When Boo-Boo stabs Morris Boyle I am reading a news magazine that someone has smuggled onto the wing. It is an article about a dog who uncovers a grave of several small bones wrapped carefully in bits of waxed paper. The dog is not a police dog but only one which happens to be digging by a gazebo in a neighbor's garden. Also recovered are: three black candles, tufts of hair, a ring and two decks of playing cards. The woman who owns the gazebo and the gardens has lived alone for as long as anyone can remember.

She tells a story which begins: Before you knew me, a stranger, a religious man of cosmopolitan background. . . . It is a ridiculous story, and no one listens to her. This is in a part of our country cut off and burned dry by a drought of several years so you'd imagine its trees to hang like sticks from the sky above the old woman, and the sky itself absurd and the dog as they stand there surrounded by reporters, she already having been recorded as feeling herself to be the victim of a cruel, if
ultimately harmless, high school prank. It is this close community of small towns, and teenage drug abuse, she mentions more than once. But that evening, in a sprawling pond behind her home, police detectives called to the scene discover a child's head sunk in a bag of stones.

Around me, the weather has turned drizzly and hot. Sometimes with a small polished mirror held outside my bars, I watch the hall. I'm waiting. And I wait and nothing changes. There is only silence or an unbroken noise. The silence is a prayer. Of surrender. To this, I whisper, to this and other devotions.

I don't know.

What is there to tell here in security lockdown I eat breakfast. Lunch. Dinner. Do some push-ups. Like a holy man of days I jack my dick testifying to the bars the walls and ceiling. Then wait for mail call, medical rounds—for the nurse or med-tech who will pretend not to hear at all if I speak; and for the fat guard delivering letters cell by cell, calling out our names. . . . He is more direct, but crazy as well, warning me every day that no one can expect to return from prayer alive.

My mother again writes that she is frightened. She puts more locks on her door.

I wish that I could help.

But there is no message from here, there is nothing.
Although maybe I should tell her this: embrace, like the many heads of one snake, your fear. And: walk out to meet it.

I'm not sure, I don't believe I should say anything at all: but listen, around me the weather has turned. It has turned the walls to sweat like crack like wine like sick. They sweat roaches, and they sweat my life unreal. Please, calls Boo-Boo every afternoon, Mother of God allow me to die.

Go ahead.

Listen.

Hey dude, you don't have to ask permission. Just do it, alright? Do yourself and shut the fuck up.

But of course he doesn't. Instead takes a piece of straightrazor to Morris Boyle. Oh God, is what the Boyle yells.

Oh Jesus shit, he says.

There is a road around the prison and in the summer dust will cover it by noon and on the day I was taken to lockdown I watched the Sergeant and a co-1 come down this road, which was already hot and dusty and settled itself behind them as they walked. I had been doing sit-ups. Three sets, then rest for five minutes. From where I sat I could watch along the fence line for a quarter
mile to a point at which the ground climbed and the road turned and went out of sight, the trees across from it stunted, the sky low and hot and punching down into the road. Then the Sergeant and Mr. Mays came down past the trees and onto the compound. Tampa Fats, acting as a spook for a poker game, warned the players. But the cops walked past Fats and the game and up to me.

The room where I was taken was small and tight and without air. There were three of us in the room: myself, the Colonel, and an investigating Lieutenant.

"Now, we'd look a little foolish, wouldn't we," the Colonel said, "knowing what we do, and letting you back on the compound?"

Behind the Colonel's desk was a Coca-Cola machine. Its lights had been busted out, and over the door someone had hung a picture of a woman with holes where her face was supposed to be. Above it, on the wall, a deer head and two photographs were hung. The first, of men in army uniforms. Four guards whose faces were blurred indistinct posed together in the second. Between them they held a bowling trophy. A banner across the bottom of this picture read: Department of Corrections. Four Rivers, C.I., 1986. Near the Coca-Cola machine there was also a coatrack and a fan. That
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was all there was in the room. The fan did not appear to be working. It was very hot.

