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MISSISSIPPI STORIES

Joe Wilkins

The past isn't dead. It's not even past.
—Faulkner

In the Mississippi Delta it goes like this: Memphis with its bluelights; Highway 49 a lonesome road of cypress swamps and Tuesday-night juke joints; the river, in all kinds of brown and foaming glory, stepping gracefully down to meet you somewhere south of Vicksburg. The steel girders of the bridge whip past my open window. Below, a fat brown snake of water twists through shaggy oaks, kudzu vines and dirt-walled levees. The sky is warm and hazy. Liz smiles at me from across the bench seat of our Chevy pickup. We've seen a lot of country already—Dakota dust rising to the sky, a thousand

Photograph by Alex Knighton

acres of tall grass rocking in Nebraska wind and that back road in Kansas where fireflies licked the inky dark with their quick light—but now we’ve crossed the Helena bridge out of Arkansas and have our nose pointed due south, toward Clarksdale, Mississippi. Fields of cotton and soybean stretch to far horizons of cane swamp and river trees. An old man, shovel slung across his shoulders, stands on a ditch bank. He watches us watching him.

That night we stay at a place called the Shack-Up Inn out on Highway 49, where a plump guy in shorts and T-shirt, who calls himself “the Shackmeister,” rents out refurbished and air-conditioned shotgun shacks for forty dollars a night. He hands us the key, tells us there are Moon Pies on the pillows, beer in the fridge, and to come see him in the commissary for dinner. So we haul our bags inside, have a cigarette on the porch, then head over for something to eat.

After a plate of what they call barbecue pork, but which tastes like a little bit of pit-smoked and shredded heaven, we sit and sip beer and talk with the Shackmeister and the few other locals in for an evening drink. They pry our story from us: just graduated from college, road-tripping to our placements in Sunflower as public school teachers with Teach For America, thinking about hitting the Louisiana coast before we have to start teaching. And we learn that the building we’re sitting in really is an old plantation commissary, where just forty years ago black tenant farmers came for groceries bought with company scrip. They shake their heads at this, lament that the commissary was abandoned, that the shacks they’ve lined up for us in a neat row no longer house anyone but tourists. We study their faces, which, like ours, are flushed with heat and alcohol. And then the Shackmeister leans in toward us. He says it’s a good thing we’re here and all, but don’t expect anything to change: “What we got here is the genetic dregs. All the good ones made it to Chicago or Detroit or somewhere up north. The ones left ain’t worth a damn dime.”

As the seventh-period bell rings, I rush to order the stack of class expectation sheets by the pencil sharpener, erase the board, straighten the desks. It’s the first day of school, and I’m running ragged—my voice is nearly gone, I haven’t sat down in hours, and I don’t know anyone’s name. It all feels so harried, so close to the edge of chaos, or worse.

I grab my clipboard and turn to go greet my seventh-period students at the door as they come in. But I see a student already in the room, his back to me, rifling through the stacks of papers by the pencil sharpener. The yellow polo shirt of his uniform is untucked, and for being in the ninth grade he has very broad shoulders. His shaved head gleams in the fluorescent lights. He’s not supposed

to be in here. There's a sign outside the door that says all students are to wait for me in the hallway. I say, "Excuse me, are you in seventh-period pre-algebra?"

Without even looking at me, he grunts something that sounds like an affirmative and says, "Name's Corey." Then, in one sure motion, he shoves the entire stack of expectation sheets off the table; hundreds of papers twist through the air and scatter across the floor.

I'm shocked. I don't know what to say.

Now Corey's staring right at me, grinning.

I get home before Liz, so I leave her a note and walk the gravel road toward the Sunflower River. From the bridge I stare down at the muddy, slow-moving water. Since we started school a month ago, we've done nothing but work. We're up at 5:30 in the morning and off to work forty-five minutes later. Students arrive somewhere around seven. We teach until 3:30 P.M. That's eight hours a day of face time with students, whether in class, at lunch, on hall duty, tutoring during prep period or whatever else. The majority of my students are two to three grade levels behind, so I hold study sessions Monday, Tuesday and Thursday until 5:00 in the evening, and Liz stays and plans or has meetings until about the same time. I grew up in the high desert of eastern Montana, putting in twelve- and fourteen-hour days bucking bales and branding cattle; I graduated magna cum laude in engineering; I worked as a software engineer for a multi-million-dollar corporation, and none of it was nearly as demanding as teaching.

I plunge into the tall grass and hike along the river. Though every day is still a stew of humidity, it hasn't rained in the month and a half we've been here, and the water has dropped, slowly revealing all manner of things sunk in the steep banks: an old television, a spool of inch-thick wire, dozens of shoes, the wet and rotting carcass of a dog. One of our mutual friends, who has traveled halfway across the globe, told us on the phone the other day he wasn't sure he could visit us in Mississippi. "Too foreign," he said. And he's right: Liz and I are both thoroughly confused. We don't know this place, these people. We get home from work exhausted, often frustrated and angry, and immediately begin getting ready to do it all again the next day.

Finally winded, I squat down between two oak trees and watch a turtle make his way down the banked wall of mud and disappear into the black water. Sweat rolls down my neck. Blackberry and kudzu twine up and around the river trees. To the west, the sun is a white ache in the darkening sky.

There are moments in your life as a teacher, especially if you work with students who suffer every day the brutal, life-stunting blows of poverty, racism and low expectations, when you suddenly realize that there are more of them than there are of you.

