

“Held Together With Lies”: Faulkner’s South and the Southern Gothic as a Genre for the
Oppressed

Submitted by

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whose generosity, knowledge, and wit were

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Southern literature emerged as its own genre out of a desire and imagined need for mainstream, privileged white Southerners to discuss their identity free from the perceived misjudgment of the rest of the nation. Originating well before the Civil War would mark the South as an irrefutably unique entity within the United States, Southern literature has, from its beginning, grappled with sophisticated questions of identity and self-realization. After the War, the Southern Gothic originally filled a need to discuss this new identity in more sophisticated through still problematic and narrow terms. What this perceived persecution and genuine otherness produced, however, is a medium for actual outcasts and outsiders to express themselves in valuable ways. The Southern Gothic is a particularly apt format for stories of queer, minority, and women writers to tell their stories as it was intentionally created to discuss and understand oddity and singularity. The paranoid white gentry of the New South forged, through a series of misguided creative efforts, a literary path for writers such as Dorothy Allison to reclaim as a genre for the very people they rendered outcasts. What was intended as another avenue for the propagation of the history of a privileged few has become a literary bastion of the many experiences of Southern life.

The academic discipline of Southern Studies arose in part to define Southern culture on Southerners’ terms. In the years surrounding the Civil War, there were several efforts on the part of pro-Confederate Southerners to curate a literature of the South’s white upper class, and certain ideas of Southern exceptionalism certainly stem from that train of thought; however, Southern Studies as a field fills a necessary role in the broader study of American literature. Southern Studies departments, based predominately in the South itself, allow scholars to define and discuss elements of Southern culture in less biased terms than those of the national lexicon. Decades of stigmatization from the rest of the country coupled with a

keen awareness of a unique and specific history seem to be the motivations for the founding of the field. Most major universities below the Mason-Dixon Line began to adopt programs for the study of Southern culture in the mid-1970s, with academia settling on the term “Southern Studies” at roughly the same time. Within these departments, the focus of research is often on gender, race, and sexuality, examining the whole population of the South, especially those marginalized by the ruling class.

Accounts of Southern history often fail in their discussion of the past as a series of actions carried out by privileged white males. This tendency toward minimizing the lives of the rest of the population is seen in early curations of Southern culture which almost exclusively discuss white, genteel lives, rendering slaves and the poor little more than scenery and affluent women coveted household decorations. Southern Studies, however, assumes institutionalized racism, vestiges of plantation life, and romanticized patriarchy as a cultural starting point and from there discuss the histories of everyone else. The South’s collective assumed “otherness,” while important and interesting, can obscure the stories of the truly marginalized.

In the first chapter of his book *Away Down South*, titled “Cavalier and Yankee: The Origins of Southern ‘Otherness,’” James C. Cobb attempts to locate the point in American cultural history “at which ‘southern’ began to convey sociocultural as well as geographic distinctions” (Cobb, 9). Though he calls his attempt “largely a matter of perception,” Cobb argues this moment is most accurately traced back to a time before American independence. The arrival of African slaves in the Seventeenth Century and the South’s widespread adoption of chattel slavery began almost immediately to distinguish Southern life from that of the rest of the nation. The luxuries afforded by unpaid labor rendered the Southern landowner an inherent aristocrat. In this chapter, Cobb quotes James Fenimore Cooper’s reflections on

his interactions with Southerners: “the South had ‘more men who *belong to the class of what is termed gentlemen*’ than ‘any other country of the world’” (24).

This view of the South’s history and legacy, however, is, as Cobb goes on to discuss, narrow: It defines the lifestyle and identity of the South in terms of what privileged white males experienced throughout decades and centuries of systematic oppression of African Americans (first slaves and then second-class citizens), women, and the poor. This identity nonetheless prompted Southerners to consider themselves a part of a unique if not elite group within the United States, and the years leading up to the Civil War intensified the desire to distinguish Southern literature from that of the rest of the country.

