In which we traded a bustling Nashville for Hohenwald, hometown of William Gay. After a series of U-turns and a concert of rustling maps, we wound our way through the woods, trailers, houses, and farms of Tennessee, finally finding Little Swan Creek Road. We were then greeted by Gay’s two dogs in the driveway outside his log cabin. Giving our esteemed author the honored passenger seat next to George Singleton’s hand grenade, our stuffed possum mascot, and Mark Olenick’s plastic-looking pickled eggs, we headed fifteen minutes back into town to Rio Colorado, one of maybe four restaurants in the area.

After fajitas and quesadillas, navigated by a reluctant Gay, we went in search of an illusive elephant sanctuary which remained just that—illusive and unfound. One van, however, stumbled upon a large tree-gnawed by a beaver. These markings they found so interesting that they were compelled to pull over and photograph them in spite of the imminent risk of being shot-gunned for trespassing.

The wonderful wanderings and delays eventually led us back to Gay’s home where he read us one of his prize-winning short stories, “The Paperhanger.” Being in the author’s low-lit living room and surrounded by the landscape that had inspired the stories added an urgent reality and sincerity to the fiction.

Gay, a worn-in, somewhat reclusive spirit with curling gray hair, pained yet playful eyes, wore spectacular, black high-top sneakers, spent a generous amount of time answering our questions, telling stories, signing books, taking pictures, and letting us play on the slide in his yard.

Satisfied yet a little saddened at the thought of departure, we piled back into the van and drove past the headless eagle at the end of Gay’s dirt driveway and out of the darkening disgruntled Tennessee South. The old Natchez Trace carried us to the Best Western of Muscle Shoals, Alabama, where some sold out and went to Outback Steakhouse, while the rest mused over four not-so-appealing menu items at the local bar-b-que. The night was topped off with a milkshake expedition which helped us all to find redemption, before we headed to the beds of Muscle Shoal’s finest Best Western.
Raymer had been working at the housing project for more than a month, and during this time the little old man had consistently moved with the sun. Raymer had begun work during the chill days of a blackberry winter, and the man had shuttled his chair as each day progressed, claiming the thin, watery light as if he drew sustenance from it. Now it was well into June, and at some point the man had shifted into reverse, moving counterclockwise for the shade but always positioning his lawn chair where he could watch Raymer work.

Raymer hardly noticed him, for he was in more pain than he had thought possible. He could scarcely get through the day. He was amazed that hearts could actually ache, actually break. Secretly he suspected that his had been defective, already faulted, a secondhand or rebuilt heart, for it had certainly not held up as well as he had expected it to. Corrie, who had been his childhood sweetheart before she became his wife, had, inserted the point of a chisel into the fault line and tapped it once lightly with a hammer, and that was the end of that.

By trade he was a painter, and some days he was conscious only of the aluminum extension ladder through his tennis shoes and the brush at the end of his extended arm, which leaned out, and out, as if gravity were just a bothersome rumor, as if he were leaning to paint the very void that yawned to engulf him. When Raymer came down to move the ladder, the old man was waiting for him at the foot of it holding a glass of iced tea in his hand. He was a wizened little man who did not even come to Raymer's shoulder. He had washed-out eyes of the palest blue, and the tip of his nose looked as if, sometime long ago, it had been sliced off neatly with a pocketknife. He was wearing a canvas porkpie hat that had half a dozen trout flies hooked through the band, and he was dressed in flip-flops, faded blue jeans, and an old Twisted Sister T-shirt.

Raymer took the glass of tea as you'd take a pill a doctor ordered you to, and stood holding it as if he did not know what to do with it. Drink it up before that ice melts. You don't talk much, do you?

Raymer sipped the tea. It was sweet and strong, and the glass was full of shaved ice. A sprig of mint floated on top, and he crushed it between his teeth. He worked for myself, he said.

I was watchin you ever since you come out here. You're right agile on that ladder. Move around like you was on solid ground. How old a feller are you?

I'm twenty-four, Raymer said, chewing the mint, its taste as evocative as a hallucinogenic drug, reminding him of something but he could not have said what.

Where'd you get that T-shirt?

It was in some stuff that my daughter left when she married, Mayfield said.

You ever do any bluff-climbin? Any what?

Bluff-climbin: Climbin around over these limestone bluffs down by the Tennessee River.

No.

I bet you could, though. I used to do it when I was a hell of a lot older than twenty-four. I can't do it now, though—my joints has got stiff, and my bones are as brittle as glass.

I'm sorry, Raymer said, feeling an obscure need to apologize for infirmities of age he hadn't caused. He was thinking of Corrie the last time he'd seen her, thinking of her hands pushing against his chest.

It ain't your fault. Listen, I got somethin I need a coat of paint on. You stop by when you knock off work this evenin, and I'll show it to you.

Well, I don't know. I push myself pretty hard. I'm usually about worn out by the end of the day. It ain't much, and I ain't lookin' to get it done for nothin. I'll pay you. If I'm not too tired.

The main thing is I want to talk to you. I've got a business proposition for you.

Raymer drained the glass and handed it to the old man. He began repositioning the ladder. I'll see at quitting time, he said.
his brushes, he thought he might make it to his truck and escape without painting whatever it was the old man wanted painted. He wanted to go home to the empty house and sit in the dark and think about Corrie. But Mayfield was a wily old man and had anticipated him. He was leaning against the front of Raymer’s truck when Raymer came around the building with his brushes in his hand. He had one flip-flop cocked on the bumper and was leaning against the grille with an elbow propped on the hood. He wasn’t much taller than the hood of the truck. I’ll show you that thing now, he said. It’s over on the porch of my apartment.

Raymer didn’t even know what it was. It appeared to be a sort of flattened-out concrete lion. Its paws were outstretched, and its eyes looked crossed or rolled back in its head. It looked like an animal on which something had fallen from an enormous height, flattening its back and leaving a rectangular cavity.

What the hell is it?
It’s a homemade planter, of course. It was my wife’s. It’s all I’ve got left after fifty years of marriage, all I have to remember her by.

Raymer gazed at the sorry-looking thing. It seemed precious little to have salvaged from fifty years of marriage, but he guessed it was more than he had.

What color you want it? Paint won’t stay on that concrete anyway, not out here in the weather.
I ain’t worried about the weather—that thing’ll be on this porch longer than I will. Paint it red, brighten things up around here.

While Raymer painted it red, the old man told him a tale.
I was watchin the way you get around on that ladder, he began. You ain’t got no fear of heights. That ladder must run out forty foot, and you never make a misstep. Course it wouldn’t take but one, and that’d be all of you. I was thinkin about them bluffs down on the Tennessee River. Down there below Clifton. I bet a young man like you wouldn’t have no trouble climbin up to some caves I know of on them bluffs.

Raymer was barely listening. While he was painting the lion, he was replaying a loop of tape in his head of Corrie telling him about the emptiness in her life. What’s the matter? he had asked, but whatever was the matter was so evasive and intangible that it couldn’t be pinned down with a word. No word was precise or subtle enough to explain it. We never have enough money, but it’s not really about money, she had said. He had dropped out of college so that Corrie could finish nursing school. He didn’t know what kind of emptiness, or what had been removed to cause it, but the space must have been sizable, because she had found a six-foot-foot guitarist in a country band to fill it. The guitarist’s name was Robbie, and he had a wild mane of curly red hair and a predatory, foxlike face.

