's a talented man." He was a thin man, Decker was, with a sandy mustache that was getting in his mouth and pale eyes that were slightly bulgy and moist at the edges. "He's got real talent. When he gets his break he's gonna be somebody." He brought his beer glass to his lips and turned away from me to drink, his eyes already gone inward.

The sound of balls rolling the hardwood lanes and the clashing of pins was like an artificial thunder, some pale and mechanical representation of storms to come or perhaps warnings of ones we could avoid. Sometimes several balls across various lanes thrown in coincidental unison made an apocalyptic crash; sometimes the whole place went almost quiet but for the clip of a solitary pin like the knocking out of a single tooth. Then with the night at its fattest, when all the leagues had bowled their last frame and migrated to the bar, he took the small platform in the back corner and turned on the sixty-watt bulb in the droplight hanging by the cord.

"Bring me my guitar from behind the bar, Ricky," he said.

I took him his guitar and then I took my own and he shut his eyes and did what he felt God had put him there to do. When it came time I played the river song and he sang it and then left the stage, taking credit for both his talent and mine, for who was I but his son and how had I gotten here but as the fruit of his creative potential. Everyone met him with both fists full of beer when he came down off the six-inch-high stage where he left me picking arpeggios all around the edges of the river song, the bar flies slapping him on the back and the black men settling their attention on me, looking with a fixity of expression like one does when hearing serious news.

There was a kind of agitation I felt on those nights as some seed of rebellion began to sprout within me. I used to lie awake at night staring at the radio dial and listening to the hits on AM radio until long after any chance of being rested by the time the morning alarm went off had come and gone. The digital hours and minutes went around on their wheels and the lever of the sixty-minute sleep timer rose from its down position until it had only one minute left and I pressed it down again, resetting it over and over. The first time I heard the song *Crocodile Rock* I stared at that green light on the dial and felt the full flare and constriction of indignance from having ownership of something that is yours stolen away. That was not what I knew music to be. The timer clicked off, the green light went out.

THINGS CHANGED WHEN I STARTED studying music outside the family. To this day it seems I'm waiting for the return of that time when we harmonized. It's not a conscious expectation; it's an undertone, a bit of static always there below the plump hum of everyday life, a jagged graph line etched across the lost moments waiting for an egg to cook or a TV commercial to end. An anxiety that is never completely consumed, not by the night's last drink, not by the most obliterating lovemaking. The desire is only to go back and look at

that moment, now that time has fully revealed it as a turning point, to go back and inspect it to see if its features reveal its nature, to walk around it and wonder at it at leisure, to know it in its heyday and determine whether it was wise to itself or not, if it knew its own purpose, and if not then to feel like one had not merely been its fool. If only I could freeze it like a spike on an oscilloscope and marvel at its lack of differentiation, puzzle over how such sameness could conceal such drastic change and such calamity. But time pays out the present inexhaustibly and *now* is always the nearest cousin to *then* that we have. A moment is a moment and their essence is all the same.

To this day it seems I'm waiting for the return of that time when we harmonized. Time pays out the present inexhaustibly and *now* is always the nearest cousin to *then* that we have.

When I was twelve I joined the school band and began learning to read music and recognize key signatures. It was an absolute revelation to me the response I had to the sight of notes on the staff. It was not a thing I could even find words for, but looking at musical notation the feeling that came to me in the middle of my chest was of *nature*, like the whole and good earth resided right there in my heart. It was so natural, the sight of it. I saw the music like whole pictures on the page. There was no necessity for study aids or mnemonic devices, no *Every Good Boy Deserves Favor* to memorize the notes on the staff. I did have to learn. But the learning did not have the futility so common to abstraction; it had more the feeling of memory, like I was teasing from out of my mind something I had once known. And the more the complexity increased the better it felt to me. The clusters of notes that represented chords did not strike me as more work to do but rather as more food to eat. They hung there like meaningful clusters of grapes. The higher the notes climbed above the staff and the lower they descended below it the more assured I felt facing the page. Where there was complexity there was no intimidation, only nourishment.

