



Seneca

No Known Copyright

Princeton University Library reasonably believes that the Item is not restricted by copyright or related rights, but a conclusive determination could not be made.

You are free to use this Item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use.

Princeton University Library Disclaimer

Princeton University Library claims no copyright governing this digital resource. It is provided for free, on a non-commercial, open-access basis, for fair-use academic and research purposes only. Anyone who claims copyright over any part of these resources and feels that they should not be presented in this manner is invited to contact Princeton University Library, who will in turn consider such concerns and make every effort to respond appropriately. We request that users reproducing this resource cite it according the guidelines described at <http://rbcs.princeton.edu/policies/forms-citation>.

Citation Information

Morrison, Toni. 1931-
Seneca

1 folder (partial)

Contact Information

Download Information

Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 12:55:04 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/qf85ng86v>

Saturday 10th September, 1994

Seneca

fr. to
p. 33 Chapter 3

When Mavis pulled into the driveway near the kitchen door she
slammed the breaks so hard ~~all~~ ^{Slid ~~clipped~~ from the seat and} her packages fell beneath the
dashboard. The figure sitting in the garden's red chair was completely
naked. She could not see the face under the hat's brim but she knew
it wore no sunglasses. A mere month she'd been away and for three
weeks of that time couldn't wait to get back ~~to the house where~~
~~Connie and Mother lived which for two years now she considered her~~
~~home as well.~~

Something must have happened. To Mother. To Connie. At the
squeal of the brakes the sunning figure did not move. Only when she
slammed the Cadillac door did the person sit up and push back the hat.
Calling out "Connie! Connie?" Mavis hurried toward the garden's
edge.

"Who the hell are you? Where's Connie?"

The naked girl yawned and scratched her pubic hair. "Mavis?"
she asked.

dr
Relieved to learn she was known, spoken of, at least, Mavis lowered her voice. "What are you doing out here like that? Where's Connie?"

she's
"Like what? Inside."

"You're naked!"

"Yeah. So?"

"Do they know?" Mavis glanced toward the house.

"Lady," said Grace, "are you looking at something you never saw before or something you don't have or you a clothes freak or what?"

"Blessed! Blessed! Blessed one!" Connie came bounding down the steps, her arms wide, toward Mavis. "Oh how I missed you!" They hugged and Mavis could not help loving the thump of the woman's heart against her own.

Connie,
"But [^]who is this and where are her clothes?"

"Oh, that's little Grace. She came the day after Mother died."

"Died? When?"

"Seven days now. Seven."

"But I brought all the things. I have it all in the car."

"No use. Not for her anyway. My heart's all scruntched but now you back I feel like cooking."

fr.
"You haven't been eating?" Mavis shot a cold glance at Grace.

"A bit. Funeral food. But now I'll cook."

"There's plenty," said Grace. "We haven't even touched the...."

"You put some clothes on!"

"You kiss my ass!"

"Do it," said Connie. "Go, like a good girl. Cover yourself we love you just the same."

"She ever hear of sunbathing?"

"Go on."

Grace went, exaggerating the switch of both of the cheeks she had offered Mavis.

"What rock did she crawl out from under?" Mavis asked.

"Hush. Soon you'll like her. That's all that's left. Liking. In the end, that's all there is."

No way, Mavis thought. No way at all. Mother's gone but
Connie's okay. ^{and} This house is ~~still~~ ^{Place} my ^{Not hers.} refuge. ~~With that girl here, I~~
~~may as well be~~

They did everything but slap each other and finally they did that.

SENECA

1973

Not much point to garden peas. May as well use canned. Hardly a tastebud in town could tell the difference. Certainly not Steward's. Blue Boy packed in his cheek for twenty years first narrowed his taste to a craving for spices, then reduced it altogether to a single demand for hot pepper.

When they got married, Dovey was sure she could never cook well enough to suit the twin known to be pickier than his brother, Deek. Back from the war, both men were hungry for down home food, but dreaming of it for three years had raised their expectations, exaggerated the possibilities of lard making biscuits lighter than snow; of the responsibility sharp cheese took on in hominy. Eventually Deek hummed with pleasure as he sucked sweet marrow from hocks or crunched chicken bones to powder. But Steward remembered everything differently. Shouldn't the clove be down in the tissue, not just sitting on top of the ham? And the chicken-fried steak--Vedalia onions or white?

On her wedding day, Dovey stood facing the flowered wall paper, her back to the window so her sister, Olive, could see better. Dovey held the hem of her slip up while Olive drew the seams. The little brush tickled the backs of her legs, but she stood perfectly still.



