

A MARIAN WOOD BOOK

PUBLISHED BY G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

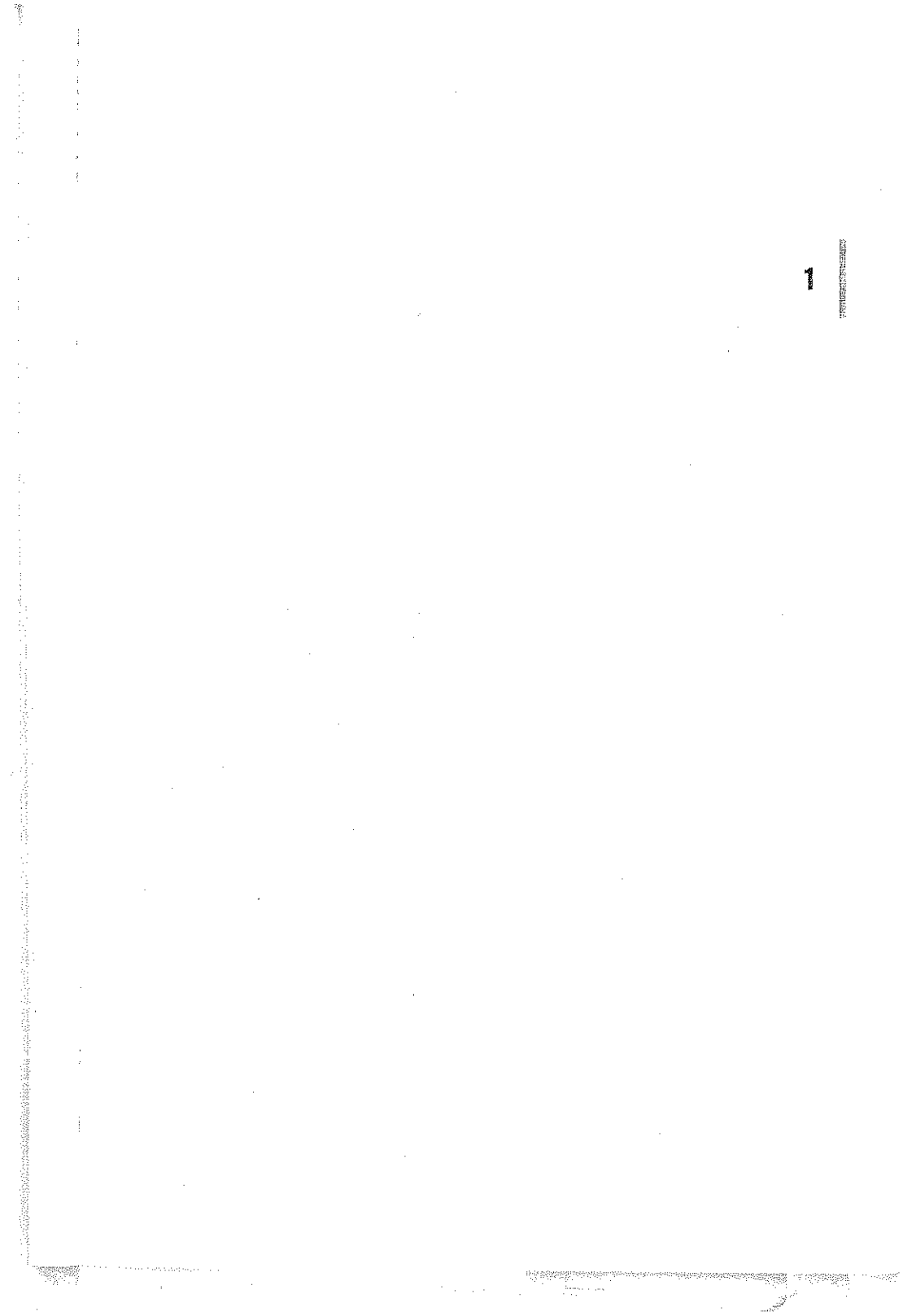
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NEW YORK 2001

CORNELIUS EADY

BRUTAL IMAGINATION

P  
O  
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M  
S



*who is Susan Smith*

*The speaker is the young black man  
Susan Smith claimed  
kidnapped her children.*

**HOW I GOT BORN**

Though it's common belief  
That Susan Smith willed me alive  
At the moment  
Her babies sank into the lake

*what is the  
point*

When called, I come.  
My job is to get things done.  
I am piecemeal.  
I make my living by taking things.

So now a mother needs me clothed  
In hand-me-downs  
And a knit cap.

Whatever.  
We arrive, bereaved  
On a stranger's step.  
*Baby, they weep,*  
*Poor child.*

*what is*

## MY HEART

Susan Smith has invented me because  
Nobody else in town will do what  
She needs me to do.

I mean: jump in an idling car  
And drive off with two sad and  
Frightened kids in the back.

Like a bad lover, she has given me a poisoned heart.  
It pounds both our ribs, black, angry, nothing but business.

Since her fear is my blood  
And her need part mythical,  
Everything she says about me is true.