I learned chord constructions with names I could never have dreamed of—diminished, augmented, suspended—all of which meant something personal to me. I had it perfectly, the sense of it, and by instinct I dared not analyze it. Any instance where music contradicted itself or had to contort to compensate for some irregularity, I understood. I anticipated what I was about to learn. The arrangements of sharps in the key signatures resonated with different parts of my being as if each rang a

specific bell in me or was a particular color that was quite clearly visible to my soul's eye. It was a language and it was the language that I spoke by nature.

At the end of the first week of band practice the band teacher, Mr. Gage, asked me to stay after. I was playing an old Kalamazoo back then and I was putting it in the case as the woodwinds and brass packed up their cases and filed out.

"Wait here a minute, son," Mr. Gage said.

He went into the office down the hall from the practice room and came back carrying a guitar case. He set it flat across two chairs and pulled the clasps and opened the top. It was an old Guild with a spruce top and F-holes and a trapeze tailpiece. The wood of the fretboard was dull and there was a gummy film on the chrome hardware and what looked like a cigarette burn on the head. The strings were new and had not been clipped and the wire ends stuck out all around the head like the spring works of a derelict clock. But its shabbiness was only superficial. It had altogether about it the look of a reverend article, a tool of divination or a geometrical mystery like a suspension bridge, some thing that sent whispers to your heart of a crossing you had heard of once but forgot.

"My dad's songs are mostly in B flat to match his singing."

"I played with Ellis Marsalis when I got this guitar, before he went with Cannonball Adderley," he said. "Go ahead, pick it up."

I took it and held it face up across my lap and looked at it.

"You know who Ellis Marsalis is?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"Tune it up," he said.

I set the Guild on edge on my thigh and plucked the open strings, dialed the B string down a quarter turn and pulled it back up again. I strummed it again then played an E chord.

"It's already tuned," I said.

"You sure?" he said.

"Yes sir."

"How do you know?"

" I can feel it when it's out of tune," I said.

"What's it feel like?" he said.

"Like…sort of like your shoes are on the wrong feet or like your sleeve is all twisted and you can't get your arm through it. How it makes you feel sort of irritated right here." I pointed to my breast bone.

"You know how to improvise?" he said.

"Little bit," I said.

"Okay," he said. "Play something to this."

He started playing a gentle chord progression, a ballad.

"Can you play in B flat?" I asked. "That's my best key."

"Why is B flat your best key?"

"My dad's songs are mostly in B flat to match his singing."

"Your dad's songs? What kind of songs does your dad write?"

"My dad writes great songs."

"Sing one for me," he said.

"I can't sing," I said.

"What do you mean you can't sing? Anybody can sing."

"You ought to hear my dad sing. His voice'll take the paint off this place."

"He's not here though, so you're on your own. Come on. There's nothing to be afraid of. There's no jury here."

"I'll play it for you," I said.

I had spent what must have been hundreds of hours playing his songs, and I had invented layers of orchestration around the chord progressions so that I could work both my father's vocal melody and my mother's harmony into a complex net of notes that was like the banjo picking in Bluegrass music. I made an exercise of playing these arrangements of mine over and over while going deeper into daydreams until my fingers had their own independence and my mind's ear could listen to the music like some bystander who took no part.

Acceptance from family, though it is expected from the outset and presumed to be unconditional, is life's most precious commodity. But the acceptance of strangers has a sweetness all its own. And when one becomes inured to familial praise, precious words from an other not only feed the heart but somehow replenish the golden glow of acceptance at home. Mr. Gage's response was one of the nicest things I'd ever heard. When I finished playing he spoke in a down home dialect that was unlike the very formal way he spoke in class.

"Boy," he said. "If you ever take a notion to lay your music aside, I'm gon' tuh hire a man to kick yo' buh-hind till yo' head get back on straight."

Then he pursed his lips and squinched his eyes and raised his eyebrows and laughed in a high pitch. My face went hot with pride, that polar opposite of shame that strangely shares the same manifestation.