There were no stockings in Haven or the world in 1949 but to get married obviously bare legged mocked God and the ceremony.

"I don't expect he'll be satisfied at table," Dovey told her sister.

"Why not?" asked Olive.

"I don't know. He compliments my cooking, then suggests how to improve it next time."

"Hold still, Dovey."

"Deek doesn't do that to you, does he?"

"Not that. He's picky other ways. But I wouldn't worry about it if I was you. If he's satisfied in bed the table won't mean a thing."

They laughed then and Olive had to do a whole seam over again.

Now the difficulty that loomed in 1949 had been solved by tobacco. It didn't matter whether her peas were garden fresh or canned. Convent pepers, hot as hellfire, did all the cooking for her. The trouble it took to cultivate peas was wasted. A teaspoon of sugar and a plop of butter in canned ones would do nicely since the bits of purple-black pepper he would sprinkle over them bombed away any quiet flavor. Take late squash....

Almost all the time, these days, when Dovey Morgan thought about her husband it was in terms of what he had lost. His sense of

taste one example of the many she counted. Contrary to his (and all of Ruby's) assessment, the more Steward acquired, the more visible his losses. The sale of his herd at 1958's top dollar accompanied his defeat in the statewide election for Church Secretary because of his outspoken contempt for the schoolchildren sitting in that drugstore in Oklahoma City. He had even written a mean letter to the women who organized the students. His position had not surprised her since, ten years earlier he'd called Thurgood Marshall a 'stir-up Negro' for handling the N.A.A.C.P.'s segregation suit in Norman. In 1962 the natural gas drilled to ten thousand feet on the ranch filled his pockets but shrunk their land to a toy ranch and he lost the tk trees that had made it so beautiful to behold. His hairline and his tastebuds disappeared over time. Small losses that culminated with the big one: in 1964, at forty, they learned neither could ever have children.

Now, almost ten years later, he had "cleaned up," as he put it, in a real estate deal in XX and Dovey didn't have to wonder what else he would lose now because he was in an already losing battle with Reverend Misner over the words ^{attached to} ~~soldered~~ on the lip of the Oven. An argument fueled in part, Dovey thought, by what nobody talked about: young people in trouble or acting up behind every door. Arnette,

home from college, wouldn't leave her bed. Harper's boy, ~~the one~~
^{Menus}
~~they~~ called Sharktooth, drunk every weekend since he got back from
Vietnam. Roger's granddaughter, Billie-Marie, disappeared into thin
air. Jeff's wife, Sweetie, laughing, laughing at jokes no one made.
K.D.'s mess with that girl living out at the Convent. Not to speak of
the sass, the pout, the outright defiance of some of the others--the
ones who wanted to name the Oven "^{Such and Such}~~something~~-place", and who had
^{Neither}
decided that the original words on it were never "~~Beware the Furrow~~
~~of His Brow,~~" but ~~something else~~, something that enraged Steward
and Deek. Dovey had talked to her sister (and sister-in-law) Olive,
about it; to Mable Fleetwood; to a couple of women in the Club.
Opinions were varied, confusing, even incoherent because feelings ran
so high over the matter. Also because the young people, snickering at
Miss Esther's finger memory, insulted them all. They had not
suggested, politely, that Miss Esther may have been mistaken; they
howled at the notion of remembering invisible words you couldn't
even read by tracing letters you couldn't pronounce.

"Did she see them?" they asked their fathers.

"Better than that. She felt them, touched them, put her finger
on them," shouted the fathers.

"If she was blind we could believe her. That'd be like braille. But some five year old kid who couldn't read her own tombstone if she climbed out of her grave and stood in front of it?"

The twins frowned. Fleet, thinking of his mother-in-law's famous generosity, jumped out of the pew and had to be held back.

The Methodists, early on, had smiled at the dissension among the Baptists. The Pentacostals laughed out loud. But not for long.

Members in their own churches, young and old, began to voice opinions about the words. Each had people in their congregations who ^{were} ~~had been~~ among the ^{or related to} fifteen families to leave Haven and start over.

And the Owen didn't belong to any one denomination. It belonged to all, and all were asked to show up at Calvary. To discuss it, Reverend Misner said. When they assembled at 7:30 the atmosphere was pleasant, people simply curious. And it remained so right through

Misner's opening remarks. Maybe they were nervous, but when the young people spoke, starting with Roy, their voices ^{were so} ~~seemed~~ strident to ~~down~~ ^{down} ~~Down~~. ^{fe} The women looked at their pocket books; the men forgot to blink.