Hell, he’s not even good-looking, Raymer had told her. He looks like a goddamned fox.
Like a what?
The sword was wrapped in what looked like an old tablecloth. The old man unfolded the oilcloth and held up the sword for Raymer to see. Raymer was expecting something polished and lethal, but the steel had a dull patina of time, and it seemed to draw light into itself instead of reflecting it.

It's one of them old CSA officer's swords, ain't it? the man said.

I really wouldn't know one from a meat cleaver, but I guess it is if you say it is. It's certainly some kind of sword. What else was in there?

Belt buckles. Rusty guns. Bones, like I said. Further back there was different kinds of bones, arrowheads, and clay pots. That place was old. I ain't no zoologist or nothin', but them was Indian bones.

Hellfire, Raymer said. I thought you needed someplace nobody knew about. It sounds like folks were just tripping over each other to get into your 'cave. It must have been the Grand Central Station of caves.

The old man took the sword back and folded its shroud around it. Nobody's interested in that kind of stuff anymore, he said. Everybody's forgot about it. When I was in there, I guess I was the first in seventy-five years. Nobody's been there since— I'd bet on it.

If you left nineteen thousand dollars in there, you bet pretty high, Raymer observed. I thought you said you didn't gamble.

Mayfield had not yet turned on the lights in his living room, and behind him the door loomed dark and silent. Raymer thought of his own still house, where he must go.

I've got to get on, he said. What happened to your nose?

I had plastic surgery. I wanted it this way. I picked this nose out of a book.

No, he was a

Not too bad—lookin'.

You need to get over it. Get on to the next thing.

Closure? Raymer was grinning. Where did you hear that? Was relationship therapy part of the bootlegging trade when you followed it?

I heard it on TV. I got no way of gettin' out anywhere. I watch a lot of

Them talk shows—they shrinks and social workers are always talkin' about closure. Closure this, closure that. I figure you need some. You need somethin' for sure. You got a look about you like you don't care whether you live or die, and maybe you'd a little rather die. I've seen that look on folks before, and I don't care for it. It ain't healthy.

Raymer was thinking that maybe the old man was right. He did need something, and closure was as good a word for it as anything else. Everything had just been so damned...
polite. She hadn’t even raised her voice. Just I’m going, goodbye, don’t leave the light on for me. If only she had done something irrevocable, something he couldn’t forget, something so bad she couldn’t take it back. Something that would cauterize the wound like a red-hot iron.

Did it have a metal lid, this famous jug?
What?

If it did, after twenty years in a wet cave the lid’s rusted away and the money’s just a mildewed mess of rotten goop. A biological stew of all the germs that came off all the people who ever handled it. Fermenting all these years.

I never heard such rubbish. Anyway, I’m way ahead of you. The money’s wrapped in plastic, and I melted paraffin in a cooker and sealed it with a couple of inches of that. Like women used to seal jelly.

This silenced Raymer, and he took a sip of beer and sat watching Mayfield bemusedly. After a while he set his bottle aside. He seemed to have made up his mind about something.

Do you believe in God? he asked.
Do what? Of course I do. Don’t you? Do you own a Bible?
I believe there’s one in there somewhere.
Go get it.

Mayfield was in the house for some time. Raymer watched staccato lightning flicker in the west out of tumorous storm clouds. Thunder rumbled like something heavy and unainly rolling down an endless corridor, faint and fainter. When Mayfield came out, he had a worn Bible covered in black leather. He held it out to Raymer.

Did you want to read a psalm or two? he asked.

Raymer didn’t take the Bible. Do you swear you’re telling me the truth about that money? he asked.

The old man looked amused, as if he’d won some obscure point of honor. He laid the Bible in the seat of the lawn chair and placed his palm on it. I swear I hid a vinegar jar with nineteen thousand seven hundred dollars in it in a cave down on the Tennessee River.

Raymer figured he might as well cover all the contingencies. And as far as I know, it’s still there, he said.

And as far as I know, it’s still there, Mayfield repeated.

It was never about money, Corrie had said, but Raymer thought perhaps it had been about money after all. Corrie had been happiest when they had money to spend, and she fell into long silences when it grew tight. The happiest he had seen her was when they bought an old farmhouse to remodel. But everything ate up money: mortgage payments, building materials. Anyway, what Corrie seemed to enjoy was the act of spending, not what she bought.

He had given her a $300 leather jacket for her twenty-second birthday, and she had left it in a Taco Bell and not even checked on it for a week. Naturally, it was gone. They probably made a lot of others just like it, she said. Somewhere someone Raymer didn’t know was wearing his $300.

He cut the motor and let the boat drift the last few feet toward shore, rocking slightly on the choppy water. He took a line up from the stern and tossed it over a sweet-gum branch. He drew it around and tied it off and just stood for a moment, staring up the face of the bluff. The cliff rose in a sheer vertical that he judged to be almost two hundred feet. The opening he was looking at was perhaps thirty feet from the top.

You went up that thing?
I damn sure did. With a five-gallon vinegar jug of money.

The hell you did.
The hell I didn’t. It’s not as steep as it looks.

It better not be. If it is, Spiderman couldn’t get up it with suction cups on his hands and feet. Are you sure it’s the right one?

I’m almost positive, Mayfield said. He had opened a tackle box and sat with an air of concentration, inspecting its contents. At length he selected a fly and began to tie it to the nylon line on the fishing rod he was holding.

It was ten o’clock on a balmy Saturday morning. They had already been inside several inlets where the river backwatered and had inspected the bluffs for caves. They had seen two openings that could have been caves, but the openings had not looked right to the old man. Mayfield had brought a cooler of beer and Coca-Colas, a picnic basket filled with sandwiches, his tackle box, a creel, and two fly rods. Raymer had brought only a heavy-duty flashlight and a two-hundred foot coil of nylon rope, and he was disgusted. If we had one of those striped umbrellas, we could lollygag on the beach, he said. If we had a beach.

He began a winding course up the bluff. It was cut with ledges that narrowed as the bluff ascended, and sometimes he was forced to progress from ledge to ledge by wedging his boots in vertical crevices and pushing himself laboriously upward. From time to time he came upon stunted cedars growing out of the fissured rock; but he didn’t trust them to hold his weight.

Halfway up, the ledges ceased to be anything more than sloping footholds on the rock face, and he could go no farther. He stood on a narrow ledge not much wider than his shoe soles, hugging the bluff and glancing up. The rest of the bluff looked as sheer and smooth as an enormous section of window glass. The hell with this, he said. He worked himself down to a wider outcropping and hunkered there with his back against the limestone and his eyes closed. He could feel the hot sun on his eyelids. When he opened them, the world was spread out in a panorama of such magnitude that his head reeled, and for a moment he did not think of Corrie at all.

