

**SOUTHERN BLOOD**

by

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FADE IN:

EXT. FIELD - NIGHT

Towering cross burns. Flames fly, licking gently at the cross. Crackles and sparks fill the air.

A small boy clings to his mother. They move close to watch the cross burn.

Mother and son stand still and silent, their eyes wide, reflecting and rising with the flames.

Orange sparks float away, escaping into the black sky.

INT. FARMHOUSE - DAY

An old man in faded blue overalls awakens on a cot, on a screened-in porch, to the sound of a TV blaring infomercials. This is VIRGIL SHARP (70s).

There's something delicate in Virgil's face and something tragic and wild in his dark eyes.

He raises his wrist, looks at his watch. He sits up, laces his boots.

LIVING ROOM

Virgil enters to find his wife LURLEEN (late 70s) stroke victim, in a wheelchair, quilt drawn up to her neck, with only her shriveled face and gnarled hands showing.

She watches TV with the volume way up, a plate of cold biscuits in her lap.

She turns her head for a moment but doesn't say anything. After another moment, she turns it back to the TV.

VIRGIL  
What're you doing?

LURLEEN  
Nothing. Watching TV.

VIRGIL

I'm gonna go over and see how  
he's doing.

LURLEEN

Leave him alone and let him work.

VIRGIL

That ain't the first time you've  
said that, Lurleen.

LURLEEN

It ain't?

VIRGIL

No. You've said it about a hundred  
times. I'm sick of hearing it.

LURLEEN

Then you ought to leave me be.

VIRGIL

I just want to go and see how  
much he's got done.

LURLEEN

I'm getting hungry.

Virgil motions to the plate in her lap.

VIRGIL

Eat them biscuits.

EXT. VIRGIL'S FARM - DAY

Virgil walks in the sweltering heat, away from the chipped  
redbrick house, past a pickup truck, a tractor parked in an  
equipment shed and pastures of corn, peas and okra.

He looks toward the bottom pasture. Black cows graze in  
the tall green grass.

SUPER TITLE:

Oxford, Mississippi  
2004

Virgil mops at the sweat on his brow with his forearm as he trudges down a dirt road and up a hill, beneath white oaks with their green tops hanging thick under the sun.

Diesel smoke floats through the woods. Silence.

WOODS

A yellow bulldozer BREAKS the silence. It crawls with steel treads, jetting black smoke, tearing and shoving trees into a mound.

The DOZER DUDE (30s) turns off the dozer. Virgil stands in the shade of a monster white oak, looking around.

There are two sloping walls of trees, a natural place to build a pond.

The Dozer Dude jumps down to greet Virgil.

VIRGIL

How's it going?

DOZER DUDE

Pretty good. I'm pushing all these trees out of here. You ought to let somebody cut them good white oaks for you. They're worth some money. I know for a fact them big ones right there is worth eight hundred dollars apiece.

VIRGIL

I don't like nobody on my place.

DOZER DUDE

It's your wood, yes sir.

VIRGIL

When you gonna be finished?

DOZER DUDE

I got to move 267 cubic yards of dirt.

VIRGIL

Ain't what I asked you.

DOZER DUDE

That's a shitload of dirt, mister.

VIRGIL

When?

DOZER DUDE

Two days.

VIRGIL

Eighteen feet?

DOZER DUDE

I'll have a borrow pit right there in front where the levee's gonna be, and that'll be the deepest part of the pond, eighteen, nineteen feet, yes sir.

Virgil scans the location, dreamy-eyed.

VIRGIL

I can see it plain as day. I've been seeing it for a while. Shit, dreaming about it. Build a pond, put some catfish in it. I'll bring a lawn chair up here and some cold drinks. Sit under this tree and fish in the afternoons.

DOZER DUDE

Sit in the shade and reel 'em in, yes sir.

VIRGIL

Fry up a mess for supper that night. Just like I used to when I was a boy. There ain't nothing better than fresh fish you've caught for supper.

Virgil turns to the Dozer Dude.

VIRGIL

There's nothing more important in my life right now than building this pond. Nothing.

DOZER DUDE

Something to share with your  
grandkids. I get it.

VIRGIL

I ain't got no grandkids.

EXT. TYRONE'S HOUSE - FRONT YARD - DAY

Made of cinderblocks and from sheets of tin, the roof a patchwork of asphalt and wood shingles.

A black kid with baggy clothes and tattered sneakers stands beside a dusty red go-kart.

This is TYRONE JACKSON (10). He bends down and touches the go-kart's chain. It's loose. He CRANKS it up, the chain rattling. He kneels and feels the chain again.

He sits down in the seat, turning the steering wheel in his hands. Pushes on the gas pedal and drives across the yard, passing a junked truck, chickens nesting in it.

EXT. GRAVEL ROAD - DAY

Tyrone stops the go-kart on a hill. Below him, the Dozer Dude works in the clearing he has made in the middle of the woods, a small yellow machine in a large bowl of brown sun-warmed earth.

Tyrone watches as the dozer runs backward hard with the black smoke pouring from the pipe. Dozer Dude stops and lowers the blade and pushes it into the earth.

Far down below sits Virgil's red brick house. Tyrone hits the gas, spinning in a tight circle, the chain clattering, and bounces down the road.

EXT. VIRGIL'S FARM - DAY

Virgil hears an engine's WHINE; he turns his eyes to the road. Tyrone, the black kid, on his red go-kart, zips past, spurting a rooster tail of gravel.

Virgil spits on the ground and walks across the yard, under big pecan trees and across the driveway.

EXT. FIELD - DAY - (FLASHBACK)

YOUNG VIRGIL (30s) grips a hefty mallet. He strides across beautiful green grass to four men on a crude platform.

The men push a seventy-foot wooden cross, wrapped in kerosene-soaked burlap, from behind.

Two more men, one shirtless and wearing a white hood, help, shoving a large tree fork against the cross.

EXT. VIRGIL'S FARM - DAY - (BACK TO PRESENT DAY)

Virgil stands before a fenced-in heifer pen. He turns on a water hydrant; the hose in the water tank gushes water.

He holds the top of the wire fence and looks at his fourteen heifers, all fat and fine.

EXT. FIELD - DAY - (FLASHBACK)

Three more men, forming points of a triangle, grasp wires attached to the cross and steady it in an upright position.

Young Virgil sparks a smoke, monitoring their progress. The men grunt as sweat darkens their shirts.

As the cross rises, Young Virgil moves to the base. He shouts directions:

YOUNG VIRGIL  
A little more...little more.  
OK, y'all, ease it up...sloooow!

Between instructions Young Virgil slams a wedge in between the cross and the hole in the earth.

YOUNG VIRGIL  
Come on...little more!  
(slam)  
All right, y'all! Ready?  
(slam)  
Just a hair...little more!  
(slam)  
Little more! That's it!

The cross towers above the men, firm and straight as a pine. Young Virgil stands back to admire it.

The man in the white hood steps up.

MAN IN WHITE HOOD  
What you think, Virgil?

Young Virgil wipes the sweat from his face.

YOUNG VIRGIL  
I think it's hot as hell  
out here.

Man in the white hood looks up at thick clouds in the sky.

MAN IN WHITE HOOD  
Least we got us some cloud cover.

YOUNG VIRGIL  
Clouds don't do shit for the heat.

LURLEEN (V.O.)  
(squelching feedback, distorted)  
Virgil! Where are you?!

EXT. VIRGIL'S FARM - DAY (BACK TO PRESENT DAY)

Virgil lifts a salt block as Lurleen's distorted voice, laced with feedback, SQUELCHES from inside the house

LURLEEN (O.S.)  
Virgil, come quick!

Virgil unlatches the heifer-pen gate and carries it to the feed trough.

Heifers drink from the water tank, lifting their shiny muzzles, water dripping from them.

VIRGIL  
Sook, baby, sook.

LURLEEN (O.S.)  
Virgil! Virgil!



VIRGIL

Shit.

INT. FARMHOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Lurleen watches the TV, volume way up. *Oprah*. Police bullhorn in her lap. Virgil enters, sweating.

VIRGIL

What the hell you want now?

LURLEEN

My medicine's ready. They just called. Go on and pick it up.

VIRGIL

Now?

LURLEEN

Stop and get some groceries while you're at it.

VIRGIL

I don't see how you can watch so much TV.

He leaves the room. She lifts the bullhorn and hollers at him through it. Harsh static and feedback:

LURLEEN

That's not the first time you've said that! You've said it a hundred times! I'm sick of hearing it!

INT. PICKUP (MOVING) - DAY

Virgil drives into the setting sun, a big orange ball. He shields his eyes. Slowly hits the brakes.

He looks down a dirt driveway that leads to Tyrone's shack. Clothes hang on a line, drying. Chickens nest in a truck.

INT. SUPERMARKET - DAY

Virgil pushes an empty cart, passing people drifting up and down the aisle.

He pushes the cart past a young black man in a long white apron who's stocking shelves. The young black man looks up and smiles at Virgil.

YOUNG BLACK MAN

How you doing today, sir?

Virgil just looks at him and rudely goes by.

INT. TYRONE'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Tyrone holds an old flashlight as he searches through some drawers. Finds some D batteries and sticks them inside the barrel of the flashlight, screws the top back on.

Hits the button and it throws a beam of light against the wall. He grabs a roll of friction tape from the drawer.

EXT. TYRONE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

He moves to his go-kart parked beside a big pine tree. He tapes the flashlight to the front of his machine.

He stands there in the electric black that covers everything. In the sky, a falling star shoots flaming white and dies.

He sits down in the seat, reaches forward and turns on his flashlight. It shines like a real headlight.

Pushes on the gas pedal, and the flashlight lights his way out of the driveway and onto the dusty gravel road.

GRAVEL ROAD

He drives slowly, seeing what's on the road, out there in the night.

Go-kart rolls along, bumping gently in the gravel, loose chain dragging, heading toward a wooden bridge.

Just off the road, he sees an old house that is overgrown and almost hidden.

He drives onto the bridge and stops. Peers down into the dry creek bed. Pushes on the gas, rolls to the end of the bridge and onto the gravel road again.

He turns around at the edge of a cotton field, drives back toward the bridge.

He rolls onto the bridge and hits the brakes. QUEEN, a beautiful black woman (20s) in an old timey dress, stands a few yards away from him. She stares at him, crying.

Then she's gone. Vanished. Into thin air. Scaring the living shit out of him.

He spurts all the way up the road with gravel flying out behind him, rattling off into the darkness.

INT. CO-OP WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

Virgil stands beside TOBY TUBBY (70s) who limps as he inventories pallets of feed, clipboard in hand.

VIRGIL

How often that fish truck come around?

TOBY

Right often. They always put an ad in the paper 'fore it comes.

VIRGIL

I'm gonna get there early, before the crowd rushes in and buys all the fish.

TOBY

Ever hear from Lucinda?

VIRGIL

Not in a while. I can't believe my only daughter lives in Atlanta, with a retard.

TOBY

I didn't know he's retarded.

VIRGIL

Never even finished third grade. Lucinda says he has some kind of syndrome, toorette something or other.

TOBY

How's Lurleen?

VIRGIL

She's a lot of trouble. A lot of trouble. A lot more trouble now than what she used to be, before she had that stroke.

TOBY

Killed that woodchuck in here yesterday.

Toby points to a woodchuck stretched out bloody on a pallet, its stained yellow buck teeth showing.

VIRGIL

Forty years. Listening to her snore at night. Putting up with all her shit. All her bitching.

Toby, preoccupied with inventory and the dead woodchuck, doesn't really listen to Virgil, who, in turn, doesn't really listen to Toby.

TOBY

I didn't think woodchucks even lived in Mississippi.

VIRGIL

Damn, I get tired of it. I don't know how much longer I can handle her by myself.

TOBY

Is a woodchuck a groundhog?

VIRGIL

I wonder how long it's gonna take her to die? She can't clean the house. Can't cook.

TOBY

What was that thing about if a woodchuck could chuck wood?

VIRGIL

She microwaves stuff. We got one of them now. Lucinda give it to us. Heats up day-old biscuits pretty good.