There are two other things that Mr. Gage said to me that first evening and both seemed strange to me, like he was trying to tell me something I should know but that at the time I didn't get.

He said, "Do you know what it means to be bi-dialectal?"

"No I don't."

"It means to speak in two dialects. For example, there's the way I speak at school?" He sat up straight and straightened his tie and cleared his throat. "And there's the way I talk wid duh folk." He slouched and made a sly grin. "You see what I mean?"

I nodded.

"You don't have to forsake one for the other. When you can speak more than one way you can travel in more than one land. Dig?"

"Yeah, kinda."

He took up his own guitar, a big hollow-body Gibson with a dark reddish arch top and pearl inlays.

"Having said that," he said. "Let me show you this."

He flattened his fingers over the strings in a strange configuration and strummed, then interjected a melancholy little riff. His fingers jumped back to the chord and he walked it down chromatically and slung another little sliding riff that climbed up to again caress the first solemn chord. His fingers moved with such distinctness and yet such fluidity, like smooth dark fish that swam up and down the neck without effort. The music had luster and glow and inexplicable emotion, very full, very warm.

"You know what that is?"

"No."

"That's the flatted fifth. You know what they call that?"

I shook my head.

"Classical guys used to call that the devil's interval."

"Why?"

"Because it makes you feel things you don't want to know about."

He gave me some things to practice, then he gave me a Django Reinhardt record and told me to listen to certain tracks from it. Before I left he said, "Now I want you to take this guitar home and I want you to practice on it. Don't you ever get rid of that Kalamazoo cause that's your first guitar and you never get rid of your first guitar. But—" He slid into the dialect of the folk again—"yo' music done got too big fuh dat thing."

"Oh," I said. "I couldn't take that."

"Sure you can. I'm just lending it to you for a while."

"I don't think my dad would like it."

"Tell him to talk to me about it."

"I better not."

"You want to be in the band?"

"Yes."

"Then take the guitar."

He took the guitar from me and put it in the case.

"Come on I'll give you a lift home."

"It's okay," I said. "I'll walk. I live real close to school."

"You're gonna walk home at night carrying two guitars?"

"It's okay."

He shook his head.

"You got a guitar in each hand and you're gonna carry books and a record too? Get real."

We rode home in his big Ford LTD. I told him to stop in front of the house next to ours and I got the guitars out of the back seat as fast as I could.

"Don't worry," he said. "I'm not coming in for coffee. Now shut the door and remember what I told you to practice."

When I walked in the house my father was sitting at the table reading from the book of Acts. He was usually at work when I got home but it was his night off. I set the Guild on top of the washing machine in the back hall and carried my guitar to my room which was off the kitchen.

"Where you been, Ricky?" my father said. "Why are you so late?"

"I just got back from band."

"What band?"

"You know, the school band we talked about. You said I could join."

"When'd I say that?"

"You and mom said."

"What the hell they gonna teach you in band anyway?"

My mother came out of her bedroom and said, "Ed, watch your mouth sitting there in front of the open book."

He closed the book and said, "What kind of band is it?"

"It's like a jazz band or something," I said.

"A jazz band? What, like Dixieland?"

"I guess."

"We said last week he could try it out," she said.

"I don't want nobody messin' with his music," my father said. "I'll teach him what he needs to know."

"He knows more than you do," she said. "You haven't been able to teach him anything for a year."

"More like two," I said.

"Don't get smart, boy. Your family says what your music is. Not some school. I don't trust nobody messin' with my music. History and arithmetic is one thing, but music is another. A school is an institution and like it says on Woody Guthrie's guitar 'This Machine Kills Fascists.'"

"Don't be melodramatic," my mother said.

Our house was an old house built way back when Hull was just a part of the North Field. The original structure was the main room, a bathroom and two bedrooms directly off the main room. There were no hallways. Two large additions were made over the years. First the kitchen was added with a bedroom directly off it. Then years later the back bedroom where my parents slept, a half bath and the back hall were added. My mother was standing in the doorway of her bedroom and she glanced toward the back hall where I had set the Guild.