It would have been better for everyone if the young people had spoken softly, acknowledged their up-bringing as they presented

their views. But they didn't want to discuss; they wanted to instruct.

"No ex-slave would tell us to be scared all the time. To "beware" God. To always be ducking and diving trying to look out every minute in case He's getting ready to throw something at us, keep us down. What kind of message is that? No ex-slave who had the guts to make his own way, build a town out of nothing could think like that. No ex-slave...."

"Quit calling him a ex-slave. That's my grandfather you talking about. He wasn't no ex nothing and he wasn't making his own way; he was part of a whole group making their own way."

"He was born in slavery times, he was a slave, wasn't he?"

"Everybody born in slavery time wasn't a slave. Not the way you meaning it."

"There's just one way to mean it."

"You don't know what you talking about!"

"None of them do! Don't know jackshit!" shouted Roger Best.

"Whoa, whoa!" Reverend Misner interrupted. "Brothers. Sisters. We called this meeting in God's own house to...."

"One of His houses," snarled Harper.

"All right, one of His houses. But whichever one, He demands

respect from those who are in it. Am I right or am I right?"

Roger sat down. ^{All right.} "You right, and I apologize for the language. To Him," he said, pointing upward.

"That might please Him. Might not. Don't limit your love to Him, Roger. He cautions every which way against it."

"Reverend." The Reverend Pulliam stood up. He was a dark, wirey man--white-haired and impressive. "We have a problem here. You, me. Everybody. The problem is with the way some of us talk. The grown-ups, of course, should use proper language. But the young people--what they say is more like backtalk than talk. What we're here for is--"

Roy actually interrupted him, the Reverend! "What is talk if it's not 'back'? You all just don't want us to talk at all. Any talk is 'back-talk' if you don't agree with what's being said."

Everybody was so stunned by the boy's brazenness, they hardly heard what he said.

Pulliam, dismissing the possibility that Roy's parents were there, turned slowly to Misner. "Reverend, can't you keep him still?"

"Why would I want to?" asked Misner. "We're here not just to talk but to listen too."

The gasps were more felt than heard.

Pulliam narrowed his eyes and was about to answer when Deek Morgan left his seat and stood in the aisle. "Well, sir, I have listened ^{I believe} ^{about as much as I need to.} ^{Now ~~listen close.~~} and I have heard enough. Nobody, I mean nobody is going to change the Oven or call it something strange. Nobody is going to mess with a thing our grandfathers built. They made each and every brick one at a time with their own hands—~~not yours.~~" Deek looked steadily at Roy. "They dug the clay--not you. They carried the hod--not you. They mixed the mortar--not a one of you. They made good red brick for the town when their own shelter was sticks and sod. You understand what I'm telling you? And we respected what they had gone through to do it. Nothing was handled more gently than the bricks those men--men, hear me? not slaves ex or otherwise--the bricks those men made. Tell, them, Roger, how delicate was the separation, how we wrapped them, each and every one. Tell them, Fleet. You, Sargeant, you tell him if I'm lying. Me and my brother lifted that iron. The two of us. And if some letters fell off, it wasn't due to us because we packed it in straw like it was a baby. So, understand me when I tell you nobody is going to come along some eighty years later claiming to know better what men who went through hell to learn knew. Act

short with me all you want, you in long trouble if you think you can disrespect a row you never hoed."

[quiet, then amens] *(odd. Shivers in spite of perspiration)*

"Seems to me, Deek, they are respecting it." Misner said. "It's because they do know the Oven's value that they want to give it new life."

"They don't want to give it nothing. They want to kill it, change it into something they made up."

"It's our history, too. Not just yours," said Roy.

"Then act like it! I just told you! That Oven already has a history it don't need you to fix it."

"Wait, now Deek. Think what's been said. Forget naming, naming the Oven. What's at issue is clarifying the motto."

"Motto? Motto? We talking command! 'Beware the Furrow of His Brow'! That's what it says clear as daylight. That aint no suggestion; that's an order!"

"Well, no. It's not clear as daylight." said Misner. "It says '...the Furrow of His Brow.' There is no 'Beware' there."

"You were not there! And you wasn't here either at the beginning! Esther was!"

"She was a baby. She could have been mistaken."

Fleet moved into the aisle. "Esther never made a mistake of that nature in her life. She named this town, dammit. 'Scuse me, ladies."

Destry, looking strained and close to tears, held up his hand and asked "What's so wrong about 'Be the Furrow'? 'Be the Furrow of His Brow'?"

"You can't be God, boy!"