## WHO AM I?

*Who are you, mister?*  
One of the boys asks  
From the eternal backseat  
And here is the one good thing:  
If I am alive, then so, briefly, are they,  
Two boys returned, three and one,  
Quiet and scared, bunched together  
Breathing like small beasts.  
They can't place me, yet there's  
Something familiar.  
Though my skin and sex are different, maybe  
It's the way I drive  
Or occasionally glance back  
With concern,  
Maybe it's the mixed blessing  
Someone, perhaps circumstance,  
Has given us,  
The secret thrill of hiding,  
Childish, in plain sight,  
Seen, but not seen,  
As if suddenly given the power  
To move through walls,  
To know every secret without permission.  
We roll sleepless through the dark streets, but inside  
The cab is lit with brutal imagination.

## SIGHTINGS

A few nights ago  
A man swears he saw me pump gas  
With the children  
At a convenience store  
Like a punchline you get the next day,  
Or a kiss in a dream that returns while  
You're in the middle of doing  
Something else.

I left money in his hand.

Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ who lives in \_\_\_\_\_,  
South Carolina,  
Of average height  
And a certain weight  
Who may or may not  
Believe in any of the  
Basic recognized religions,  
Saw me move like an angel  
In my dusky skin  
And knit hat.

Perhaps I looked him in the eye.

*what was  
- was it*

*Who is  
Acemini*

*Hm*

*who*

Ms. \_\_\_\_\_ saw a glint of us  
On which highway?  
On the street that's close  
To what landmark?

She now recalls  
The two children in the back  
Appeared to be behaving.

Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ now knows he heard  
The tires of the car  
Everyone is looking for  
Crunch the gravel  
As I pulled up,  
In the wee, wee hours  
At the motel where  
He works the night desk.

I signed or didn't sign the register.  
I took or didn't take the key from his hand.  
He looked or forgot to look  
As I pulled off to park in front  
Of one of the rooms at the back.

Did I say I was traveling with kids?  
Who slept that night  
In the untouched beds?

→ Reality

MY FACE

If you are caught  
In my part of town  
After dark,  
You are not lost;  
You are abandoned.

*part of town*

All that the neighbors will tell  
Your kin  
Is that you should  
Have known better.

All they will do  
Is nod their heads.  
They will feel sorry  
For you,

But rules are rules,  
And when you were  
Of a certain age  
Someone pointed  
A finger  
In the wrong direction



And said:  
All they do  
Is fuck and drink  
All they're good for  
Ain't worth a shit.

*Who are  
they talking to?*

You recall me now  
To the police artist.  
It wasn't really my face  
That stared back that day,  
But it was that look.

## SUSAN SMITH'S POLICE REPORT

My shape came from out-of-nowhere.  
The way some things don't belong  
That's the way

I clanged up to the car  
Trapped by a badly timed light.  
Her poor kids never saw our image

Swell in the rearview mirror.  
I was the danger of bulk; fast,  
Nervous fingers

Barked the unlocked door open  
And in I flooded, all the heartache  
A lonely stretch of road can give.

Then she was alone, blinking in  
The sight of an indifferent moon  
Above the pines.

This, she swore, was the sound  
Of my voice.

WHERE AM I?

Looking for Michael and Alex means  
That the bushes have not whispered,  
That the trees hold only shade  
That the lake still insists on being a lake.

I flicker from TV to TV. My flier sits  
On their grandmother's easy chair. I hover  
Over so many lawns, so many cups of coffee.

I pour from lip to lip. The town blossoms  
In yellow ribbons, sprinkled like bread crumbs  
Or bait. I crackle from cell phones and shortwave,

I am listened for in alleys. Looking for Michael  
And Alex means each car is scanned at the  
Drive-thru windows, that sightings are hoped for

At the self-serve pumps. Clerks long for the crook  
Of my arm, reaching for diapers and snacks.  
So many days I have loped from ear to ear,

From beauty parlor to church. They count the days  
Till someone comes back. We've never left.

## THE LAKE

*When called, I come.*

*My job  
Is to get things  
Done.*

Our hands grip the wheel  
As I steer toward  
The lake.

The children and I  
Have been driving  
For days.

Ever look someone  
You know  
Straight in the eye

And have them look  
Right through you? That's been  
Our fugitive lives.

They think:  
*They'll have to sleep  
Sometime,*  
But we don't do things  
The way you do.

They think:  
*Sooner or later*  
*They'll have*  
*To eat,*

But a deal's a deal.  
Our appetite behaves.  
Our day seeps  
Through yours.

Ever try to say  
Something,  
And know what you said  
Slid past an ear?

That's the way these headlights  
Rake the road along the lake.  
That's the way  
Her children yawn in the  
Back seat.

## THE LAW

I'm a black man, which means,  
In Susan's case,  
That I pour out of a shadow  
At a traffic light,

But I'm also a mother,  
Which is why she has me promise,  
"I won't hurt your kids,"  
Before I drift down the road.

I'm a mother,  
Which is why we sing  
*Have mercy, come home,*  
*No questions asked.*

But I'm black, and we both know  
The law.  
Who's going to believe  
That we had no choice  
But to open that door?

Who's going to care  
That it was now or  
Never,  
That there was no time  
To unbuckle them,

That it was take the car  
Or leave the car?

I'm black, which means  
I mustn't slow down.  
I float in forces  
I can't always control,

But I'm also a mother,  
Which is why  
I hope  
I'm as good as my word.



*She knew she could get further with this  
if she said a black man did it.*

*—A black resident of Union, South Carolina*

## WHY I AM NOT A WOMAN

How far do you think we'd have gotten  
If I'd jumped in her car, a car I wanted  
For who knows what,  
A woman,  
And not noticed the paraphernalia?  
The rattles, the child's seat?  
Had smelled the spills, the dried pee,  
The cloudy musk of old formula?