"The facts are, son—" the Colonel said, "and here's number two, the first being we have every reason to believe the contract on your life . . . you see? But the second being that the man who has come forward—and here I'm just thinking of you, son—the man dealt with no more than a go-between, and this is where the problem lies and where you can get out of the problem . . . it being to tell us who the perpetrator or perpetrators of the contract are. This is what you can straighten out right now."

Everyone was being very pleasant. When I'd first been brought into the office the Lieutenant had looked up at me from where he sat on a corner of the Colonel's desk and asked if I would like the handcuffs off. "Well now," the Colonel told me, "seems we got us a little problem and some confusion both." The Colonel appeared to be about sixty years old and was thin and tall and formal in a southern manner which made him seem very pleased to be having this conversation. But he was not at all happy. "A five hundred dollar contract," the Colonel said. It was as if we were all friends. And now they would have me locked down twenty-four hours a day under administrative confinement until I could be
shipped because I was white and because I had people and possibly a good lawyer and if they let me back onto the compound I was going to be killed and that could cause them trouble. So of course everything was decided and there was no reason for anyone to be unhappy, except me, who did not count, and the Colonel perhaps, who did, and who had already been inconvenienced by this bit of paper work and because of that wanted names and would not be pleased if he did not get them.

"A five-hundred-dollar contract," the Lieutenant repeated.

Through a window which had recently been cut into the wall of the office and left unfinished I could see the road the Sergeant had walked down a short while before, and beyond that a field of cut stumps. Ten or twelve prisoners were in the field. Several of them worked, pulling stumps from the ground, while the rest stood waiting beneath a stand of cottonwoods which had peeled and were rotting in the sun. The men who waited held picks and shovels in their hands and looked down and did not appear to speak to one another. Only once had I found trouble while in this prison. The first day in a nontransit dorm, I was sitting on my bunk, just unpacked, but with three shirts and my sunglasses still lying on top of an upturned box when a big jitterbug called Cocoa and three of his running partners came up
to me. "Hey man," Cocoa said, "them ours," pointing to my sunglasses. I'd seen Cocoa around before. One morning, turning a corner behind the education building, I'd come upon a group of inmates watching a robbery. It was Cocoa, who had an old man down on the ground and was kicking him, working his legs, laying all his frame into every kick. Everybody just stood around and watched. "Easy now, cracker," Cocoa told me that day in the dorm, "real easy." One of the homeboys Cocoa had brought with him wore a gold tooth and touched a spot on his lip just above it and then adjusted the brim of his cap so that it sat sideways on his head. Underneath the hat was a red bandanna.

"Them me, cracker," Cocoa said again and then slowly reached down and took the sunglasses.

"Alright," the homeboy said, laughing softly.

That night after supper I had sat on some bleachers by the baseball field until I saw Cocoa go into the dorm alone. I waited a minute and then walked to a blind spot between the dorms and the fence and dug around a large rock, pulling it from the ground. Underneath was an eighteen inch long piece of re-bar I'd stolen from the machine shop and buried a few days before. Holding the pipe through a hole cut into my pants pocket I went to the dorm and found Cocoa sitting on one of the toilets in the large shower room at the back of the build-
ing where, at that time of day and if I was quick, there was little chance of anyone coming in on us. The toilets were separated from each other only by small brick partitions, chest high, and left open at the front, and I walked up on him before he knew I was there and began without a word to swing the re-bar. The first time Cocoa was hit he screamed and his eyes rolled back into his head. After that he only made small wet sounds and was probably mostly unconscious, although once it seemed he was trying to get an arm up to protect his face. There was blood everywhere. “Whose sunglasses are these?” I kept asking Cocoa.

Later, I cut the name tags from my clothes and pitched them and the pipe into a laundry cot. I had never been more frightened in my life. But this, now, would have nothing to do with Cocoa and it would be much worse. I knew that immediately. On the streets I’d robbed cocaine dealers. Now they’d found me and had contacts in this camp and there was nothing to be done. It occurred to me for some reason then that what I was looking at—the road, now empty, and the clean line of fence, both somehow unreal against the sky, and behind them the sky, immediate, as if someone had painted it on a white sheet of paper and laid it inside my mind—these would be the idea of prison I’d always carry with me.
“I don’t know, sir,” I said. “You depending on me . . . it would seem to make you the one got a problem.”