"It's not being Him; it's being His instrument, His justice. As a race--"

"God's justice is His alone. How you going to be His instrument if you don't obey Him?" asked Reverend Pulliam.

"We are obeying Him. If we follow His commandments, we will be His voice, His retribution. As a people--"

Harper cut him off. "It says 'Beware'. Not 'Be.' Beware means 'Look out. The power is mine! Get used to it!' "

"'Be' means you putting Him aside and you the power," said Roger.

"We are the power if we just--"

"See what I mean? See what I mean? Listen to that! Hear that,

Reverend! Blasphemers need a strap."

tk

Misner asks for a song to calm.

As could have been predicted, Steward had the last word--or at least the words they all remembered as last because they broke the meeting up. "Listen here," he said, his voice thick and shapely with Blue Boy. "If you, any one of you, change, take away, or add to the words in the mouth of that Oven, I will blow your head off just like you was a hood-eye snake."

Dovey Morgan, chilled by her husband's threat, could only look at the floorboards and wonder what visible shape his loss would take now.

Days later she still hadn't made up her mind about who or which side was right. And in discussion with others, including Steward, she tended to agree with whomever she was listening to. This matter was one she would bring to her Friend--when he came back to her.

Driving away from the meeting, Steward and Dovey had a ~~small but~~ familiar disagreement about where to go. He was headed out to the ranch. It was small now that gas rights had been sold, but in

Steward's mind it was home--where his American flag flew on holidays; where his honorable discharge papers were framed; where Ben and Good could be counted on to bang their tails maniacally when he appeared. But the little house they kept on St. ^{Matthew} ~~Paul~~ Street--a foreclosure the twins never resold--was becoming more and more home to Dovey. It was closer [✓] to her sister, to Mount Calvary, the Club. It was also where her Friend chose to pay his calls.

"Drop me right here, Steward. I'll walk."

"Girl, you a torment," he said, but he patted her thigh before she got out.

Dovey walked slowly down Central Avenue. In the distance she could see lanterns from the Juneteenth picnic hanging near the Oven. On her left was the bank, lower than any of the churches but seeming nevertheless to hog the street. Neither brother had wanted a second floor like the Haven bank had, where the Lodge kept its quarters. They didn't want traffic into their building for any reason other than bank business. The Haven bank their father owned collapsed for a whole lot of reasons and one of them, Steward maintained, was having Lodge meetings on the premises. "Ravels the concentration," he'd said. ^{Three streets beyond} On her right, next to Patricia Best's house, was the school

where Dovey had taught while the ranch house was being completed.

Pat ran the school by herself now, with Reverend Misner and tk filling

in for tk and tk. The flowers and vegetables ^{on one side of} surrounding the school

were ^{an} a ~~luxuriant~~ extension of the garden in front of Pat's own house.

Dovey turned into St. ^{Matthew} ~~Paul~~ Street. The moon's light glittered

white fences gone slant in an effort to hold back foxglove, iris,

sunflowers, cosmos, daylilies while alba and silver king pressed

through the spaces between the slats below. The night sky, like a

handsome lid, held the perfume down, saving it, intensifying it,

refusing it the slightest breeze on which to escape.

Touching the ^{fencing} tk lining the path, Dovey climbed the steps. There
on the porch she hesitated and thought of turning back to call on Olive
who had not attended the meeting. She changed her mind and opened
the door. Or tried to. It was locked--again. Something Steward had
recently begun that made her furious: bolting the house as though it
were a bank too. Dovey was sure theirs was the only locked door in
Ruby. What was he afraid of? She patted the dish under a pot of
hosta and picked up the skeleton key.

Before that first time, but never again, there was a sign. She had

been upstairs tidying the little foreclosed house and paused to look through a bedroom window. Down below the leaf heavy trees were immobile as a painting. July. One hundred one degrees. Dry. Still, opening the windows would freshen the room that had been empty for a year. It took her a moment--a tap here, a yank or two--but she managed finally to raise the window all the way up and lean forward to see what was left of the garden. From her position in the window the trees hid most of the back yard and she stretched a bit to see beyond their spread. Suddenly a mighty hand dug deep into a giant sack and threw fistfuls of petals into the air. Or so it seemed. Butterflies. A trembling highway of persimmon colored wings cut across the tree tops forever--then disappeared.

Later, as she sat in a rocker under those trees, he came by. She had never seen him before and did not recognize any local family in his features. He was walking quickly, as though late for an appointment, using this yard as a shortcut to some place else. Perhaps he heard the light cry of her rocker. Perhaps he wondered whether his trespass was safe. In any case, when he turned and saw her he smiled raising a palm in greeting.