The toothless old woman sits on her wide porch in a wheelchair. Every day she eyes us as we walk the streets of Sunflower after dinner, but today she calls to us and waves. I don't catch what she's saying. A middle-aged black woman, who looks to be the old woman's caretaker, sees our confusion and calls out, "Mrs. Towle just wants to talk to y'all. Come on up and I'll grab you a chair." She disappears inside the huge house for a moment and reappears with two straight-backed wooden chairs. We slowly step up onto the porch, and Mrs. Towle motions for us to sit. We introduce ourselves to both Mrs. Towle and Miriam, but Miriam just smiles and steps to the other side of the porch to smoke.

Mrs. Towle's pallid face has fallen in on itself. Her old lips flap without sound. Each breath wracks her body. With much labor, she asks where we live here in town. We tell her, and she slowly turns her old head to us and says, "Well, y'all sound like Yankees." She pauses, then, as she faces the road once more, adds, "Lord, but I been tryin' to forget about 'em."

I drive over the old train tracks and turn down Church Street, my student's address on the dash in front of me. The blacktop is grooved and worn nearly down to gravel. Cypress-wood churches line either side of the road. Some look to be abandoned; others are clean and neat and newly painted. I've been to St. Benedict the Moor, one of the churches on the left and one of the two Catholic churches in town. In the '60s the church hall at St. Benedict was a meeting place for civil rights workers, but the first time Liz and I attended, the white priest sidled up to me at the end of mass—after the mostly black and elderly parishioners had all shook our hands and wished us well and told us it was so nice to have some young blood around—and whispered that we should try the service on the other side of town. He explained, "It's nicer over there."

At the end of the second block, a group of shirtless young men horse around with a football. They go silent as I drive by. I recognize a few of them from school, but they don't wave or smile. Neither do I. When I turn at the end of the block, one of the boys hollers something.

Freeman Road is lined with shotgun shacks, some stacked up on cinder blocks, some sagging here and there, some missing large hunks of roof. I assume they're empty, but then I notice laundry draped across porch railings, dogs wandering up and down the street. And the children: a boy, maybe six or seven, swings a stick at clouds of mosquitoes; a teenaged girl sings along with the radio, her eyes tightly closed in mock passion; a toddler throws dust into the air, laughing as it rains across his dark face.

I drive to the middle of the block and pull up in front of one of the shacks. A broken chair is overturned in the dirt, car batteries stacked up against the front steps. There's no railing around the porch. A woman with her back to me bounces a baby on her hip. But now the woman turns, and her face suddenly becomes Nina's face—fourteen years old, always happy, incredibly intelligent, my second-period student of the quarter who has earned a party at the local Pizza Hut tonight with the five other students of the quarter already waiting for us there—and I realize I'm shaking. I'm no stranger to poverty. After my father died, my mother raised her three children and paid the debts on the farm with a part-time teacher's salary of around thirteen thousand dollars. But this is something else altogether.

Nina hands the baby to one of the perhaps half-dozen other children on the porch, says something to them all, then turns and smiles at me as she jumps down the steps and rushes across the bare dirt yard.

You see, you all up North and out West think integration and civil rights happened here and now it's done. Mr. Wilkins, I'm telling you right now it ain't so.

You been seein' it since you been down here. We don't live together. We don't care about one another. I'm most of sixty years old. I was born and raised in the Delta. I remember what that cotton felt like in your fingers. I went to the freedom meetings. I marched and got loud. And when they rounded us up for it, I sat in my cell in Parchman and sang.

But now, thirty years later, white folks still white folks, and black folks still black folks.

In the Mississippi Delta it goes like this: you wake to thunder, the crash of rain on tin, gunshots, the thin cries of faraway dogs; still tired, you dress and

stumble through the old house in the half-light; you drive south down Highway 49 and smoke a cigarette; fog closes the whole wet world behind you.

My seventh-period students pour out the door; I lean against an unused locker in the hallway. The rock and chug of diesel engines rumbles over the hysterical laughter of children. Marshall Feldway Junior High is the old white high school, so it's on the white side of town; when the last bell rings, nearly all of my students—the school is 99 percent black—have to be bused back to the other side of the tracks.

It wasn't a good day. For the last week I've had an uneasy truce with my seventh period, but today Bradford said something to Diamond about five minutes into class—what, I don't know—and she swore at him, then me as I tried to get her to come talk to me in the hall. As she continued to yell, Bradford jumped up and pushed her over her desk. I sent both Diamond and Bradford to the principal's office, but it was too late. The whole class was on edge, all thirty-four of them looking up at me: Corey twitching and leering, Octavia just hoping things would calm down, Lamarcus gazing apathetically at it all.

There are moments in your life as a teacher, especially if you work with students who suffer every day the brutal, life-stunting blows of poverty, racism and low expectations, when you suddenly realize that there are more of them than there are of you. In that moment the equation resolves itself far too simply, right down to the basics of physical survival, and for an instant you recognize life through the mean and frightened eyes of your students.

Even in my short tenure as an educator, I've discovered most teachers quit when this happens. Then a string of subs is called. The students learn next to nothing for a few weeks until someone new can be found, if they can be found, and if they stay. Otherwise, students sit in, say, a biology lab with no biology teacher for weeks. Other times they'll go through five, six, seven teachers in a year, a semester.