TOBY

Probably came in on a load of feed up north.

VIRGIL

Why in hell did I marry her? Must've seemed like a good idea at the time. But sometimes overtime things don't work out.

TOBY

Killed it with a shovel.

VIRGIL

Sometimes overtime you find out you've messed up pretty bad. That's how I feel most of the time.

TOBY

How much you paying the dozer fella?

EXT. POND - DAY

Virgil counts out hundred-dollar bills into the Dozer Dude's dirty hand, under the last monster white oak.

VIRGIL

...six thousand.

Dozer Dude shoves the wad into his pocket. He motions to a pile of trees beside the levee.

DOZER DUDE

How about me coming back for that wood one weekend? You stand to make a lot of money.

VIRGIL

No.

DOZER DUDE

Alright then. I'll just pack it  
all up.

Dozer Dude walks away. Virgil looks out over the vast  
expanse of the new but empty pond, over an acre in size, a  
great big dry brown hole. Not a speck of grass in it.

It's nineteen feet deep with one side going out at a  
gradual slant, a nice spillway.

Virgil smiles, a big bubble of happiness in his heart.

DOZER DUDE (O.S.)

All you need now is some rain.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - FRONT PORCH - DAY

Virgil in his rocker. He watches the sky. The sun shines  
bright as the TV drones on in the living room, coming  
through the wall. All the fools hollering and selling.

EXT. POND - DAY

Virgil stands in the bottom of the empty pond, marveling at  
how deep it is, at how high over his head it is.

He looks up at the lip of the levee. Tyrone stands on top  
of it, watching him. The little black kid smiles through  
rotten teeth and waves:

Virgil yells:

VIRGIL

Get the hell off my property!

Tyrone drops out of sight like a puppet snatched from a  
puppeteer's stage.

INT. FARMHOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Virgil enters. Lurleen, in her wheelchair, watches  
*Forensic Files* on the TV, volume way up as usual.

She mashes corn on the cob with her gums. She mauls it  
without getting any kernels down her throat.

LURLEEN

Turn on the air conditioner.

VIRGIL

Why don't you sit on the porch?  
Try and catch a breeze.

LURLEEN

No TV out there.

He turns on the window unit. It hums. Then something on the back porch CREAKS.

BACK PORCH

Virgil opens the door to the screened-in area: the chains on the porch swing sway back and forth, CREAKING.

He sits on his moldy cot. Lies down and closes his eyes, listening to the TV blare through the wall.

EXT. FIELD - NIGHT - (FLASHBACK)

A KLANSMAN in a white hood and a long white robe holds a torch as he stands before a tall cross wrapped in burlap.

The Klansman marches forward and lays the smoking flare at the cross's base. The flames leap skyward, up the burlap, as the air fills with crackles and sparks.

INT. FARMHOUSE - BACK PORCH - NIGHT (BACK TO PRESENT DAY)

Virgil awakens to the sound of a woman crying. Queen, the beautiful black woman from the bridge, stands before him, an apparition, crying, reaching out her hands --

He lifts his hands to touch her. She disappears.

DREAM -- VIRGIL FLIES AWAY

He floats six feet in the air. He hovers. Lifts right through the roof and then rolls over and flies around.

He goes way high and fast. He frowns, wrapped in sadness. Moments later, enveloped in elation, he smiles as blue-and-white clouds hurtle toward him.

The clouds part and peel off to the side and swallow him. He travels through splotches of vivid orange blinking colors for what looks to be millions of miles.

At supersonic speed he zooms to the center of a place where naked-dancing black girls wait panting and ready on the mossy banks of a clean river.

The black girls' sweet, juicy lips pull at his clothes --

INT. FARMHOUSE - BACK PORCH - NIGHT (END OF DREAM)

Virgil, head in his hands, struggles to shake off the visions. He rises, leaves the porch.

INT. BARN - NIGHT

A kerosene lantern hangs by a piece of coat hanger wire over a wobbly table that holds a tray with tools and a Thompson submachine gun.

Virgil cleans the gun with a cloth. Wind sighs through the cracks in the barn.

He raises his head from his work and listens, seated at the little table, the faint sound of chirping crickets leaking through the plank walls.

He picks up a plastic squeeze bottle of oil and squeezes some of it onto the cloth.

He sits there rubbing the gun with love, in the little circle of light.

He rubs some on the stock, sliding the gun across the padded surface of the wobbly table, watching the scratched and dented wood shine under the lantern.

Then he puts down the rag and pulls the gun over his lap. He opens the bolt and checks the tension on it, watching it shut when he lets it slip off his finger.

He sticks a round canister clip into the belly of the gun, and lets the bolt slip, sending a round into the chamber.



He sits there with it on his lap, pointed up. He puts it to his shoulder, aims at a bag of feed in the corner, almost touching the trigger.

QUICK FLASH

Red fire pours from the barrel, rounds chattering through the magazine, the gun barking: BRUPBRUPBRUPBRUPBRUPBRUP.

BACK TO SCENE

Flicks the safety on and gets up with it. Fully loaded.

He reaches up, lifts the lantern and uses it to light his way to one of the back stalls.

His shadow looms large around him as he walks, throwing scant light into the dark corners, the lantern swinging in his hand, the gun heavy with its belly full of lead.

He arrives at a harness room with a cobwebbed wooden door and pushes the sliding latch aside and opens it.

HARNESS ROOM

He steps up into a walled box that holds leather mule collars and an old steamship trunk.

He kneels and sets the lantern down and opens the trunk. He starts to put the gun inside, in the top tray, but then sets the gun on the floor and lifts out the tray instead.

It's full of old things: rusted red-and-white bass plugs, a rusted bayonet that's still sharp. He tests its edge with his thumb. Dried blood still shows on the blade.

He sets it back and roots around in the tray. He lifts out a small tobacco sack. Draws the strings open. Reaches in.

He catches hold of a chain and draws it out. A locket follows it.

His knees hurting, he sits down. The white gold glows dimly in the wavering light from the lantern. An owl hoots down in the woods.

The chain is supple in his fingers. He opens the locket.

Inside, a black-and-white photograph of Queen.

She smiles stiffly, standing in a photographer's parlor in her old-timey dress. Virgil closes his eyes, remembering:

INT. FARMHOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY - (FLASHBACK)

Queen stirs a pot of beans on the stove beside YOUNG LURLEEN (30s) and YOUNG LUCINDA (10).

Young Virgil enters, dirty and sweating. He steps to the sink and washes his hands, just a few inches from Queen, who has big brown eyes so dark they shine.

Young Virgil and Queen share a knowing smile.

INT. BARN - HARNESS ROOM - NIGHT (BACK TO PRESENT DAY)

Virgil sits there for a long time, silent. Studies Queen's image. He closes the locket, sticks it back in its little bag, drops the tray back in the tray.

And starts to set the tray back in there and then put the gun away, but he doesn't.

He sets the tray aside, reaches into the bottom of the trunk; pulls a folded quilt up out of the way and pulls out a long white robe and a white hood.

They're yellowing now, starting to rot. He brings the robe close to his nose, inhaling the faint smell of woodsmoke and pine tar and blood.

He looks at the once-white hood, its eyepieces making it a vacant mask.

MEMORY FLASH

Towering cross burns. Flames fly, licking gently at the cross. Crackles and sparks fill the air.

BACK TO SCENE

Virgil sighs. He puts everything away and closes the lid of the trunk and shoves it under a pile of empty feed bags.

He gets the lantern and shuts the door to the harness room and slides the latch closed again.

He goes to the hall of the barn, his steps soft in the dry dirt and crushed bits of hay.

EXT. YARD - NIGHT

Virgil, lantern in hand, slips out between the two big doors. He strolls toward the house.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - NIGHT

He arrives at the house. He blows out the lantern, stops and looks up at the dark, dead moon. There's a faint rumbling far off in the sky. A blooming yellow light.

INT. FARMHOUSE - BATHROOM - DAY

Virgil lifts Lurleen from the commode. He strains as she grunts and groans in pain.

LURLEEN

Go slow. You trying to kill me?

VIRGIL

I'm going slow.

LIVING ROOM

Virgil drags Lurleen, hands under her arms, to the wheelchair, where he plops her down.

She groans and moans. He looks out the window at the dry, bright day.

VIRGIL

I wish to hell it would rain.

LURLEEN

I wished you'd shut up about it.

VIRGIL

Why can't you get excited about the pond?

LURLEEN

I hate fishing. You know that.

Virgil moves into the kitchen and makes a tomato sandwich, cutting tomatoes, breaking out a loaf of bread.

VIRGIL

That why you never let Lucinda go fishing? Never even let her near a foot of water.

LURLEEN

I was afraid she'd fall in and drown.

VIRGIL

In a foot of water?

LURLEEN

She never calls.

VIRGIL

You're the one who run her off.

LURLEEN

Me?

VIRGIL

Always stayed on her. Don't do this, don't do that. Sit up straight. Keep your legs crossed. Stop picking your nose. Why don't you go to the bathroom? Mash that zit.

LURLEEN

I'm her mother. I'm supposed...

VIRGIL

Now look where she is: Doesn't know how to swim and lives in Atlanta with a retard.

LURLEEN

Albert's an artist. He paints.

## VIRGIL

Right. I've seen some pictures of what Albert's painted. Looks like what a chimpanzee could do with a brush and his own shit if he could shit in different colors.

She picks up the remote and flips the TV to *Bonanza*. He takes his sandwich and leaves the room.

## EXT. FARMHOUSE - FRONT PORCH - DAY

Virgil eats his sandwich, rocking in his rocker, TV blaring from the living room.

He stops rocking to look up at the sky. There's a cloud about as big as a box of dog biscuits up there.

A few measly drops of rain hit the roof, splatter off into the dust, soak away and that's it.

He leans out from the porch and holds his hand out. Pulls it back in. Dry.

## EXT. VIRGIL'S FARM - DAY

Virgil picks worms off his tomato plants. He studies the sky. Clear as the inside of a bell.

A WHINING PITCH from near the road: Tyrone spins his red go-kart in a tight circle, chain clattering, then bounces down the road, out of sight.

Virgil mops his forehead with his forearm, remembering:

## INT. BEDROOM - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Young Virgil's mouth on Queen's soft, dark neck.

Inside her, he catches a hard nipple between his thumb and finger. Her breath catches in her throat.

She grinds her hips against him, her breath getting faster and faster -- moaning.

INT. FARMHOUSE - BACK PORCH - NIGHT (BACK TO PRESENT DAY)

Virgil rips off his shirt, and in the breathless dark he stands and mops his head and shoulders with the shirt.

He flings the shirt away, sits on the cot, removes his boots, rises and slips off his overalls.

QUICK FLASHES

Repeating the remembered passion of Queen and Young Virgil, continuing, mounting --

Inside her, he catches a hard nipple between his thumb and finger. Her breath catches in her throat.

She grinds her hips against him, her breath getting faster and faster -- moaning.

BACK TO SCENE

Already sweating again, Virgil stoops and hunts for the shirt. He finds it and wipes his body again, and, with his body pressed against the dusty screen, he stands panting.

MEMORY FLASH

Queen, cold and stiff, rots on the floor, all the light gone from her eyes, a flesh-less grin on her face.

Flies buzz and swarm over her rancid corpse.

BACK TO SCENE - DAY

Virgil awakens on the cot to hundreds of buzzing flies swarming the porch.

He jumps up, runs inside, returns with a fly swatter and goes into a fit of fly swatting, getting the posts all bloody with mashed fly guts.

INT. FARMHOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Virgil enters, harried from trying to kill hundreds of flies. Lurleen watches TV, the volume cranked.

LURLEEN

Raining yet?

VIRGIL

Hell no.

LURLEEN

It's gonna be a long summer.

EXT. VIRGIL'S FARM - DAY

Virgil stands and studies the sky for signs of rain. Grey clouds redden in the wake of the sinking orange ball.

EXT. CORN FIELD - DAY

Corn stalks stand browning under a bad sun. Virgil pulls some shucks open to see barely anything inside kernel-wise.