"Hello," she called.

He changed his direction and came near to where she sat.

"You from around here?"

"Close," he said, but he did not move his lips to say so.

He needed a haircut.

"I saw some butterflies a while back. Up there." Dovey pointed. "Orange-y red, they were. Just as bright. Never saw that color before. Like what we used to call coral when I was a girl. Pumpkin color, but stronger." She wondered, at the time, what on earth she was talking about and would have stuttered to a polite close--something about the heat, probably, the relief evening had brought--except he looked so interested in what she was describing. His overalls were clean and freshly ironed. The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled above the elbows. His forearms, smoothly muscled, made her reconsider the impression she got from his face: that he was underfed.

"You ever see butterflies like that?"

He shook his head but evidently thought the question serious enough to squat down before her.

"Don't let me keep you from where you're going. It was just, well, my Lord, such a sight."

He smiled sympathetically and looked toward the place she had pointed to. Then he stood up, brushing the seat of his overalls, although he had not sat down in the grass, and said, "Is it all right if I pass through here?"

"Of course. Anytime. Nobody lives here now. The folks who built it lost it. Nice, though, isn't it? We're thinking about maybe using it from time to time. My husband...." She was babbling, she knew, but he seemed to be listening earnestly, carefully to every word. At last she stopped--too ashamed of her silliness to go on--and repeated her invitation to use the short cut whenever he wanted.

He thanked her and left the yard, moving quickly between the trees. Dovey watched his figure melt in the shadow lace surrounding the houses beyond.

She never saw the persimmon wings again. He, however, did return. About a month later, then off and on every month or two. Dovey kept forgetting to ask Steward, or anybody else, who he might be. Young people were getting harder to identify and when friends or relatives visited Ruby, they did not always attend services, as they used to do, and get introduced to the Congregation. She could not ask his age but supposed he was at least ¹⁵ten years younger than she

^{perhaps}
and ~~maybe~~ that alone made her keep his visits secret.

Thing was, when he came, she talked nonsense. Things she didn't know were on her mind. Pleasures, worries, things unrelated to the world's serious issues. Yet he listened intently to whatever she said.

By a divining she could not explain, she knew that once she asked him his name, he would never come again.

Once she fed him (a bowl of applesauce) and he ate it all.

^{Matthew}
John Street. More and more frequently she found reasons to remain on St. Not hoping or looking for him, but content to know he had and would come by there--for a chat, a bite, cool water on a parched afternoon. Her only fear was that someone else would mention him, appear in his company, or announce a prior claim to his friendship. No one did. He seemed hers alone.

So on the evening of the argument with the young people at Mount Calvary, Dovey stuck the key in the lock of the little foreclosed house annoyed with Steward for making it necessary and agitated by the nasty turn the meeting took. She hoped to sit with a glass of iced water, read some verses or a few psalms and collect her thoughts on the matter that was angering everybody in case her friend passed by

in the morning.

"Beware the Furrow of His Brow"? "Be the Furrow of His Brow"? Her own opinion was that "Furrow of His Brow " alone was enough for any age or generation. Specifying it, particularizing it, nailing its meaning down was futile. The only nailing needing to be done had already taken place. On the Cross. Wasn't that so? She'd ask her friend. And then tell Olive.

Saturday 10th December, 1994

Sunday 18th December, 1994

"Look out, quail. Deek's gunning for you. And when he comes back he'll throw a sack full of you on my clean floor and say something like 'This ought to take care of supper.' Proud. Like he's giving me a present. Like you were already plucked, cleaned and cooked."

The kitchen was flooded with newly installed fluorescent light so Olive could not see into the darkness outside as she waited for the kettle to boil. She wanted to get her ^{tonic} ~~potion~~ properly steeped before her husband returned. One of Connie's preparations lay at her fingertips, a tiny cloth bag folded into a waxed paper packet. She thought it was midnight when Deek eased out of bed and dressed in

hunting clothes. But when he crept downstairs in sock feet, she'd looked at the clock glow: 3:30. Two hours more of sleep, she thought, but it was six a.m. when she woke and she had to hurry. Get breakfast, lay out his business clothes. Before that, however, her ^{tonic} ~~potion~~--very much needed now because the air ^{was} thinning again. (over)

Ever since the woman Connie worked for died. Or maybe earlier, when she had picked up a supply of potion x months ago and found a stranger in Connie's kitchen. She must have gone away before the woman died otherwise Connie would not have needed to light a fire in the fields. Nobody would have known except for the plume of black smoke. ^{Anna Flood} ~~It~~ saw ~~the~~ it, drove out and got the news.