How many times has one voice come toward conception—moaning under the weight of light, and the voice itself no more than a moment’s absence of that light?

Once, when I was nine years old, there was a fire at a horse stable. It was March and patches of snow were still on the ground. Several horses had escaped the barns by kicking down their stall and then stable doors, and when these—some three or four only—rose suddenly from the frozen woods they themselves had become the fire, their manes and steaming flanks, and most especially the rising cold of all their eyes.

Blood sweated and splayed out onto the snow. I was only nine years old and wanted this to stop and began praying, but from the barns all that could be heard were whistle-pitch screams of terror—and I remember seeing myself then as both the horses which remained trapped, and the uncontrollable wall waiting before them.

Now, here, swallowed within this prison if I could only make for myself a geography of fire distinct somehow from fire—

“Don’t bitch up,” we call to one another.
“Don’t break weak.”
Boo-Boo stabs Morris Boyle and I believe there is no difference, but the day burns thin as parchment to display an engine of living spread between ribs—and me, who sits alone and shakes to death here in my cell.

He stabs Morris Boyle and I can taste and see through to the sweat of weakness, waiting—but not for me. . . . Because daily I kill myself, scouring clean intestines, kidney, liver—and lay them singly across my bed, one after the other. And all I wonder is this: how is it that one of us becomes bone-white with want, and the other not?

This is what I mean: prison, to me, has become the first clean mirror. And can only be what it is. In the mirror this is the heart of midnight. With a sheet propped under my head as a pillow, all night I stare at the bars. I stare the bars, which are green, into nothingness. Then stare them into the world's last hard bands of light. Then I step beyond the light: I'm standing in a clearing at a wood's edge. Behind me is the prison. The moon sits hunched above it like some great catbird. It's a high summer moon, yellow and finely veined. A cloud passes across its face. And for one moment I'm no longer a man standing outside a prison but am again a young boy rowing his skiff. It is a July night smelling of salt marsh, and from our front porch my parent's voices drift, threadlike and disembodied, across the water as if
they were issuing from the darkness itself which leaves
imperceptible not only the porch where I know my
mother and father sit but our house as well and even
the shore, only a line of lanterns strung from posts
running the pier’s length to anchor my imagination as I
move along the vast black lip of an open sea, yet all the
while believing not in any terrors, but instead in the
finality of those lights and that shore, and of the voices
behind them. On that night also, lying against the gun-
wale, shivering slightly, my shirt damp with oil and wa-
ter, I watched high flathead clouds cross in silence be-
fore the moon, and was in that moment as sure of the
equable passage of the world as I’ve ever been. So now,
standing just beyond the barbed wire fence I try to find
again, waiting in this memory, belief, and hold it to
myself a long minute. Then I draw a deep breath of air
sweet with orange blossoms and walk away from the
prison compound.

All night I walk, twice skirting marshy areas. Close
to dawn I think I hear the dogs and crawl into a thicket
which opens slightly around the trunk of a tree. All day
I wait and sleep in there. Once, when I wake, my eyes
will barely open. They are swollen and oozing. My skin
feels warm. Asleep again, I dream of insects large as
bats. What stops this dream? Is it the dogs, can I hear
them? Later, I sit up and become sick. My legs are
swollen from bites and the poison of nettles. But it's dark again. I start out. By midnight I've gone at least ten miles. Now my hands begin to turn blue. It seems I can picture myself drinking some time earlier from a dirty pool. I try to reconstruct events in my mind, yet can't. Just before sunrise I stumble from a steep bank onto a small dirt road wound like a ribbon down through the darkness. At the end of the road is a tiny cottage. I stand up once more, carefully, and begin to walk. While my legs seem to move, I get nowhere. Finally I sit down in the middle of the road and begin to cry. A door swings open at the front of the cottage. An old man comes out. He walks down the road and lifts me in his ruined arms.