EXT. YARD - DAY

A pall of dust covers brown patches where the green grass should be.

EXT. ROAD - DAY

Virgil drives his pickup down a dusty one lane, past trees and grasses and yards and pastures, all dry and dusty.

EXT. BRIDGE - DAY

He gets out of his truck to look down at the river. Low. Bad low. Banks of the river about fifty feet high.

EXT. RIVER - NIGHT - (FLASHBACK)

Young Virgil and Queen swim naked, down on the shoals. She rises from the water and wanders along the bank, getting mud on her feet and laughing.

He rises, takes her to a quilt on the clean white sand, frogs calling, crickets screaming --

EXT. POND - DAY (BACK TO PRESENT DAY)

Parched. The bottom cracked in places. Virgil makes his way down the spillway; walks down into it.

He immediately notices tire tracks. Small ones. Donuts cut in the withered dirt. And shoe prints. Kid's shoes.

INT. BARBER SHOP - DAY

Ceiling fan stirs. A BARBER, middle-aged man with a mild face, shaves Toby.

Screen door crashes open. Virgil stands in the doorway, shirt open at the throat, each armpit a dark half-moon.

TOBY

Where you been, stranger?

Virgil enters. Runs water from a sink faucet. Drinks.

VIRGIL

Pond. Damn little nigger kid been messing around down there. I've seen his go-kart come flying by, throwing gravel everywhere. That boy has got no business messing around down there.

TOBY

Get some posted signs. Stick 'em up around the pond.

VIRGIL

He's coming down that old log road, that's where he's coming from, little black bastard.

TOBY

Put up a barrier. Get some wire.

VIRGIL

Barbed wire.

Toby rears up.

TOBY

No, not barbed wire.

The Barber forces Toby back into the chair, holding his face down, razor poised.



TOBY

That might hurt him. He might come flying along on that go-kart and not see it; put his eye out.

VIRGIL

I don't care. That pickaninny's trespassing.

TOBY

In a way, I guess, I can't blame him. He's a kid. Kids get excited real easy. Course a kid's gonna get excited about a big new hole in the ground. Probably wondering what it is.

VIRGIL

Lives on Harvey Miller's old place.

BARBER

That's a real shithole over there. Living like trash.

VIRGIL

I don't care how they live, just as long as that boy stays off my land. That is one thing I ain't gonna put up with: somebody coming on my land.

TOBY

Where else you been today?

VIRGIL

Serepeta.

TOBY

Why?

VIRGIL

See if it rained down there, but it ain't. Drove to Water Valley, Banner, Paris, Springville.

TOBY

No rain.

VIRGIL

Two weeks and no rain. I can't get no fish till the pond fills up, and it refuses to rain. Won't rain in the morning, won't rain at lunch. Sure as hell won't rain in the afternoon or in the evening. Won't rain at all, not while I'm waiting on it.

BARBER

Then stop waiting on it.

VIRGIL

You're right. I'll just ignore it.

Long silence. Then:

VIRGIL

Try and forget about it.

Silence for a few more moments. Then:

VIRGIL

This can't go on. It just can't go on forever without it raining.

Another pregnant pause. Then:

VIRGIL

Everything would dry up and die if that happened. The rivers would all run dry. All the animals would die of thirst. There'd be a big famine like in the Bible. But that won't happen. Not in Mississippi.

Another long pause. Then:

VIRGIL

Worse than waiting on Christmas when I was a kid. Not that I got much. An orange, if I was lucky.

Silence for a few more moments. Then:

VIRGIL  
Sick of waiting.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY

Virgil drives his truck through town and up to the square. He waits for the traffic to clear.

INT. TRUCK - DAY

Virgil, hot and frustrated, sweats and waits behind the wheel, impatient. He looks up at the cloudless sky.

Someone behind him blows their horn. He looks in the rearview mirror, sweat dripping down his chin.

VIRGIL  
Don't you be blowing at me.

The traffic keeps coming around the square and there isn't anyway for him to pull out.

The person behind him HONKS their horn again. He pushes the truck into neutral and pulls out the hand brake

EXT. STREET - DAY

Virgil leaves the truck and walks back to the rusty junk car behind him.

CLEVE, a black man in his thirties, is behind the wheel, window rolled up.

Virgil knocks on the window. It slides down a crack.

VIRGIL  
What're you blowing that damn horn  
at me for?

Cleve's eyes are red and jaundiced. Shitfaced, he slurs his words.

CLEVE  
I don't know.

Virgil turns his nose away from Cleve's breath.

VIRGIL  
You been drinkin', boy?

Some more horns BLOW. Virgil looks up briefly. Some people in cars stare at him. He looks back at Cleve.

VIRGIL  
I'll pull out when...

CLEVE  
Who you calling boy?

Virgil ignores the question.

VIRGIL  
I'll pull out when all this traffic lets me out. All right?

CLEVE  
I got enough hair on my ass to weave you a blanket, so don't be calling me no boy.

VIRGIL  
Don't blow that horn at me no more. I'll pull you out of there and jerk a nanny goat in your nigger ass.

CLEVE  
Oh, now I'm a nigger.

VIRGIL  
You understand me?

Cleve rolls down the window.

CLEVE  
I understand you, old timer. Now you best get the fuck out of my face.

Virgil storms back to his truck. He climbs behind the wheel. A big break in the traffic and he pulls right out.

INT. TRUCK (MOVING) - DAY

Virgil drives. Mirrored heat waves shimmer in the road ahead of him. Suddenly, the rear chassis SQUEALS.

INT. FARMHOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Lurleen watches TV, loud.

LURLEEN

Turn on the air conditioner.

Virgil switches on the window unit. It rattles and hums.

VIRGIL

I wish it'd rain. I know, I know,  
I've said it a hundred times.

He leaves the room. They yell at each other, over the roaring din of the TV.

LURLEEN

Where you goin'?!

VIRGIL (O.S.)

Check the brake shoes on the truck!  
I heard some squealing on the  
way over here!

LURLEEN

Go to town! Get my pills!

VIRGIL (O.S.)

I hate this yelling between  
rooms shit! You know that, Lurleen!

LURLEEN

What?!

VIRGIL (O.S.)

I hate...Oh, never mind! I'll go right  
after I check the brake shoes!

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DRIVEWAY - DAY

Virgil pulls a jack from the bed of the truck. He sets the base of the jack on a board in the loose gravel, beside the left rear tire.

He jacks the truck up a little, then grabs a lug wrench, loosens the nuts on the wheel.

Removes the lug nuts, then jacks the truck up until the wheel clears the ground.

Virgil sits down next to the wheel and takes off the last lug nut. He lays it beside the others and starts pulling off the wheel.

The truck comes sideways toward him. He tries to shove the wheel back on.

The truck comes down; pins his hands between the wheel well and the tire tread -- mashing his fingers.

He shuts his eyes and screams:

VIRGIL

Oh shit!!!

He tries to jerk his hands loose, but his skin tears. He tries to stretch his leg out and kick the jack erect, but nothing doing.

His face against the rear fender, he hollers:

VIRGIL

Lurleen! Hey! Help!

Lurleen! Help! Help!

(under his breath)

Son. Of. A. Bitch.

He struggles to slide his hands out again.

VIRGIL

Lurleen! Goddammit! Lurleen!

Lurleen does not answer. She doesn't show up. There's just the silence of the gravel road beside the house.

He squeezes his ass cheeks, afraid he's going to shit himself. Screams:

VIRGIL

Hey! Hey! Heyyyyyyyyyy!!!

Tears leak from his eyes.

VIRGIL

Oh shit. Heyyyyyyyyyy!!!

A yelp for help lost in the wilderness Sweat drips down his forehead, stinging his eyes, rolling off his chin.

VIRGIL

Please! Somebody! Lurleen!

He attempts to pull his hands loose again, the sharp metal of the wheel well cutting into his flesh.

He looks at the closed driver's door. He stretches his leg out to see if it will reach, but he can't make it go very far past the edge of the door.

He winces in pain and furious effort.

VIRGIL

Oh God. Oh Lord.

He cries as he shits himself, dark brown stains running down his overall legs.

His knees shake. He trembles all over. A far-off rumbling over the horizon. Like THUNDER.

A caravan of four-wheel motorcycles appears on the gravel road, cruising past the farmhouse, all headed somewhere in a solid line, like covered wagons crossing a prairie.

Virgil raises his head, screaming frantically at the men and women on the four-wheelers:

VIRGIL

Help! Stop! Help me!!!

They all wave at Virgil -- unable to see his predicament -- churning dust as they sweep up the hill into the slanting evening sun.

VIRGIL  
Stop! No! Help me!

Defeated, Virgil drops his head:

VIRGIL  
Please. Help me.

He closes his eyes, remembering:

INT. BATHROOM - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Queen goes to her knees on the floor next to the commode. Young Virgil rushes in as she vomits into the bowl. He holds her hair away from her face as she throws up.

She turns her face up to him, goblets of half-digested things on her lips. Their eyes lock together. Morning sickness. She's pregnant. With his baby. A black baby.

Her eyes full of tears, she heaves and trembles. He pulls some toilet paper off the roll and wipes her mouth.

She spits strings of mucus into the cloudy bowl; leans back on her bottom, resting, waiting to see if it's going to come back up again.

He reaches out to comfort her, stroking her arm.

INT. DRUG STORE - DAY

A DRUGGIST in his 60s stands behind the counter, waiting on a calm and collected Young Virgil.

YOUNG VIRGIL  
I need some poison.

DRUGGIST  
What kind, Virgil?

YOUNG VIRGIL  
Arsenic.



The Druggist takes a few seconds, looking at Young Virgil.

DRUGGIST

Why of course. If that's what you want. What're you going to use it for?

YOUNG VIRGIL

That's none of your business.

DRUGGIST

The law requires you to tell us what you're gonna use it for.

INT. BARN - NIGHT

Young Virgil unwraps a package and takes out a box. Under the skull and crossbones: "For rats."

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DRIVEWAY - DAY (BACK TO PRESENT DAY)

Virgil, hands trapped under the wheel well, drops his head, tortured, sweating --

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Queen, empty soda pop bottle by her hand, lies on the floor, cold and stiff, all the light gone from her eyes, blood and snot trickling from her nostrils.

Young Virgil lifts her corpse --

EXT. PEA PASTURE - NIGHT

Down below the barn, Young Virgil smooths dirt with a shovel over the grave so it doesn't look any different than the rest of the ground.

INT. BARN - NIGHT

Young Virgil throws her clothes into a fifty-gallon drum, pours gasoline inside and sets it on fire, flames leaping.

INT. FARMHOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Young Virgil enters, filthy and exhausted. He pours a cup of coffee, sits down and drinks it with his hands shaking.

Young Lurleen, face bloated with sleep, walks in, tying her bathrobe.

YOUNG LURLEEN  
Where you been?

YOUNG VIRGIL  
Up all night with a sick heifer.

YOUNG LURLEEN  
Do you know where Queen is?

YOUNG VIRGIL  
Went back to South Carolina,  
on the train.

YOUNG LURLEEN  
You take her?

YOUNG VIRGIL  
Yeah, I took her.

Young Lurleen yawns and leaves the kitchen.

YOUNG LURLEEN (O.S.)  
She coming back?

YOUNG VIRGIL  
No. She won't be back.

YOUNG LURLEEN (O.S.)  
I'll miss her cornbread.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DRIVEWAY - DAY (BACK TO PRESENT DAY)

Long, dark shadows fall across Virgil, whose hands are still trapped under the wheel well.

Flies buzz around his shit-soaked overalls. Faint PHONE RINGING from inside the house. He yells:

VIRGIL  
Lurleen, get the phone!

It keeps RINGING. It RINGS and RINGS. Then it stops.

Nothing but silence. Virgil moans. Then TIRES CRUNCH on GRAVEL. It grows LOUDER.

A car noses past the front of the truck. The Dozer Dude is behind the wheel. He waves.

Car cruises along, about a mile an hour. Virgil screams:

VIRGIL

Stop!

Dozer Dude slams on the brakes. He leans his head out the window. Lifts a can of beer, takes a drink.