Everything below him was diminished—a tiny boat with a tiny man casting a line, the inlet joining the rolling river where it gleamed like metal in the sun. Far upstream, toward the ferry, a barge drifted with a load of new cars, their glass and chrome flashing in the sun like a holograph. Mayfield glanced up to check his progress and waved an encouraging hand. Raymer was seized with an intense loathing, a maniacal urge to throttle the old man and wedge his body under a rock somewhere.
When he reached the base of the cliff, he was wringing wet with sweat. He waded out into the shallow water and got the coil of rope. Mayfield was unhooking a small channel cat and dropping it into his creel.

What’s the trouble? he said.

Raymer shook his head and did not reply. He lined up the mouth of the cave with a lightning-struck cypress on the white dome of the bluff and went up the riverbank looking for easier climbing. He entered a hollow, toppled out on a ridge, and then angled back toward the river looking for the cypress. Finding it seemed to take forever. When he did find it, he tied the end of the rope around its base and dropped the coil over the bluff. Then he hauled thirty or forty feet of rope back up and began to fashion a rough safety line. The idea of swinging back and forth, pendulumlike, across the face of the bluff, dependent on an old man with a fishing pole to rescue him, did not appeal to him, but he tied the rope off anyway. He felt like a fool to the tenth power, and in his heart of hearts he knew he wouldn’t find any money.

His feet reached the opening first, and for a dizzy moment they were climbing on nothingness, pedaling desperately for purchase until the bottom of the opening connected with his shoes. When he was sure he was safe on solid rock, he unclipped the flashlight from his belt and shone it into the opening. This could not be it. Here was no huge room and went hand over hand back up the face of the bluff.

When Raymer waded out to the boat and tossed in the rope and the light, Mayfield did not seem concerned. Likely it’s another bluff, he said. All these sloughs get to lookin’ the same, and it’s been upwards of twenty years since I was here. I used to fish all these backwaters when I first come up from Alabama. Now I think on it, it seems the mouth of that cave was just about hid by a cedar. That’s why I picked it to begin with. I never would have found it if I hadn’t been watchin’ a hawk through some field glasses.

Then you just deposited your twenty thousand and sat back waiting for the interest to add up.

I told you, I didn’t need it. I’d tip a waitress a dollar for a fifty-cent hamburger. I never cared for money.

I guess you were just in the bootlegging trade for the service you could render humanity.

Right.

I wish I had sense like other folks, Raymer said. Why does everybody think I just fell off the hay truck?

You’ve got that red neck and that slack-jawed country look, Mayfield said placidly. And a fool is such a hard thing to resist.

He had sent her three dozen American Beauty roses, and the apartment was saturated with their smell. Raymer sat on the couch with his legs crossed and a cup of coffee balanced on his knee and had the closest thing to a conversation he had had with Corrie since the day she left.

This is so unlike you, she said. All these flowers. How much did they cost?

They were day-old roses, half off. I told you it didn’t matter.

And climbing around in caves looking for hidden treasure. It’s so unpredictable. Who would have thought it of you? Are you having some sort of a crisis?

Raymer kept glancing around the apartment. He had neither seen Robbie nor heard mention of his name, but the place made him nervous anyway. It was fancier and more expensive-looking than he remembered, and he wondered how she could afford it.

Everything looked like a sleek and dynamic symbol for a life he could not aspire to. The furniture was low and curvilinear, as if aerodynamically designed for life in the fast lane.

He’s almost certainly senile, she said, What makes you think he’s telling you the truth?

I know he’s telling the truth. He’s religious, and he laid his hand on the Bible, and wait a minute—quit that. It may be funny to you, but he took it seriously.

Religious and bootlegger just sort of seem contradictory terms to me.

I’m not going to argue semantics. The point is, he’s telling the truth. I even drove down below the state line and talked to some folks who used to know him. He was a bootlegger, and he was successful enough at it to have socked away twenty thousand dollars without missing it. That’s ten thousand for me. Us, if I can talk you into it. We could just spend it, just piss it away. Buy things. Go on a cruise. I’m making money for us to live on, and I’ve got more work to do.

She gave him a sharp took of curiosity. What’s in it for you?

You. If you’ll give me a chance, I’ll win you back. By the time we spend ten thousand dollars, I can persuade you to give it another shot.

We gave it a four-year shot. It wasn’t working.

I’ll try harder.

Oh, Buddy. If you tried any harder, you’d break something. Rupture all your little springs or something. It wasn’t you. It was just a bad idea—although you did make it worse. You’re such an innocent about things. You get a picture of things in your head and your picture is all you see. You don’t know me. You don’t even know yourself. All you know is your little picture of how things ought to be, and that’s the way you think they are.

Well, whatever. Ten thousand dollars is still a lot of money.

She didn’t argue with that. Wouldn’t it be fun to go down to the Bahamas? I’m on summer break. We could lie on the beach. All that white sand. We could just lie in the sun and drink those tall drinks they have with tropical fruit in them.

Then you’ll do it?

I’ll think about it. Like you said, it’s a lot of money. She paused, and was silent for a time. There’s just one thing, she said. Where’s the fox at?

Robbie? He’s playing a string of club dates in Nashville, trying to get a record deal. By the way, you shouldn’t call him that—it just shows how petty you are. I told him about it, and he wasn’t amused.

Piss on him. I never set out to be a comedian.
the pit of his stomach. Goddamn it, he said. He put the truck in reverse and backed up until he could see the fox. It wasn't moving. He got out. The fox's eyes were open, but they were blind and dull; its sharp little teeth were bared, and blood was running out of its mouth. Its eyes had been as bright as emeralds in the headlamps, and they had gleamed as if they emitted light instead of reflecting it. I don't believe this, Raymer said. This is just too goddamned much.

He rose and took a drop cloth from the bed of the truck and wrapped the fox in it. He stowed it in the back of the pickup and drove on toward home.

Raymer was shaking his head. Why don't you just admit it? he asked. You wanted to go fishing. You wanted to get away from the project and picnic on the river. So you fed me all this bullshit, and here you are, with your little basket and your little fishing pole.

Mayfield regarded him placidly. It don't matter what you think, he said. The money's not there because you think it is. It's there because I put it in a jar and poured paraffin over it and packed it up the side of that bluff. If you think it's not there, that don't change nothin. It'd be there even if you didn't exist.

Because you packed it up the side of that bluff.

Right.

Raymer sat in the stern of the boat looking at his hands. He had slipped twenty scary feet down the face of a bluff before he could stop himself, and the nylon line had left a deep rope burn across each palm, as if he'd grabbed a red-hot welding rod with both hands.

Truth to tell, though, exploring the caves was interesting. He had not found any dead Confederates, but he had been in a cave in whose winding depths Indians had left flint chippings, pottery shards, all that remained of themselves.

As always, Mayfield seemed to know what he was thinking. Why won't you admit it yourself? You know you're gettin a kick out of it. I bet you ain't thought of your wife all mornin.

Raymer shook his head again. He grinned. You're just too many for me, he said. Thursday he was rained out in midafternoon, and he drove to the bank and checked the balance in his account. It was a lot higher than he had expected. He was amazed at how little he had spent. Like the old man, he seemed to be accumulating it in paper sacks, fruit jars. It was growing all the time.