Is this how light death is, I wonder.

He speaks gently and tells me that fever has burnt the very being, and its weight, from my bones. Mr. Ghede is his name.

In his room lingers a dry sweet taste. I'm sitting at a table, Mr. Ghede at its other end. Before Mr. Ghede waits a pencil and a piece of paper with which I've asked him to draw a map of the woods. He wears the cokethick glasses of the nearly blind and if my limbs weren't swollen to inhuman proportion I would hit Mr. Ghede and rob him. The old man places a steaming mug of broth in my hands. He will help me.
Mr. Ghede puts his face up close to the pencil and paper, peering at them. Drink the rest, he tells me, it will make you feel better.

I notice there’s a pond behind the cottage. And gardens. The old man has built a doll-house half again larger than his own quarters. After that, time must pass because the room becomes different. It is lit by candles placed in each of the four corners. I can see into the light. The roof and walls rush down to the floor.

Mr. Ghede stands outside a window. I see him watching. First there is this: the heavy smell of flowers. They are in my mouth and on my tongue like nettles. I gag and fill the air with petals thick as wings. The old man has put something in my drink to do this. As I look he turns into terrible Mr. Bones and then becomes an old woman without teeth.

He chuckles. Goat’s blood, he says. Now he seems to be watching my face. Goat’s blood, and wine and something special to give you vision.

I hallucinate a graveyard. The old man comes screaming about his life’s sleeping mind, talking like one hundred mouths and calling his name to be Baron Cimetiere. I can’t let go. Electricity has crucified my head to this picture. Of the staring angels and the stars which bow down. And Mr. Ghede. He’s smiling. The old man is different than the other dead. He has sharp
little teeth with which to bite and the pain of cancer is on his inside. Then I know him to have done something terrible. And he begins to speak. Come in, he says. Come in, come in, he sings. Come in.

Mr. Bones is waiting, he shouts, wanting to read each one, the story of their doom and cuff their little ears and ring their little ears.

Everything falls away from me.

When I open my eyes I’ve been tied to a chair. Mr. Ghede sits directly in front of me. A doll is on his lap. He explains it to be our soul which he’s carried in his angel heart like a broken stump chamber of salvation. Then he touches its waiting eyes to mine, my hair and my mouth.

As Mr. Bones, he explains, he had no face at the shopping mall.

“They’ll find the head sunk in a bag of stones.”

And Mr. Ghede has indeed become beautiful. A blue light surrounds him. It trembles. I can see words fall out of his mouth as he speaks them.

“A young man’s head in a bag of stones.”

There are one hundred, maybe one twenty—it’s difficult because of changes, how some cells they double up,
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some not, but there are about that many of us in security lockdown. Mostly on rule infractions or investigation, the rest, one reason or another, have asked for protective custody. So, maybe one twenty. It is a corridor of two wings, back to back, thirty-five yards long. Each cell two and a half paces across. Three lengthwise. In stacks at the head of my bunk I have matched three pair of underwear, two shirts, two pants—the shirts and pants, blue—three towels and one facecloth. This is how my day goes: at four o’clock someone throws shit on a med-tech and gets banged up in a strip cell. I listen. Then lie on my bunk, exhausted with hate.

My father would want blood and the pain of redemption.

He, however, is dead.

It may be important to realize that my father once gained some small share of fame in a country band singing on stage about drinking men matching their lives to the empty days of a city. No one believes this, he had a reputation as a minister-type of sorts. But there you go, every weekend he wore long string ties and white shirts with red and gold phoenixes over each pocket to a club in downtown Boston on a street close to its Combat Zone. During summer afternoons, hookers, young girls from Ohio and Tennessee would stop in for
a drink or dance before going to work. They giggled and paired off like shy children.

"Look at the teardrops," my father sang to them, "running all down the streets."

He was eighteen years old.
I don’t know.
Actually, he never sang.

He was a minister. That’s how they met. It is another part of the country, one dry with dust, and my mother is in the audience. She is beautiful then.

Or, she is ugly. Or dead.
And he is an undertaker.