DOZER DUDE

Hey, sir, what you doin'?

Virgil closes his eyes, shaking his head.

VIRGIL

Come here and help me!

DOZER DUDE

What?

VIRGIL

Get your ass over here and jack this goddamn car up off me!

Dozer Dude backs up, pulls in and gets out. He takes the base off the jack and scrapes the loose gravel down to hard ground and sets it on that.

He finds a chunk of wood and sets it behind the other rear tire to keep it from rolling.

Then he jacks the truck up. Virgil winces as the rough metal slowly releases his hands. He cries with relief.

VIRGIL

Oh God. Oh God. Oh God.

DOZER DUDE

Hold on.

Dozer Dude pumps on the jack. The fender well lifts off Virgil's hands. Virgil slams himself backward, flat on his back in the gravel.

He stares at his hands. Swollen. Slightly purple. Tire tracks printed in them. He wriggles his fingers.

He drags himself backward, away from the car. He rubs his hands together.

VIRGIL

Help me up.

Virgil extends a hand. Dozer Dude lifts him up. Virgil's knees tremble so hard he leans on the truck to stand.

DOZER DUDE

Good thing I come by.

VIRGIL

What brings you around these parts?

DOZER DUDE

I come to see if you maybe changed your mind about that lumber. Have you?

VIRGIL

Have I what?

DOZER DUDE

Changed your mind, about selling them white oaks.

VIRGIL

No.

DOZER DUDE

Yes, sir.

Dozer Dude turns up his nose at something shitty.

DOZER DUDE

Lord, what's that smell?

INT. FARMHOUSE - BATHROOM - DAY

Soiled underwear and overalls in the bathtub.

BEDROOM

Virgil, clean shirt on, slides on some clean drawers, then some jeans.

KITCHEN

He opens a cabinet door. Pulls out a garbage bag. Sees Lurleen in the living room. She sits in front of the blaring TV, leaning over sideways in the wheelchair.

VIRGIL

Didn't you hear me calling you?

When she doesn't answer he curses her under his breath.

BATHROOM

He puts the soiled underwear and pants inside the garbage bag, rolls it up tightly, turns on the water in the tub and washes out the inside of it.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DAY

He stuffs the bag into a metal garbage can, closes the lid over it.

INT. FARMHOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Lurleen still sits in front of the blaring TV, leaning over sideways in the wheelchair, with one of her arms out at an odd angle, and just as still as can be.

Virgil enters, stroking his sore hands.

VIRGIL

I thought I was going to die  
out there.

He leans over and lowers the volume on the TV some. He walks around in front of Lurleen and looks down on her.

She's looking at nothing. She's not breathing. Dead.

He sees her scalp plainly through her thin white hair on top of her head. Virgil sits on the daybed.

He glances at the TV. *Oprah*. He stares at his wife and reaches out his hand to touch her on the arm.

It THUNDERS far off. He leaves the room.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - BACKYARD - DAY

He steps into the yard and looks south. Dark rain clouds are grouped down there.

The wind stirs in his hair. A bolt of pure white lights up the side of a gray cloud.

DEEP THUNDER rolls BOOMING out of the sky again and again and again. The wind picks up as the ceiling blackens and moves his way.

Birds flee before it, scattering in the wind, wavering, dodging its path. The sky RUMBLES. Virgil sees the beauty of the world God made.

INT. FARMHOUSE - BACK PORCH - DAY

He sits down on his mildewed cot and leans back against the wall and watches the wind blow the leaves on the trees.

Fat drops of water swirl dust as rain falls at the edge of the yard. The birds fly across, weaving in the wind.

A cow bawls down in the pasture. It rains hard. Comes down and thickens in intensity. The outline of the barn fades behind a wall of rain.

It pours down in the yard, runs off the eaves and puddles next to the house, splashing up against the old red bricks.

The sky closes and becomes a solid color like steel and more water comes down.

It THUNDERS. The wind BLOWS. Virgil sits reveling in the storm for a long time, an old man, watching it rain.

INT. FARMHOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

As the storm rages outside, THUNDER CLAPPING, Virgil goes over to the wall, flips the switch to turn on the lights.

His dead wife in the wheelchair. He touches her. Her legs are very dark.

A table with a bunch of envelopes and junk mail and a small bound book. He flips open the book, scans through it.

He raises his head and looks at Lurleen. The phone RINGS. LOUDLY. Right beside him.

Startled, he jumps and almost picks it up. It RINGS, again, and he starts to pick it up. It RINGS again, his hand on the receiver.

It RINGS again. He picks it up.

VIRGIL

Hello?

A happy female voice comes through the phone:

LUCINDA (V.O.)

Hey, Daddy.

VIRGIL

Oh. Lucinda. Uh. Hey.

LUCINDA (V.O.)

What are you doing?

VIRGIL

Not much.

He sits on the daybed.

VIRGIL

Setting on the daybed.

He looks at the TV.

VIRGIL

Watching TV.

LUCINDA (V.O.)

Oh, well, I just called to check on y'all. What's Mama up to?

VIRGIL

She's done conked out on me.

LUCINDA (V.O.)

Kind of early for her, isn't it? I thought she always stayed up half the night watching TV.

VIRGIL

I reckon she was wore out.

LUCINDA (V.O.)

I hate I missed her. I ought to call and check on her more. How's she been doing on that new medicine the doctor gave her?

VIRGIL

She never did say.

LUCINDA (V.O.)

Tell her I called.

VIRGIL

Is it hot in Atlanta?

LUCINDA (V.O.)

Lord yes. It's been awful. You and Mama should visit sometime. It's only about an hour flight. Albert would love to show you his new paintings.

VIRGIL

I ain't getting on no airplane.

LUCINDA (V.O.)

Oh, Daddy. There's nothing to it.

VIRGIL

Why don't you come over here?



LUCINDA (V.O.)

I can't right now. We're just too busy. We're having a dinner party tomorrow night and we're getting ready for that. Albert's got a pretty bad cold and we're trying to get him over that.

VIRGIL

Well.

LUCINDA (V.O.)

Maybe we could come over sometime around Thanksgiving.

VIRGIL

Well.

LUCINDA (V.O.)

What you been doing, Daddy?

VIRGIL

Waiting on my pond to fill up.

LUCINDA (V.O.)

Pond?

VIRGIL

I just had it dug. It's up on the hill.

LUCINDA (V.O.)

How big is it?

VIRGIL

It's pretty big. Took out two hundred and sixty-seven cubic yards of dirt.

LUCINDA (V.O.)

I don't know how much that is.

VIRGIL

It's a shitload. I'm gonna put some catfish in it soon as it fills up. I been waiting on it, well, it just started raining.

LUCINDA (V.O.)  
You just can't get good catfish  
in Atlanta.

VIRGIL  
Maybe you can come fishing later.

LUCINDA (V.O.)  
Maybe we can.

VIRGIL  
Does he know how to fish?

LUCINDA (V.O.)  
His name is Albert, Daddy. And  
I can show him how.

He looks at his dead wife sitting in her wheelchair.

VIRGIL  
You dating any regular men?

LUCINDA (V.O.)  
Daddy, I'll hang up on you.  
Goddamnit. Call over there  
to see how you're doing and  
you start that shit up again.

VIRGIL  
Where you at?

LUCINDA  
The Ritz-Carlton. In a bar.

VIRGIL  
You using their phone?

LUCINDA (V.O.)  
Whose phone?

VIRGIL  
I don't know. Hotel phone, I guess.

LUCINDA (V.O.)  
I'm on my cell phone, Daddy.

VIRGIL

Oh.

Silence on the line, and Virgil can't speak.

LUCINDA (V.O.)

Okay. I was just calling to check on y'all. I better let you go.

VIRGIL

Okay.

LUCINDA (V.O.)

Y'all think about coming over to Atlanta some time now.

VIRGIL

I don't know.

LUCINDA (V.O.)

You take care of Mama, okay?

VIRGIL

I'll take care of her.

He stands to hang up the phone. After a few moments, he cuts off the lights and curls up on the daybed, beside the stiff body in the wheelchair.

He takes off his boots, draws his knees up to his chest and pulls the little worn bedspread over him.

Chains on the front porch swing CREAK and RATTLE. Rain PELTS the dark window behind him. Queen CRIES, outside. He covers his ears against the sad sound.

THUNDER CLAPS and BOOMS -- lightning flashes.

EXT. VIRGIL'S FARM - NIGHT

THUNDER BOOMS -- lightning flashes. Virgil, rubber boots on, uses a flashlight to light his dim yellow way up the hill toward the new pond, boots slurping in the fresh mud.

THUNDER CLAPS. Wind BLOWS. Stirs the tree tops.

POND

He stares down into the deep, wide hole: muddy ground in the bottom pings up little geysers as the drops plink down.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

Light rain slows to a drizzle. LUCINDA SHARP (50s) heavy set, in a black dress, stands under a tent before an ornate casket mounded with flowers.

People drift back to their cars. Virgil stands at the edge of the tent with Toby. The two men wear suits and ties.

Lucinda notices two WORKERS hanging around a truck with shovels, ready to bury her mother.

She walks over to Virgil and Toby.

VIRGIL

You ready to go?

LUCINDA

I guess so. You coming over to the house, Mr. Tubby?

TOBY

Aw yeah. I'm coming. I want to see that catfish pond.

LUCINDA

Good.

Lucinda turns to her father.

LUCINDA

Are you okay?

VIRGIL

I'm all right I reckon.

Lucinda eyes Virgil's rusty, dented truck.

LUCINDA

When are you going to get rid of that old truck, Daddy?

Virgil looks at the truck.

VIRGIL

Never.

LUCINDA

Why?

VIRGIL

It was my daddy's truck.

LUCINDA

Papaw's?

VIRGIL

Yep. I been through thick  
and thin with it.

Virgil glances at the faint tire treads on his hands.

LUCINDA

I don't see how you can ride  
around in that thing with no  
AC. In this hot weather.

VIRGIL

I just roll down the window.

LUCINDA

Well. Okay. I guess I'll  
meet y'all there then.

TOBY

Yep.

Toby heads to his mini-van. Lucinda watches Virgil go to his old truck, get in and start it up.

She moves to her rental car parked on the road. She climbs into the vehicle.

INT. CAR - DAY

Lucinda adjusts the rearview mirror and sees the two workers going to the tent with their shovels.

She puts the car in gear and heads down the drive.

EXT. BRIDGE - DAY

She drives across the bridge and slows down to look at the old house on the other side.

EXT. VIRGIL'S FARM - DAY

Cars and trucks parked in the drive. A few people stand in the yard and a few people sit in rockers on the front porch, eating.

Lucinda wanders behind the equipment shed. She lights a smoke, and wipes tears from her eyes.

From behind, somebody slips his hands over her eyes.

LUCINDA

Now I wonder who that is?

She turns around to face her father.

LUCINDA

Hey.

VIRGIL

Still smoking.

She blows her smoke in the opposite direction.

VIRGIL

When you plan on quitting?

LUCINDA

I'm not. My nerves need cigarettes.

VIRGIL

You smoke at work?

LUCINDA

They have a smoking lounge. I go down there and have one while they're changing sets or setting up lights.

VIRGIL

It's the only thing you do I don't like.

LUCINDA

We both know that's not true.

She takes a last drag on her smoke and drops it. He loosens his tie and unbuttons his collar.

He undoes the tie and slides it from around his neck. He rolls it up carefully and puts it in his pocket.

LUCINDA

You gonna go in and eat?

He puts his hands in his pockets and toes a pebble.

VIRGIL

Yeah, I reckon so. Your mama had got to where she didn't cook much no more.

LUCINDA

I think it'd be kind of hard to cook in a wheelchair.

VIRGIL

She said it was easier to use the stove since she didn't have to bend over.

LUCINDA

When're we going to look at the pond?

VIRGIL

After we eat. If we can get into the house to eat.

EXT. POND - DAY

Lucinda, in her T-shirt, shorts and sandals, stands and looks down into the muddy water of the pond.

She admires the acre of water, banks gently sloped and smoothly finished; so natural that only the pile of trees near the levee reveal what was here before.