He asked to withdraw $500 in ones and fives. The teller gave him a peculiar look as he began to count out the money.

It's for a ransom note, Raymer said, and for a moment she stopped counting. She may be right, he said. Besides, it would take twice as long to spend it. If you're really trying to, as you put it, win me back, this would give you twice as long to do it.

Raymer was put off balance by what she'd suggested, and he felt a little dizzy. He thought the smell of the roses might be getting to him. The room was filled with a sickening sweet reek that seemed to have soaked into the draperies and the carpet. It smelled like a wedding, a funeral.

The smell of the roses had even saturated her hair. An enormous sadness settled over him. Across the county line when a mouth did not taste the same as it had that day by the wishing pool, and she had opened her mouth to conjectural money, and Corrie's reply bore this out.

I've got to think all this through, she said. I've got to decide what I'm going to tell Robbie.

At the door she kissed him hard and opened her mouth under his and rounded her sharp breasts against his chest, but her mouth did not taste the same as it had that day by the wishing pool, and the odor of the roses had even saturated her hair. An enormous sadness settled over him.

Going back, he was five miles across the county line when a small red fox darted up out of the weedy ditch and streaked into his headlamps. He cut the wheel hard to miss it, but a rear wheel passed over the fox, and he felt a lurch in his.
received the telegram, but the Reaper was walking up and down the block looking for his house number.

You’re sure got a good tan, the barmaid told him. It looks great with that blond hair.

What are you, a lifeguard or something?

Something, Raymer said. I’m a necrozoologist.

A what? Necrowhat?


Try to determine where the animal was bound for when it was struck.

There’s no such thing as that.

Sure there is. We’re funded by the government. We get grants. She laid a palm on his forearm. I think you’re drunk, she said. But you’re cute anyway. Stop by and see me one day when you’re sober.

When he went to use the pay phone, he was surprised to see that dark had fallen. He could see the interstate from there, and the headlights of cars streaking past looked straight and intent, like falling stars riffing down the night.

The phone rang for a long time before she answered.

Where were you?

I was asleep on the couch. Where are you? Why are you calling?

I’ve got it, he said.

Jesus. Buddy. You found it? All of it? All of it.

You sound funny. Why do you sound like that? Are you drunk?

I might have had a few celibatory-celebratory-beers.

If you were going to celebrate, you could have waited for me. I’m waiting for you.

now, he said, and hung up the phone.

* * *

A chest freezer stood on the back porch of the farmhouse they had bought to renovate. Raymer raised the lid and took out the frozen fox, still wrapped in its canvas shroud. He folded away the canvas, but part of it was seized in the bloody ice, and he refolded it. He slid the bundle into a clean five-gallon paint bucket. A vinegar jar would have been nice, but he guessed they didn’t make them that big anymore. The money was in a sack, and he dropped it into the bucket, shaking the bag out, the ones and fives drifting like dry leaves in a listless wind. He glanced at his watch and then picked up the loose bills from the floor and packed them around the fox. He stretched a piece of plastic taut across the top of the bucket and sealed it with duct tape. He replaced the plastic lid and hammered it home with a fist. Then he went into the kitchen and filled up the coffeemaker.

When headlights washed the walls of the house, he was sitting at the kitchen table drinking a cup of coffee. By the time he had crossed to the front room and turned on the porch light, Corrie was standing at the front door with an overnight bag in her hand.

She came in looking around the room, the high, unfinished ceiling. Looks like you quit on it, she said.

I guess I sort of drifted into the doldrums after you left, he said. Is that bag all you brought?

I figured we could buy some new stuff in the morning. Where is it? I want to see it.

He’d expected that. He pried off the lid and showed her. He’d been working on the wiring in the living room, and the light was poor here. She was looking intently, but all it looked like was a bucket full of money.

Can we dump it out and count it? I thought it was in some kind of glass jar.

The jar was broken. I think a rock slid on it. If he hadn’t had the whole mess airtight in plastic, it would probably have been worthless. I’ve already counted it, and we’re not going to roll around in it or do anything crazy. I still don’t feel right about this, and we’re leaving for Key West early in the morning, before I change my mind. I can see that old man’s face every time I close my eyes.

Whatever you say, Buddy. Five gallons of money sure has made you decisive and takecharge. It looks good on you.

Later he lay on his back in bed and watched her disrobe. You don’t have to do this, he said. We don’t have to rush things.

I want to rush things, she said, reaching behind to unclasp her brassiere.

Raymer’s mind was in turmoil. There was just too much to understand. He wondered if he would ever drive confidently down what Corrie had called the life’s highway, piloting a sleek car five miles over the limit instead of standing by the road with his collar turned up and his thumb in the air. There were too many variables—the rates of chance and exchange were out of balance. The removal of Corrie’s clothing was to her a casual act, all out of proportion to the torrent of feelings it caused in him. Her apartment was less than forty miles away, but it was no-man’s-land, off-limits. She had laid stones in the pathway that had driven him to a despair that not even the sweet length of her body laid against his would counterbalance.

An hour or so after he should have been asleep, he heard her call him. Buddy? When he didn’t answer, she rose, slowly so that the bed would not creak. She crossed the floor standing in the bathroom door watching him. He lay breathing in, breathing out. He heard her take up the bucket and turn with it. The bucket banged the doorjamb.

Goddamn, she breathed. Then he heard the soft sounds of bare feet and nothing further, not even the opening and closing of the front door, before her car cranked.

It was hot and stale in the room. It smelled like attar of roses, like climate-controlled money from the depths of a cave, like a rotting fox in the high white noon.

He got up and raised a window. Night rushed in like balm to his sweating skin. She hadn’t even closed the front door. The yard lay empty, and still and so awash with moonlight that it appeared almost theatrical, like the setting arranged for a dream that
was over, or one on which the curtain had not yet risen.

When he crawled back into bed, he lay in the damp spot where they had made love, but he felt nothing. No pleasure, no pain. It was just a wet spot on a bed, and he moved over and thought about getting up and changing the sheets. But he didn’t. He was weary and, despite all the coffee, still a little drunk. He tried to think of Corrie’s lips against his throat, but all his mind would hold on to was the hiss in her voice when the bucket banged the door. Then even that slid away, and on the edge of sleep a boat was rocking on sun-dappled water, an old man was changing the fly on his line, and Raymer was feeling the sun hot on his back and wondering, Would you really lay your hand on the Bible and swear a lie? The old man’s face was inscrutable, as always, but somehow Raymer didn’t think he would, and when he slipped into sleep, it was dreamless and untroubled.

An Interview with William Gay

We had all seen the photo on the back flap. Thin as the barn door planks in the background, cigarette hanging unlikely from fingers buried shyly inside his jean pockets, a figure—more ghost than man—smiled back, his jaw set in a friendly frown. The name under the picture said William Gay, but no one really knew if the two corresponded and so an unsure silence pooled as we pulled up to the sturdy log cabin off Little Swan Church Road, waiting, wondering who would emerge.