They never meet at all... save once.
As for myself, I am living in prison.

Sometimes, listening to the days sweat themselves dry against the grey square plexiglass skylight fifteen feet away out in the corridor I imagine myself, while pulled into this cell, waiting out too the same rainstorm in a bar with vodka tonic and country girls and outlaw music on its stage.

Otherwise, after two free letters for the week and a pack of Bugler rolled into cigarettes I’m out of options. During the morning it’s quiet. Then someone will start. Yo, whiteboy. Or nigger. Anything at all.

On the afternoon Morris Boyle had first been brought to security lockdown everyone got up on him
fast, as they did whenever a new man came down. This was about two o'clock. Hey baby, it started. Come to daddy. And then they were all up on the bars—What is it mamma oh whitebread whitebread, whistling slung hip and eyes, testing, and it turned out him being slight and frail, meaning nothing, but also in protective custody and having asked for it himself his first day down. Which is what he told real quick. How two niggers stole his Reeboks. Then came back later about some jewelry—

Why didn't you . . . , Danny Spencer began.

Boyle asks him: What? Get stabbed over some watch, there was something I was supposed to do—it was all completely out of control.

The whole wing began rocking. He seemed to be exactly what they were waiting for.

That night I heard Gregory Angels, who was in the cell next to him, running the facts down to Boyle. “Man, you already let yourself get run off the compound. . . . Everyone gets tested. . . . And they know, my friend; what they know is you can’t live in p.c. forever. Sooner or later you got to go back to population, and when you do, they want you thinking you’re more afraid than you really are. That you got to hook up with one of them . . . that you got to, so might as well do it now. Someone to look over you, you know what I’m saying?
"You will be giving them cigarettes, you will be giving them money. You will have a daddy, and anything he wants, belongs to him."

It did no good.

They gave Boyle a name. Holly, because he was from California and to them that meant Hollywood.

"Come on, Holly," June-Bug told him, "why you checked in? Come on out to my cell, you be safe."

And then Country Cool soothed, "Fuck them niggers. You my friend, I get out there—no one on the compound gone mess wit you."

Always trying to run that smooth shit.

"What you think you'd do if I was in your cell," Boyle asked, and they loved it. They all laughed, saying they couldn't tell him, they had to show him. And every time he was taken to shower or sick call, every time, the whole cell block got on the bars talking that shit. But Country Cool was different. He was in love. Flat out in love. Had Boyle cut out and owned, and talked real soft, sweating in the heat, and he'd moan, "Oh Holly, what they gone do—what they done wit you now, baby?" All day long he ran his game, mostly soft, sometimes with that real easy threat you hear in prison, and always making Boyle believe that he knew him better than he himself did. "Oh Holly, what they done wit you, baby?"
Boyle couldn’t take it. A week after coming down he was ready to sign himself back onto the compound. The cops made him fill out a form saying he no longer felt his life would be in danger, and then upgraded his status to administrative confinement and moved him out of his segregation cell overnight while the paper work was processed. They put him in with Boo-Boo. We all knew what was coming, and waited.

And of course it came.

I don’t know. My beliefs may run counter to what you assume. I enjoyed none of this. It wasn’t all that long before Boyle was brought back to protective custody from the hospital. This time they moved him into the cell next door. Two cops walked him down. Mine is the last cell on the wing. Everyone had an even closer interest in him now, and I didn’t like to see it. He might have been alright if he’d fought when Boo-Boo tried to take him off, that alone could have done it. Sometimes, fighting once will give a man the heart he needs. But he hadn’t. Boo-Boo tried to force him—he had a shaft of straight razor bedded in a pen and its point was sharpened, but it was mostly for slashing. Boo-Boo had stuck Boyle once or twice, and then, when Boyle fell into a ball screaming for the cops, he’d really gone to work, cutting him across the face and arms. That was how the
guards found them. Boyle bleeding pretty good and rolled into a ball. . . . Boo-Boo, who is not right in the head, more confused than anything else.