LUCINDA

It's a beautiful pond, Daddy.

Virgil and Toby, in their overalls, stand next to her.  
Toby spits tobacco juice into a small white cup.

VIRGIL

It's about halfway full. I figure  
if I get three or four more  
good rains it'll fill on up.

TOBY

I believe it's deep enough to  
where you can go ahead and get  
your fish and put 'em in.

VIRGIL

Soon as that fish man comes around  
again.

TOBY

He was just here, let's see...this is...  
he was here the third week of  
July. So he ought to be back  
'fore too long.

VIRGIL

Reckon how many I ought to get?

TOBY

Deep as this thing's gonna be,  
I'd say a whole lot.

A bat comes out of the woods and swoops low across the  
water, touching the surface with its wingtips.

It skitters and jerks across the air, returning, flying  
off, coming back. Virgil hiccups.

VIRGIL

Hic-uh! Excuse me.

TOBY

I better get back before it  
gets dark. It's a mighty fine  
pond, Virgil. I'll find out  
about that fish man in the  
morning.



VIRGIL

Hic-uh! Hic-ow!

TOBY

Damn, might want to drink some water there, Virg'.

VIRGIL

I ate too fast. Hic-uh!

Toby leaves, walking off into the woods.

LUCINDA

Remember how he used to catch those monster catfish?

VIRGIL

With his bare hands. Hic-uh!

LUCINDA

I remember how good they tasted. Queen used to cook that fish.

VIRGIL

Hic-uh! Hic-ow! God.

LUCINDA

I drove past her old house. You still own that?

VIRGIL

Hic-uh! Hic-ow! Hic-oh! I still own it.

LUCINDA

Hold your breath, Daddy.

Virgil holds his breath for a full thirty seconds. Then lets it out in one long exhalation.

VIRGIL

There.

LUCINDA

What happened to Queen, Daddy?

VIRGIL

She went home, to South Carolina.  
You know that.

LUCINDA

Why didn't she say good-bye?

VIRGIL

No tellin'.

LUCINDA

Why have we never heard from her  
again?

VIRGIL

Hic-uh!

LUCINDA

For years I thought she was  
still here, just hiding somewhere.

VIRGIL

Hic-uh! You coming home for  
Christmas? Hic-oh!

He holds his breath again.

LUCINDA

I'm pretty busy with work. I  
used to play with Queen.  
We'd go swimming together.  
Seems like she would've stayed  
in touch.

He exhales.

VIRGIL

Stay pretty busy modeling do you?  
Or is it you just hate to come  
home for Christmas?

LUCINDA

I don't hate it.

VIRGIL

You always act like coming home  
for Christmas is just too much  
shit to put up with.

LUCINDA

You don't like me living in  
Atlanta, do you?

VIRGIL

No, I don't.

LUCINDA

Atlanta's a good place to live?

VIRGIL

So's Mississippi. Hiccup!  
Hic-uh! Hic-ow! Lord.

LUCINDA

I can't live my life just to  
please you.

VIRGIL

At least you could find a regular  
boyfriend.

LUCINDA

This again, Daddy?

VIRGIL

Grandkids, it'd be nice.  
Hic-uh!

LUCINDA

I'm sorry I failed you. It  
doesn't matter who I date.  
I'm forty-three. The clock's  
run out on me.

VIRGIL

Hic-uh! Hic-oh! God!

LUCINDA

It's run out on you too, Daddy.

INT. FARMHOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Clock on the wall says it's nine o'clock. Virgil watches the second hand moving around, hiccupping three times to the minute:

VIRGIL  
Hic-oh! Hic-ow! Hic-oh!  
Lord!

He moves to the sink, grabs a gallon jug of water and slurps down half of it. Waits to see if it works.

VIRGIL  
Hic-ow!

Virgil holds his breath for thirty seconds. Lets it out.

VIRGIL  
Hic-ow! Hic-oh! Hic-oh!

LIVING ROOM

Virgil sits on the daybed with a plate of ham and tomatoes in his lap. Picks up the remote, aims it at the TV.

CNN News. Shit getting blown up. More killing.

VIRGIL  
Hic-oh! Hic-uh! Hic-uh!

He pushes the button: Sports. Baseball. WW II movie. Documentary on Hitler. Documentary on Vietnam. A naked man and a naked woman on a couch.

VIRGIL  
Hic-oh! Hic-uh! Hic-oh!

He slices his ham as he watches the naked couple rocking and panting against each other. The woman slings her hair around. The man doesn't look too excited.

VIRGIL  
Hic-oh! Hic-uh! Hic-oh!

He turns up the volume

WOMAN (O.S.)

Oh, *baby!*

MAN (O.S.)

Oh, *yeah!*

VIRGIL

Hic-up! Hic-up! Hic-uh!

He tries to take a bite of ham.

VIRGIL

Hic-uh!

He turns off the TV, gets up with his plate and his glass.

KITCHEN

He rakes the food off his plate into the garbage, pours the water down the drain.

VIRGIL

Hic-up!

EXT. FARMHOUSE - BACKYARD - NIGHT

He stands, hiccupping, gazing at the sky. Clear, gray, fading to black, a few pink streaks fading along with it.

Lightning bugs dance in the air. He staggers away, hiccupping, sounding like a one-cylinder gas engine:

VIRGIL

Hic-up! Hic-ow! Hic-uh!

He goes back into the house. Light over the yard goes off.

INT. FARMHOUSE - BACK PORCH - NIGHT

Soft summer rain falls outside the screened-in area.

Virgil lies face up on the cot, trying to sleep to no avail, hiccupping slow and regular:

VIRGIL

Hic-uh! Hic-ow! Hic-oh!

He sits up, snatches the gallon jug of water from the floor and chugs some water. Waits.

VIRGIL

Hic-uh!

He buries his face in his hands. After a few moments, he falls back on the cot and clamps his eyes shut.

EXT. PEA PASTURE - DAY

Down below the barn, in the partial shade of some river birches, Virgil holds a shovel as he studies the dirt below his boots.

He sinks the blade into the ground. Lifts the dirt and throws it backward.

He reaches in for another one and another one and another one. The shovel hits something soft.

He drops the shovel and goes to his knees and pulls at the soil with his hands, piling it to one side.

He claws with his fingers as he breathes faster, moving his hands rapidly. In a fever.

Queen's face (with its flesh-less grin) emerges first, small pockets of dirt cupped on the eyelids.

Crying, moaning, Virgil brushes the dirt away gently, a bone hunter exhuming a fossil.

He stands, bends over and grabs the cadaver's wrists. He pulls hard, straining against the earth --

INT. FARMHOUSE - BACK PORCH - NIGHT

Virgil awakens from this nightmare, fighting the blankets, wild-eyed. He rises, staggering.

VIRGIL

Hiccup.

INT. FARMHOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Virgil, face haggard from a restless night with no sleep, hiccups as he gathers things that belonged to his wife: some clothes, police bullhorn, pincushions, heating pads.

VIRGIL

Hic-uh! Hic-uh! Hic-uh!

He shoves it all in a big garbage bag. He folds the wheelchair, sets it in the corner.

VIRGIL

Hic-uh! Hic-oh! Hic-uh!

BATHROOM

Lurleen's teeth in a glass of murky water. Virgil hiccups as he takes them out, dumps the water in the sink.

VIRGIL

Hic-uh! Hic-uh! Hic-uh!

EXT. VIRGIL'S FARM - DAY

Virgil hangs upside down by his knees, on a short tree limb, hiccupping, slow, quiet, steady:

VIRGIL

Hic-uh, hic-uh, hic-uh.

INT. BARN - DAY

Virgil grabs a box of buckshot. He opens it, and dumps some down his throat. Grimaces, swallows.

VIRGIL

Hic-ow!

INT. TRUCK (MOVING) - DAY

Virgil drives, hiccupping. He passes Tyrone's shack. Tyrone sits on the porch, reading a book.

VIRGIL

Hic-uh!

INT. CO-OP WAREHOUSE - DAY

Virgil enters, walks up to the counter where Toby tinkers with a small fan.

TOBY

Hey, Virg', got that fish man's number and address for you.

Toby hands Virgil a piece of paper. Virgil hiccups, ECHOING in the cavernous warehouse:

VIRGIL

Hic-up! Hic-up! Hic-up!

TOBY

Dang, you still got them hiccups?

VIRGIL

Hic-up!

TOBY

That's over twenty-four hours. Seems like you'd done something to get shed of 'em.

VIRGIL

Hic-up! I don't want, hic-up -- to get shed of them. Hic-uh! I like them. Hic-uh! But if you had them, hic-up, I would get shed, hiccup, of them for you. Hic-up! You want to know how! Hiccup!

TOBY

How?

VIRGIL

I'd just tear your head off. Hiccup! Hic-oh! Then you wouldn't have nothing to hiccup with. Hiccup! I'd be glad to -- hiccup -- do it for you.

TOBY

I ain't got the hiccups, Virgil.



VIRGIL

I'd pay, hiccup, a million dollars,  
hiccup, to set here for, hiccup,  
one minute without setting 'em off.  
Hiccup! Hiccup! Hic-ow! God!

TOBY

Drink some water.

VIRGIL

Hiccup! I been drinking water  
since nine last, hiccup, night.  
I done drank so, hiccup, much water,  
hiccup, that if I was to fall down,  
hiccup, I would gush like an artesian  
well. Hic-up! Hic-up! Hic-up!

TOBY

What you need is a good scare.  
You know, like boo! Or maybe  
see a doctor.

Virgil drops his head in anguish:

VIRGIL

I done suffered and suffered.  
Twenty-four hours. No food,  
no sleep. When, hiccup, is  
it gonna end? Hiccup!

INT. FARMHOUSE - BACK PORCH - DAY

Virgil on the cot, elbows on his knees, face in his hands,  
hiccupping, slow, quiet, steady:

VIRGIL

Hic-uh, hic-uh, hic-uh.

EXT. POND - DAY

Virgil admires his pond, almost full. The water has a dark  
tone to it, calm, all the muddiness gone from it.

VIRGIL

Hic-uh!

He notices the tall grass, grown up across the dirt that's been shaved off by the dozer blade, most of it on the sloping sides of the banks where it's steep.

INT. EQUIPMENT SHED - DAY

Virgil climbs up on his tractor with its roll cage, wiping the sweat from his brow.

VIRGIL  
Hic-ow! Hic-uh!

He turns the key, the motor kicks over a few times and then it CHUGS as it comes to life, black smoke rattling from the exhaust pipe.

VIRGIL  
Hiccup! Hiccup! Hiccup!

He eases out the clutch and drives.

EXT. EQUIPMENT SHED - DAY

He backs the tractor to the stall, where a rotary mower collects rust.

He gets down off the tractor and hooks up the mower to a three-point hitch.

VIRGIL  
Hic-ow!

EXT. POND - DAY

Virgil drives the tractor, mower in tow, down by the pond and studies the area he's going to mow: grass about three feet high.

VIRGIL  
Hiccup! Hic-uh!

He lowers the mower, pushes the clutch, engages the lever and mows. Remembers something. Stops.

VIRGIL  
Hiccup! Hic-oh! Hic-ow!

He straps on his safety belt and drives.

VIRGIL

Hiccup!

He makes the first pass on level ground, the mower shearing the tall grass nice and smooth.

VIRGIL

Hiccup!

He mows on fairly-level ground, clipping off all the grass that surrounds the pond.

Then eases the tractor off onto the slope near the shallow end, mowing, making the first pass on the steep slope with no trouble.

VIRGIL

Hiccup! Hiccup! Hic-uh!

He pulls back out and turns around to make another, lower pass. Goes a little deeper down the slope.

VIRGIL

Hiccup!

The ground breaks away from one of the back tires, and then the other one.

The tractor slides back end first down the slope at an angle, tearing the thinly rooted grass loose.

Virgil hits the brake - but there is nothing he can do to stop the slide of the heavy tractor down toward the water.

His foot stomps on the clutch; hand darts to the lever -- taking the tractor out of gear -- but the tires still slide in the waterlogged dirt.