Even if I had pushed her out, head wild  
With all I guessed I'd taken,  
How many minutes,  
After my foot brushed a ball,  
After my eyes cooled down and focused on  
The rubble of play,

How many lights do you think I'd run  
Before all the stuff they'd dropped  
Over the years  
Into the small cracks; the straws, the cold  
Fries, the pacifier,



How long do you think the cops would listen  
Had Susan not sworn  
I was black, I was a bad dream,  
The children didn't mean a thing  
To that woman.

*the thing*

## ONE TRUE THING

I was made to be a driver, but the truth is, I was, from the  
Beginning, Susan's admiral. The sheriff suspects  
I sped the car into the lake like the christening of a great  
Ship. The fact is, momentum has more than one cure.  
You should think of a rowboat, a prank of tiny holes drilled  
Into the bottom. A fast car hits the water like a wall of brick  
And glue. But a car, gently pushed, quieter than a cop's  
Imagination, will bob out, fill up, then roll like a leaky can. \*

W. S. V. 1/21/72

## COMPOSITE

I am not the hero of this piece.  
I am only a stray thought, a solution.  
But now my face is stuck to lampposts, glued  
To plate glass, my forehead gets stapled  
To my hat.

I am here, and here I am not.  
I am a door that opens, and out walks  
No-one-can-help-you.  
Now I gaze, straight into your eye,  
From bulletin boards, tree trunks.

I am papered everywhere,  
A blizzard called  
You see what happens?  
I turn up when least expected.  
If you decide to buy some milk,

If you decide to wash your car,  
If you decide to mail a letter,

I might tumbleweed onto a pant leg.  
You can stare, and stare, but I can't be found.  
Susan has loosed me on the neighbors,  
A cold representative,  
The scariest face you could think of.

*In 1989, in Boston, Charles Stuart  
killed his pregnant wife and  
shot himself in a scheme  
to collect insurance money.  
He told the police the assailant  
was a young black male.*

## CHARLES STUART IN THE HOSPITAL

Susan Smith now knows what  
Charles Stuart knew in Boston:

We do quick, but sloppy work.

All these details:

*How tall was I? the police asked Charles,  
And ask Susan,*

*But I vary; I seem smaller and taller  
After dusk.*

*What was the tone of my voice?*

*Did I growl like a hound as I waved  
The pistol in their face?*

*Was I as desperate as a teenaged boy,  
Horny for a sweetheart's kiss?*

Here's what I told Susan:

"I won't harm your kids."

But if the moment was mine,  
Why would I say that?

I sit with her at the station

The way I sat with Charles

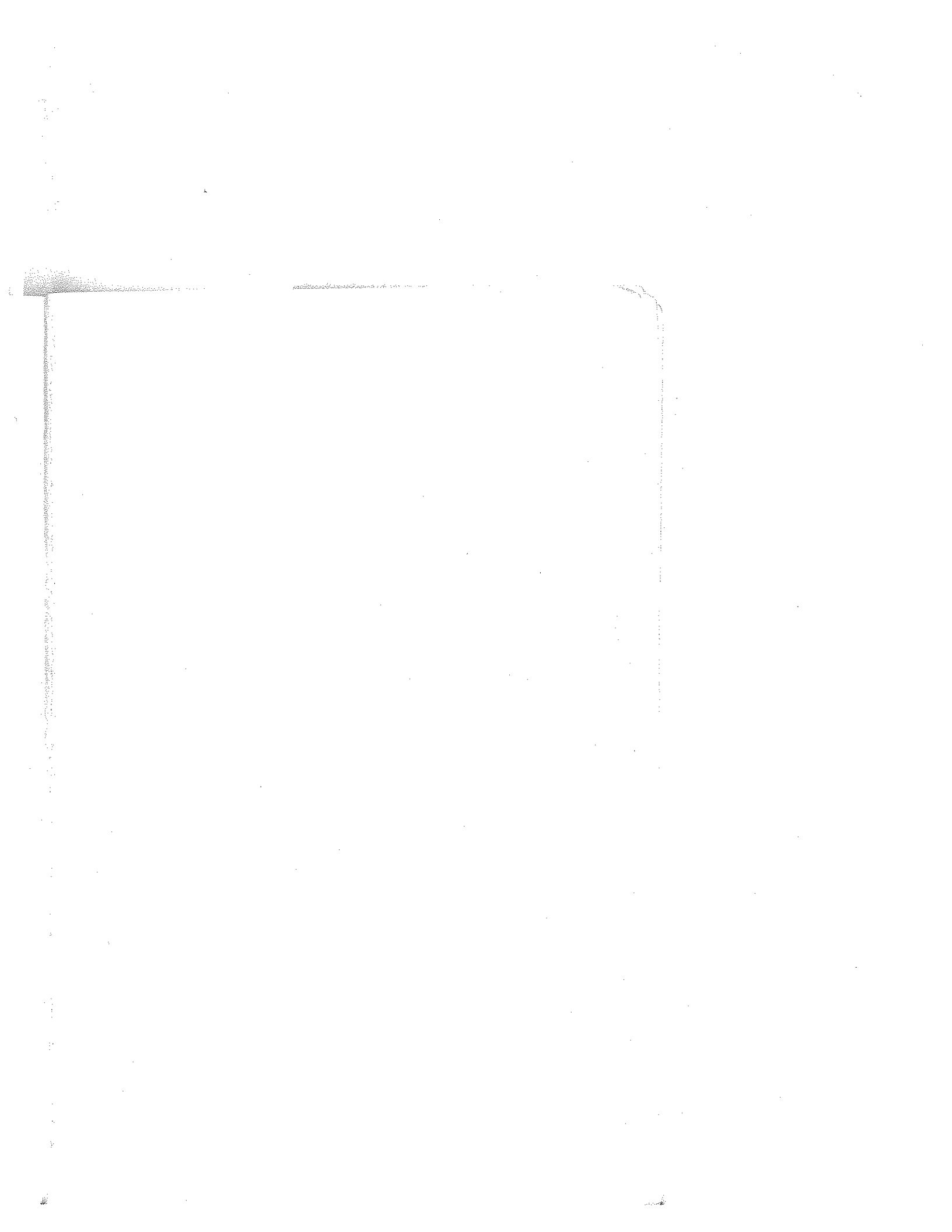
At the hospital:

A shadow on the water glass,  
Changing hues,

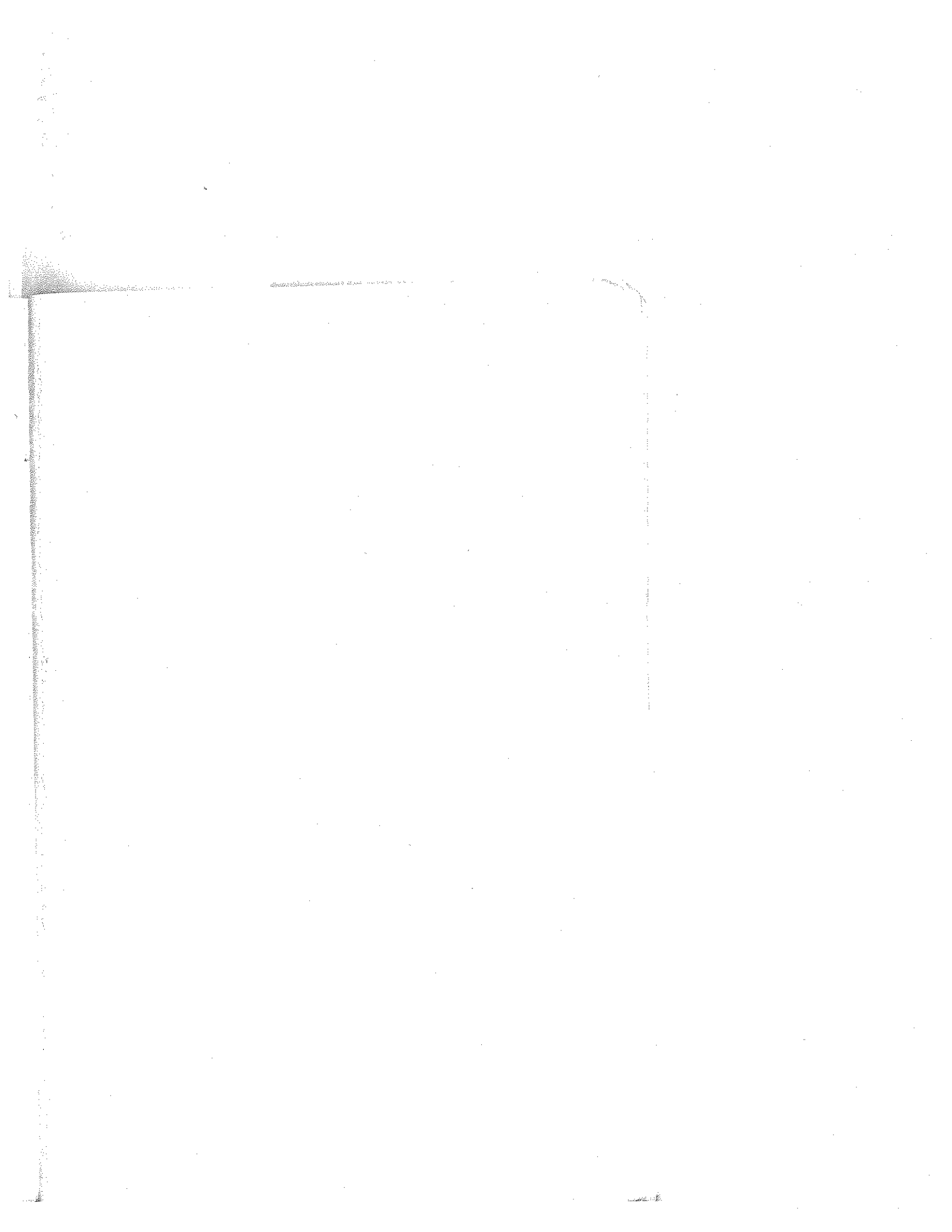
The slant of my nose and eyes.  
Depending on the light  
And the question.

Charles rocks in bed with the bullet  
We gave ourselves.  
*How far away was I?* We never stopped  
To think.  
We were in a hurry.  
In Boston and South Carolina  
I was hungry for a car  
And didn't much care how I got it.  
*Deadly impatient*, Charles tells the cops,  
But if I couldn't be seen,  
But why would I do it that way?  
Why do wives and children seem to attract me?