At mail-call on the same day they brought Morris Boyle back to lockdown the fat guard asks what I would’ve done, he has two letters for me in his hand—“Listen, he says, “if you’d found out about the contract before we did . . . what then? Maybe think about asking for protective custody, huh?“

He holds the letters just beyond my reach. “And what about after leaving here,” he asks. “If it follows right along—anywhere you’re transferred . . .”

Nickerson is his name. He holds my letters chest high. He wants me to look at him.

This is what he’d like me to think about: how it would be about money, period . . . if I was in population there would be no one person to go after—nothing I could do to make everyone stand back. And every night, sleeping in an open bay dorm—less than two feet between row after row of double bunks, the bunks themselves and clothes hanging and string lines making the whole dorm a blind spot . . .

“We can’t see shit, my friend,” he tells me.

“Who would it be,” he asks. “Sooner or later . . .” Nickerson shrugs his shoulders.
I believe Nickerson when he says there is little enough hope in prayer. I also believe—fuck him.

Maybe because of what Nickerson says Boyle decides that he and I are the same. Boyle is wrong. It is this way with Boyle: he could have fought.

Boyle is just showing himself weak.

One night, about ten-twelve days after that, Boyle must have heard me pacing. The rest of J-Block was silent. It was three o'clock into the morning. “Ain’t this something,” he asked, and the voice startled me. Between the shared wall of the two cells and the grille gate, in a space of several inches, I saw Boyle watching me. His hands were held out from his sides, palms up, and he looked all around himself. “Ain’t it,” Boyle repeated as if he should be conceded a certain disbelief at finding himself in protective custody. This is what he wanted. Justification. And to form an alliance.

“Ain’t this really something,” he asked.

I wouldn’t help. I won’t be one of those circling like a dog smelling blood. But I wouldn’t help.

“I don’t know,” I told Boyle. “I don’t know about all that shit.”

Yet I’m happy enough to have Boyle to talk with. On the compound I’d had books, mostly on history, and so each night after it gets quiet I begin to talk and for the most part he is willing to listen and picks up on
ideas. Sometimes he ruins it by not following and then saying something stupid. But other nights he seems to drink it in and even points out this or that inconsistency. Which I don't mind. Enjoy in fact. Only then he forgets. Trying to be clever, he wants to make it something else. "Homeboy lays it out like numbers . . ." he says, "but it's you. I can smell it. I can hear you going cold right through these walls."

That makes me angry and I get real quiet. Because he should understand. Already. It is this this this—not homeboy, not knowing, not any shit which might expect something later. Who the fuck is Boyle anyway, he should be glad I speak to him at all.

So I get real quiet. To remind Boyle, but this time it doesn't faze him at all.

"Check this out," he tells me, "I was up the Panhandle. A small town out along the beach . . . the ocean and everything. At night all the time feel as if you could expect something. I'd been . . . see, there were a lot of well-off women. Divorced. Widowed women; forties and so, and they hit the clubs. Sooner or later I thought I'd hook up with one, hit something big. I like the clubs too. So, I'm out. I'm at a table and this woman comes over. Just like that. Don't even look at anyone else. Sits down and wants to know if I got some coke. And I know this woman. I know . . . you understand? Her. 'You a
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cop,’ I ask. Which of course she isn’t. The woman is just nervous. I think this is not her thing. Any of it—the dope, the bar scene? But she’s made up her mind . . . about this, decided. So, I ask if she’s a cop and then bust up. Relaxing everything a bit . . . I am going to get the dope, right? Only, she wants both of us to go—come right along with me. Okay, even better. Of course we end up at her house, a condo. I’ve never seen anything like it. The woman owns—check this out, she lives on the entire top floor. There is a jungle outside her living room. A regular jungle, okay? The trees and all. Forty stories up. Her entire living room, windows. When I got out of the car it was just morning. ‘Up there,’ she said, pointing, and I got out of the car and right in front of me was the whole package. I told myself, I said, ‘this is it brother. . . .’