He hits the bottom of the bank, mud crumbling away. The tractor tips right over into the pond on its side, exhaust pipe HISSING as it goes under.

He takes a deep breath just before his face slams into the water, his left arm snapping on the hard roll cage.

The mower blade whirls as it goes under water, throwing up a shower that douses him before it comes to a stop. The motor misses and runs a few more seconds and stops.

Oil comes up and pools and spreads out over the pond in rainbow-colored hues.

His face splashes water as his right hand tries to unlatch the safety belt, but he can't find the release.

He raises his face and can just barely get his mouth and nose out of the water.

The tractor stops moving. He draws a careful breath. He breathes a couple of times. Forces himself to calm down.

He's twisted in the seat, hurting his back. He grimaces in pain, sitting on his tractor with just his face sticking out of the water.

He cannot unlatch the safety belt, his body putting too much pressure on the latch.

He keeps pushing the button, but it won't budge. His right leg is bent under the steel plate near the transmission.

Virgil is stuck. Stuck tight. In his own damn pond.

VIRGIL

Lord God!

He takes a deep breath, lowers his nose and mouth back into the water, taking the strain off his back.

He settles there with the sun-heated water waving in his hair, holding his breath and fumbling with the latch on the safety belt, just his eyes sticking above the water.

He lifts his broken left arm and makes his hand go to the rim of the seat. He pushes on it, crying out in pain:

VIRGIL

Jesus!

Hot tears squeeze from his eyes. His feeble left hand finds the button on the release.

The safety belt releases him. He grabs the steering wheel and slides off the seat, but his right foot is still trapped under the steel plate.

He sinks deeper into the water, struggling to get his foot loose but it won't come.

He twists around, gripping the steering wheel, his face going down in the water --

EXT. RIVER - DAY (REMEMBERED BAPTISM)

Virgil's mom, MRS. SHARP (30s) sings with the congregation while a raw-boned PREACHER stands in the river, preparing to immerse a terrified, struggling LITTLE VIRGIL.

PREACHER  
Don't fight it, boy!

Little Virgil glimpses the fevered faces of his mother and the congregation singing on the riverbank, just before being plunged under the river.

The Preacher's voice echoes -- filtered through the water:

PREACHER  
Don't be frightened, son!

EXT. POND - DAY (BACK TO PRESENT DAY)

Virgil's face sinking deeper into the water --

Then -- suddenly -- Tyrone, scared and shaking, wades out in the water with a piece of rubber hose in his hand

VIRGIL  
Get back! You know how to swim?!

TYRONE  
No, sir.

Tyrone lifts the rubber hose.

TYRONE  
You can breathe through this.  
I saw it on a movie.

Virgil, growing tired, can't help letting some water get into his mouth, and he keeps spitting it out.

Some water goes down Virgil's throat, and he coughs.

TYRONE

I'm gonna climb up on the wheel.

VIRGIL

Be careful.

Tyrone wades on out, up to his chest. He catches hold of the big black cleats on the tire sticking out of the water.

He pulls himself up.

TYRONE

Hold on. I'm comin'.

Tyrone clambers up on the side of the wheel and kneels there with water dripping from his clothes.

He reaches for Virgil's hand. Virgil puts his hand up, feeling Tyrone's little fingers. He holds onto them.

TYRONE

Here.

He hands the rubber hose to Virgil. Virgil, his left arm broken, can't finagle a way to work the hose, so he hands it back to Tyrone, and grips the steering wheel again.

VIRGIL

I can't use that. You got to go call for help.

TYRONE

Yes, sir. I already did. I run home and done that soon as I seen you turn over.

VIRGIL

You did?

TYRONE

Yes, sir.

VIRGIL

Who'd you call?

TYRONE

Nine one one. Lafayette County  
Fire Department. They on the way  
right now.

Virgil lies there in the water, looking up at the little  
black kid, who smiles, revealing bad, rotten teeth.

VIRGIL

What's your name?

TYRONE

Tyrone.

Virgil, water dripping from his nose, nods at Tyrone.

VIRGIL

I'm sorry about hollering  
at you.

TYRONE

That's all right. You're  
Mister Sharp, ain't you?

VIRGIL

Yeah, I am. You can just call  
me Mister Virgil if you want to.

TYRONE

They'll be here 'fore long,  
Mister Virgil. I'm gonna sit  
right here with you.

VIRGIL

I thank you.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

TV on a high shelf flickers dim bursts of color over the  
sheet that covers Virgil's legs.

He wears a cast on his left arm. Watches the TV with the  
volume turned way down.

Toby enters.

                  TOBY  
How's the arm?

                  VIRGIL  
Throbs a little.

                  TOBY  
Least your hiccups is all gone.

                  VIRGIL  
How's my tractor?

                  TOBY  
Wrecker got it out okay.  
Don't look like nothing's  
damaged on it.

                  VIRGIL  
Where is it?

                  TOBY  
In the shed.

                  VIRGIL  
Water probably got in the motor,  
or the fuel lines.

                  TOBY  
More than likely.

Virgil shifts around, uncomfortable.

                  VIRGIL  
I'm ready to go home.

                  TOBY  
Let's go.

                  VIRGIL  
Keeping me overnight for  
observation. Shit. They're  
just trying to squeeze some  
more money out of my insurance  
company.



TOBY

Get you coming and going.

Virgil shifts around some more, frustrated.

VIRGIL

I don't like this bed. I'm  
used to my own bed. I can't  
sleep in this damn thing.  
It's hard. It ain't big  
enough. Aw hell, I ain't  
a damn bit sleepy no way.

TOBY

You ought to call Lucinda.

VIRGIL

Why?

TOBY

Tell her what the hell happened.

VIRGIL

She might come over. I don't  
think I can handle that right now.

TOBY

You've sure hit a rough patch.  
The drought, the hiccups, almost  
drowning in your own pond.

VIRGIL

The truck.

TOBY

What about the truck?

VIRGIL

Oh, nothing.

TOBY

If I didn't know better  
I'd say you was cursed.

VIRGIL

Bad luck, that's all it is.

TOBY

When you've had bad luck for  
this long, it refuses to believe  
it's bad, let alone luck.

VIRGIL

It was an accident.

TOBY

Do you want to go to church  
Sunday?

VIRGIL

Church? What for?

TOBY

Pray. Thank the Lord.

VIRGIL

There's only one person I  
want to thank.

EXT. TYRONE'S HOUSE - DAY

Virgil drives his truck into the dirt yard. He climbs out,  
cast on his left arm, and can't help but notice the  
chickens nesting in the junked truck.

He surveys the area: old refrigerators and fifty-gallon  
barrels crammed full of trash.

He approaches the house. Beer cans litter his path. He  
steps up on the porch. Front door opens. It's Tyrone.

TYRONE

Hey.

VIRGIL

Hey there yourself.

TYRONE

You all right.

VIRGIL

Aw yeah. I'm fine.

Virgil holds up his cast.

VIRGIL

I just got to wear this thing  
for a while.

Virgil stands there and looks around at the shabby yard.

VIRGIL

I was wanting to speak to  
your mama and daddy, one.  
Is one of them around?

TYRONE

I ain't got no mama, and my  
daddy, he's at work.

VIRGIL

I see. Well. I just wanted to  
ask them, him, something. I can  
come back some other time. What  
time he get in?

TYRONE

No tellin'. Probably after dark.

Virgil looks over by a pine tree and sees Tyrone's go-kart.

He nods at it.

VIRGIL

What's wrong with your go-kart?  
I ain't seen you on it lately.

TYRONE

Chain done got loose. It won't  
stay on.

VIRGIL

Will it run?

TYRONE

Oh, yes sir.

Tyrone walks over to the go-kart and flips the toggle  
switch and chokes it, then pulls the starter cord a few  
times, and it SPUTTERS to life.

He revs it up, but the chain is draped over the driving gear like a loose necklace. He shuts it off.

Virgil walks over.

VIRGIL  
Can your daddy not fix it?

TYRONE  
Said he didn't know how.

Virgil squats down next to the go-kart, looks at it. He slips the chain off the driving gear.

VIRGIL  
This all that's wrong with it?

TYRONE  
Far as I know.

VIRGIL  
It just needs a link took out.

TYRONE  
How you do that?

VIRGIL  
I'll show you.

Virgil gets up, walks over to his truck and, with his good arm, lifts a heavy metal toolbox from the back.

He brings it over and sets it on the ground.

VIRGIL  
Will your daddy care for me  
fixing it for you?

TYRONE  
I don't reckon so.

EXT. ROAD - DAY

Tyrone drives the go-kart, ROARING up and down the road, power sliding, cutting donuts.

Virgil watches him from the yard as he puts his tools away.  
Tyrone pulls back in front of the house and shuts it off.

VIRGIL  
Running pretty good, ain't it?

Tyrone gets off his go-kart.

TYRONE  
It sure is. I sure thank you  
for fixing it for me.

VIRGIL  
You're welcome.

Virgil stands there looking at Tyrone for a few moments.

VIRGIL  
I been wanting to ask you something.

TYRONE  
Okay.

VIRGIL  
How come you to see me when I rolled  
my tractor over? Did you just  
happen to be walking by?

Tyrone hangs his head, ashamed. Looks back up at Virgil.

TYRONE  
I was watching you.

VIRGIL  
How come?

TYRONE  
I was wonderin' if you put some  
fish in your pond.

Virgil smiles just a little.

VIRGIL  
So you was kind of spying on  
me, huh?

TYRONE

Yes, sir. I guess I was.

VIRGIL

I'm glad you was. Nobody would  
have found me till I was dead.  
You like to fish?

TYRONE

I've never been.

VIRGIL

How old are you?

TYRONE

Almost ten.

VIRGIL

You almost ten and you ain't  
never been fishing?

TYRONE

No, sir.

VIRGIL

Does your daddy fish?

TYRONE

Yes, sir.

VIRGIL

He just never takes you.

TYRONE

He keeps saying he's gonna  
take me, but he ain't never  
took me yet.

VIRGIL

Hmmmm.

Virgil turns toward his truck. He reaches over into the bed. Brings out a beautiful red reel and a black rod.

He hands the rod and reel to Tyrone. Virgil reaches back into the truck, comes up with a brand-new tackle box.

He hands the tackle box to Tyrone. Tyrone sets the rod down, places the tackle box on the ground and opens it.

Inside, it's loaded with bright fishing gear: catfish hooks, bream hooks, crappie hooks, red-and-white bobbers, lures and jigs, fish scaler, packets of lead weights, nylon stringers, fillet knife in a leather holster.

VIRGIL

Now you've got something to fish with when he takes you. And you can fish in my pond any time you want to. Long as it's okay with your daddy. I was gonna wait and ask him if it was okay for me to give you this stuff, but if it ain't, he can let me know.

Tyrone gazes at the fishing pole. It's the most awesome thing he has ever seen, including the go-kart. It's sleek. It looks expensive. And somehow, it's his.

Along with what looks like everything a boy would need to fish. Smiling, he looks up at Virgil.

TYRONE

When you getting your fish?

EXT. FISH MAN'S PLACE - DAY

A big red truck, hood propped open, with gold letters on the side: Tommy's Big Red Fish Truck. It's parked in front of a fancy double-wide trailer.

On a hill behind the trailer, five well-manicured ponds scatter down its length.

Underneath the hood of the truck, TOMMY BRIGHT (30s), uses a ratchet to adjust spark plugs.

VIRGIL (O.S.)

Hello.

Tommy stops working. Virgil stands there, cast on his left arm, his pickup parked beside the road.

VIRGIL

My name's Virgil Sharp. I want to talk to the fish man.

TOMMY

That's me. Or what's left of him. I'm Tommy Bright, but I'm just about out of business.

Virgil, alarmed by this news, says:

VIRGIL

Well, damn, I hate to hear that. I got your address from a friend of mine works at the Co-Op in town. He said he didn't know when you was coming back.

TOMMY

Yes, sir. I've had some trouble and looks like the bank's gonna foreclose on me next week.

Tommy resumes working on the spark plugs.

TOMMY

I've done let most of my help go.

VIRGIL

You ain't got no fish left?