Olive had to hurry then, too. Getting food from neighbor women and cooking some things herself. She, Dovey and ^{Anna Flood} ~~Sweetie~~ ^{carried it} drove out there knowing full well there was no one to eat it but themselves. Hurry, hurry then too, because the woman had to be shipped quickly up north. In ice. Connie seemed strange, broken somehow and Olive added her to her list of people who worried her. ^{life} K.D., for example. And Arnette. And Sweetie. And now the Oven site was on her mind. A few young men had taken to congregating there with out-of-state liquor, people said, and the small children who liked to play there had

It had started ~~leaving~~ thinning
out, ~~like~~ as if from too much wear,
~~as~~ not when ^{Bryan} the first one was killed
but ~~when~~ two weeks later - ^{even} before
Bryan's body had been shipped -
when they ^{were} ~~were~~ informed that
^{Bryans, 19 and 21, and the other} Easter was dead
too. Both had been home on
that furlough Thanksgiving, 1968.

Connie had ^{sold her two bags of already} shelled pecans. A
girl was there, and ^{although} she took
her for gasoline, ~~but~~ she stayed
for a ^{long time afterwards,} while. ~~There was, certainly,~~
~~some~~

been told to go home. Or so their mothers said. Then a few girls (who Olive thought needed slapping) found reason to be there, ^{Like} including Arnette and Billie Marie, ^{used to} Which, she supposed, was why K.D., Whenever Deek or Steward let him alone, hung out there too.

Folks said these young men needed something to do. But Olive, knowing there was so much to do, didn't believe that was it. Something was going on. Something besides the fist. Jet black with red fingernails painted on the back wall of the Oven. No body claimed responsibility--but more shocking than collective denial was the refusal to remove it. The loungers said, no, they hadn't put it there and no, they wouldn't take it off. Although Kate Golightly and Pat Best, with a bucket, Brillo, paint thinner and soapy water, got it off, five days passed during which the town leaders in a hot rage forbid anyone but the loungers to erase it. The clenched fingers, red-tipped and thrust sideways, not up, hurt more than a blow and lasted longer. It produced a nagging, hateful pain that Kate^s and Pat's scrubbing could not erase.

Steam hiss roused her and Olive poured hot water into a cup over the little muslin bag. She placed a saucer over the cup and let the medicine steep.

Maybe they ought to go back to the way they did things ~~twenty-~~
~~odd years ago.~~ ^{when her babies were new} When everybody was too busy building, stocking,
harvesting to quarrel or think up devilment. They way it was before
Mount Calvary was completed. When baptisms were held in sweet
water. Beautiful baptisms. Baptisms to break the heart, full of
major chords and ^{weeping} tears and the thrill of being safe at last. When the
pastor held the women in his arms, lowering them one by one into
newly hallowed water. Never letting go. Breathless the others
watched. Breathless the women rose. Each in her turn. Their wet,
white robes ~~heavy~~ and billowing in the sunlit water. Hair, face
streaming they looked to heaven before bowing their heads for the
command, 'Go, now.' and the reassurance, "Daughter, thou art saved."
The softest note when it hit sweet water doubled, trebled itself; then
other notes from other throats came and traveled along with the
first. Tree birds hushed and tried to learn. Slowly, then, hand in hand,
heads on supporting shoulders, the blessed waded to the banks and
made their way to the Oven. To dry, embrace and congratulate one
another.

^{Calvary} Now the Baptist church had an inside pool ^{; Zion and Redeemer} ~~and the others had~~
special vessels for dribbling a little water on an upright head.

When Roy and the other two, Destry and the girl Caline, asked for a meeting, it was quickly agreed upon. No one had called a town meeting in years. Everybody, including Olive and Dovey, thought the young people would first apologize for their behavior and then pledge to clean up and maintain the site. Instead they came with a plan--of their own. A plan that completed what the fist had begun. Roy took the floor and without notes, gave a speech perfect in every way but intelligibility. Nobody knew what he was talking about and the parts that could be understood were plumb foolish. He wanted to give the oven a name, to have meetings there to talk about how pretty they were while giving themselves ugly names--like black. Like not-American. Like African. All Olive knew about Africa was the seventy-five cents she gave to the missionary society collection. She had the same level of interest in Africans as they had in her: none. But Roy talked about them like they were neighbors, or worse, family. And he talked about white people as though he had just discovered them and seemed to think what he'd learned was news.