I sat with Charles the way I sit  
With Susan; like anyone, and no one,  
Changing clothes,  
Putting on and taking off ski caps,  
Curling and relaxing my hair,  
Trying hard to become sense.









## UNCLE TOM IN HEAVEN

My name is mud; let's get that out  
Of the way first. I am not a child.  
I was made to believe that God  
Kept notes, ran a tab on the blows,  
So many on one cheek, so many on  
The other.

*What does that  
mean?*

*→ on cheek?  
That's no stream  
the...*

I watch another black man pour from a  
White woman's head. I fear  
He'll live the way I did, a brute,  
A flimsy ghost of an idea. Both  
Of us groomed to go only so far.

That was my duty. I'm well aware  
Of what I've become; a name  
Children use to separate themselves  
On a playground. It doesn't matter  
To know I'm someone else's lie,

Anything human can slip, and that's enough  
To make grown men worry about  
Their accent, where their ambition might  
Stray. It doesn't help anything to tell you  
I was built to be a hammer,  
A war cry. Like him, nobody knew me,

But in my prime, I filled the streets, worried  
Into the eardrum, scared up thoughts  
Of laws and guns. How I would love  
Not to be dubious,

But I am a question whole races spend  
Their time trying to answer. My author  
Believed in God, and being denied the  
Power to hate her,

\*  
Herbert  
Becker Stone

I watch another black man roam the land,  
Dull in his invented hide.

UNCLE BEN WATCHES THE LOCAL NEWS

Like him, I live, but never agreed to it.  
A hand drew me out of some mad concern.  
I was pulled together  
To give, to cook  
But never eat.

So I know this fellow, this guy  
They're overturning the world  
To find. He and I were  
Stamped from the same ink. \*  
I look at them look, high, low,  
Over, under. I know  
What that white lady thinks,

She's as sad and crazy as the smile  
They've quilled under my nose.

### JEMIMA'S DO-RAG

I crown her secret, the hair  
The world seems to dread.  
At night, alone, after work has loosened  
Its grip, and the muscles of her smile  
Can relax, at the dresser, beside the  
Washbasin, down comes the beauty  
They try so hard to bind.

I hear there's a man on the street,  
Eyes dead as marbles, dodging  
The law. They say his cap is made  
Of wool. If he sleeps, I bet he dreams  
Like we do, scalp uncoiled, nobody's helper, X  
No one's aunt.

BUCKWHEAT'S LAMENT

Lil B...  
Lil B...

My family tells me this white gang I run with will  
Grow up, and leave me behind. Our bones  
Will change, and so will their affection. I will  
Be a childlike man who lives in a shack. Just  
Wait, they promise, my hair will become  
Hoo-doo. The white girls will deny how we rassled,  
What we saw. They laugh

Wait 'til you're *grown*. And I hear this sad place  
At the middle of that word where they live,  
Where they wait for my skin to go sour.

*Lincoln Theatre Nov 1950  
is black w/lyric actor*

**STEPIN FETCHIT READS THE PAPER**

Not the dead actor,  
Historically speaking, but the ghost  
Of the scripts, the bumbling fake  
Of an acrobat, the low-pitched anger  
Someone mistook for stupid.

This so-called bruiser rattling the streets,  
Heavy with children, I'd like to  
Tell him what a thankless job  
It is to go along to get along.  
All the nuances can and will  
Be rubbed smooth and by the time  
It's over,

*thankless  
job of a job*

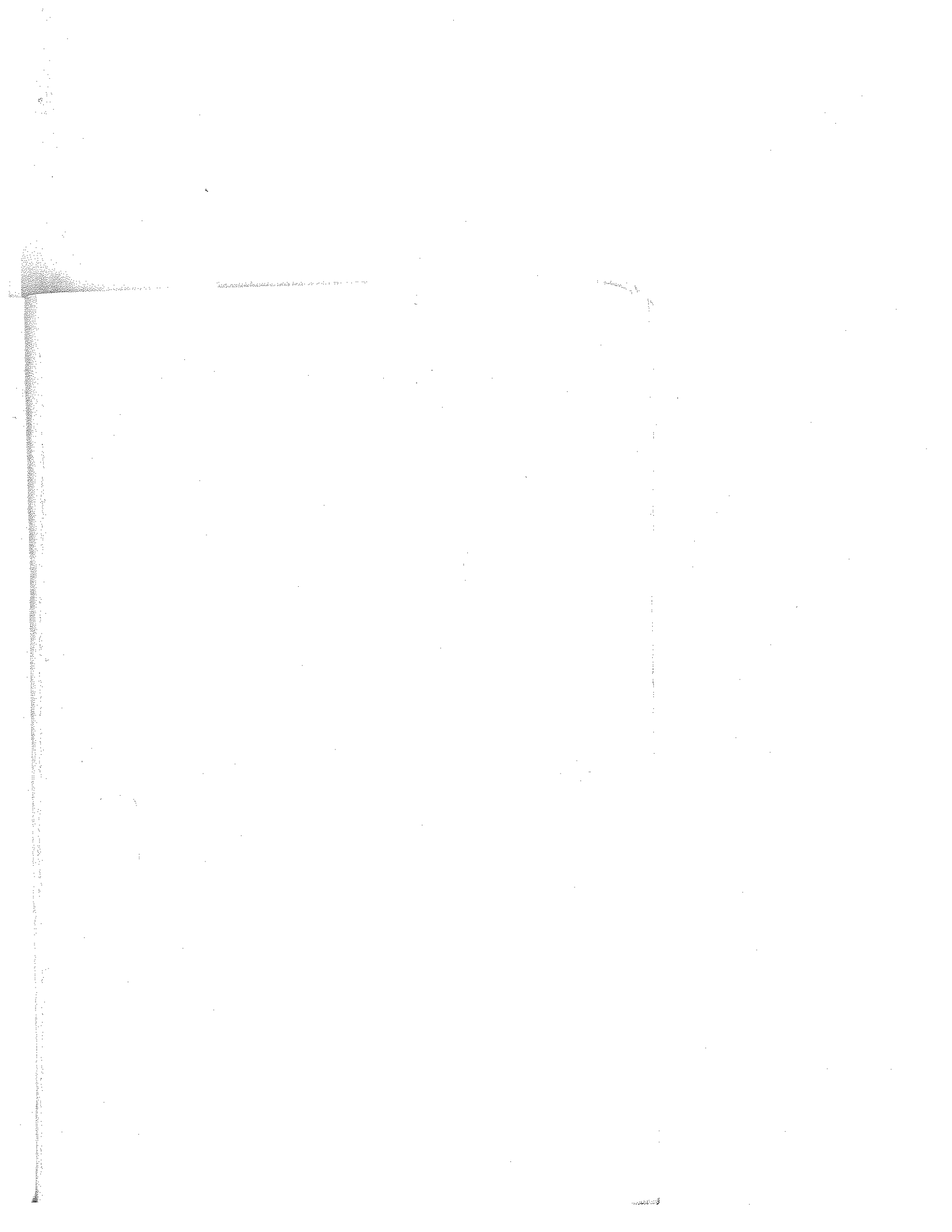
By the time you're dead and the people  
You thought you were doing this  
On behalf of are long forgotten,

