P 19:  Pilate’s Earring

And it did stay there, until the baby girl turned twelve and

took it out, folded it up into a tiny knot and put it in a little

brass box, and strung the entire contraption through her left

earlobe. Fluky about her own name at twelve, how much

more fluky she’d become since then Macon could only

guess. But he knew for certain that she would treat the

naming of the third Macon Dead with the same respect and

awe she had treated the boy’s birth.

P 13: The Watermark

As she unfolded the white linen and let it billow over the fine mahogany table, she would look once more at the large water mark. She never set the table or passed through the dining room without looking at it. Like a lighthouse keeper drawn to his window to gaze once again

at the sea, or a prisoner automatically searching out the sun as he steps into the yard for his hour of exercise, Ruth looked for the water mark several times during the day. Sheknew it was there, would always be there, but she needed to confirm its presence. Like the keeper of the lighthouse and the prisoner, she regarded it as a mooring, a checkpoint, some stable visual object that assured her that the world was still there; that this was life and not a dream.  That she was alive somewhere, inside, which she acknowledged to be true only because a thing she knew intimately was out there, outside herself.

Even in the cave of sleep, without dreaming of it or thinking of it at all, she felt its presence. Oh, she talked endlessly to her daughters and her guests about how to get rid of it—what might hide this single flaw on the splendid wood: Vaseline, tobacco juice, iodine, a sanding followed by linseed oil. She had tried them all. But her glance was nutritious; the spot became, if anything, more pronounced as the years passed.

The cloudy gray circle identified the place where the bowl filled every day during the doctor’s life with fresh flowers had stood. Every day….

Ruth let the seaweed disintegrate, and later, when its veins and stems dropped and curled into brown scabs on the table, she removed the bowl and brushed away the scabs. But the water mark, hidden by the bowl all these years, was exposed. And once exposed, it behaved as though it were itself a plant and flourished into a huge suede-gray flower that throbbed like fever, and sighed likehe shift of sand dunes. But it could also be still. Patient, restful, and still.

But there was nothing you could do with a mooring except acknowledge it, use it for the verification of some idea you wanted to keep alive.

P 51-2:  Lincoln’s Heaven

“I worked right alongside my father. Right alongside him.  From the time Iwas four or five we worked together. Just the two of us. Our mother was dead. Died when Pilate was born. Pilate was just a baby. She stayed over at another farm in the daytime. I carried her over there myself in my arms every morning. Then I’d go back across the fields and meet my father. We’d hitch President Lincoln to the plow and…That’s what we called her: President Lincoln. Papa said Lincoln was a good plow hand before he was President and you shouldn’t take a good plow hand away from his work. He called our farm Lincoln’s Heaven. It was a little bit a place. But it looked big to me then. I know now it must a been a little bit a place, maybe a hundred and fifty acres. We tilled fifty. About eighty of it was woods. Must of been a fortune in oak and pine; maybe that’s what they wanted—the lumber, the oak and the pine. We had a pond that was four acres. And a stream, full of fish. Right down in the heart of a valley. Prettiest mountain you ever saw, Montour Ridge. We lived in Montour County. Just north of the Susquehanna. We had a four-stall hog pen. The big barn was forty feet by a hundred and forty—hip-roofed too. And all around in the mountains was deer and wild turkey.  You ain’t tasted nothing till you taste wild turkey the way Papa cooked it. He’d burn it real fast in the fire. Burn it black all over. That sealed it. Sealed the juices in. Then he’d let it roast on a spit for twenty-four hours. When you cut the black burnt part off, the meat underneath was tender, sweet, juicy. And we had fruit trees.  Apple, cherry. Pilate tried to make me a cherry pie once.”

Macon paused and let the smile come on. He had not said any of this for years. Had not even reminisced much about it recently. When he was first married he used to talk about Lincoln’s Heaven to Ruth. Sitting on the porch swing in the dark, he would re-create the land that was to have been his. Or when he was just starting out in the business of buying houses, he would lounge around the barbershop and swap stories with the men there. But for years he hadn’t had that kind of time, or interest. But now he was doing it again, with his son, and every detail of that land was clear in his mind: the well, the apple orchard, President Lincoln; her foal, Mary Todd; Ulysses S. Grant, their cow; General Lee, their hog. That was the way he knew what history he remembered. His father couldn’t read, couldn’t write; knew only what he saw and heard tell of. But he had etched in Macon’s mind certain historical figures, and as a boy in school, Macon thought of the personalities of his horse, his hog, when he read about these people. His father may have called their plow horse President Lincoln as a joke, but Macon always thought of Lincoln with fondness since he had loved him first as a strong, steady, gentle, and obedient horse. He even liked General Lee, for one spring they slaughtered him and ate the best pork outside Virginia, “from the butt to the smoked ham to the ribs to the sausage to the jowl to the feet to the tail to the head cheese”—for eight months. And there was cracklin in November.