"What's this?"

"Mr. Gage gave me that to use," I said.

"Who's Mr. Gage?" my father asked.

"He's the band teacher."

I went and grabbed the guitar and brought it into the kitchen and set it on the floor.

"What are you doing with that? Where's your K-zoo?"

"It's in my room," I said, pulling the clasps.

"If you traded off that Kalamazoo I swear I'll tan your hide, boy."

"It's just a loan. I said no but he said I had to to be in the band." I pulled it out and held it up to my father. "Here look at it."

"Get that thing away from me."

"For Pete's sake, Ed, don't be obstinate," my mother said. "What is so wrong with him learning something new? It'll be good for him to learn to read music. He needs to know that kind of stuff. Do you want him to spend his whole life in the bowling alley too?"

"My whole life ain't over yet if you hadn't noticed!"

"You know what I mean," she said.

"You mean I'm never getting out of that bowling alley. You mean you think it's all over."

She sighed and said, "For Pete's sake, Ed," and the way she said it could not have been more pathetic. The weight of love eventually drowns us all.We tread water as long as we can, but the exhaustion shows. My mother went back to her room.

My father looked at the Guild. "Put that thing away," he said, and he got up and left the room.

FERRIS JOHNSON WAS A GAMBLER known for playing the horses. He was a black man with bright blue eyes and he was only twenty-four years old but he was big and he knew no humility. He wore polo shirts and pleated pants and the pants bunched a little at the ankle and the shirts were always coming untucked so that he looked half dressed up and unkempt at the same time. He didn't swagger or posture, in fact there was something decidedly un-macho about the way he walked. But he moved with confidence and never made excuses for himself. His criminality was his full and only iden-

tity and the girls he turned out on the street were as devoted and respectful of him as fear can make someone. Even the brassiest of them behaved demurely around him because that was what he demanded. They pretended to act like family, showing a sweetness and concern for each other that sisters might show and the harmless flirtation toward him of nieces for a favorite uncle. But there was something metallic and harsh around the charade.

Their smiles were hard and their eyes shone with the gleam of alcohol. The bonds between them were brittle and their fast talk and hard ways were a shell through which no evidence of their humanity could be seen. Ferris Johnson's girls came through the place in their high heels and short-shorts, all legs and paint and jangling bracelets and they never seemed to face you for long and never spoke directly to you but looked over your head and conversed with more than one person at the same time. I remember them as always receding, even when they were sitting before you talking tough with their eyes shining they seemed to be moving away, bent slightly at the waist and skating away on gangly legs and platform shoes, the promise of something growing in you even as they diminished before you. More and more they cut through the Wayside to loiter, look for action, smoke cigarettes. Ferris Johnson became a fixture in the bar, always sitting with a small glass of something sweet before him. From time to time he bowled a game, taking a lane by himself and throwing the balls like a retired pro and showing no interest or care even when he threw seven strikes in a row and a crowd started to gather expecting a perfect game.

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During this time I practiced with Mr. Gage's band several nights a week and rarely spent time at the Wayside. My brother, who was six years older, got a job at the Chrysler tank plant. He quit school his senior year and rented an apartment in Centerline. My sister, four years older and embroiled in all the intrigue of sweet sixteen, disappeared into a reliance on cliques and extracurricular activities, the magic of fashion and invented persona and the power of sexual allure. Any sorrow or confusion I might have felt under any other circumstances at the elemental changes my family was undergoing was displaced by the feeling that I was being initiated into some great mystery, that my real life was being handed to me. What I did not realize was that what was

happening was the seduction of my soul by my own worst desires. I was becoming a bigot against my own kind.

Sometimes when I would learn something new with the band, when Mr. Gage opened up some new aspect of music to me, I felt like a thing of goodness had been bequeathed to me that was a boon for all, that I could take it around like a magic light in a box and anyone I showed it to would feel the blessing I felt. But there seemed to be no one to share this light with. My father, when I would see him, was preoccupied with matters at the bowling alley. Sometimes I overheard my parents talking about growing dangers, about the possibility of moving the family elsewhere.