TOMMY

No, sir.

Virgil's heart sinks. Deflated, he turns to walk away.

TOMMY

Just some catfish. You interested?

Virgil turns, hope rising in his heart, perking up.

VIRGIL

Catfish is exactly what I need. How many you got?

Tommy stops working to think about this, figuring the number up in his head.



TOMMY

I think I got two thousand twelve  
inch and a thousand eighteen inch.

VIRGIL

I'll take 'em.

TOMMY

Oh, I believe I got a few bream  
left too. They're great fish for  
grandkids.

VIRGIL

I ain't got no grandkids.

TOMMY

Alright then.

VIRGIL

How much for the catfish?

TOMMY

Can you pay me in cash?

VIRGIL

Shit yeah.

TOMMY

Eighteen hundred.

VIRGIL

Deal.

TOMMY

Plus your truck.

VIRGIL

My truck?

Tommy strolls over to Virgil's truck. Virgil follows.

TOMMY

I always wanted one of these  
old Fords.

VIRGIL

My truck ain't for sale.

Tommy stands back, shaking his head.

TOMMY  
Forget the money. I just  
want the truck.

VIRGIL  
It ain't even got air conditioning.

TOMMY  
I'll just roll down the window.

VIRGIL  
You ain't getting my truck now.

TOMMY  
What happened to your arm?

VIRGIL  
Had a little accident.

TOMMY  
I understand, about not wantin'  
to let go of your truck.

VIRGIL  
I appreciate it.

TOMMY  
Go to Holly Springs, order  
your catfish. Ought to have  
'em by Christmas.

Tommy returns to the big red fish truck. Works on the  
plugs. Virgil just stands there, looking back and forth  
between Tommy and his old rusty pickup.

EXT. CO-OP WAREHOUSE - DAY

Virgil walks out with Toby, who holds a sales slip. Toby  
hands the slip to a sleepy man with Down Syndrome, who's in  
a chair with a fan blowing lots of hot air on him.

TOBY  
Two bags of catfish feed.

The man rises, takes a two-wheeler and pushes it into the shadows of the big tin-covered building.

Toby leans against the wall in the shade. Virgil leans with him. They mop their brows with hanker chiefs.

TOBY

You ever call Lucinda?

VIRGIL

Naw. I don't want her worryin'.

TOBY

And she ain't called you?

VIRGIL

She ain't called. I don't reckon.

TOBY

She might've called while you's gone.

VIRGIL

I guess she could have.

TOBY

You ought to get one of them answering machines. That way you wouldn't miss no calls. We got one.

VIRGIL

You do?

TOBY

Yep. Plus, if it's somebody you don't want to talk to, you can just let the machine catch it.

VIRGIL

How you know who it is?

TOBY

Caller ID.

VIRGIL

What's that?

TOBY

It's a little screen on your phone that shows you who's calling.

VIRGIL

My phone ain't got no little screen on it.

TOBY

You got to get a new phone that's got one on it.

VIRGIL

I'll be damned.

The man comes back with two big paper bags full of catfish feed on his two-wheeler.

Virgil walks over to a brand new shiny pickup truck and lets down the tailgate. The man follows, lifts the bags and slides them into the bed.

Virgil raises the tailgate and fastens it shut.

TOBY

Why'd you get a new truck?

VIRGIL

Oh, just time for a change.

TOBY

And you finally got some catfish.

VIRGIL

Fixing to. Yes, sir. Ain't nothing stopping it now.

EXT. GRAVEL ROAD - DAY

The big red fish truck comes to a stop at the muddy log road that leads to the pond.

Virgil strolls up to the cab. Tommy rolls down the window.

VIRGIL

Just straight down this a way.

TOMMY

Looks kindly muddy. Is the whole road like that?

VIRGIL

Pretty much. Rained a lot.

TOMMY

That ain't good. My truck's heavy when it's loaded with this much water and I hate to get it stuck.

VIRGIL

Shit. I didn't think about that.

TOMMY

I should've said something.

VIRGIL

Aw hell, you won't get stuck.

TOMMY

Don't know about that, sir. Last time I stuck it I had to get a dozer and we snapped three log chains before we got it out.

VIRGIL

Risky business.

TOMMY

Damn sure is. I'm afraid, I'm real sorry and all, but maybe we best forget this whole deal. You can have your truck back.

VIRGIL

Nooooo. No. No soap, young fella. I aim to have them fish. I'll think of something.

TOMMY

Think on it quick. I'm leaving for Memphis, tonight, and I won't be back.

INT. REBEL GRAVEL - DAY

REBA (40s) stands behind the counter, on the phone.

REBA  
We ain't got none of that.  
Sorry.

Virgil stands before her, waiting. She hangs up.

VIRGIL  
I need some pit run gravel.

REBA  
I'm sorry, we're closed.

VIRGIL  
This is an emergency.

REBA  
I'm sorry, sir, but we are closed.  
Did you not hear me?

VIRGIL  
I heard you.

REBA  
Then come back tomorrow.

VIRGIL  
Tomorrow'll be too late.

REBA  
Excuse me just a minute.

Two little boys and one little girl climb on a backhoe near the far wall. Reba screams at them:

REBA  
Y'all get off that goddamned  
backhoe 'fore you kill yourselves!  
I done told you little shits!

Virgil checks his wrist watch. Time's running out.

REBA

(to Virgil)

My sister's kids are here from Peoria and they're about to drive me crazy.

VIRGIL

I need some pit run gravel.

REBA

We're a business with posted hours, sir. We're closed. Besides, I don't think we got any pit run gravel. I've never heard of it if we do.

VIRGIL

It's that stuff sets up like concrete.

REBA

Oh, you mean clay gravel.

VIRGIL

Does it set up hard like concrete?

REBA

Yes, it does. Excuse me.

The kids still climb all over the backhoe. Reba screams:

REBA

Jimmy Don, would you get them off that backhoe!

(to Virgil, quiet)

We can deliver it tomorrow. How much do you need?

VIRGIL

I need two hundred feet and I need it today.

REBA

Tomorrow.

VIRGIL

Today.

REBA

Or maybe not at all.

JIMMY DON (40s) emerges from the back room.

JIMMY DON

What's all the commotion out here?

REBA

(flustered)

Them kids won't get off that backhoe and he wants some clay gravel.

JIMMY DON

Did you take your medicine, Reba?

REBA

Hell yes I took my medicine and if you're gonna take that tone with me I'll go my ass straight to the house and watch TV and you can work your own damn counter.

Reba storms over to the backhoe.

JIMMY DON

(to Virgil)

How may I help you, sir?

VIRGIL

I need some clay gravel put down on the road to my pond so the fish man can deliver my fish. And I need it today, now. Can you do that?

JIMMY DON

I'm sorry, sir. We're closed. I can deliver, come tomorrow.

VIRGIL

That's one less day, and I don't have many more days left.



JIMMY DON

What's that supposed to mean?

VIRGIL

It means my clock's running out.  
All I want to do is fish with my  
grand kid, in my own pond, before  
the good Lord comes to take me.

EXT. ROAD - DAY

The new, red clay gravel road goes down through the shady woods. And beyond that, through the dark leaves, a patch of calm dark water.

POND

Virgil grabs a bucket, tilts it over the pond.

Water comes flowing out in a wide tongue and little and big catfish come swimming with it, fins and tails and whiskers, splashing into the pond.

He upends it until they're all gone. Some take off, but others hang around the very edge of the pond.

He reaches down and touches a little catfish with his finger and it sluggishly swims away into the depths.

He turns around to look at Tommy the fish man, who sits beside his big red fish truck, open, laden with rectangular aluminum fish tanks. Empty buckets all around.

Tommy mops his face with a rag.

VIRGIL

How come they hang around the bank?

TOMMY

They don't know what to do yet.  
You see any dead ones?

VIRGIL

Not a one.

TOMMY

I feel bad about making you  
build me a road.

VIRGIL

I needed one anyway.

Virgil scans the road, admiring how nicely packed it is.

TOMMY

All your fish will be big enough  
to eat 'fore too long, if you  
feed 'em good. They grow fast.

Tommy rises. Virgil pulls a wad of bills from his pocket  
and gives it to Tommy.

VIRGIL

I counted it twice, but you  
can count it again.

TOMMY

All I wanted was your truck.  
Here, go on now, keep your money.

Tommy goes to hand it back, but Virgil refuses the money.

VIRGIL

No, you keep it. I'm just  
happy to finally get my fish.

Tommy stuffs the wad of cash into his pants pocket.

TOMMY

You're a good man, Mr. Sharp.

VIRGIL

No I ain't.

EXT. HARDWARE STORE - DAY

Garbage cans under a big metal awning. Virgil checks the  
price on a thirty-gallon can.

He grabs the can and carries it over to the front door,  
sets it down and goes inside.

EXT. POND - DAY

Virgil unloads the garbage can from his truck and sets it under the big white oak.

He takes a bag of feed, tears it open, pours it into the garbage can; takes the other bag and does the same thing.

Squeezes the lid down over it. He sits on the ground under the tree, in the shade, smiling at his calm, deep pond as the sun peeks down between the leaves above him.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - FRONT PORCH - DAY

Virgil, at a table, holds Tyrone's fancy rod and reel with his good arm. Tyrone kneels next to him.

TYRONE

How's your arm?

VIRGIL

Don't hurt so much no more.  
Be glad when I get this cast off.  
Son of a gun's heavy. And it  
itches where you can't scratch.

Virgil adjusts a little wheel next to the thumb button.

Then he tugs on the line. He adjusts the wheel, tugs on the line again, making a sound like a cricket chirping as it peels off the wheel.

VIRGIL

Look here.

Tyrone gets up and stands next to Virgil, who almost puts his arm around the boy.

Virgil turns the reel toward him, points at the wheel.

VIRGIL

See this little wheel right here?

TYRONE

Yes, sir.

VIRGIL

That's your drag, Hot Rod.  
 You can adjust it for tight  
 or loose. That way if you  
 hang a big fish, he can pull  
 the line off and give you a  
 chance to wear him down and  
 land him. If it's set too  
 tight, and you land a big one,  
 he's liable to break your line.  
 You always got to set your  
 drag before you go fishing.

EXT. TYRONE'S HOUSE - DAY

Cleve Jackson, the black man Virgil had the heated  
 encounter with at the town square, rocks in his rocker on  
 the front porch, his rattletrap car parked in the yard.

He lifts a whiskey bottle and pulls the last dregs from it,  
 then rummages in the cooler beside him and pulls out a  
 dripping tallboy and opens it.

A screen door flaps open and shut from inside the house.

CLEVE

Tyrone, boy.

Tyrone emerges from the front door, nervous.

CLEVE

Where the hell you been?

TYRONE

Nowhere.

CLEVE

Who fixed your go-kart?

Cleve motions toward the go-kart by the tree. Tyrone  
 thinks before answering:

TYRONE

Mr. Virgil.

Cleve reaches for a cigarillo and lights one. He sits  
 smoking for a bit.

CLEVE

Who in the fuck is Mr. Virgil?

TYRONE

Lives on that farm up the road.

CLEVE

White man?

TYRONE

Yes, Daddy.

CLEVE

How come he fixed your go-kart?

TYRONE

He had an accident, on his tractor,  
and I helped him.

CLEVE

Helped him how?

TYRONE

I called the fire department.

CLEVE

I don't give a shit. I want  
you to stay away from that  
honky-ass white motherfucker.

Tyrone fidgets, not responding.

CLEVE

Boy, you hear me?

TYRONE

Yes, sir.

CLEVE

Then answer me when I talk to you.

Cleve chugs some whiskey.

CLEVE

I catch you over there, I  
will knock you into the  
middle of next week.

Cleve flings the empty whiskey bottle into the weeds, rises, almost falls over, and stumbles to the junked truck, chickens scattering. He notices Tyrone's long face.

CLEVE

Something wrong?

TYRONE

I wish things was different.

Cleve roots around in the truck, searching, mumbling:

CLEVE

If your mama hadn't left, things would be different. Aw fuck it. Good riddance. Up north's the best place for that bitch.