And it's not just the Delta. The national first-year teacher retention rate is startlingly low, somewhat less than 85 percent. Fast-forward a few years, and it drops to less than 50 percent. Public educators today, unlike even thirty years ago, are being asked to single-handedly fulfill the promise of this nation's ideals by educating *everyone*. And this is what we must do. But it's hard. And many teachers quit because it's so hard. They also quit because they aren't given the resources to do the job well or because they can't see that they're making any kind of difference or because they're frightened. But mostly they quit because every day they not only have to teach students how to add and subtract integers but

also put their shoulders to that great iron wheel of history—rusted lock-tight with institutionalized inequality, deception and violence—and heave.

I keep telling myself I'm not going to quit, but as the last of the students skip and kick their way out of the fetid air of the hallway, I wonder what, if anything, I'm teaching them.

All weekend we've slept and read and rocked on the pinewood porch at a guest home up in the Mississippi hill country. The hills are the eastern border of the teardrop of flood plain that runs from Memphis to Vicksburg, the Mississippi Delta. And though as the crow flies we are maybe an hour from our house in Sunflower, it feels like another world.

We walk the old town square of Oxford, where Union soldiers refused to fire on the fine white bricks of the courthouse, where Faulkner ran the post office, where thousands marched against the integration of Ole Miss. The buildings are stone and tall and stately. There's a sushi bar and a gourmet catfish house back-to-back. There are boutique shops and bookstores and espresso. We spend hours walking and shopping and counting the marble columns on old plantation houses. This is our first trip out of the Delta since we moved to Mississippi nearly six months ago; we've worked hard and somehow feel we're owed this weekend of luxury.

On Sunday we wind our way out of the hills and just before noon drop down into the Delta. Vast fields of rice and soybean shake and waver in the midday sun. The air is heavy. I smell the rot of earth and wood and still water. We cut south through the swamp town of Marks, Mississippi, where Main Street is six blocks of crumbling brick false-fronts and a shiny new liquor store. On the outskirts of town, shotgun shacks line either side of the road; there's a grandmother with one eye talking to stray dogs. I slow as we pass the Quitman County School. It looks like all schools here: grounds ringed with razor wire, single-wide trailer houses that serve as overflow classrooms squatting out back, the glass front doors patched with masking tape.

As we look away, Liz stares down the highway and says, "I'd almost forgotten. We were just an hour out, and I'd almost forgotten." I don't say anything. I'm thinking of all the white faces milling up and down the streets of Oxford. I'm thinking about how good and easy it felt to be one of them. Liz starts crying. I drive south toward Sunflower.

She stands near the front of my classroom, her cinnamon-colored hair pulled tightly back, eyes down, hands fiddling with the hem of her shirt. She has a cof-

fee-and-milk complexion and is big for a fifteen-year-old girl. Though she does not look at me—she stares shyly at the floor—I can tell she’s smiling. She has a wonderful smile. The school counselor stands behind her: “This is Jameshia Davis, Mr. Wilkins. From now on she’ll be in your homeroom and your seventh-period pre-algebra class as well.”

I nod and say thanks and show Jameshia where to sit before turning back to my homeroom class. I’m telling them that last year here at Marshall Feldway nearly 60 percent of the students failed to pass on to the tenth grade. I’m telling them how important it is that this semester we set a goal as Homeroom 11 that every single one of us move on. I’m telling them I know they can do it, but only half of them are listening; Donovan, seventeen and still in the ninth grade, sleeps in the back, his angular face gone strangely soft and slack. Travis sits in the windowsill, flexing his immense biceps for no one in particular; he has serious problems with aggression and has been in and out of trouble with the police all year. Nakeita and Rose talk loudly about something that went on last weekend. Shatara has her ear to Beverly’s very pregnant belly.

It’s January, the beginning of the second semester, and now I see Jameshia looking up at me. I’m saying something about goals again, and she’s nodding her head, still smiling.

Driving south of Greenwood, we stop at what looks like a small café. A few black men sit on stumps outside; they pass a bottle of liquor stuffed in a paper bag. The door is wide open, and the smell of slow-smoked pork and buttered greens is unmistakable and mouth-watering. We smile and walk up to the men and ask if they’re still serving lunch inside. No one answers. No one says or does anything for a moment. Then a tall, middle-aged black man appears in the open doorway. He stares at us, shakes his head, says, *We ain’t got nothin’ for y’all to eat around here*, and disappears back inside.

On the way out of town, just before we cross the tracks, a cop pulls us over. He too is tall, though younger and lighter skinned, what Delta folks call “high yellow.” He checks our IDs and tells us we were driving too fast. He asks us what we’re doing over here. He tells us we’re on the wrong side of town. Tells us to leave.

Now, I ain’t saying it wasn’t worth it. It changed a few things, Mr. Wilkins. Gave me some hope. And for about a year, around 1971, I believe, we all went to school together. White girls sitting alongside black boys, and black girls sitting alongside white boys, and all of them listening to white teachers and black teachers.

He checks our ID's and tells us we were driving too fast. He asks us what we're doing over here. He tells us we're on the wrong side of town. Tells us to leave.

But then the county passed a law saying property taxes outside the city limits could be used for nonreligious private schools, and all the whites around here set up their academies, and now you the only white man in this school, Mr. Wilkins. What do you think of that? You the only one after thirty years!