“General Lee was all right by me,” he told Milkman, smiling. “Finest general I ever knew. Even his balls was tasty. Circe made up the best pot of maws she ever cooked. Huh! I’d forgotten that woman’s name. That was it, Circe. Worked at a big farm some white people owned in Danville, Pennsylvania. Funny how things get away from you. For years you can’t remember nothing.

P78:  The Crowd

Milkman closed his eyes and then opened them. The street was even more crowded with people, all going in the direction he was coming from. All walking hurriedly and bumping against him. After a while he realized that nobody was walking on the other side of the street. There were no cars and the street lights were on, now that darkness had come, but the sidewalk on the other side of the street was completely empty. He turned around to see where everybody was going, but there was nothing to see except their backs and hats pressing forward into the night. He looked again at the other side of Not Doctor Street. Not a soul.

He touched the arm of a man in a cap who was trying to get past him. “Why is everybody on this side of the street?” he asked him.

“Watch it, buddy,” the man snapped, and moved on with the crowd.

Milkman walked on, still headed toward Southside, never once wondering why he himself did not cross over to the other side of the street, where no one was walking at all.

He believed he was thinking coldly, clearly.

p 85: Guitar’s Doe

“Whatever.”

“Just listen, Milkman. Listen to me. I used to hunt a lot. From the time I could walk almost and Iwas good at it. Everybody said I was a natural. I could hear anything, smell anything, and see like a cat. You know what I mean? A natural. And I was never scared—not of the dark or shadows or funny sounds, and I was never afraid to kill. Anything. Rabbit, bird, snakes, squirrels, deer. And I was little. It never bothered me. I’d take a shot at anything. The grown men used to laugh about it. Said I was a natural-born hunter. After we moved up here with my grandmother, that was the only thing about the South I missed. So when my grandmother used to send us kids back home in the summer, all I thought about was hunting again. They’d pile us on the bus and we’d spend the summer with my grandmother’s sister, Aunt Florence. Soon’s I got there I looked for my uncles, to go out in the woods. And one summer—I was about ten or eleven, I guess—we all went out and I went off on my own. I thought I saw deer tracks. It wasn’t the season for deer, but that didn’t bother me any. If I saw one I killed one. I was right about the tracks; it was a deer, but spaced funny—not wide apart like I thought they should be, but still a deer. You know they step in their own prints. If you never saw them before you’d think a two legged creature was jumping. Anyway, I stayed on the trail until I saw some bushes. The light was good and all of a sudden I saw a rump between the branches. I dropped it with the first shot and finished it with the next. Now, I want to tell you I was feeling good. I saw myself showing my uncles what I’d caught. But when I got up to it—and I was going real slow because I thought I might have to shoot it again—I saw it was a doe. Not a young one; she was old, but she was still a doe. I felt…bad. You know what I mean? I killed a doe. A doe, man.” Milkman was gazing at Guitar with the wide steady eyes of a man trying to look sober.

P129:  The Paralyzed Woman and the Frozen Man

…Milkman heard the noises, heard the window shake, but refused to move or

take his arm away from his eyes. Even when he heard the tinkle and clatter of glass he did not move.

Hagar put her shoe back on before reaching into the window hole she had made and turning the catch. It took her the longest time to raise the window. She was hanging lopsided over the railing, one leg supporting her weight.  The window slid in a crooked path up its jamb.

Milkman refused to look. Perspiration collected in the small of his back and ran out of his armpit down his side.  But the fear was gone. He lay there as still as the morning light, and sucked the world’s energy up into his own will.  And willed her dead. Either she will kill me or she will drop dead. Either I am to live in this world on my terms or I will die out of it. If I am to live in it, then I want her dead. One or the other. Me or her. Choose.

Die, Hagar. Die. Die. Die.

But she didn’t. She crawled into the room and walked over to the little iron bed. In her hand was a butcher knife, which she raised high over her head and brought down heavily toward the smooth neck flesh that showed above his shirt collar. The knife struck his collarbone and angled off to his shoulder. A small break in the skin began to bleed. Milkman jerked, but did not move his arm nor open his eyes. Hagar raised the knife again, this time with both hands, but found she could not get her arms down. Try as she might, the ball joint in her shoulders would not move.

Ten seconds passed. Fifteen. The paralyzed woman and the frozen man.

At the thirtieth second Milkman knew he had won. He moved his arm and opened his eyes. His gaze traveled to her strung-up, held-up arms.