One night I came home and my father was off work. He was in the living room watching *It Takes a Thief* and I said, "Daddy, you want to play?"

He looked like Bobby Darin but he was beginning to show signs of middle age. He had imprints under his eyes and his cheeks were starting to fatten. We got out our guitars and played some of the old favorites. Between songs I told him about some of the things I was learning, the chord constructions and key signatures, reading musical notation. I got to talking about the relative minor and how the notes of the relative minor were contained in the major scale that was its relation. He looked perplexed and when I tried to demonstrate on the neck of the guitar he just stared at the fretboard as though he could hear the recession of his dreams there like a Middle Eastern lament. I couldn't understand what it was that prevented him from seeing what I saw so clearly myself. My good thing turned bad in the face of his limitations and I felt we were no longer partners.

"I don't like what they're teaching you," he said.

"We can see that," my mother said.

TWO DAYS LATER there was a fight at the Wayside. It was a Friday night, which was usually a practice night for me, but Mr. Gage had cancelled to fill in for someone at a gig in Cleveland. The parking lot was full and the place was packed. I walked through the door into the narrow rubber-floored entryway where the doors to the restrooms were and all the smells of the place hung in a rich mixture, the sweet beery smell, the tobacco, and leather and alley wax together with the night air and the camphor and stench from the bathrooms. This narrow entrance was long and dark and at the end was a heavy door and through it came the muffled clatter of pins and the

voices and music that would suddenly expand and become tremendous when you pushed through that door entering into the huge space with the lanes one after the other until you couldn't count them, the arms swinging and the smoky air a curtain through which all these strangers from who knows where came to play and be on display, enjoying equally the modest isolation of the curved plastic seats from which they could watch and speculate and measure and the communal stage where you stood to throw your ball, standing exposed and open to all judgment. The bowling alley was the place of possibility and promise in our neighborhood.

Her name was Jenny and she was a seventeen year old white girl who...made no claim of victimization and expressed no desire to get off the streets. She was Ferris Johnson's newest girl.

While still in that passageway the door to the men's room swung open and one of Ferris Johnson's girls stumbled out followed by an old man with a tweed hat and a sport coat. He had heavy creases at the sides of his nose and a big belly surrounded by a new alligator belt. His shoes were suede with fake buckles.

"OK, I'm going back to the bar, honey," the girl said. "You have fun."

"I just had my fun," he said, and he patted her behind.

"You know where to find me now," she said. "Don't be shy."

"I wouldn't know how," he said.

The man turned toward the door to the street and the girl turned to go back into the bowling alley, falling in a step behind me. A huge rush of embarrassment went through me and the heat of danger hummed in my stomach.

"How you doin, Ricky baby?" she said.

I knew who she was. Her name was Jenny and she was a seventeen-year- old white girl who I had seen around the place for a few months. She seemed to be particularly despised by my father and Sonny and Decker because she made no claim of victimization and expressed no desire to get off the streets. She was Ferris Johnson's newest girl and she went around on his arm whenever she wasn't on the street making

money for him. She was beautiful, I thought. She had dark straight hair and a face like Susan Dey. I couldn't for the life of me imagine how a girl like that could have fallen through all the safety nets of her pride and self respect to a place of such shame and I had had fantasies of rescue since I first saw her, fantasies of such archetypal simplicity and naiveté that they folded immediately each morning when I set eyes on the real world.

"Fine," I said.

"You gonna play us some music tonight, honey?"

She put her arm around me. Her voice was a soft corrugated riffle, a woman's voice, and though she playfully condescended to me I liked the attention.

"I don't know," I said.

"You're a foxy little man," she said. "I bet you drive all the little girls at school wild."

We came through the door as another one of Ferris Johnson's girls, a short black girl who called herself Princess, was coming through arm in arm with a tall man in cowboy boots. Far down into the bowling alley beyond the shoe counter, my father came twisting his way out of the crowd that stood bottlenecked at the bar entrance and behind him Sonny the bartender and they didn't look happy. When my father set eyes on me his face became madder still.