Jameshia has made friends easily, and right now, as the students change classes, I hear her deep, rolling laugh all the way down the hallway. I clutch my clipboard and brace myself. I have more or less established control in my other five classes. Some days are better than others, but most of the time we make our learning goals, and the scores on the weekly Friday benchmark tests are good and getting better. But there's been little improvement in seventh period: more than three-quarters are failing; the assistant principal, always packing his thick wooden paddle, visits two or three times a week; and six students have even been kicked out and sent to the district's alternative school. If Jameshia starts acting out now, my seventh period may be beyond me.

She walks up to me with a group of her friends. She's all smiles and is calling my name over and over: a slow rendition of something akin to "Mistuh Willkuhns." Her yellow polo shirt is untucked and splotted with a lunch stain. I see she doesn't have her handouts (I don't have a textbook; when school started my principal told me, "Maybe next year"), but before I can say anything she starts in: "Mr. Wilkins, I know a woman be perfect for you! She real pretty and can cook you some chicken and rice, mm-hmm! You know who she is, Mr. Wilkins?"

I try to protest, tell her I'm already engaged, change the subject to her handouts, but, the playful, laughing tone has left her voice, and she continues: "She my momma, Mr. Wilkins. And she need a good man like you. You got a job, and you ain't too bad a lookin' for a white man. Mr. Wilkins, I ain't kiddin' you. You just what she needs."

It's Saturday, and we're browsing small-town antique stores. On our way out of Belzoni, the catfish capital of the world, we pull over at what looks like an old railroad building or a small crop warehouse. The cypress wood sign out front says, "Bill's Bargain Barn." Every letter but the *i* in "Bill's" is capitalized, and all are drawn in red paint.

We pull open the wooden door and walk in. The interior is dark. Somewhere a fan turns slowly. There's detritus everywhere: rusting signs hung from the ceiling, dusty newspapers in boxes, an old gumball machine, dark lamps, dismembered mannequins on sofas. Only a twenty-inch-wide trail snakes its way through the mess. We don't see anyone. We call out into the gloom, and a short, round man steps out from behind some boxes.

He's maybe thirty or thirty-five, slightly balding. He keeps his thumbs hooked in the pockets of his jeans and stares at the floor. His right foot trembles. As he begins to speak, he jerks his head up and then back down. Up and back down again. He says his name is Tommy. He says it again. He tells us to go ahead and look around. We thank him and walk by as he steps into a crevice between pieces of old furniture. We pretend interest in a few items. Tommy follows us: "Where y'all from? Where y'all from? You got Yankee accents, so where y'all from?" For simplicity's sake, I tell him Spokane, Washington, where Liz and I both went to college. Tommy's eyes instantly light up and he shouts, "Gonzaga University! John Stockton! John Stockton! John Stockton!"

Before Liz or I can respond, a much older man pushes by Tommy, who is still chanting "John Stockton," and stops in front of us. The old man is small as well, but barrel chested and tightly muscled. He has dozens of scars across his arms, and one loud, white one that runs up from his chin and disappears under his black baseball cap that is stitched with all kinds of golden-threaded military insignia. He doesn't introduce himself. He just starts talking.

I have trouble following his monologue. It skips and jumps: for awhile we're in the navy; then we're cursing the county politicians; now we're talking tires, and I'm beginning to get a little bit uncomfortable. The man has slowly limped his way closer. He's less than a foot away. He keeps touching my shoulder. Liz takes my other arm. I feel her silently urging me to make for the door, but now the old man is waiting for me to say something. Tommy chants and mumbles behind him. "Teachers," I say, hoping I'm answering the right question. "We're teachers in the public schools."

The old man's face breaks into a knife-like smile. He starts talking again about all the black men he served with in Korea, about what fine soldiers and honest friends they were. He goes on about how most of his business here in town is

black because the other secondhand stores around make it a point to keep their atmosphere unwelcome to them. Tommy chimes in with something about how poor the public schools are, and without even glancing back at Tommy the man switches to the schools. He hates—really hates, he says, as his broken teeth snap together—how all the white folks send their kids off to private schools. He’s proud to say he sent his boy to the public schools, but he knows all the white politicians, down in Jackson and up in D.C., think public education is a goddamned joke.

A bit stunned, we nod and agree but continue to pick our way over boxes and end tables toward the exit. The old man keeps talking. I push open the door; the late winter sunshine is blinding after the dark of the barn. We quickly cross the gravel lot and get into our pickup. The old man follows us out. Tommy does as well and, seeing that our license plates aren’t from Washington state but Montana, immediately goes ballistic. He shakes his bright red face back and forth. He shuffles from the passenger-side window to the front of the truck and back again, chanting, “But what about John Stockton?”

The old man doesn’t even seem to hear Tommy. As I turn the key and the engine fires, the old man leans in my open window, grabs my wrist, looks me in the face, says, “You know, some folks say a nigger is a nigger and a nigger steals. But it ain’t so. I treat ‘em like men, and they don’t steal from me.”

On hall duty, the third-period bell just ringing, I watch the school principal, Mr. Briggs, in his shiny suit and tie, chase down Derrius Lee. Derrius is wiry, athletic and boyishly handsome, but he’s also failing nearly all his classes and perpetually in trouble. He talks back and swears. He doesn’t do his work. He bullies other students, particularly Ricardo, the only openly gay student in the school. And Derrius will fight at the drop of a hat. You’ll hear a roar go up down the hall and push through the ring of students to see two boys swinging and slamming each other up against the lockers. Too often Derrius is one of those boys. And Derrius’s violence doesn’t stop with his peers; he’s physically threatened a couple of teachers, myself included.