Perhaps the whole thing had been made up. Maybe the book had just written itself. Hohenwald, William’s hometown, sounded more like a province of Narnia or Yoknapatawpha County than a place on the map. Luckily, the man who emerged looked much like the face from the jacket photo and so we all let out a breath as the silence was broken by the yapping of Gay’s two frisky dogs, a brindle pit bull mix named Augustus McCrae and a part Sharpee named Heathmoore.

The soft-spoken writer then accompanied us to Rio Colorado, one of, let’s say, four restaurants in the area, which would be the site of the interview. We seemed small within rooms big enough to accommodate the town’s entire population, but the owner’s optimistic spirit was appreciated. As the smell of tacos, burritos, and quesadillas engulfed us, the man from the photo bashfully answered all our questions about his bold fiction.
How did you make a living before you were a writer?
WG: I was in the Navy, lived in New York. Then I came back here and I was a carpenter and traveled to do construction for years. I learned to lay brick for a while—all this to support my family.

And then you started writing?
WG: I'd been writing since I was fourteen. Then I was in the navy, Vietnam, New York, Chicago. All this time I was writing. When I was young I was reading Thomas Wolfe and William Faulkner. It seemed like a natural progression to go from reading *Look Homeward Angel* and *The Sound and the Fury* to writing. I started sending stories out—first *The New Yorker*, then *Harper's*, right on down the list. After a while I figured out I should be submitting to the literary quarterlies. I had some success there. An agent saw a story and asked me if I had a novel and I wrote *The Long Home*. The title is a metaphor for death, from Ecclesiastes. It's set in the same place as *Provinces of Night*, right around here.

Did you get Faulkner when you were young?
WG: Probably not. I read it for the roll of the language. The whole idea from the beginning was to write good sentences, sweet sentences.

Are you Fleming [from your novel *Provinces of Night]?]
WG: Fleming is a nicer guy than I am. My agent read it and said I was a mix between Fleming and E.F.

Who did you show your early writing to?
WG: When I was married I showed it to my wife. That didn't work too well. She used to call me John Boy writing all that stuff. I was working eight hours a day then typing 'till four in the morning on stories—peculiar behavior I suppose.

How long have you been back in Hohenwald?
WG: I've been here almost constantly for 25 years.

Has this area of the rural South changed much?
WG: Saturn [the auto plant 25 miles away] changed everything. We had people coming in here who didn't want to live there; they wanted to live at a reasonable distance. But it probably changed before that. The rural South began to change in the 50s when people got TV. They saw how others lived and they went north from here and got decent jobs.

Ron Rash says we're losing a connectedness to the land. Do you believe that?
WG: It's sure threatened around here. The timber's being cut, even the little stuff. They chip it. There is a disconnectedness from the land but there's not much we can do about it. People don't feel connected to it anymore. Now it's like most people are just gypsies.

You write about those people?
WG: The wanderers are just more interesting to me. The people I write about don't usually know when they get up in the morning where they will be in the evening.
How did you make a living before you were a writer?
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You write about those people?
WG: The wanderers are just more interesting to me. The people I write about don't usually know when they get up in the morning where they will be in the evening.
You also write about young people.
WG: I like writing about young people and old people. The young are interesting because everything’s up for grabs.

We’re going to Oxford next. Any thoughts on it?
WG: I thought Oxford was like Oz; once you pass the city limits you fade out. There’s a presence there. I guess it’s the whole Faulkner mystique. They say Rowan Oak’s haunted. Piano music. They say you can still hear it.

The check came and Gay rose, his plate untouched. We packed into our vises and rode in search of an Elephant Sanctuary for retired circus elephants. We didn’t find it. Instead we followed the creek through pure rural country—winter timber, creek bottom fields, small patches of wasted corn, and horses in every field, then backtracked to William’s house.

Inside the cabin, a blanket lay on the sofa missing the body that had slept under it. The author’s other basic needs were close at hand: a guitar resting on the recliner, a half-eaten sleeve of saltines, and a prominent music and DVD collection that threatened to overflow the wooden shelves.

William, much smaller in his rocker beneath his oval-shaped glasses, read us his O’Henry Award winning short story “The Paper Hanger” from behind his unpretentious, curly gray mustache. He talked of writing, and his life through a generous hour.

WG: After my ex-girlfriend read that story I think she was kind of scared of me. She broke up with me after that.

What are three things you like about the South?
WG: By and large the people. Things are slower. People think a little slower and people down here take a little more time to think about things. I like the fact that the landscape is different. I couldn’t live where there weren’t trees—thunderstorms, changes in the weather. Is that three?

And the one thing you don’t like?
WG: Southerners can be short-sighted, particularly about race.

Something Old, Something New—Possibilities for Defining the South
by Wilson Peden

Hohenwald. Say it fast and it sounds like “hole in the wall.” That’s kind of what Hohenwald is. If Tennessee is a city block, then Hohenwald is that restaurant you’d call a hole in the wall; there’s a shabby looking facade, but you know there are some treasures on the inside. Like fiction writer William Gay.

William Gay shows a little bit of that “hole in the wall condition” himself. Simply looking at William, it’s perfectly believable that he scares other writers at conventions. His hair is gray and wiry, growing long and curly in the back almost to his shoulders. A scruffy mustache and soul patch do little to hide the deep creases along his mouth—cigarettes and hard living taking their toll. But when he speaks, his voice is soft and gentle. There’s no country slang or broken grammar—every sentence is lucid prose. This is the voice he writes his fiction with.

Though the voice of Gay’s fiction is almost poetic, his scenarios and characters are rough—at the fringes” he would say, working class people who don’t know where their next meal is going to come from, or what they’d be willing to do to get it. The Bloodworths, the family at the center of Gay’s novel, Provinces of Night, seem to have a lot in common with Faulkner’s Snopeses. More than forty years after Faulkner’s death, the Southern Gothic is alive and well, and so is the land that it sprang from.

Gay’s novels aren’t a throwback to or imitation of an earlier style—he writes about what he knows, about places like Hohenwald. Hohenwald still stands today as testament to some of the best and worst of what many call a bygone era. There is rural, open space, small farms and undeveloped land, natural wilderness beauty. There is also, according to William Gay, economic depression and stubborn closed-mindedness. Hohenwald is in many ways a portrait of the typical Southern town in the mid-20th century.

It’s easy to make broad generalizations about the South. An outsider might say the South is a backwater region that has refused to move into the future. A patriotic Southerner might counter with reports of foreign immigration, increased industry moving in, and the existence of liberal meccas like Chapel Hill and Asheville. The truth is that they both exist, often within a few miles of each other.

I have been aware of the great geographic and cultural diversity of the South for some time, since my grandfather first took me traveling in the Southeast, up the Appalachians and across the Cumberland Gap, forging into horse country in western Tennessee and Kentucky. The people on one side of the mountain aren’t the same as the people on the
where it's going. With rural places like Hohenwald and the Mississippi Delta, there's a rare opportunity—a chance to see exactly what will happen to those places with the coming of development. A chance to step in and make the South what we want it to be.