Founded in 1834, *The Southern Literary Messenger* is perhaps the earliest conscious attempt to define the South as a unique cultural entity within the United States in the sense that today’s scholars define the region, particularly within the decades between Reconstruction and the end of the Civil Rights era. In its first edition, the editors of *The Messenger* implored Virginia’s citizenry to support their attempt to curate the Southern identity: “It would be a mortifying discovery, if instead of kindness and good will, [our benefactor] should be repulsed by the coldness and neglect of a Virginia public. Hundreds of similar publications thrive and prosper north of the Potomac. *Shall not one be supported in the whole South?*” they ask, relying on separatist sentiments to create a moral desire to support the South-centric publication (1). This approach was successful, and the *Messenger* was published somewhat regularly until the last year of the war, when the drain on Richmond’s resources closed down their publishing house. The second edition, published in October 1834, commended readers for their support in an editorial titled “To the Public, and Especially the People of the Southern States”: “The appeal to the citizens of the south... was not in vain. That such a paper is to be desired in the southern states no one will controvert” (1). These editorials reflect a pride in the South’s unique identity but also reveal the anxiety

surrounding the South's precarious lifestyle. The paper's fizzling out in the last year of the war can be simply linked to a lack of resources, but the calling into question of Southern identity after an economically crippling defeat likely may have influenced decisions to abandon the paper as well.

Early iterations of the Southern Gothic can be traced back to one sometimes-editor of *The Southern Literary Messenger*, native Virginian Edgar Allen Poe. Though his writing dealt less with specific *Southern* Gothic imagery, his adoption of the Gothic aesthetic stands as one of the earliest confluences of distinctly American literature and Gothic imagery. Thus, while Poe is best defined as a Gothic or, at most, American Gothic writer, his relationship with the forging of the South's literature and penchant for the Gothic aesthetic is not to be overlooked, rendering the relationship between Southern identity and separatist sympathies even more difficult to disentangle. The Southern Gothic emerged as distinct literary genre at some point in the early Twentieth Century, with William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, and others providing a separatist movement of their own in the face of the racism- and misogyny fueled New Agrarian school of writing.

Though more sophisticated than the work of their contemporaries, these authors' works were not immune to the problematic tropes of Southern identity. The early Southern Gothic writer is white, often male, and well-educated; however, the genre's obsession with Southern exceptionalism creates an apt artistic space for the outcast in American literature. Thus the need for Southern Studies is as real as the need for the Southern Gothic. Through this lens, scholars are able to examine the South and all its nuance without the romanticism or blind condemnation that tend to dominate discussion of Southern culture on a national scale. Within academia, it offers a way into the difficult and complex cultural contexts that have produced some of America's most significant art.

Modern scholarly discussion of Faulkner's work in particular tends to focus on his carefully curated, distinctly Southern aesthetics as a means of understanding the white Southern psyche in the 1930s, when ways of life and tradition were not only at stake but on the brink of experiencing a large-scale overhaul. Faulkner's works do not take particular issue with what are now acknowledged as unjust political and socioeconomic realities in the early Twentieth Century South; rather, these realities are a part of a familiar backdrop in his Yoknapatawpha County. What is at stake for Faulkner is, of course, the past and its place in the present.

In another chapter of *Away Down South*, "Southern Writers and 'The Impossible Load of the Past,'" Cobb discusses the end of a particular kind of Southern isolation in the wake of the First World War, quoting Allen Tate's observance that "the South re-entered the world – but gave a backward glance" (130). What Cobb argues, however, is that this "'backward glance' that marked the full flowering of the literary phase of the Southern Renaissance came primarily in the 1930s...in the absence of a critical historical tradition" (130). Questions of the past's legacy became overwhelming, Cobb argues, in a rapidly changing South. Southern identity was even more at stake, Cobb suggests, with the commercial success of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, which he describes as "more critical and complex than it appeared" (130). While the novel is doubtlessly romantic in its dealings with plantation life, Cobb argues that the anxieties of the New South are easily discerned in the best-seller, noting that though "as a young woman, Mitchell had rebelled personally against the New South's Victorian social and gender traditions" and that the novel itself ultimately puts "material comfort" at stake, forgoing criticism of that highly structured society and instead clinging to hope for the luxury afforded privileged white people in the Old South.

Though Cobb and others argue *Gone with the Wind* is at least a proto-progressive piece, its cultural impact, if nothing else, is undeniably socially regressive, and its reliance on

socioeconomic, gender, and racial norms within both the New South and Old South societies prohibits any meaningful discussion of the problematic foundation of Scarlett's society. At its best, the Southern Gothic moves beyond nostalgia and pseudo-romance, assuming a common society as a backdrop and moving on to discuss the past as part of the present. The Southern Gothic succeeds as a cultural snapshot when it captures a South that, though consumed with tradition, is skeptical, aware of its precarious state, and "glancing back" with open eyes.