Yet there was something more and else in his speech. Not so much what could be agreed or disagreed with, but a kind of

accusation. Against whites, yes, but also against them--the townspeople listening, their own parents, grandparents, the Ruby grownfolk. As though there was a new and more manly way to deal with whites. Not M.L.'s way, but some African type thing full of new words, new color combinations and new haircuts. Suggesting that out-smarting whites was craven. That they had to be told, rejected, confronted. Because the old way was slow, limited to just a few, and weak. This last swole Deek's neck and, on a weekday, had him blowing out the hearts of quail to keep his own from exploding.

He would be pulling in with a bag of them any minute now, and Olive would have to serve up a platter of their tender, browned halves. So, she contemplated rice or sweet potatoes as the contents of her cup steeped. ^{When} ~~By the time~~ she ~~had~~ swallowed the last drop, the kitchen door opened.

"What's that?"

She liked the smell of him. Windy-wet and grassey. "Nothing."

Deek tossed his sack on the floor. "Give me some of it."

"No. How many?"

"Twelve. Gave six to ^{Sargeant} ~~A.~~" Deek sat down and before taking off his jacket unlaced his boots. "Enough to take care of two suppers."

"K.D. go with you?"

"No. Why?" He grunted with the effort of de-booting.

Olive took them away and put them on the back porch. "He's hard to find these days. Up to something, I bet."

"You put coffee on? Like what?"

Olive sniffed the dark air, testing its weight, before closing the door. "Can't tell, exactly. But he has too many reasons for wearing thin shoes."

"Chasing tail, I expect. ^{Member that} ~~Some~~ gal dragged herself in town ^{couple years back} and ^{started} ~~was~~ staying out to that Convent?"

Olive turned to him, coffee tin at her breast as she eased off the lid. "Why you say 'dragged'? Why you have to say 'dragged' like that? You see her?"

"No, but others did."

"And?"

Deek yawned. "And nothing. Coffee, baby. Coffee, coffee."

"So don't say 'dragged.' "

"Okay okay. She didn't drag in," Deek laughed dropping his outer clothes on the ^e floor. "She floated in."

"What's wrong with the closet, Deek?" Olive looked at the

waterproof pants, the black and red jacket, the flannel shirt. "And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Heard her shoes had six inch heels."

"You lying."

"And flying."

"Well. If she's ^{still} at the Convent, she must be all right."

Deek massaged his toes. "You just partial to those women out there. How many of them now? Four?"

"Three. The Mother ~~just~~ died, remember?"

"Right. Yeah. ^{First time} Roger got to use his big new van."

"Ambulance," said Olive, gathering up his clothes.

"Brought three payments ^{the next day} in. Hope he can keep it ^{the rest} up. Not enough hospital mortuary business around here justify that over-priced buggy he got."

The coffee smell was starting and Deek rubbed his palms.

"Is he hurting?" Olive asked.

"Not yet. But since his profit depends on the sick and the dead, I'd just soon he went bankrupt."

"Deek!"

→ (over)

^ "Fleet's the one in trouble." He stood at the sink and lathered

" Couldn't do a damn thing for my ^{bays} ~~sons~~,
Buried them in a bag like Kittens"

" They had lovely coffins. Lovely! "

" Yeah. But inside. "

" ^{Why don't you quit.}
Quit, Deek. ~~Quit Now.~~
TK

" I 'spect he'll make out. Less he
dies before ~~he~~ I do. " ~~In~~ which case,
well, you know what to do. I don't
feature riding in that van no how, ~~#~~
but I wan't a top of the line box so
he'll ~~AAAAH~~ make out just fine — (over)

his hands.

"You keep saying that. How come?"

"Mail order."

"What?" Olive poured coffee into the big blue cup her husband preferred.

"You all go to Denby, don't you? When you want a toaster or a electric iron. And if you don't, you order out of a catalogue and go all the way out there to pick it up. Where's that put him?"

"He never has much on hand. And what he has been there too long. That lounge chair changed colors three times sitting in the window all that time."

"That's why," said Deek. "If he can't move old inventory, he can't buy new."

"He used to do all right."

Deek tipped a little coffee into the saucer. "Ten years ago. Five." The dark pool rippled under his breath. "Boys coming out of Deetnam, getting married, setting up. Farms doing ok everybody doing ok." He sucked at the saucer rim and sighed his pleasure.

"Now, well...."

"I don't understand, Deek."

"Now, well...."

"I don't understand, Deek."

up at her
"I do," he smiled. "You don't need to."