Maybe some things shouldn't change. I, for one, would like to see some places stay as sparse as they are, leave a little room to breathe out in the countryside. I'd like to see places like Ellicott Rock Wilderness stay wild, and never see the touch of development. We've seen the might-be future of these places—mile-long strip malls like Muscle Shoals are not a pleasant thought to me. And they don't have to happen either.

Not that we should preserve everything. I've never seen such economic desolation as the ghost towns of the Delta, small towns that just linger in squalor. Nor do I want to hang on to the kind of deliberate ignorance that William Gay describes in his hometown. Some changes in the South have been for the good. In the late seventies, Oxford experienced a type of literary Renaissance spurred by the arrival of William Morris and the founding of Square Books, which not only brought about a mini-intellectual enlightenment, but breathed new life into the dying town square. All this was accomplished without making any sacrifices to the town's historic legacy, or inflating the small population there.

I don't know exactly what the South should be, or where it is headed on its current track. What I do know is that from what I have seen lately, much of the Old South still remains as it always was. There are still farms, wildernesses, small towns, strong traditions. And there are also some big cities, some new industry, some new cultures. There is still time to hang on to the Old South, or as much of it as we want to hang on to, and there are plenty of new things to build on as well. If there is one thing I have learned about the South, it is that the opportunity to define the South and what it means to be Southern in the twenty-first century is still very much an open possibility.

other side. Don't even get me started on the mountains versus the coast. It's easy to see how disparate geographies have created a kaleidoscope culture in the South that shifts with the landscape. What's harder to see is that the South still exists in many different times.

Hohenwald, the town that wouldn't leave the fifties behind, is not so far from Nashville, a definite urban center. Nashville is a thoroughly modern city, with the interstates and skyline to prove it. Nashville might be built on a musical heritage, but that heritage has been so commercialized that it's been locked away behind glass in shops and museums. The only things left in the streets are concrete and neon. Nashville could be anywhere—you won't see anything Southern unless you pay the admission price.

If Hohenwald is a picture of the past, and towns like Nashville and Chapel Hill are the future, then if we look at enough towns and cities, we can get a sort of timeline of the South—snapshots at different stages of development. Instead of trying to define the South in one broad swath and say where it was and is, there is the opportunity to see
My first true NASCAR experience came two summers ago, when I joined the fans who instantly made me fall in love with the sport. Jim Wright, in his *Fixin' to Git: One Fan’s Love Affair with NASCAR*, states that “NASCAR fans are the nicest bunch of folks you’d ever want to meet. True, there’s the occasional nasty drunk, racist half-wit, and rude, slobbering idiot, but these are people you’d find anywhere there’s a lot of beer being downed.” And beer there is; my friends and I claim that a NASCAR race is the only place that you can carry a cooler around, pop open a beer, and down it right in front of the police—who are doing the same thing, although discreetly—and not get arrested for public intoxication. One August night (Bristol is known for its famous August night race), I met every kind of NASCAR fan. The two men who sat beside us in the Dale Earnhardt Terrace continuously offered us Crown Royal. When we looked like we weren’t having fun, they passed it over to us; when we looked like we were having too much fun, they still passed it over. Dale Jr. won the Sharpie 500 that night, and, although we had to concentrate very hard, we saw him cross the finish line and complete his victory lap. After the race, we met the good ole boys, the fans from Louisiana who drove us around a junkyard that overlooked the track and told us how their wives could never appreciate Bristol the way they do. Then, after getting lost and somehow ending up on the opposite side of the track, we met the nasty drunk who thought we wouldn’t notice that he was leading us away from where we wanted to go. We never thought that we’d top August 2004, but a year later, we did. It was a memorable night because it was Rusty Wallace’s last Bristol Race, and Rusty (NASCAR fans never use last names to refer to their drivers) loves Bristol. We had a special ceremony in which fans in one section of the track held up cards that spelled out “Thank you Rusty” in huge white letters with a blue background. Then two army jets flew over the track to honor Rusty’s famous number two. And that was the night that we met the other kind of race fan, the completely redneck and aggressive drunk. My friend and I were very excited about our hand-made, sleeveless shirts that stated, “We love Dale Jr.” But we didn’t realize that they would draw so much attention. On the back, my shirt said, “Bump draft this,” and my friend’s stated, “Wanna rub fenders?” I had no idea that other fans would take “bump draft this” literally; all kinds of people bought us drinks because they simply couldn’t resist staring at the back of our shirts. People even asked if they could take our picture. Sure, in exchange for a beer! Needless to say, we were once again...
intoxicated without ever buying one beer. But our fun ended when my friend was slapped by a man’s girlfriend. Apparently, he had been checking out our shirts as we walked by, and his girlfriend was not too happy about it. I turned around to find my friend on the ground with a bunch of men holding this strange woman away from her. The woman and her boyfriend were removed from the track, and my friend’s face was a little swollen, but she was fine, thanks to all free beer we were given. Yeah, there can be the occasional aggressive and nasty drunk, but in general, race fans are very caring and passionate people. They’re passionate about their driver and generous with their drinks, no matter who wins.

It has been my experience with NASCAR that fans who support different drivers get along just fine. But there is one exception: the Earnhardt fans versus the Gordon fans.

Wright points out that “Winston Cup fans used to fall into three roughly equal-sized groups: Jeff Gordon fans, Dale Earnhardt fans, and everyone else.” Though Earnhardt died tragically in 2001, the separation of fans into these three categories is still the present model. Dale Jr., Earnhardt’s son, became the favorite among those fans who loyally supported his father. But his name wasn’t the only reason for his success. When NASCAR returned to Daytona after Dale Earnhardt’s sudden death, Dale Jr. finished with a victory, and following this emotional win, Earnhardt Jr. went on to establish himself as one of NASCAR’s superstars, taking his father’s place as one of Gordon’s top rivals.

If you’re a Dale Jr. fan, it’s almost forbidden to support Gordon. Even when I attended my first true NASCAR race, I was aware of this unspoken rule. So when I ask people who they like and they say “Gordon,” I simply walk away. Like avoiding danger, walking away from a Gordon fan is instinctual. In fact, you really don’t even have to ask; one look at the cooler and koozie they’re carrying and the hat and shirt they’re wearing says it all. But shouldn’t we all just get along? There seems to be a mixed verdict on that. The rivalry started, as Wright explains, before the death of Earnhardt:

When they were both driving, Gordon and Earnhardt were, by a wide margin, the two most popular and simultaneously least popular drivers on the circuit. Earnhardt fans were “old school,” good old boys (and girls), the kinds of folks who drive pickups, sport tattoos, eat pork rinds, hunt, fish, and drink cheap beer. Gordon fans are “pretty boys” (and girls), younger, more attractive wine-and-cheese types who drive sports utility vehicles, are proficient at video games, and jog regularly to stay in shape.

Gordon took NASCAR’s future in a new direction, but Earnhardt kept NASCAR tied to its rural Southern roots; he embodied the traditions that made the sport popular.