Faulkner's work is undeniably marked by obsessions with identity and time. As a writer obviously and primarily concerned with stories of his own people, Faulkner's success as a novelist and remembrance in the literary canon may be attributed as much to the circumstances of his time as to his ability as a writer. That is to say, because Faulkner was writing in this moment, the overall themes of his work are heightened by the socioeconomic and political realities of his time. What is at stake in Faulkner is more than the fate of a handful of rural Mississippians. For Faulkner, what is at stake is the future of the South and the preservation of the past.

Discussions of the Southern Gothic, like discussions of the South itself, often devolve into a string of clichés and idle stereotypes. In 1960, Flannery O'Connor had already grown tired of the oversimplification of Southern literature, writing, "Anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it's going to be called realistic." The Southern Gothic is often typified by its startling imagery and strange sexual codes, but the Southern Studies scholar takes note of the overarching theme of identity and anxiety over preserving, and later reconciling with, a deeply troubling, violent, and exploitative past. Simple, whitewashed narratives of Southern life have appealed to the masses for decades. From Margaret Mitchell's best-selling *Gone With the Wind* to the 1989 hit *Steel Magnolias*, national audiences have made it clear that

there is something fascinating about these accounts of Southern life and, particularly, Southern women.

Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* did not garner the same immediate financial success of *Gone With the Wind*. Elizabeth Jane Harrison argues in her book *Female Pastoral: Women Writers Re-visioning the American South* that *Gone With the Wind* appealed to readers and movie-goers alike with what she refers to as "Scarlett's heroic qualities" (43) as well as "the 1930s' neo-Confederate cause" (44). What Harrison fails to acknowledge beyond a brief dismissal, however, are "the problematic aspects of the novel" (44). To call *Gone with the Wind* a "Feminist Farm Fantasy" (43) is to ignore what Scarlett is fighting for – a preservation of the Old South and the plantation lifestyle. While identity is certainly at stake in *Gone with the Wind*, it is so rooted in Scarlett's relationship to the plantation that the reader is never asked to consider the possibility that the Old South has no real place in 1930s America.

Conversely, Faulkner's work assumes the complicated nostalgia and backward glances of Southern culture and examines it as a part of a larger cultural landscape. Several of Faulkner's texts, most notably *As I Lay Dying*, mark the beginning of progressive thought within the establishment class of Southern writers. While working through the obsessions and anxieties of the time, Faulkner's works, often problematic, intentionally antiquated, begin to pose the questions that will adapt the genre to be particularly well-suited for those marginalized by not only the neo-Confederate sympathies briefly discussed in *Female Pastoral* but by the patriarchy, racism, and strict societal expectations that stem from that ideology. *As I Lay Dying* offers several examples of Faulkner's more nuanced relationship with the South, its past, and its people.

In approaching the text from a feminist perspective, one must consider Faulkner's motivations for exploring his own obsessions and ideas through the women narrators in the novel. Importantly, the men's chapters in the story tend to move the plot along while the women's narration creates and develops much more of the folklore and mythology of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. These women also offer musings on the topics that most fascinate Faulkner: family, origins, and his own concept of *blood*. Tracing the conventions of the Southern Gothic back to Faulkner rather than his more conventional contemporaries, women are not only the designated storytellers but the philosophers and keepers of myth. While Darl, Jewel, and even Cash come to important spiritual and conceptual realizations, the women of *As I Lay Dying* spend almost all of their time dwelling on the philosophical questions that loom over much of Faulkner's work.

In the only chapter narrated by Addie, Faulkner explores themes of nihilism and lays out much of his concept of *blood*. At this point, Addie has died and is narrating the story of her spiritual death from her casket. Even in death, her frustration with her family and her lot in life are evident, and she seems not to have reached real clarity on the great questions of her life. After recalling her attempts to connect with her young students through brutal violence, she tells the story of how she came to marry Anse. Addie's nihilism becomes a sort of family resemblance when she remembers revealing to Anse that her "people" have all passed on:

“...I have people. In Jefferson.”

His face fell a little. ‘Well, I got a little property. I’m forehanded; I got a good honest name. I know how town folks are, but maybe when they talk to me.....’

‘They might listen,’ I said. ‘But they’ll be hard to talk to.’ He was watching my face. ‘They’re in the cemetery.’

‘But your living kin,’ he said. ‘They’ll be different.’

‘Will they?’ I said. ‘I don’t know. I never had any other kind’” (171).

Here Addie embraces Faulkner's famous epithet, that the past “isn't even past.”