But now Mr. Briggs football-tackles Derrius in the hall. With Derrius pinned beneath him, Mr. Briggs throws off his suit coat and raises his strap, a thick but flexible three-foot hunk of leather, and brings it down hard again and again on Derrius’s legs and thighs and buttocks. Derrius howls and struggles. He reaches around and grabs for the strap. Mr. Briggs just drops it and starts in on Derrius’s ribs with his fists. Derrius is crying, still screaming when he can get his breath, pleading unintelligibly. Mr. Briggs continues to beat him.

I look up from the ruin. A half-block away I can see the old railroad tracks. The house was just barely over the line, just barely on this side of the tracks, but they burned it anyway.

Finally, sweat rings blooming under the arms and around the neck of his daisy-yellow shirt, Mr. Briggs lifts himself off the boy, says something about being on time to class, scoops up his coat and strap, and walks back toward the office. Derrius rolls over and stands and stumbles down the hall in my direction. I slowly turn away and close my classroom door; as my students get started on their Do Now entry task, Derrius limps past.

We pile hunks of cypress and oak and old boards in an earthen pit. We step back, and a teacher friend of ours sloshes gasoline over it all; the chemical stink of it is instantly thick in my nostrils. Someone passes me a bottle of bourbon. I tip my head back and bubble it one, two, three times. I pass the bottle to Liz. I hear the twang and ring of a blues guitar. Our friend strikes a wooden match and tosses it, and flames lick fifteen feet into the dark Mississippi sky.

In the blazing light and shadow, I look around at all the cheering faces. It's Friday night, and we're all schoolteachers looking to burn off a little steam. For most of us, it's our first year here in Mississippi. Each week, each day and hour, is hard. A few that started with us last August have already quit. Not many—maybe four or five out of nearly ninety in Teach For America. Yet some have quit.

But the bottle is in my hands again. It's time to drink bourbon and laugh with friends by a cypress fire. The magnolias have begun to blossom, and I'm still here.

I tell him to stop, but Corey just keeps beating some rhythm on his desktop. His eyes are shot with red streaks; he snorts and grins and nods in time to the song inside his skull. I can tell he's strung out and decide to leave him alone. I turn back to the board and my lesson.

But before I can get started, Jameshia, who sits next to Corey, says, quietly, "Mr. Wilkins, why don't you do something about him? You supposed to be the teacher. With him makin' all that noise, I ain't gonna learn nothin' up in here."

I tell Jameshia to raise her hand if she has something to say, that Corey's going to be written up for this already, that she should mind her own business.

Jameisha purses her lips and shakes her head. She says, loudly this time, "Written up don't mean nothin' to him. You got to do somethin', Mr. Wilkins!"

As I move to my desk to get a disciplinary form, I tell Jameshia to step into the hall.

She looks at her friends, at Corey, at me. She doesn't go anywhere.

But it's just the same up north, Mr. Wilkins. White folks move out of the city, leave the black folks behind. Then they all go and blame the crime and drugs and bad schools on those that can't afford to get out in the first place.

Yeah, I been to Chicago, been to New York, and I been to those suburbs too. I seen those eyes on those boys on the corner. I know what that's all about. But y'all don't know. 'Cause we don't live together nowhere, Mr. Wilkins.

In the Mississippi Delta it goes like this: if you graduate, you get out—Indianola, Greenville, Memphis; otherwise, you cut fish on a fourteen-hour shift at Delta Pride, sell cigarettes and Mountain Dew at the Double Kwik, or sit on a cypress stump down by the train tracks and suck cheap wine from a paper sack.

She slumps in her desk, chin mashed down to her chest. I ask her again if she has her homework. She doesn't say anything. I tell her she'll miss her homework stamp for the day, but if she gets to work on the Do Now, she can still get her other two stamps. She still doesn't say anything. I walk to the next desk, but behind me I hear her mumble. I turn back to her and calmly tell her to step into the hall. Jameshia raises her head and stands up. She pushes her desk to the floor and says it again: "Fuck you."

We stand in the dirt and gravel of the street and watch smoke curl up around the blackened foundation. Ash scatters in the breeze. We heard about it last night from our neighbors, two calls and a visit: Miss Clarice, her makeup still impeccable at ten o'clock in the evening, wide-eyed, breathless, excited: "Did you all hear? That house those black folks moved into is on fire! Near burnt down already, I guess. I hope no one was hurt and all, but I don't believe I know the family? Did you all know them?"

I look up from the ruin. A half-block away I can see the old railroad tracks. The house was just barely over the line, just barely on this side of the tracks, but

they burned it anyway. Of course we know the family: their niece is in Liz's kindergarten class.

I swallow. I taste ash.

After sunset Liz and I open our windows and climb into bed and hold one another as the night sounds come slowly on. First there are the shuffling growls and yips of stray dogs rooting through garbage cans. Then, as the dogs too settle down to take their sleep, ten thousand crickets begin to whirl and thrum. Now we hear the rattling call of the cicadas, and in the strange green light thrown by our alarm clock a praying mantis steps carefully across the window screen. And finally the frogs: quick chirps in the trees, wild screams up from the river, and down in the cypress swamp, the dull bass thump of the bullfrog.