"Get your hands off my son!" he yelled.

He ran toward us and grabbed Jenny's arm and yanked her away and I said, "Dad, she didn't do anything."

Jenny pulled her arm free and he turned and slapped me in the face.

Sonny grabbed Jenny from behind and pushed her back through the door and my father put his finger in the face of the man with the cowboy boots and said, "You need to get along, partner. Take your whore with you."

The man put his hands up and backed a step and went through the door with the black girl close at his heels. My father followed them, me behind him, into the long dark entranceway.

"Don't you tramps ever come back here!" he shouted. "Don't be turning my bowling alley into a whorehouse."

Sonny let go of Jenny and pushed her on ahead of him toward the door.

"You should be ashamed of yourself, you tramp," my father said.

She tipped her head back defiantly and said, "Yeah well maybe you should too."

"I got nothing to be ashamed of," he said.

"That's what they all say," she said.

He started to go after her. "She's going," I said.

My father turned and raised his hand again and said, "You get inside before I lose my temper."

I stepped back and puffed myself up and looked past him but Jenny was no longer watching. She charged through the door to the street and without looking back stuck her arm out straight toward us with her middle finger in the air. Then she walked away. I was alone there with my father then and even he seemed to have already forgotten me. He walked back through the door and Sonny came back up the chute and put his hand on my head. "It's okay, Ricky. There's lots of trouble tonight, that's all. It's not your fault."

We followed my father back into the bowling alley past the shoe counter and into the bar where Decker was behind the bar watching the till.

"Gimme a roll of quarters from the drawer, Decker," my father said.

Decker pulled a roll of quarters from a cotton sack and handed it over. My father walked over to the table where Ferris Johnson sat with a glass of liqueur and said, "Mister, it's time for you to leave."

Ferris Johnson had an embarrassed grin on his face and for all his reputation it was clear he was not going to resist. He stood up and very nervously said, "It's cool," and when he stepped out from around the table my father hit him with the fist full of quarters. Johnson's head snapped to one side like it would twist right off. Both hands went to his face and in his eyes I saw utter shock and fear. All the way out of the bar, with my father stalking after him, he shook his head back and

forth with rapid little turns as if to say, "What in God's name are *you*?"

IN THE NEIGHBORHOODS WHERE I GREW UP every kind of bigot could be heard to say, "Don't get me wrong I ain't prejudiced against niggers…" and then go on to describe the particular kind of black person they could not abide. I was just a kid, but to me that sentence said everything you needed to know about those who spoke it. My father was one of those people.

The morning after the incident Sonny called to say that someone had driven a car through the front of the bowling alley in the middle of the night. My father was remarkably calm about it.

"I guess we traded in all those little holes for one big one," he said.

Though he was the father and I the son and still a long way from manhood, there was one realm where I had power.

It wasn't as dramatic as it sounded and the hole was covered with one big sheet of plywood. It was only the store room behind that bar that had been damaged. My father seemed strangely relieved at the news, as though the hole in the building meant there was no vengeance pending. A great worry had obviously been taken from him. In the days that followed I was confused by my own feelings. I was thirteen now and while I was not without awe at his courage I felt resentment too. He had shamed me in front of the opposite sex. That she was a worldly woman too, one who would not herself be shamed, made it worse. She was not one of the girls from school. She was someone, I thought, who was testing the very limits of God's forgiveness for her. My father never acknowledged that anything had happened to me that night and that was unacceptable to me. Though he was the father and I the son and still a long way from manhood, there was one realm where I had power.

Everyone was talking about how my father had run Ferris Johnson off.

"Now don't get me wrong," Decker said, his moist eyes pale and serious. "I have defended a lot of black men, and I have nothing against them. As God is my witness," he said seriously to the floor, taking a sip of beer and curling his upper lip in to get the suds left on his mustache. "They're the same to me as any other man. But that Ferris Johnson, he is a bad man. It's got nothing to do with his color. He's a bad guy and your father did what he had to do. He's a brave man, your father."