And the debate continues. The death of Earnhardt didn’t end the rivalry; in fact, the success of Dale Jr. only heightened it. Dale Jr. fans will even include Earnhardt Sr. in the arguments, claiming Jr. is better simply because he came from legendary blood. A 2003 Roanoke Times article by Dustin Long points out this ongoing conflict:

[To Earnhardt Jr. fans] Gordon represents what is wrong with NASCAR. Gordon isn’t a Southerner, has too clean an image and won too much without struggling early in his career.

Dale Jr.’s father embodied the mythic Old South, and Jr. represents the South’s future. He’s promoting NASCAR by appearing in advertisements and on TV shows. His rough appearance and bachelor status have made women love him (as I demonstrated at the August 2005 race with a shirt that said, “Born to be Mrs. Dale Jr.”) and men idolize him. Earnhardt Jr. embodies the New South. He remains true to our culture but is willing to incorporate our nation’s new developments such as technology.

Although Gordon also incorporates the nation’s changes, he cannot represent the New South simply because he is not Southern. The incorporation of a driver from California has drawn more fans to the sport and, but at the same time, caused controversy among Southern fans: how can an outsider be the one to perfect a Southern sport? The root of the argument between Gordon and Earnhardt fans will always be one that isn’t from the South and one is. In a message to non-Gordon fans, Wright proclaims, “to the legions of Gordon-haters, I say, ‘Get over it.’” As an Earnhardt Jr. fan and a Southerner, I say, “Never.”

The sport of NASCAR has, no doubt, increased its popularity nationally. In the beginning, it boasted Southern champions, raceways and fans. Today, however, there’s competition from outside of the region. But Southerners still claim NASCAR. It originated out of our moonshining ancestors trying to outrun the law on the South’s back-roads. Its fan base is still mostly Southern white men, and it greatly embodies both New and Old South traditions and culture. The debate among fans is whether the sport is still Southern. Earnhardt Jr. fans blame Gordon for invading a Southern sport, and Gordon fans think Earnhardt Jr. and his followers are keeping the sport from becoming a national and global phenomenon. It’s a battle between the South and the rest of the nation. Our beloved sport is becoming popular, but that doesn’t mean that it’s not Southern. By golly, NASCAR is Southern, and nothing that happens will change the fact that its roots belong to us. Non-Southerners may be increasingly bumping our fenders, but when the race is over, we hold the checkered flag.

Earnhardt Jr.—carrying the traits of his late father—represents the South, a hard-nosed approach and a rough image. Of course, Gordon fans disagree: Drawn by their driver’s good looks and winning ability, they grew NASCAR from a regional obsession to a national sport. Either way, there is a natural tension among their fans.
Quenching the Devil’s Thirst
by Ivy Farr

History books are crammed full of stories about Prohibition—the American “alcoholiday” of the 1920s and 30s that led to the peddling of illegal alcohol throughout the country is one example. Chicago was a hotbed of illegal activity. Names such as Al “Scarface” Capone and “Bugs” Moran are nearly as widely-known now as they were then, and the story of the Saint Valentine’s Day Massacre has since horrified the American people through books, television, and other popular media.

The Reader’s Digest article “American Folklore and Legend” asserts that “the illegal manufacture, importing, and distribution of booze during the Thirteen Years became the foundation on which present-day organized crime came into being.” It’s no surprise that the mere mention of “Prohibition” conjures images of tommy guns, mobsters, and widespread violence.

But omitted from most books is the history of the rural South and the impact that illegal alcohol had on its culture during Prohibition, pre-Prohibition, and even in modern times. Moonshining, boot-legging, and liquor-running were closely-guarded secrets in their heyday and still remain so to this day, but the impact that the illegal practice had on rural southern culture is evident in both obvious and subtle forms today in cartoons, advertising, movies, music, and sports.

The practice of making homemade liquor can be traced back hundreds of years. Many Southerners’ ancestors had made it in their home country before they ever came to America. The tradition was passed through the generations, not as a means of making money but mainly for recreational purposes. The year 1794 brought the first tax on alcohol, which resulted in the Whiskey Rebellion in Pennsylvania and Ohio. The government continued to collect these taxes until 1918 when Prohibition began, making the distillation and selling of alcohol illegal.

In the late 1910s a long period of economic hardship began for rural Southerners. King Cotton had been depleting the southern soil’s richness throughout generations of improper farming techniques, so cotton crops were sparse to begin with. To compound the situation, the boll weevil was introduced in the southwestern United States in 1892 from Mexico. This pest soon devastated the South’s cotton crops, entering Alabama in 1915 and destroying the vast majority of its crops by 1919. In 1921, the weevil entered South Carolina.

The Great Depression, which officially began for the country in October of 1929, took
its toll on the entire country and made no exceptions for the already-suffering rural south. Workers at a few factories in the South lost their jobs when those factories shut down, and the Depression pushed matters from bad to worse for small subsistence farmers. They needed another form of income to supplement the meager earnings they could get from their farms. Prohibition had made alcohol illegal in 1918, yet Northerners continued obtaining the contraband from Canada throughout the dry period.

Prohibition had been especially popular, ironically enough, in the South, but the demand for alcohol was certainly not absent there. Southerners had been making their own alcohol for years. Moonshining presented an excellent opportunity to rural Southerners who needed to pay debts. Folks could produce it on or close to their own property and sell it tax-free—that is, if they could evade the law long enough to deliver it to the buyer.

The seclusion of rural Appalachia was ideal for producing moonshine. The two most important elements for the process were seclusion and running water. The shadowy Appalachian Mountains supplied both the solitude and isolation necessary to hide stills from law enforcement agents as well as plentiful creeks and streams to distill the strong product. The cool water of the Appalachian springs was perfect for the final step in the distillation process. The prime “cooking season” was during the summer, or at least while the leaves were still on the trees. This hid the smoke that rose from the stills as the beer was brewed and fermented. The dense forests also provided the best wood for making moonshine. Hickory and locust wood was best for heating the fires, because they produced less smoke.

Producing only a few gallons of moonshine required massive amounts of supplies. One recipe shown on an Internet encyclopedia called for 50 gallons of water, a bushel of cornmeal, a peck of wheat bran, 25-50 pounds of sugar, and between one-half to one gallon of corn malt or yeast. The concoction was boiled in a 55-gallon still where it would take about four or five days to ferment. Often, the beer produced after fermentation was sold, since more beer could be produced from such a recipe than could liquor. The yield of liquor for this recipe was only one or two gallons.

There were three names for homemade liquor. “Moonshine” got its name because the distillation process usually took place at night because it limited smoke rising from the mountains which would signal that a still was operating. “White Lightnin’” was so-named because of the feeling one got after drinking a slug of the potent stuff. White Lightnin’ was much stronger than most of the commercial liquors available today. “Mountain Dew” was also a popular name, which evoked images of the dew-covered grass on a misty mountain morning.

Though rural Appalachia was ideal for producing moonshine, transporting it presented a different problem. After Prohibition, the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax Commission was determined to collect the taxes due to the federal government for alcohol consumption, while moonshiners were determined to outrun those tax-collectors to provide tax-free liquor to consumers. The rural Southern moonshiner was pitted against the city-slicker federal agent in an all-out war. One “old timer” cited on Wikipedia recalled that a bootlegger he once knew “always took different ways home, just in case the revenuers were waiting on him.”