Earlier in the chapter, she reveals her father's obsession with death, that he called it

“the reason for living” (169). The novel’s events occur only because Addie has died. While she exists in her children’s memory as a caregiver, life-giver, source of comfort, or failure, her self-written legacy seems to be one of violence and remorse.

For Addie, childbirth and motherhood are spiritual deaths. Unlike the mothers discussed in Williams’s article, Addie does not gladly give herself over to sacrificial motherhood. She grows resentful, and her distance is noted among her children. (Insert quote). Faulkner’s portrayal of Addie as a woman deeply harmed by her society’s expectations for her and the conventions of marriage in the 1930s rural South allow her to speak to more than domesticity and motherly bliss. As indicated by the recollections of violence in her classroom, Addie is psychologically disturbed by the lack of connection in her life, and her very casual agreement to marry Anse reveal just how desperate she is for a bond. When this not achieved by marriage or motherhood, Addie becomes resentful and is a distant figure to most of her children.

For Southerners concerned with origins and identity as not only Faulkner but Hurston, O’Connor, and even Mitchell were, the past looms as a sort of creator in that the New South their work seeks to understand came into being only because of the South’s troubled and troubling history, and for writers across the genre, mothers serve as metaphors for this past and its place in daily life. Mitchell’s Ellen O’Hara, mother of Scarlett, the model Southern belle, is a long-suffering, saint-like figure who does not survive long after the fall of the plantation. Scarlett’s devotion to and idolization of her mother, a relic of the Old South, is reflective of neo-Confederate nostalgia and desire to return to so-called antebellum glory. For Faulkner, origins are not to be simply revered and left in the past. In *As I Lay Dying*, Addie’s presence is felt most acutely after her death, and she herself exists in a limbo-like state, not gone from the world and continuing to hold great power in her family’s daily life yet a distinctly unconscious force in the corporeal world. For Allison, these questions of identity,

origin, and *blood* are further complicated by her work's more nuanced and progressive statements about motherhood. Anney is an enabler, a vestige of the poor white class disenfranchised by the plantation system.

In her article, "Female Gothic fiction, grotesque realities, and *Bastard out of Carolina*: Dorothy Allison revises the Southern Gothic," Peggy Dunn Bailey acknowledges Allison's resistance to being labeled a "Southern Gothic writer," quoting a 1994 interview in which Allison, when asked to define her literary tradition, responded, "I belong to the tradition of iconoclastic, queer, southern writer." Though Allison complicates her place in the broader American literary tradition, Bailey correlates the themes and characters of her work with the long history of the Southern Gothic. What Bailey calls the "distinctly American, frequently Southern, aspect of the Gothic" is the presentation of "human beings...as the ultimate sources of horror."

Bailey discusses the necessity of the Southern Gothic as a medium for the disenfranchised, oppressed, and dispossessed in the sphere of American literature and explains the difference between works in the genre and popular works featuring Gothic or supernatural elements: "The Southern Gothic is fueled by the need to explain and/or understand foundational trauma, the violation or loss of that which is essential to identity and survival but often irretrievable." Thus the Southern Gothic becomes necessary as an art form, attempting to fill an important gap in the understanding of the human experience. The common themes of family and home indicate an obsession with origins and their ultimate meaning in an individual's life, that "foundational trauma" Bailey explains.

In many Southern Gothic texts, the obsession with origins is represented in queered or otherwise deviant models of motherhood. Keira V. Williams discusses themes of motherhood in the Southern Gothic in her article, "'Between Creation and Devouring': Southern Women

Writers and the Politics of Motherhood,” in which she focuses on the narrow standards set for Southern women, the risk of defying those in the slightest, and the importance of nuanced portrayals of cycles of abuse, focusing on Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina* alongside more traditional portrayals of the Southern mother.

In the novel, poor white life begins and ends with shame and is marked entirely by negative perceptions, both from the wealthier members of white southern society and within the working class itself. While the “white trash” and “ILLEGITIMATE” labels compromise both Bone’s and Anney’s sense of self and agency, the conditions of Bone’s “white trash” reality also burden her with a complex understanding of her mother, forcing her to contextualize Anney’s passivity as more than what Williams calls an “uncomplicated [act] of evil.” Coupled with that class-based shame is the narrow identity of women in this society. Bone, Anney, and several other women throughout the novel fail both to live up to what society expects of them as women and to find happiness, fulfilment, security, and agency within their class’s own unique gender hierarchy.