My father and Sonny were buoyant and for a week or so there was no sign of Ferris Johnson or any of his girls, although I kept hoping that Jenny would show up just so I could see her and be seen by her. Then one night my father suggested that we do what we hadn't done in a long time and really play it up one Saturday night, maybe even write something new and have mom and sis come along to sing as well.

"I've got an idea, dad."

"What's that, Ricky?"

"Why don't I get Mr. Gage down here and the band too and show you and everyone what I'm learning. We can all play."

"I don't know this Mr. Gage. I don't know anything about all that relevant minor stuff. That ain't music to me."

"It is music. It's *just* music."

"It ain't real music. My music is real music. Nothing you get from strangers means anything next to your family's music."

"I just want to show it to you, that's all."

"The only thing you need to show me is how you back me up on that guitar. Now I don't want to hear it. And I told you to take that Guild back where you got it."

But that night I made the case to my mother and through the wall, while I lay in bed, I heard her lobbying on my behalf. I knew that any argument she made would carry with it the threat of mutiny because my father's actions had brought the threat of danger into her family's lives, and always with danger the shadow of death came following.

In the weeks that followed I felt the presence of betrayal in me like a piece of rice, a small and slender but hard thing, a persistence which interrupted the sameness of my undifferentiated self, a thing that, while it kept to itself, would not be obscured. Even during practice with Mr. Gage when that most precious of all states of mind was accomplished where the spirit of the song itself showed up and slipped a hand into each player like a puppeteer, like a mesmer, and you fell away from yourself in service to the song, when you were in that zone where the eyes don't focus or blink, nor do they see, even in that place the small polished piece of rice sat in the middle of my dark self like a pebble in a petri dish. It was there when I conceived the idea for the arrange-

ment I would do of my father's song, it was there when I lay awake staring at the green dial on the radio, it was there when the night finally arrived when I packed up my Guild and rode in Mr. Gage's Ford LTD with three black men and walked with them into the Wayside Bowling Alley and introduced them to my father. For those weeks the hard kernel made no secret of itself or of the fact that despite my trying it could not be spit out. Yet to this day a fury in my heart rails in protest that it was not warning enough.

The hole in the brick had been replaced below the high windows on the front of the building and the new mortar stood out and showed the ragged shape of the new section of wall puzzled in and interlocked with all the old brick. I walked in with Mr. Gage and Walker and Carl Wright and went down that dark entrance into the whole place where the lanes were laddered all the way down to the far wall in diminishing parallel until they were almost one of top of the other. We walked along the carpet past the shoe counter and the low racks of balls into the bar where I saw Decker sitting on a stool amidst the noisy crowd and my father and Sonny behind the bar, my father bent over the sinks plunging beer glasses over the brush spindles and glaring across the room where Ferris Johnson sat wearing a green suit before a table where there sat a glass of something sweet. We pushed through the crowd and over Decker I shouted, "Dad this is Mr. Gage," and right then I felt that piece of rice lodge in my esophagus.

My father looked at me and looked at Mr. Gage and back at me again. His lips just so slightly came away from his teeth. Mr. Gage held out his hand and said, "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Lovett. I've heard a lot about you."

My father held up his dripping hands like a surgeon by way of excusing himself. Decker stood up and laughed self-consciously and extended his hand to Mr. Gage. Mr. Gage looked at me.

"That's the stage over there," I said.

As we crossed the small dance area before the stage Ferris Johnson stood up and shouted, "Play some soul music! Motown!"

We set up on the little stage with barely enough room for two chairs and standing room behind for Walker and his upright bass and Carl Wright and his saxophone. As we tuned up Ferris Johnson stood swaying in front of his table looking drunkenly toward the stage and my father stood drying his hands behind the bar and glaring our way. I counted out the time and we started playing the arrangement I had

done of the river song, the tempo faster than it had been and the melody abstracted and obscured among the twisting and twining melodies that Carl Wright blew on his horn, the identifiable notes of the original melody intermittent peaks that stood up just higher than the surrounding range of notes while I matched those markers with chord variations. It required a good deal of attention to maintain the ear's focus on that known melody, even if you knew it well. The one bulb swung slightly overhead and the music seemed to run away in several directions as Ferris Johnson took slow stumbling steps toward the stage and my father came around the end of the bar. I concentrated on the music, trying to gather those various strands in, to focus the music and find that zone, create that space that would allow the music to blossom and take over, turning the musicians into servants of itself. But the music seemed to spray outward as if giving in to some external suction and Ferris Johnson kept coming. That kernel pressed back when I swallowed.