Rural Southerners designed cars that were ideal for carrying liquor and that could easily dump the stuff should the driver be followed by a federal agent. Powerful motors were placed in small, lightweight cars, making them able to run at incredible speeds. Bootleggers thus gained an extreme advantage over federal agents. Instead of using violence to defend their territory as the gangs of Chicago had done, bootleggers used their advantage of speed to outrun rather than to outshoot their rivals.

This battle between bootleggers and federal agents was immortalized in the movie Thunder Road, filmed in 1958. A primitive version of cinematography compared to today’s standards, it portrays the life of Luke Doolin, a bootlegger who hauls his father’s moonshine from the mountains of Kentucky to Memphis and to Asheville. The movie opens with a few lines describing the enormous monetary loss incurred by the U.S. due to moonshining. A special branch of the government was dedicated to seeking out and shutting down illegal stills and impounding the powerful cars used for transport.

The movie depicts just how dangerous the life of a bootlegger—the man who actually ran the liquor to the distributor, not to be confused with the moonshiner who manufactured it—really was. It excites audiences with car chases between Luke and the federal agents he tries to outrun on several occasions. It also gives the viewer a picture of the moonshining process as a business. Each community had its own area to which it distributed, and conflict arose if another bootlegger invaded their territory. In a meeting concerning a rival gang of bootleggers, a moonshiner says, “We’re in business, Jess. We
have to keep up-to-date or go under." As a result, bootleggers were always embellishing
their cars with more powerful motors and other innovative features to increase their
advantages in car chases.

The movie’s theme song, “Thunder Road,” rose to the top of the music charts after
the movie was released. Sung by Robert Mitchum, who played the lead role in the
movie, the lyrics paint an accurate picture of the bootlegger’s life:

Sometimes into Asheville, sometimes Memphis town,
The revenuers chased him, but they couldn’t run him down
Each time they thought they had him, his engine would explode
And be drove by like they were standing still on Thunder Road.
Thunder, thunder, over Thunder Road,
Thunder was his engine and white lightnin’ was his load.
Moonshine, moonshine, to quench the devil’s thirst,
The law, they never get him, ‘cause the devil got him first.

Lucas Doolin, infamous bootlegger and protagonist of the movie, dies in a fatal car
accident after running over a track of nails set across the road by the rival gang of
bootleggers, showing just how dangerous the life of a bootlegger could be. Driving in
high-speed chases often led to horrific accidents or even death.

Out of these dangerous car chases came one of the most popular spectator sports in
the United States: NASCAR. Young, hot-headed bootleggers had cars that could outrun
federal agents. One may be sure that the exaggerated stories, bragging, and boasting so
typical of Southern folk soon followed. All it took was one bootlegger to challenge
another to a race. Add another racer, and you have a sport. Born in Asheville, North
Carolina; Spartanburg, South Carolina; and Dawsonville, Georgia, the legend of
NASCAR evolved out of the very tradition of moonshining and bootlegging, and has
now grown into an incredibly successful spectator sport.

Remnants of a past filled with moonshiners, secret stills, and outrunning law
enforcement can be seen in other ways as well. The backwoods of Appalachia is the
setting for John Rose’s comic strip Snuffy Smith. A moonshiner himself, Snuffy, the rural,
patch-work mountain man in a floppy hat, is always concocting some plan to evade the
authorities, and, better yet, is always successful. Just this week’s strip depicts the sheriff
accusing Snuffy of stealing some chickens. ‘I’ll have ya dead to rights on this-un ‘cuz
I got full descriptions of th’ missin’ fowl. They wuz leghorns! White leghorns!’ Snuffy
then states proudly, “Sorry, sheriff—Can’t halp ya! Th’ only chickens in here are golden
brown!” as Ma holds a plate of freshly fried chicken. The moonshiner is depicted even
in this Sunday’s newspaper as a crafty man who is successful in breaking the law.

The world of music has developed the image of the moonshiner as well. George Jones
popularized the song “White Lightnin.” The song is a tribute to the life of a moonshiner:
one with a rock ‘n’ roll beat and comic lyrics. Scottie Wiseman bought the rights to
and produced a song called “Mountain Dew.” Accompanied by bluegrass instruments, he
sings of the secrecy of obtaining moonshine and keeping it a secret from federal agents.

These humorous songs are an important part of Southern culture and were incredibly
popular when they were released.

The “Mountain Dew” label is familiar to all those who enjoy a refreshing drink on
a summer day. The first label of Mountain Dew, the mellow soft drink manufactured
by Pepsi, depicted several moonshiners in their stereotypical felt hats, guns aimed at
invisible) federal agents. The bottle also included the phrase, “It’ll tickle your innards!” an
allusion to the sensation produced in the original “Mountain Dew,” and by the
carbonation in the “soft” drink. The stereotypical image of the moonshiner as a barefoot
mountain-man with a floppy felt hat and worn-out overalls is a popular advertising
image for tourist sites as well.

NASCAR, popular music, advertising campaigns, cartoons, and movies have all been
born out of the illegal moonshining culture. Festivals are held each year all over the South
celebrating the illegal activity. Moonshining was terribly successful, and it quickly became
the new “cash crop” of the rural South. It must be noted, however, that moonshining at
its peak was not recreational; most moonshiners operated their stills out of necessity in
order to be able to make ends meet. It was not an occupation that made people rich. “By
no means,” WD. Washburn says, “were these people living the rich wealthy life styles of
the ‘Great Gatsby’ parties of the eastern shore or with the gangster flare of the notorious
Chicago bootleggers, but instead, they were just simply surviving.” Moonshining and
boot-legging saw many rural Southerners through hard times and also landed many of
them in jail. But their illegal activity gave rise to an entire element of culture that gives
the rural South much of the personality that it obstinately clings to today.
The morning started with a meeting in Trakas' and Lane's room. Scattered on the floor and over beds we started discussing what it always came down to in the end: Wal-Mart. I wondered and then suggested that the mega-chain was not actually a threatening concern for the average Southerner because they enjoyed the "low prices, always" and, in general, weren't as consumerist as the rest of the country. Not everyone agreed and I was shocked that not everyone conceded that my comment was brilliant.

Oh, Laura.

While leaving Muscle Shoals we saw—

1. Advertisement for future hotel: *Southern hospitality at its finest*
2. The Rocking Chair, a country store and rest area
3. Dixie Gas
4. Elegant bar named HOGS & HEIFERS
5. Cotton field
6. Railroad
7. Coon Dog Cemetery (but I think people are buried there)

A windy day on the Natchez Trace. Gay wrote a piece on the history of Natchez Trace but his dastardly ex-girlfriend stole his only copy. Heartless. So, relying on his memory, he recounted the old road's exciting history as a dangerous path plagued by one-eyed pirates and ax-murderers, (okay, maybe not pirates and murderers, but at least a few thieves), looking to confiscate from the north-bound travelers the goods that they had just traded for in the South. The dern thing, incredibly, was still pock-marked by the tracks where the wagons forded the river.

Laura leaps while Ivy contemplates the ethics of haybale jumping.