The secondary role women play in this Southern society at large coupled with the denial of self the Boatwrights experience as poor whites become a form of social grooming for sexual abuse. The shame attached to womanhood by mainstream society and the condemnation of the Boatwrights’ failure to attain ideal whiteness and white womanhood shame Bone and her own mother not only into believing she deserves Glen’s abuse but that she is to blame for his abusive tendencies. For Faulkner, this secondary, domestic role empowers the women in his work to serve as oracles and sages, but Allison moves Southern women, still wise, still taught to survive, into a realistic portrayal of the Twentieth Century South. Totally rejected by the mainstream and embraced only as a subjugated class by their subculture, the women in this novel have little hope of finding a voice within their society or making sufficient and meaningful changes within their own lives. The reader sees this

structure most obviously and dramatically queered in Aunt Raylene, the woman who owns her own land on the outskirts of town. She is content there, where ““Trash rises”” (180), as she tells Bone when she begins spending more time with her.

Williams’s assertions regarding Southern motherhood can be applied to *As I Lay Dying* as well. The shame, or at least anxiety, surrounding not only the South’s future but the forces that created its present naturally lead its writers to fear their maker. The culture that bore the New South was indeed monstrous, and rather than confront that reality, early Southern Gothic writers must grapple with the anxiety of a society that is, like Bone’s home life, “held together with lies” (Allison, 248). These early discussions, though still centered around white people and often concerned with a preservation of a problematic past, create archetypes of the outcast and marginalized that render the Southern Gothic genre uniquely, if accidentally, tailored to queer and otherwise stigmatized writers.

It is this type of Southern narrative that endures as a part of the American canon. Following Faulkner, Hurston, and Walker, Allison claims these stories as the literatures of the South with her best-seller *Bastard out of Carolina*. *Bastard* not only opened a national discussion on child sexual abuse and economic inequality but brought to the forefront of contemporary American literature the realities and complexities of Southern life. Without explanation or apology, Allison tells this queer, feminist story within the artistic tradition of the Southern Gothic, claiming the genre for the outcast on an international scale.

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Sketches and Real Life in Oxford, MS, and Other Places

No Such Thing as Secrets

I step out of the airport, expecting the humidity to hit me like the softness of my childhood bed, but instead I feel for the first time the big festering that is Southern summer. The bus ride is not better. I've never come home without greeting, without a ride from the airport and without a meal.

"I come every day at a different time. They told me to come at a different time. They said it is better for her. It is better with the dementia," she says, walking briskly down the hallway.

"If I come at the same time every day, she can start to expect it, and it will become a part of her routine, which is very bad." She says this and looks at me as if to say, "It is your turn now," but this is all too new to me, and I don't know how to talk casually about a person who is trying so hard not to leave, so I just say, "Yes, ma'am," like the child I feel like, nearly jogging to keep up with her as she turns corners.

"You must not show how shocked you are. It can't be like that time with the puppies."

"I won't." I was only seven when I saw the dog having puppies and threw up on Aunt Amanda's new patio set, but that momentary lapse in composure has come up all twenty-three times I've seen her since.

"Alright. Now straighten your tie. We have to do this," she says, and I'm shocked by her inclusiveness. *We* are doing this. Now I'm frightened. We don't talk this way. Things aren't supposed to be hard for us. Now we *have to* do this, and I am frightened by her honesty.

“Mama, look who is here to see you. Do you remember Jeff?” I’m relieved when she does. Three hours later, she is gone. When she dies, I am standing outside with all of my small cousins. When they know, as the nurses say, “it would not be long,” I’m told to take the children outside for some air. That night, I am in the back seat of my father’s Chrysler though he is still at the hospice home making arrangements with the caretakers and funeral home. I am between two young cousins, and Amanda is at the wheel. We are going “home,” back to the town where the puppies were born.

“Can we pull over, please?” I manage some urgency in my tone, and soon enough I am bent over, clutching a speed limit sign, vomiting on the dirt shoulder of the highway. One of my small cousins, stopping to watch, is kind enough to point out a sizeable amount of vomit on my sleeve, yellow and already baking in the heat that has not left with the sun. I think of how that is the food I ate on the plane and with Sandra early this morning.

“Hey, Ruthie!” Now he is calling to his sister. “Jeff puked all over himself! Look!” And now Aunt Amanda is out of the Chrysler, telling me to leave the shirt on the side of the road and get back in the car. We are still forty-five miles away, she tells me. I do not want to leave my shirt on the side of the road, not only because it is the only article of clothing I own worth more than fifty dollars. I’ve been fond of long sleeves lately, and I’d rather wear my vomit than bare everything. But everything today is making me feel small and quiet. I say, “Yes, ma’am.” I throw the shirt in the dust. I sit very still in the car in my undershirt, eyes closed, until we are at my parents’ house.