These sounds carry us to sleep, and in my dreams we hold one another and are held above the cotton fields and cypress trees, above the big white houses and shotgun shacks, above the river by these beautiful, terrifying songs.

During prep period, I hike across campus to the alternative building. I knock on the door and someone keys me inside. I'm again shocked that there's no air conditioning and no windows, that the walls are naked brick and the exposed plumbing in the corner incessantly drips and, every few minutes, screeches with a charge of water.

Jameshia sits right up front. She's not doing anything. None of the perhaps two dozen students are doing anything. I go to her desk and squat down and set the latest assignments in front of her. I talk to her about what she'll have to do to keep up. I stop for a moment. She turns her head away from me. She's crying. Her whole body begins to shake and pitch.

I leave the work on her desk and go visit with my other students in the alternative building. Some are going through the motions of completing their work, but most have given up. It's April, and they know they'll fail the ninth grade. They know that in the Sunflower School District about half of the students who start will never graduate from high school, and they know now which half they'll be in. When I come to work with them, they laugh or swear or just stare at the wall.

I collect what homework there is to collect, talk to a few about problems they're having and leave. The sun is brilliant in the sky. I'm sweating. I'm crying.

It's too hard, Ms. Lloyd. Some of them are too far gone. Some days I'm so afraid of heartbreak and humiliation and anger that I don't know how I stand in front of

them. I'm going to have to fail Jameshia. She's sixteen years old, and I don't know what will happen to her. I mean, the best she can hope for is work at the Double Kwik or something like that. Ms. Lloyd, some days I look into Corey's dark eyes and I see an animal. I have dreams where I beat him. I should leave. I'm no good here. This has all been a waste.

I been teaching high school math for thirty-five years, Mr. Wilkins. It's been hard, but I've seen some mighty good things in that time. You only been at this one year, and I know you already seen a few good things, one or two at least. I ain't sayin' it ain't bad, but I got hope, Mr. Wilkins. You got to have that hope too. Hard don't matter. Easy don't matter. And where you from don't matter now. We don't do this for us. We do it for those girls and boys, whether they black as me or white as you, and those good things they going to do. At least we together in this, Mr. Wilkins.

In the Mississippi Delta it goes like this: dark snakes rock through the slow water of the Sunflower River; stray dogs sun their matted bellies in the Methodist Church yard; always a turtle in the middle of that gravel road that bends off into the cypress trees; cardinals stream like drops of bright blood through the sky.

There's smothered chicken and fried catfish and two racks of gleaming pork ribs, cheese grits and garlic mashed potatoes, turnip greens afloat in vinegar and butter, pinto beans and butter beans and black-eyed peas, great sheets of cornbread and half a dozen jugs of sweet tea spread across the library table. This is the annual planning-week faculty potluck, and I'm starving. I pile my plate high, then higher. Last year I brought some kind of vegetarian dish with cilantro and broccoli florets. Save a few polite spoonfuls, no one touched it. But this year I'm ready; I've brought red beans and rice with hunks of andouille sausage. I've been working on the recipe all summer, and I've been planning my classes as well. Seventh period was my fault. Jameshia was my fault. This year I'm going to do better.

We sit down to eat, and all the talk is about the food: who brought what, who made that, and oh, my gracious, but try a bite of this. I hear Ms. James—the librarian who once told me not to go to any juke joints unless I took her along because a skinny white man like me needs a big black woman like her to watch out for him—hear her say, “Now, Ms. Lloyd, you try a bite of these red beans and rice and tell me who made 'em.”

I don't say anything, but I'm sure they can hear my heart thumping in my chest. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch Ms. Lloyd try a bite, then another,

and another. She makes a couple of guesses as to the cook. Ms. James shakes her head and begins to laugh. And then Ms. Lloyd looks right at me: “Mr. Wilkins, you make these beans?” I nod. She stares at me for a moment, then leans back in her chair, smiles and says, “Well, Mr. Wilkins, you ain’t foolin’!”

I remind them of their homework assignment—two paragraphs about what our class motto, *Math = Power²*, means in their lives—and dismiss them. They file out, the boys nodding at me, the girls smiling. And now Jameshia’s standing in front of me. She’s been held back, and you can tell. She looks older, tired and discouraged, out of place next to all these bright-eyed fourteen-year-olds. But at least she’s here, I tell myself.

She shifts on her feet, stares at the floor. She mumbles something about last year and says, “Sorry.” I assure her that this is the very first period of a new year, that class is going to be a lot different, a lot better, and that if she works hard, I know she can succeed.

And in that moment Jameshia looks up at me. She doesn’t smile. She says, “Mr. Wilkins, I’m gonna promise you two things this year: first, I’m gonna make the honor roll and be your best student. And second, I ain’t gonna swear in class no more.” She stops for a moment, thinks, and as she steps into the hallway, adds, “Unless I have to.”

The little rust-colored puppy from down the street follows us back to his house. I tell him to sit, then pet him as Liz knocks on the door. A woman answers; a little blond girl, not more than four, peeks from between the woman’s knees. Liz tells them both that their dog was out, playing in the street, and we thought we’d bring him back. The woman thanks us and pulls the puppy into the house by his collar and pauses before asking about our accents. Liz tells her we’re from out West, down here teaching. She looks me over and says, “At the Academy, right?”

“No,” I say. “At the public schools.”

She nods and thinks for a moment, says, “Well, that must be real hard. I know how they don’t have the same work ethic and all over there. The blacks, I mean. They’re so different. It’s like another world and all. That’s why I prefer to be with my own race. It’s just better that way.” The little girl stares out at us from behind the bars of her mother’s legs.