There's only an image left that they  
Name you after, toothy, slow,  
Worthy of a quick kick in the pants.  
I used to have bones, I'd tell him.  
It was a story that  
Rubbed out my human walk.

*only an  
image left*

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*The black man*

**THE UNSIGNED CONFESSION OF MR. ZERO**

No car, no road, no tires, no hands, no fingers, no feet,  
No gas pedal, no turn signals, no stoplights, no watch cap,  
No legs, no pants, no worn shirt, no blank eyes,  
No heavy lids, no cold voice, no threat, no dark skin,

No lying in wait, no click of a handle, no mother's scream,  
No silence at her questions, no height, no weight,  
No strange needs, no sense of adventure, no breath,  
No nappy hair, no memories, no one to impress,

No hunger, no shit, no piss, no weariness, no reaction,  
No family, no ideas, no history, no favorite song,  
No blood pressure, no guilt, no sleep or dreams,  
No steering wheel, no rearview mirror, no ID.

Somewhere near the bushes. On the periphery.  
A noise you can't easily locate. I am the heaviness  
The sheriff thinks he detects on Susan Smith's tongue,  
The story she tries to hold between her teeth and gums.

## WHAT I'M MADE OF

Susan fills our hands with plain objects,  
Key, door handle, steering wheel,  
But my hands are nothing:  
A song you can't remember  
The words to,  
The button that pops  
Off a vest, a comb that  
Falls out of a pocket  
Or purse.

Susan fills my lungs with air,  
But what do I breathe out?  
Parchment, ink, low growls, the  
Blank gap between words.

Nothing fits upon my back,  
Nothing actually catches my eye,  
I am hidden and found,  
I am North, South, East, West,  
My dark skin porous, in-between.

Susan claims my name is muscle,  
Bone, calls me tissue  
And sinew, fills in my blank  
With the absence of her boys,

But I am water, pebble,  
Silt and gravity,  
Evidence under her nail.

*Water*

## WHAT THE SHERIFF SUSPECTS

Each time the town tells the sheriff  
To look harder, my nose straightens and  
My hair uncurls. I rustle like wind upon  
The surface of a lake. I wink just  
Below Susan's cheeks.

The sheriff has shuffled my deck all week.  
So many miles, so many deeds.  
I do not tire. I can't stop driving. I can  
Wrangle kids in broad daylight and never  
Be seen or heard. I'm not doing this for ransom.  
When I'm about, things simply don't add up,

A short distance becomes too large, clocks run amok,  
Stop signs change into traffic lights. Now he wonders  
Why he's never noticed the way Susan's body can't sit still,  
My accent rising from her alibi.

## NEXT OF KIN

The black man in town  
They thought looked like me,  
Without the dreamed-up cap  
And wardrobe,

The police have him now  
He sits in a small room.  
They turn him this way  
And that.

He'll cool there for hours.  
How do you think he feels?  
I whisper *we're innocent*  
Into his ears.

He looks so much like me,  
We could be brothers.  
Already, folks  
May have their doubts:

He's poor enough.  
Where has he been?  
He has his needs.  
What do they know?

Neighbors call him *quiet*,  
A new knot of stress  
On the tongue.

It's been a hard week  
To be black in Union, S.C., ✱  
A black woman tells a reporter,

The whites aren't civil.  
They look at you and then ✱  
Reach over and lock  
Their doors.

Now he is it.  
Susan has lent me  
His cheekbones,  
His gait.

For a while,  
He is as close as  
They'll ever get.

#### WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT THE ABDUCTOR

The sheriff reads off a list of things I have not done:  
I have not called on the phone. I did not discard the  
Childrens' clothing they found by the highway,

I wasn't the man who robbed a convenience store  
In a car the same color as Susan's. I didn't drop  
Off the child they found, in Seattle, in a child's  
Seat like hers; the baby someone thought they  
Heard crying in the woods; not there, none of  
My doing.

Bloodhounds cannot catch a whiff of me. Divers  
Rake the bottom of John D. Long Lake. I give  
Them a snootful of silt. Who am I? Nothing  
Says the sheriff, can be ruled out. A teenaged girl  
Sees a man, covered in mud, walk out of the woods.

The heat sensors of the helicopter they send fail  
To light my soggy footprints. Nothing can be  
Dismissed. A psychic tumbles through a dream.  
He nods as the children point everywhere but  
In my direction. I am zip, my  
Face and reasons an educated guess.  
All week the police computers grind,

But I am that number after the decimal that keeps  
Stuttering, won't resolve.

## INTERROGATION

The children were fussy,  
Susan tells the FBI agent,  
So we strapped them in the back seat  
And drove off to go shopping  
At Kmart.

How can a black man drive  
An old, beat-up Mazda  
In a southern town  
With two white kids  
In the backseat,  
And never be seen?  
The agent would like an  
Explanation.

He binds our arm to the  
Polygraph,

But we swear we were in the  
Parking lot,  
In the hours before  
I officially arrive,  
Under the brute light  
Of the mercury lamps.



Who could have missed us, diving  
To find a bottle, wedged  
Under the back seat?

Who didn't notice us  
As we walked the aisles,  
A cranky family among  
The other cranky families?

He insists: what we say  
Is not what we mean.  
He tries to spike our heart.

We say, as evenly as we can: the children  
Were twitchy bombs  
Of sugar; first  
We exhaust their eyes, then  
Cruise the town,  
Like any family,  
Bargaining for sleep.

## MY EYES

Susan hopes the sheriff will recognize what she's stitched  
Under my lids. Perhaps I'm a young boy whose dark skin  
Ricocheted off her and her friends on a playground.

Now I drive about, my gaze a blown switch. Maybe I'm  
The first time she noticed where they say I'm fit to live: the  
Wrong side of the tracks, chocolate town, coonville.

Haven't you seen those eyes before? she asks him, that ache  
So close to yearning, the heart's fallen architecture as you see  
How this world really works, the empty stare that tracks off  
The map, somewhere beyond negotiation.

## WHAT ISN'T KNOWN ABOUT THE ABDUCTOR

No name, no known jobs or affiliations.  
Was I working alone, was someone else  
Waiting to help? Did I intend to rob, carjack,  
Or kidnap?

Why won't I stop? Am I afraid, do I think things  
Have spun beyond my control? Why won't I  
Simply drop the kids off somewhere?

Was I paid to do this? Did Susan promise me  
Reward for taking her children?  
Did I do anything sexual to her?

Why did I go for that particular car?  
What sort of carjacker \*  
Lies in wait on a deserted road?

No age, no preference, no known associates.  
How long have I lived? Will I strike again?  
Did I grab hold of a random opportunity?

Am I someone who lives in town?  
How can I keep moving yet never be seen?  
Why us?

## PRESS CONFERENCE

And this is my life now.  
I am a faint hum behind  
The sensation, the blur of doubt  
At the corner of the flashbulb.

These are my names these days:  
Hungry, senseless, man of little  
Schooling, ninny, fraidy-cat.

If I had an opinion, I guess  
I would tell you all I'm tired,  
Days and days of near misses,  
Almost snapping into focus,

The in-between feel of circling  
These streets, a rumor.  
If I could, I'd let our weariness  
Bite into the sheriff's ear.

Susan steps to the mike.  
How do we feel?  
There's a crack in our voice.

## SYMPATHY

The sheriff's too good to be true.  
He tries to urge Susan and me to part.  
He trusts a friendly cup of coffee will skim me loose,  
But we're hard to untangle.  
I won't be easy; we know his help  
Is poison. He is courting us.  
We run a cold sweat  
While he waits.  
He is too good to be true.  
I am not for his ears, Susan knows.  
She tries not to weep; he attempts to lean toward us,  
We bob together in the god-awful silence.