He roots around some more, searching through the truck, the floorboards, behind the seats as he spews a drunken rant:

CLEVE

She the one sent me to the pen. The goddamn pen. Don't wanna go there again. Crackers and their horses. Call you old thang. Let that horse slobber on your back while you bent over picking their cotton. Chopping out their corn. Loading they goddamn watermelons.

Cleve comes out grinning, holding a half-pint of whiskey.

TYRONE

Can you take me fishing?

CLEVE

It's too hot to fish.

EXT. POND - NIGHT

Virgil throws feed out into the pond. He shines a flashlight over the water. Hundreds of little eyes shine red in the flashlight's beam.

Seconds later, a whole lot of little and big splashes form across the top of the water.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - NIGHT

Lucinda climbs out of her car. Virgil, on the porch, waves at her with his cast. She walks toward the porch.

LUCINDA  
What in the world?

VIRGIL  
Aw, I had a little accident.

LUCINDA  
When?

VIRGIL  
While back.

LUCINDA  
What happened?

INT. FARMHOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Lucinda and Virgil at the table, polishing off plates of pork chops and sweet potatoes.

LUCINDA  
You're lucky he was watching you.

VIRGIL  
Luck ain't the word.

LUCINDA  
How's the fish?

VIRGIL  
Some of 'em's plenty big enough to eat by now. I'm hoping Tyrone'll come by pretty often and fish. Be kind of nice to have a kid to talk to sometimes.

LUCINDA  
Won't be long, winter'll be here.

VIRGIL  
Winter's don't seem to get as cold as they used to be.

LUCINDA

The weather in the world is  
changing, Daddy.

VIRGIL

Winters were cold when I was a boy.  
Or maybe it was just because we  
lived in houses with cracks in the  
walls, no insulation or nothing.  
Nothing but an old woodstove to  
keep us warm.

A long awkward pause in the conversation. Lucinda scans  
the kitchen. Then:

LUCINDA

I miss Momma. I see her in my  
memory in so many places in this  
house. I'm going to get some  
fresh flowers to take over there  
and put on her grave.

VIRGIL

I ordered the stone after the  
funeral, but it ain't arrived yet.

LUCINDA

Takes time to make those things.

INT. TYRONE'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Cleve lifts a half pint of whiskey and takes a fiery sip.  
He puts dark red, thickly sliced deer meat on a cutting  
board and carries it to the table.

He grabs a sharp knife and trims the sinew from it. Tyrone  
enters, heads toward the door.

CLEVE

Where you think you're goin'?

TYRONE

Outside.

CLEVE

Supper's almost ready.



TYRONE  
I'll be right back.

CLEVE  
Sit your ass down. We have  
to talk.

TYRONE  
About what?

CLEVE  
I said sit your ass down. Boy,  
don't make me repeat myself like  
I'm some kind of goddamned radio.

Tyrone sits at the table.

TYRONE  
What is it?

CLEVE  
I have to sell your go-kart.

Tyrone shoots to his feet.

TYRONE  
Sell it?

CLEVE  
I need the money.

TYRONE  
Who you gonna sell it to?

CLEVE  
I know a guy that wants it.  
He made me an offer on it sight  
unseen. Three hundred dollars. I  
told him how good it was running.

Tyrone raises his voice to a harsh shrill:

TYRONE  
I don't want you to sell  
my go-kart!

Cleve glares at Tyrone. Tyrone changes his tone.

TYRONE

Please don't sell my go-kart,  
Daddy.

Cleve lifts his pint, getting mad, and sips from it. Licks  
whiskey from his upper lip.

CLEVE

Ain't no need in us talking  
about it no more. You just gonna  
have to get used to the idea.

Tyrone wipes hot tears from the corners of his eyes.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DAY

Lucinda and Virgil stroll towards her car.

LUCINDA

When's the cast come off?

VIRGIL

Today.

She looks up the hill, in the direction of the pond.

LUCINDA

Gonna have to keep an eye out  
for your pond. Folks will fish  
in it, unless you put up a gate.

VIRGIL

That'll stop 'em from driving  
down to it, but it won't stop  
'em from just walking in off  
the road.

LUCINDA

Maybe you need to build a fence.

They arrive at the car.

VIRGIL

I done built too many fences.

She hugs her father's neck.

LUCINDA  
I'll be home for Thanksgiving.

VIRGIL  
Bring what's his name.

LUCINDA  
You sure about that?

VIRGIL  
No. Bring him anyway. You  
know how to cook a turkey?

LUCINDA  
Mama never taught me.

VIRGIL  
Your mama never cooked our turkeys.

LUCINDA  
Who cooked 'em?

VIRGIL  
Queen.

There's a moment between them. She climbs into the car.  
Nods toward his new truck.

LUCINDA  
Nice truck.

VIRGIL  
It's got air conditioning.

LUCINDA  
Are you going to see Tyrone  
later?

VIRGIL  
He'll probably ride down here  
on his go-kart 'fore too long.

INT. TYRONE'S HOUSE - DAY

Tyrone pushes the curtains aside and peeks out. Cleve  
stands in the yard talking to some BLACK FRIEND in a fancy  
suit who counts some bills into Cleve's hand.

A shiny pickup is behind them, backed into the yard. Cleve puts the money in his pocket, and then they walk out of sight, around the side of the house.

Go-kart CRANKS up. It shoots out in front of the house, with the Black Friend driving it. He pulls the go-kart up close to his truck and shuts it off.

He gets off the go-kart, laughs and tells Cleve something. Tyrone pulls back from the curtain and lets it fall back in front of the window.

EXT. TYRONE'S HOUSE - DAY

The Black Friend and Cleve load the go-kart into the truck:

BLACK FRIEND

You seen that big pond with all the catfish in it?

CLEVE

Where?

BLACK FRIEND

It's right up the road here. Full of catfish. I mean *full* of catfish. White man's farm, right up the road.

Cleve looks in that direction.

CLEVE

Let's go fishing.

BLACK FRIEND

He won't let you fish in it.

CLEVE

How you know? You done asked him?

BLACK FRIEND

I don't have to ask him.

INT. BARN - DAY

Virgil braces his cast on a table. Uses a hacksaw to slice it off, sawing back and forth back and forth.

Finally, he saws through the thick cast. Breaks it off his arm, spreads his fingers. Relieved. Scratches his arm.

He digs around in a hidey hole in the wall. Finds a big wad of 20s. Stuffs the money in his pocket.

INT. TYRONE'S HOUSE - DAY

Cleve enters, counting his money.

CLEVE

Tyrone.

From somewhere in the house, a screen door cracks open and slaps shut.

EXT. TYRONE'S HOUSE - BACKYARD - DAY

Tyrone, rod and reel in hand, trots along, lugging his tackle box.

Cleve bursts through the screen door, shouting:

CLEVE

Boy, come back here!

Cleve takes off after his on. He catches up to Tyrone, snatches his arm, jerking him to a halt.

CLEVE

Don't you dare run from me.

Cleve snatches the rod and reel from him.

CLEVE

What's this?

TYRONE

Rod and reel.

CLEVE

I know what it is, boy.  
Where'd you get it?

Tyrone won't answer. Cleve slaps him hard across the face.

CLEVE

Answer me.

Tyrone rubs his sore face, but he's all out of tears.

TYRONE

Mr. Virgil.

Cleve slaps him again.

CLEVE

What did I tell you? What  
did I tell you?

Tyrone starts to answer, but:

CLEVE

I told you to stay away from  
that white motherfucker.

TYRONE

He give it to me before.

CLEVE

How come?

TYRONE

I helped him, when he had..

CLEVE

Shut your hole. I'm sick  
of hearing that story.

Cleve inspects the rod and reel. Takes the tackle box from Tyrone. Drops to one knee, opens it. Admires the gear.

CLEVE

He give you this too?

TYRONE

Give me all of it.

CLEVE

That cracker spent some money on this. He sho' did. I know this rod cost at least fifty dollars and the reel probably eighty. You got thirty, forty dollars worth of gear here.

Cleve leaves everything on the ground as he stands.

CLEVE

I ain't even got stuff this good.

Cleve palms Tyrone's face. Tyrone flinches.

CLEVE

Don't you ever ask a white man for something unless you need it. Hear me?

TYRONE

I didn't ask him.

Cleve shoves Tyrone.

CLEVE

Do you hear me?

TYRONE

You sold my go-kart.

CLEVE

I give you the damned thing.

TYRONE

Don't that make it mine?

CLEVE

Boy, I'm done fuckin' with you. Get your narrow ass inside. Now.

TYRONE

Why? You wanna sell my fishing gear too? Buy some more whiskey.

Cleve, seething with anger, unbuckles his belt, slips it from around his waist.

INT. FARMHOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Virgil, downright giddy, flexes the arm that once held the cast. He hums an old country tune as he slides a belt around his waist, buckles up. Laces his boots on.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - FRONT YARD - DAY

Virgil carries a rod and reel into the yard. He casts the line far into the driveway. Smiles. Reels it in.

INT. TYRONE'S HOUSE - DAY

Cleve grabs his car keys from the counter. Opens the ancient ice box. Snags three tallboys of beer.

A spot of blood marks one cheek. He feels it. Wipes it away with the back of his hand.

EXT. TYRONE'S HOUSE - DAY

Cleve moves to a corner of the house where a bunch of junk is piled up. He digs out a rusty five-gallon can of Red Panther cotton poison.

INT. CAR - DAY

Cleve slips behind the wheel of the ragged vehicle. Fires it up. Pops open a beer, pulls it down into drive.

EXT. DIRT YARD - DAY

Cleve drives the car, dust rolling out behind him.

INT. CAR (MOVING) - DAY

Cleve pulls on the beer. Hot light in the dash comes on and flickers and goes back out. Flickers, goes back off.

Finishes the first beer, flings it out the window. Opens the second beer. He reaches under the seat and comes up holding a .38 revolver.

Cleve slips it open. Checks the chambers. Fully loaded.



EXT. GRAVEL ROAD - DAY

Cleve pulls over to the shoulder. He climbs out, finishing the last beer. He pulls a pint of whiskey from his back pocket, takes a long pull from it.

Then he pulls the five-gallon can of cotton poison from the bed of the truck and staggers on down the road.

He lugs the heavy can of poison to the red clay road going down through the shady woods.

And beyond that, through the green leaves, he heads toward the patch of calm dark water.

EXT. TRI-COUNTY MARINE - DAY

Virgil shakes hands with a young SALESMAN, lots of boats around them, mostly ski boats with fiberglass fishing rigs.

SALESMAN

What can I do you for, sir?

Virgil motions toward a stack of olive drab twelve-foot aluminum boats with handles on each end.

VIRGIL

How much you getting for them twelve footers?

SALESMAN

Let you have a real good deal today, since fall will be here soon. Don't want to keep that stock over the winter.

VIRGIL

How much?

EXT. STREET - DAY

Virgil drives, smiling, a brand new twelve-foot boat tied to the back end of his brand-new pickup.

EXT. POND - DAY

Virgil parks the truck, new boat tied to it, near the shallow end. He sees something that paralyzes him.

He opens the door and steps down, clutching the rod and reel. Shuts the door. Mouth hangs open in disbelief.

He staggers down to the white oak beside the edge of the water. Flies swarm, buzzing all around him.

His knees buckle at what his eyes take in: rotting catfish on the surface of the pond, large and small, their pale bellies turned up, maggots working them over in the water.

Buzzards walk from one side of the pond to the other across the bloated bellies of the dead fish.

He drops the rod and reel as he slumps against the tree, sliding down to sit, tears welling up in his eyes, a profound sadness that overwhelms him.

Cleve appears beside the tree. He pulls the pistol from his back pocket and moves to stand in front of Virgil.

They recognize each other. Virgil looks up into Cleve's sweat-shiny black face.

Cleve flashes a shit-eating grin as he SHOOTs Virgil in the mouth -- blood splattering against the white oak tree.

Buzzards flap their wings and fly away. Cleve SHOOTs Virgil again. And again. And again. And again.

Smoke drifts out over the pond in a little cloud.

FADE OUT.

**THE END**