I think about just walking away, but I hear Liz breathe and say, “I disagree. The teachers I work with are amazing. And my students are very hardworking. Even for the poverty many of them deal with every day, I’m sure my students

will do as well or better than students at the Academy on the state tests. In my experience, when it comes to hard work, we can all get it done.”

The woman blinks quickly and puts her hand to her chest. She’s confused; her words pile out quickly, nearly on top of one another: “Well, I mean, I do know the woman who runs Lewis’s Grocery here in town, and she operates a fine store, clean and nice and all. And the new black sheriff is a smart man, and the two fellows who work with my husband do a good job. I mean, I’m not a racist or anything.”

She pauses, looks off over my shoulder, and continues, “Come to think of it, all the black people I know—I mean, really know, by meeting them person to person—are good people. I don’t think, I mean, I’m not a racist.”

Terrell Wilson leans into the lockers to my left, folds his arms across his chest and looks soberly at the mass of students making their way out the back doors and onto the buses. Terrell is a class clown, always joking and flashing his toothy smile, but right now he’s trying to act serious, going on about how much homework he has, and I know he’s angling for an extension on one of his assignments. I turn and look right at him: “It’s not going to happen, Terrell. We’ve got our second-quarter test coming up soon, and you have to be ready.”

Terrell, who is very much sold on the idea of achieving but not necessarily sold on the work of achieving, nods and thinks for a moment. I’m sure he’s planning a new strategy, but then a friend of his who has another math teacher walks up to Terrell and, glancing at me, asks under his breath, “Hey Terrell, what y’all be doin’ up in that Mr. Wilkins’s classroom?”

Terrell’s eyes and mouth flatten further into this uncharacteristically serious line, and he slowly shakes his head and says, “We be workin’ all the time. Mr. Wilkins got us gettin’ ready for that state test and doin’ next year’s algebra and everything else. Man, I got me some homework tonight, but I’m going to get it done, sure enough. ‘Cause, like Mr. Wilkins says, I’m gettin’ the power for it.” And then, shouldering his book bag and waving to me, Terrell heads down the hallway toward the buses.

Crystal walks into Mr. Briggs’s office and slumps into the empty chair. She glances nervously at her older sister. I begin: “Mr. Briggs, Ms. Travis, Crystal, I wanted to talk to you all today because I’m worried about Crystal. She is an amazing young woman—very intelligent, one of my hardest-working students—but lately her work hasn’t been meeting expectations. I’ve even had to talk to her

about being respectful of other students. I know she can do better, and I'd like to ask for some help or some ideas to make sure Crystal can succeed."

There's silence for a moment. Crystal's eyes slick with tears. Mr. Briggs nods at me, and I go on: "Ms. Travis, I sure appreciate you coming in on Crystal's behalf, but is there any chance I might be able to speak to your mother at some point as well?"

Crystal's crying now, silently, head down, tears wetting her skirt. Mr. Briggs hands me a box of tissues, and I hand it to Crystal. Crystal's sister swallows, says, "Mr. Wilkins, I been hearin' about how you keep these children workin' hard and doin' their best and all, and I'll work with you to do whatever we can 'cause I know Crystal's smart as all get-out, but . . ." and she pauses to look at her sister, "Momma left for Memphis three weeks ago and hasn't come back."

It's the middle of sixth period, and my students are paired up and hunched over their desks, intently working out the shortest distance between Sunflower and Itta Bena using the Pythagorean Theorem, when I hear the roar go up.

I tell my class to stay right where they are, and I rush out the door. It's coming from Mrs. Washington's room. I cross the hall and swing the door open to see two boys going at each other. Their shirts are off, one's nose is pushed to the left of his face; the other sluices blood between his gritted teeth. Mrs. Washington and the rest of the students are circled around the perimeter of the room in a storm of papers and overturned desks.

Directly across the fight from me, I see Jameshia, and she sees me. She sets her jaw, and nods. We both dive in. Before I can get Jamal wrapped up, Jameshia has Michael's arms pinned behind his back, and she's yelling at him: "Michael, you are so goddamn stupid! That was just stupid! You think you all tough and whatnot, gangster this and gangster that, but you just stupid!" I finally bear-hug Jamal and carry him into a corner. I talk to him slowly and calmly. I hold his shoulders against the cool stone wall. He quits struggling and goes quiet.

As the roar gives way to silence, I tell Jameshia to take Michael into the hall and keep him there. I say, "Thanks, Jameshia." The other students, now coming back to themselves, start grinning and hooting and applauding.

In the Mississippi Delta it goes like this: W. C. Handy woke from a mid-night dream at the Tutwiler train depot to a man playing spooky music on a banged-up guitar with a butter knife. Son House disappeared into Memphis and Christianity for thirty years because whatever got Charlie, Tommy and

This year my students have already advanced more than three grade levels. Though I keep setting the bar higher and higher, they keep reaching it; their hunger and want of learning is humbling: they'll be into the Algebra I curriculum by the end of the year.

Robert wasn't going to get him. You drive hours of dusty back roads as the sun goes down, drinking whiskey and listening to Howling Wolf.

Chip McCarty, our next-door neighbor, hooks his cigarette in the corner of his mouth and slowly rolls up his shirt sleeves. He traces the scars that ribbon his forearms.