I saw the muzzle flash first and then heard the awful sound of the shot, as flat as two boards clapping together.

"Play some soul music!"

Johnson was in the middle of the dance floor and he stumbled forward until he stood almost over me. My father was behind him and he looked at me with disgust and he grimaced and shook his head.

Then he shouted, "Turn around, nigger!"

Ferris Johnson turned around and we stopped playing. My father stood there in front of Johnson and he got in a boxer's stance with his left hand out in front of him and a roll of quarters in his right.

"I got your favorite surprise for you right here," my father said.

"I got yours," Johnson said, and he reached inside his jacket.

Even across the short distance of that room I saw the muzzle flash first and then heard the awful sound of the shot, as flat as two boards clapping together but so loud that hearing it felt like something terrible had happened to you, like you had just been dropped into a crucible. My father's fists were raised for battle and the blood sprayed like spit as the bullet passed through his wrist. His loose shirt snapped where the bullet passed through it. Then a dark wet stain appeared at his side just above his waist. Mr. Gage stood up, handing me his guitar, and

grabbed Ferris Johnson from behind and the gun dropped to the floor. Decker got up from his bar stool and stood rigid but swaying with fists at his side and wide eyes as if he were going to do something, but there was no real thrust to his posture. It was a look of confrontation for the sake of his dignity only. Someone pushed him back down into his seat. He grabbed the edges of the seat and made like he was going to get up, but no amount of tempting would have gotten him back up and anyone who even cared to glance at him knew it. My father made a dismissive gesture toward Johnson, the way you do when your patience for something has run out, and drops of blood arced across the space between them and sprinkled the floor. My father looked at his wrist. He sat on a stool at the bar and wrapped his wrist in a bar towel and said to the bartender, "Take me to Providence, Sonny."

The next time I saw my father he was in our back yard standing before the fire barrel. His left arm was covered in thick bandaging from just below the elbow down. His pompadour had fallen and his hair was flat against his head. The firelight from the barrel moved the shadows from place to place. The remnants of his guitar were sticking up out of the barrel. I was so overcome with misery and love and horror that I couldn't speak. He poked a stick into the fire and sparks rose on the air. "*You* have to understand," was all he said, "that dreams have a price."

I stayed with Mr. Gage for a couple of weeks and during that time I told him everything there was to tell about my father and his music and his dreams. Mr. Gage said that maybe we were not all meant to be composers. "Maybe we come to this earth more than once," he said. "And one time you're a farmer, and another time you're a salesman, and another time you're a poet. You see what I'm saying? And that last life you have before becoming an artist is the most confusing of all, because you've got one foot in the mud and one foot out, you have a tongue but you can't speak, you have eyes but you don't see yourself clearly."

Like so many things with my father, his injury was less transforming than he imagined it would be. And in fact he was able to play guitar again when he was rehabilitated. The two of us became estranged of course but the creative impulse is infinitely persistent and so is love. While a reconciliation would not be easy it would in fact come about. As it was my nature to create music I would do that too and from that something beautiful would come.

My life used to be known to me in befores and afters. There was the father I knew before and the father I knew after, the music of my child-

hood and the music I came to know after. But beyond before and after is the third part that replaces them. In the middle of my life now the act of creation comes to seem like memory. Memory becomes myth through the leavening of time and trial. The single notes of experience, past and present, take on a third harmonic and become fuller orchestrations. And even if the third is ever fully understood there is still the remainder of the seven to follow. There is always something we do not know but which we *may* know in time. There is always music after.