She had not meant that she didn't understand what he was talking about. She'd meant she didn't understand why he wasn't worried enough by their friends money problems to help them out. But Olive didn't try to explain; she just looked closely at his face. Smooth, still handsome after twenty-six years and beaming, now, with satisfaction. Shooting well that morning had settled him and returned things to the way they ought to be. Coffee the right color; the right temperature. And later today quail without their hearts would melt in his mouth.

Monday 19th December, 1994

Wednesday 28th December, 1994

Every day the weather permitted, Deacon Morgan got into a brilliant black sedan and drove three fourths of a mile. He started at his own house on St. John Street, turned right at the corner onto Central, passed Luke, Mark and Matthew, then parked *neatly* ~~carefully~~ in front of the bank. The silliness of driving to where he could walk in

less time than it took to smoke a cigar was eliminated, in his view, by the weight of the gesture. His car was big and whatever he did in it was horsepower and worthy of comment! How he washed and waxed it himself--never letting K.D. or any enterprising youngster touch it; how he chewed but did not light cigars in it; how he never leaned on it, but if you had a conversation with him standing near it, he combed the hood with his fingernails scraping flecks he alone could see, and buffing invisible stains with his pocket handkerchief. He laughed along with friends at his vanity because he knew their delight at his weakness went hand in hand with their awe at his strengths. The magical way he (and his twin) accumulated money. His prophetic wisdom. His total memory.

The morning after the meeting at Calvary, pleased with his bird quota and fired, not tired, from no sleep, he decided to check out the Oven before opening up the bank. So he turned left at Central and drove past the school on the right, Ace's Grocery, Fleetwood Housewares and several small houses on the left. When he arrived at the site he circled it. Except for a few soda cans and some paper that had escaped the trash barrels, the place was blank. No fist^s. No loungers. He should speak to Anna Flood who owned Ace's now--get

her to clean up ^{the} soda cans and mess that came from purchases made at her store. That's what Ace, her grandfather, used to do. Swept that place like it was his own kitchen, inside, out, and if you'd let him he'd sweep all across the road. Deek ~~pulled out of the Oven grounds~~

~~back~~ on to Central. He could hear schoolchildren group-reciting a poem ^{Dunbar's lines} something he'd learned by rote too, except he had ~~had~~ to hear ~~it~~ only once to memorize ^{them} ~~it~~ completely and forever. ^{The} Pumpkins stacked ~~at~~

the side of the school reminded him of things yet to be done for Thanksgiving feast.] As he drove north on Central, it and the side streets seemed to him as satisfactory as ever. Quiet houses full of industry; and in them were proud women at useful tasks; orderly cupboards minus surfeit or miserliness; linen laundered and ironed to perfection; good meat seasoned and ready for roasting.

He was braking in front of the bank when he noticed a solitary figure ahead. He recognized her right away, but watched her carefully because first of all ^{she had no coat} ~~her hair looked strange~~, and second, because he had not seen her out of her house in ^{six} ~~four~~ years.

Central Avenue, ^{three} ~~one~~ wide graded mile⁶ of tarmac, began at the ^{Sargeant's} ~~Oven~~ and ended at ~~the~~ Feed and Seed. The four ~~original~~ side streets east of Central were named after the Gospels. When a fifth street

was needed it was named St. Peter. Later on, as Ruby grew, streets were laid on the west side of Central, and although these newer streets were continuations of those on the east--situated right across from them--they acquired secondary names. So St. John Street on the east become Cross John on the west. ^{St. Luke became Cross Luke} The neatness of ^{sanity} this pleased most everybody, Deek especially, and there was always room for additional houses (financed, if need be, by the Morgan brothers bank) in the plots and acres behind and beyond those already built. The woman Deek was watching seemed to be leaving Cross Peter Street and heading toward ^{Sargeant's} Feed and Seed. But she did not stop there. Instead she was moving resolutely north, where Deek knew there was nothing for seventeen miles. What could the sweetest girl, named for her nature, be doing ^{Coatless on a chilly October morning} with ~~uncombed hair~~ that far from the ^{house she had not stepped out of since 1967?} home ~~she never left~~.

A movement in his rear view mirror got his attention and he saw the small ^{red} ~~blue~~ truck coming in from south country. Its driver would be Aaron Sand, late, as Deek knew he would be, since he was ^{bringing in} ~~carrying~~ the final payment on his ^{loan} ~~farm~~. After considering letting Sand wait and driving on to catch up with Sweetie, Deek cut off his motor. July, his clerk and secretary, was not due until ten. There should be no

occasion when the bank of a good and serious town did not open on time.