“Anyway, when we get upstairs I had the shakes a little. Been up most all the week. But I fix us a real good shot of coke to cure all that. Wham. Now I was feeling good again, thinking my luck is changing—the woman, she ain’t bad, looks like she might be pretty good in bed—I’m digging on the apartment, out on the balcony, you know? Thinking this is all of it and I turn around and the lady is dead. She’s on the couch, dead. At first I think, ‘what the fuck.’ This is not right. What am I supposed to do? So, I fix another shot. But I can’t
get high with the lady lying there, so I pick her up into the bedroom. Pull down the covers, put her in, go back to the dope. It’s morning. Out the window is sunshine and the palm trees and all them people—and I know whatever it is I gotta do I can’t do it out there. Not right then. What I end up, I find a VCR and I watch it. I must’ve watched twenty-four hours straight. Steady fixing shots. After a while, the coke? You might as well, you really can’t move at all so I just keep watching. Things do get crazy. Finally, I begin to believe I am dying—I mean, I was scared, I thought to myself, ‘oh Lord, what is this?’ My nerves like yanked goddamn light cords. Outside, all the noise firing through telephone poles and wires until the ocean and the beach and everything out there turned to glass. ‘Man oh man,’ I thought, ‘so this is it. This is what it’s all about.’ And laughed. But I wasn’t having any of it. So I go to the windows with tape and towels and face cloths. Put them, stuff them all along the windowsills trying to catch everything and make it stop. I go into the bedroom, and I’ve forgotten about the lady. . . . ‘Holy shit,’ I say. ‘Jesus Christ.’ So, things are bad enough. But then they get worse because above the bed, on the wall, in her mirror, I see me. I am looking into my own eyes at real bad dreams. My bones pushing me into someone else. And here comes the future. Me looking at me. Let it roll
is what I say. Let it roll. . . That's the only history a person needs."

The night it happens his voice is the first I hear although somebody must already have been shouting for him to shut it down. But he won't stop. He is slap bugging up. By the time I come out of my bunk, rolls of toilet paper are being lit and thrown into the corridors. "Motherfucker," someone is swearing. The whole wing has come awake. Boyle is screaming over and again. He has balled up his clothes and sheets and set them on fire. Down the hall someone hollers "rock the wing," and right down through the steel frame bunks the shaking begins. They beat the walls, the bars, the floor. In the two-man cells I know they crouch in dark corners, watching, while they pretend not to, each other, yelling as if together—"Die motherfucker," screamed at Boyle, yet their eyes on the other man in the cell with them. I see Boyle's shadow immense on the wall. Then the guards come and pull him from the bars. I can hear them beating him. It goes on for a few minutes and then it stops and they leave. I lie on my bunk until the wing again becomes settled. The lights are turned down then and I can hear the guards outside their office and soon a door closes and there is nothing. After a while I
go and look into Boyle’s cell. He’s sitting against the far wall, one arm thrown up on the grille gate, his head resting on the arm. “Weak bitch,” I say, “they going to break you down.” And for one moment when Boyle looks up I’m unsure whether I’m accusing myself or him. The air remains bitter with smoke. Every now and then someone down the line coughs. There are small murmurings. Before me I see myself crouched like a waiting animal with the stink of fear on it. “Let it roll,” Boyle smiles up. “Let it roll.”

We stare at one another.

And then I turn, and walk away.

Late; that’s what I think. At first I don’t know what’s awakened me. Then I separate a sound, a small brushing of air followed by three or four taps as if a signal. Very soft. Going to the bars, I’m looking into his cell at him—directly into his face, each time it is swinging abruptly toward me—perhaps looking at him for thirty seconds before I understand what I’m seeing. His shirt has been shredded and braided into a rope one end of which is tied to the top cross-section of the bars, and the other knotted at his neck. As his body twists, his feet brush against the grille. And I’m looking into Mr. Bones’s face.
Backed into a corner, crouching by the toilet, I whisper, “What they done, what they done with you now?”

“A skull in a bag of stones,” he replies.

And in that moment I have a vision of these walls like a shock of strict flames—and I see, I know what I would tell my mom. I would tell her, “Leave the door unlocked . . . leave the chain undone at night and each tightly drawn shade open because I’m coming home.” That’s what I’d say.