## CONFESSION

There have been days I've almost  
Spilled

From her, nearly taken a breath.  
Yanked

Myself clean. I've  
Trembled

Her coffee cup. I well  
Under

Her eyelids. I've been  
Gravel

On her mattress. I am  
Not

Gone. I am going to  
Worm

My way out. I have  
Not

Disappeared. I half  
Slide

Between her teeth,  
Double

Her over as she tries  
Not

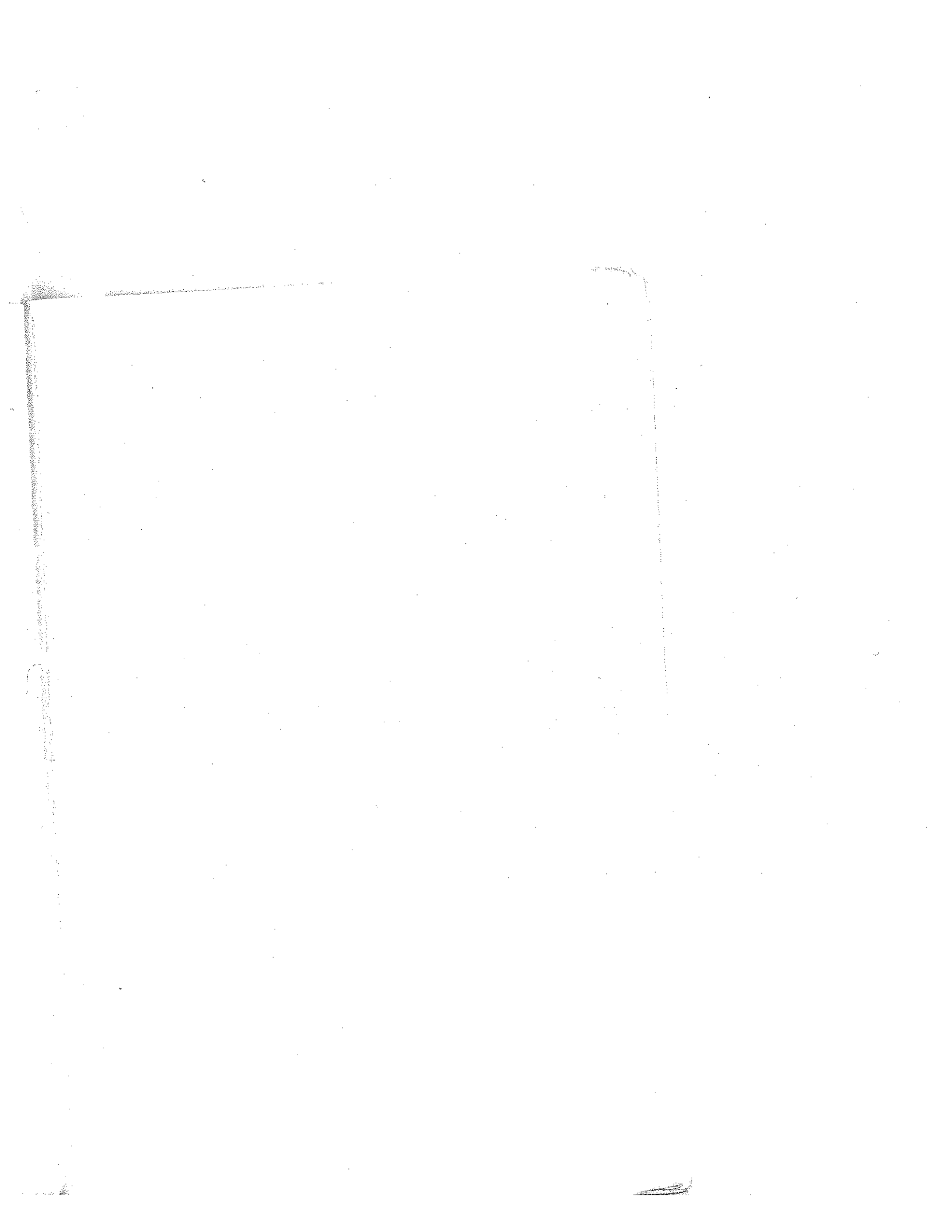
To blurt me out. The  
Closer

Susan inches me  
Toward

This, the  
Louder

The sheriff  
Hears

Me bitch.







*The italicized language  
is from Susan Smith's  
handwritten confession.*

## BIRTHING

*When I left my home on Tuesday, October 25, I  
was very emotionally distraught*

I have yet  
To breathe.

I am in the back of her mind,  
Not even a notion.

A scrap of cloth, the way  
A man lopes down a street.

Later, a black woman will say:  
"We knew exactly who she was describing."

At this point, I have no language,  
No tongue, no mouth.

I am not me, yet.  
I am just an understanding.

---

*As I rode and rode and rode, I felt  
Even more anxiety.*

Susan parks on a bridge,  
And stares over the rail.  
Below her feet, a dark blanket of river  
She wants to pull over herself,  
Children and all.

I am not the call of the current.

She is heartbroken.  
She gazes down,  
And imagines heaven.

---

*I felt I couldn't be a good mom anymore, but I didn't want  
my children to grow up without a mom.*

I am not me, yet.  
At the bridge,  
One of Susan's kids cries,  
So she drives to the lake,  
To the boat dock.

I am not yet opportunity.

---

*I had never felt so lonely  
And so sad.*

Who shall be a witness?  
Bullfrogs, water fowl.

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*When I was at John D. Long Lake  
I had never felt so scared  
And unsure.*

I've yet to be called.  
Who will notice?  
Moths, dragonflies,  
Field mice.

---

*I wanted to end my life so bad  
And was in my car ready to  
Go down that ramp into  
The water*

My hand isn't her hand  
Panicked on the  
Emergency brake.

---

*And I did go part way,  
But I stopped.*

I am not Gravity,  
The water lapping against  
The gravel.

---

*I went again and stopped.  
I then got out of the car.*

Susan stares at the sinking.  
My muscles aren't her muscles,  
Burned from pushing.  
The lake has no appetite,  
But it takes the car slowly,  
Swallow by swallow, like a snake.

---

*Why was I feeling this way?  
Why was everything so bad  
In my life?*

Susan stares at the taillights  
As they slide from here  
To hidden.

---

*I have no answers  
To these questions.*

She only has me,  
After she removes our hands  
From our ears.