Though Chip is a catfish farmer, he still enjoys catching wild fish by grabbing: sinking a cored-out stump in the river, diving down to it, sticking your bare arm into the hollow of the stump for a river fish to bite down on, then swimming to the surface with the fish still trying to eat your arm. Of course, when the fish bite, they leave scars. "This one here," Chip continues, running his thick fingers along a particularly nasty-looking ridge of scar, "was nearly a hundred pounds. Damn near took my arm off at the shoulder."

We laugh and share another beer and a few more stories, and as we walk away, Chip points the toe of his boot at the dozen or so puppies suckling his old bitch dog and calls after us, "Before y'all leave out this spring, you get you one of these puppies. I call them my boys, and I'm gonna give you one of my boys to take with you. He'll be a little bit of the South for y'all to remember us by when you're up in Yankee country again."

We're solving two-step equations together in an activity called "rally check." The students pass the whiteboard from team member to team member, each completing their part. The timer rings, and they hold up their solutions. I give all thumbs up. They smile at one another and give high-fives and knock knuckles and wait for the next equation. This year my students have already advanced more than three grade levels. Though I keep setting the bar higher and higher, they keep reaching it; their hunger and want of learning is humbling: they'll be into the Algebra I curriculum by the end of the year. And today, being up here

in the front of my classroom feels like one of those dreams of flight, where the air is delicious and vital, where every small tilt and lean of your arms sends you careening above the blue earth, where it all matters more than anything you've ever known.

Before I can get the next equation on the board, there's a knock at the door. Mr. Briggs pokes his head in and motions for me to step into the hallway. He hands me a folded sheet of paper and walks off, saying, "Mr. Wilkins, I been watching through your window here, and I like what I'm seeing. We're gonna pass those state tests, sure enough!"

I unfold the paper. It's a note: *Mr. Wilkins, I am just writing to tell you Hi. I know you remember me from last year. I was one of your worst students, but now I am in Alternative School. I miss your class. You may not believe it, but I learned a lot from you. Well, I have to go. See you later. Corey.*

It's hot, the whole place smells of sweat and varnish and bleach. We've got a lot of parents tonight, though. I've been part of the committee that's been trying to increase attendance at parent-teacher nights. We've offered refreshments and door prizes and have asked local ministers to stress the importance of parental involvement at the schools. And it looks like it's working.

Mr. Briggs starts us off with school news. Then we sing "We Shall Overcome," and the teachers take up their positions behind folding tables, while Mr. Briggs and the assistant principal haul in sheets of cookies and jugs of sweet tea for afterward.

The line of parents at my table is long. I greet each of them and hand out grade reports and tell them how much their child has accomplished and what each one can work on to get ready for the end-of-year, benchmark test. And the fathers and grandfathers and brothers and uncles shake my hand, and the mothers and grandmothers and sisters and aunts smile and fan themselves, and they all say things like, "Mr. Wilkins, I do appreciate your time. Mr. Wilkins, I will keep asking her about that homework. Mr. Wilkins, you keep on 'em, keep 'em working hard."

And now Mrs. Freeman, Brian Freeman's grandmother, shuffles up to me. She is old and bent and feisty. I once called her to talk about Brian's poor performance on a quiz, and she had me listen on the phone as she lectured Brian up and down and grounded him until his grades improved: Brian had an A by the end of the month.

Mrs. Freeman puts a hand on the table to steady herself. She leans towards me, says, "Mr. Wilkins, I got my last grandson comin' up into the ninth grade

next year, and I want you here to teach him. You gonna be here again next year or not, Mr. Wilkins?"

They've just announced the third-quarter honor roll over the loudspeaker, and Jameshia's chubby face is a mess of tears. She's crying and hugging me and saying, "Mr. Wilkins, I made it. I made the honor roll! I knew I could do it, and you didn't let me quit, and now I'm going on to high school next year, and I'm gonna miss you and all, but Mr. Wilkins I'm gonna to graduate!"

She holds on to me for a moment longer and then steps back, wiping at her eyes with the backs of her hands. I tell her how proud of her I am. I tell her she needs to remember this, to remember the hard work she's done and how good it feels to get where you want to go.

She smiles that spectacular smile.

In the spring the herons fly north again, following the geese and songbirds, and they all follow the serpentine wanderings of the river. I hear them today, outside my open classroom window: wingbeats throbbing through the still day, their cries that ring and swell and fade.

My students have gone for the summer. I showed them how they met the class goals and then some, how their hard work paid off. And I told them how proud of them I was, how they had to keep working to earn the place and power they deserved in this world, how very much I believed in each one of them. Then I let them go. They're ready for high school algebra; they're on track to get their diplomas and to have enough math credits for college. Whatever it is they want to do, I hope it for them.

I'll probably never see any of them again. My second year of teaching is done, my contract commitment is up, and I'm leaving Mississippi. Some of the other teachers I started with in Teach For America are signing on for another year, and I respect the hell out of them for it. But I'm going back to the Northwest; I'll teach there, try to follow Ms. Lloyd's example: thirty-six years and counting in the place she has always called home. The past follows us wherever we go and the world is hard all over. But it took Mississippi for me to see it. Mississippi has given me a good, hard kind of hope.

I hear Liz drive up. I gather my things, lock my classroom and walk out the back door. Liz is waiting for me. The sun trembles in the white sky. A lone heron arcs over the far trees, and I get in and we leave.