At home, we sit and talk without crying. I’ve been away at school. Sandra and I have just moved in together. We are not married. We are barely engaged. This gives the family plenty to talk about, plenty of ways to ignore what will lay us all to waste on Tuesday, after the funeral. Having admitted it *is* quite unusual to be living with Sandra and fully described

my four years at Ole Miss, I assume the attention is off me. I start to ask one of the small cousins what she thinks of third grade when Aunt Amanda cuts in.

“Jeff, those little scars on your arms, those are from when you tried to kill yourself, aren’t they?”

“Yes.” I’m dizzy.

“They’re from when you couldn’t take it and took the little razor blades out of Sandra’s pink razor, right? You use an electric razor, so you had to pry open that cheap little razor didn’t you?”

For Christ’s sake. I didn’t even tell my fucking therapist it was pink, that it was Sandra’s dull razor.

“Did you tell Sandra, when she came home early with a bad headache, that your blood became the same shade of pink against the tiling? Did you know that is why she came home? That was not an act of God, little boy. That was an act of PMS.

“Did you know that when your daddy was your age, he jumped in front of a streetcar? It pulled to a stop right in front of him, and after the steel tapped him on the shoulder, he walked across the street and joined the First Baptist Church, but that was no miracle, either. That was supply and demand.”

I’m sick, and she’s tearing off her pantyhose, scrubbing off her makeup with the tablecloth. The small cousins are crying, but my mother and aunts begin to laugh and rip off false eyelashes. Aunt Genie, the oldest of her sisters, is nearly naked, screaming.

“We all know I wasn’t premature. Mama and Daddy had to get married, and that’s why we’re all here.”

There is chicken salad on the dining room carpet, and the women who raised me are walking through it barefoot, smoking cigarettes, and letting the ash fall where it will.

It wasn't long after that I started smoking for no reason other than we moved into a place with a balcony, and I thought that was the sort of thing people did on balconies. That and, of course, I was learning there were no secrets truly my own, and as far as I knew, this was how people dealt with that sort of realization.

The Fall of Icarus

As Brueghel tells us, when poor Icarus fell to his death that fine and warm morning, it was spring, that delicate, life-giving time that was for Icarus not life-giving at all but devastating, blazing hot like the early afternoons of the months to come.

Unnoticed was this struggle by the farmer ploughing his field, the farmer ploughing his field as his father had ploughed that self-same field and as his father before him had ploughed that self-same field before him, the farmer who had not forsaken the advice and wisdom of his father to attach wings to his overalls and fall. Soon enough

these fields, as they had each year for some centuries and were fully expected to do now, would burst forth with row upon row of crop of root and vine, stirring in the farmer the same relief and pride that had moved generations.

The sea churned and took notice neither of him nor of Icarus nor of any other man who had met his end in its dark waters and sealed itself against those above and below it, an unfeeling Purgatory of the hillside.

Icarus did not feel the wax roll down his back, did not feel the peculiar unstinging that comes from wax, that unsettling sensation from something that ought to sear and punish, that pain-numbness.

Unsignificantly, without pretense or pageantry, far from the farmer's field, that field that was not so much his as he was the field's, there was, or perhaps was not as nary a man heard nor saw nor spoke of it,

a distinct *splash*, heard only by his Maker, the undignified and singular sound of Icarus drowning.

Subtraction

Say it's two p.m., and the cathedral is yellowed with spring. A muted red, the color of raspberries, meets the weeds. Say you must set out alone, leaving the small sounds of ice cubes in juice glasses. Your nerves sit like cottonmouths. Say the path trails South, between trees that smoke. Say you do not know how far, the distance between wrist and forefinger. No one ever said, "Don't laugh when nothing's funny." No one ever gave you anything except *The Book of Bird Feathers and Slide Rules*, with its useless illustrations:

1. A stripped swallow feather against a checkerboard
2. A young French girl hitting her brother with a slide rule
3. An owl plucked of its feathers, perched on a slide rule

Say you wish this were a dream, but dreaming is as far from you as slicing peaches. Oh, crossroads! On the one hand, snails murmur. On the other, the air is thick with cathedral yellowing. What muted part of you begins to understand subtraction? There, in the sound of marching band practice. Or elsewhere, where your wrist breaks?