Oh, she thought, when she saw his face, I had forgotten how beautiful he is.

178-179  The Peacock

“Okay. Tell me how you gonna cunning them out of the house.”

“Well, let’s see now.” Guitar stopped to scratch his back on a telephone pole. He closed his eyes, in either the ecstasy of relief or the rigors of concentration. Milkman stared off into the sky for inspiration, and while glancing toward the rooftops of the used-car places, he saw a white peacock poised on the roof of a long low building that served as headquarters for Nelson Buick. He was about to accept the presence of the bird as one of those waking dreams he was subject to whenever indecisiveness was confronted with reality, when Guitar opened his eyes and said, “Goddam! Where’d that come from?” Milkman was relieved.

“Must of come from the zoo.”

“That raggedy-ass zoo? Ain’t nothing in there but two tired monkeys and some snakes.”

“Well, where then?”

“Beats me.”

“Look—she’s flying down.” Milkman felt again his unrestrained joy at anything that could fly. “Some jive flying, but look at her strut.”

“He.”

“Huh?”

“He. That’s a he. The male is the only one got that tail full of jewelry. Son of a bitch. Look at that.” The peacock opened its tail wide. “Let’s catch it. Come on, Milk,” and Guitar started to run toward the fence.

“What for?” asked Milkman, running behind him. “What we gonna do if we catch him?”

“Eat him!” Guitar shouted.

He swung easily over the double pipes that bordered the lot and began to circle the bird at a distance, holding his head a little to the side to fool the peacock, which was strutting around a powder-blue Buick. It closed its tail and let the tips trail in the gravel. The two men stood still, watching.

“How come it can’t fly no better than a chicken?” Milkman asked.

“Too much tail. All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Can’t nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down.”

The peacock jumped onto the hood of the Buick and once more spread its tail, sending the flashy Buick into oblivion.

“Faggot.” Guitar laughed softly. “White faggot.”

Milkman laughed too, and they watched a while more before leaving the used cars and the pure white peacock.

But the bird had set them up. Instead of continuing the argument about how they would cop, they began to fantasize about what the gold could buy when it became legal tender.

184-6  Stealing the Gold

Breathing the air that could have come straight from a marketplace in Accra, they stood for what seemed to them a very long time. One leaned against a tree, his foot hovering off the ground. Finally one touched the elbow of the other and they both moved toward an open window.

With no trouble at all, they entered. Although they had stood deliberately in the dark of the pine trees, they were unprepared for the deeper darkness that met them there in that room. Neither had seen that kind of blackness, not even behind their own eyelids. More unsettling than the darkness, however, was the fact that in contrast to the heat outside (the slumbering ginger-laden heat that had people wiping sweat from their neck folds), it was as cold as ice in Pilate’s house.

Suddenly the moon came out and shone like a flashlight right into the room. They both saw it at the same time. It hung heavy, hung green like the green of Easter eggs left too long in the dye. And like Easter, it promised everything: the Risen Son and the heart’s lone desire. Complete power, total freedom, and perfect justice. Guitar knelt down before it and wove his fingers together into a footstep.  Milkman hoisted himself up, one hand on Guitar’s head, and shifted himself until he sat on Guitar’s shoulders. Slowly Guitar stood up. Milkman felt upward along the sack until he found its neck. He thought the rope would have to be cut, and was annoyed to find the sack hung by wire instead.  He hoped the knife would be enough, because they hadn’t figured on wire and had brought neither pincers nor a wire cutter. The sound of the grating knife filled the room. No one, he thought, could sleep through that. At last some few strands broke and it was only a moment before the entire blackness was severed. They’d figured on the weight of the sack being enough to tumble them the minute it was cut free, and planned that at a whispered signal, Guitar would bend his knees and sink down so Milkman’s feet would hit the floor almost immediately. But there was no need for this graceful footwork; the bag was much lighter than they had anticipated, and Milkman made it down quite easily. As soon as they both regained balance, there was a huge airy sigh that each one believed was made by the other. Milkman handed his knife to Guitar, who closed it and tucked it in his back pocket. There was the deep sigh again and an even more piercing chill. Holding the sack by its neck and its bottom, Milkman followed Guitar to the window. Once Guitar had cleared the sill, he reached back to help Milkman over. The moonlight was playing tricks on him, for he thought he saw the figure of a man standing right behind his friend. Enveloped by the heat they’d left a few minutes earlier, they walked swiftly away from the house and out onto the road.

At another open window on the same side of the house, the one next to the sink where Hagar washed her hair and where Reba put pintos to soak, a woman’s face appeared. “What the devil they want that for?” she wondered. Then she picked at the window sill until she had a splinter of wood and put it in her mouth.