

Hazard by Michael Royce

Tucked behind a table at the back of the Angry Bear Saloon, Turner nursed a beer. He sat alone and unnoticed under the snarling head of a cougar mounted on the wall above him, its fur mottled with rot and teeth yellow with age. Without lifting his head, he listened to a gray-looking fellow try to impress two men with stories about the great Miner Strike of 1931.

“Better believe Joe Turner’s kilt some men,” the old man said. “Not just scabs, neither.” The two men downed their shots in a single gulp. As he negotiated his departure, the talker braced himself in the doorway. He tapped his temple, shook his head from side to side and announced to no one in particular, “Yessir, that Turner done been born with a murdering disposition.” After this pronouncement, he lurched through the door, leaving his words hanging in the air like swamp mist.

As he digested the old drunk’s words, Turner’s eyes glinted and his lips pulled back into an undertaker’s smile. Yep, better to be feared than respected. He extracted his prized buck knife from his pocket and locked it open with a snap. On the table, he made a neat pile of nail clippings, dead skin and peels of dirt cleaned from under his jagged nails. The chrome on the knife was dull and the wooden grip scarred from years of daily use, but he kept the blade honed and ready. Staring at the last swallow of beer in his glass, he brooded over a recent torment.

At breakfast a few days earlier, Turner had watched Brenda, his first and favorite child, as she flipped pancakes and stirred the fatback. He’d marked the hint of sweat on the fine hair above her lips and the fullness of her figure. Like a revelation, he’d seen she wasn’t a girl anymore, but a woman bursting with promise of sweetness. Heat washed through him. Catching himself, he forced his gaze away. He wasn’t sure what he felt, but he knew it wasn’t right. His fists knotted with self-disgust in his lap. “Hurry up with those cakes, gal,” he’d snapped.

Shaking his head to put this troubled memory out of mind, Turner picked up his glass and downed the remaining beer. Without comment to anyone, he slapped money for three beers down on the counter and departed into the night for the long walk home.

The next morning, Brenda accompanied her pa on their monthly trip to pick up supplies for the family. They walked together on the path out of Turner Hollow across the bridge to the main road where Turner kept his old pick-up, its springs sagging and tires bald. As they drove into Hazard, the county seat, Turner asked, “Need anything?” Brenda heard no gentleness in his question.

“No, Pap,” Brenda said. “Ma sewed up a new dress from that material we bought a couple months ago.” A suggestion of a grin crossed her face. “People’ll get to thinking I’m a princess if I wear something new and fancy each month.” She looked at her father to see if her

humor had amused him. She saw his mouth quiver into a partial smile and knew she was the lucky one. No one else in the family would dare talk to him in that jokey sort of way.

As they visited different stores to pick up various items, she noticed a young man trailing after them like a stray dog in hope of a pat. She smiled to herself because he so clearly was waiting to find a chance to talk to her alone. He must have asked around about her and her family because when he approached in front of the dentist's office where she sat on bench waiting for her father, he said, "Howdy, Miss Brenda."

She turned to look up at him. "How do you know my name?" Her eyes skittered under his gaze. Although she was 18, she didn't have experience with boys courting. Their house was too isolated and her father didn't encourage suitors.

"I'm Samuel from up to Carver. Elbert Fugate's boy; my gramp is Josiah Elweh."

"Daddy's getting his teeth worked on." She struggled to recover her composure.

"I seen you around; been wanting to introduce myself."

Brenda knew she ought to maintain a dignified reserve, but her full lips curled into a smile anyway. "Pa don't like for me to talk to strangers."

"Well, that's why I done introduced myself, so we ain't strangers no more." As they chatted, Samuel did most of the talking. "I'd like to come calling down at yer place," he said finally.

Brenda didn't have a chance to answer because she saw her father approach, his face swollen from having two teeth yanked. She didn't know how much of their conversation he'd overheard, but she saw how he fixed Samuel with a vicious look, like a treed raccoon deciding whether to claw your face off or jump. Turner took her by the arm and steered her away quickly.

"We was just talking," she wanted to say, but she knew her pa wouldn't take to that kindly, even if she was his favorite. I'll never see that boy again, she thought, because I didn't get a chance to tell him where we live. She dragged her feet as she followed her father to the car, weighted down with sorrow that she'd never meet any boy who might take her out from under the iron hand of her dad.

Samuel, however, was not easily discouraged. He'd pestered the shopkeepers where Brenda and her father had stopped until he'd pieced together where they lived.

That following Saturday, he whistled as he walked from his home in Carver, a community of thirty houses straggling along two dirt roads, out to the main highway. Although his family worried he was searching too far from where he grew up and the kinship ties that bound the Fugates to others throughout Breathitt County, he was 22, country-lean and too headstrong to let them interfere with his intention to go courting.

The morning air felt crisp and leaves had already turned brilliant red and yellow. At the paved road, a small trickle of automobiles belonging to well-to-do businessmen drove south to

Hazard or north to Jackson, the county seat of Breathitt. Samuel figured to catch a ride and was about half right. A man wearing a black fedora pulled his new '49 Ford over and motioned for Samuel to hop in but let him off with five miles to walk.

By late morning, Samuel reached the entrance to Turner Hollow, three miles south of Hazard. Without touching the handrail, he crossed the hanging bridge over the Tawasset River up into the mouth of the hollow. At a faded, grey clapboard house with a worn porch the length of the front, Samuel saw a woman staring at him silently. "Howdy, Missus, I'm looking for Joe Turner's place?"

The woman's eyes shifted up and down the hollow before she answered. "Head straight down the crick," she said. "Turn right another mile at the fork, until you reach the last house." After a hesitation, she added, "When you get close, don't be too quiet. Turner ain't fond of surprises." With that, she hustled inside.

Samuel nodded thanks at the empty porch, not set back one bit by what she'd had to say. Lots of people living up in the hollows acted peculiar. He was fixing to visit Brenda anyway, not her dad. His long legs ate up the miles, and he grinned because he was getting closer.

When he left the leafy woods, he travelled down a ridge through open grassland toward the Turner house. Nobody was outside, except two little boys mucking in the dirt of the front yard. They took turns whacking each other until they heard Samuel call out from the corner of the split-rail fence surrounding the house. For a moment, they became quiet and nothing happened.

Then the door opened a crack and Turner stepped out, his rifle pointed toward the ground. "What you want, stranger?" Turner's gaze held Samuel in a slowly tightening vice across the distance that separated them.

"I'm here looking to pay my respects to yer daughter," Samuel said in a cracked voice. He moved gingerly into the yard. "Don't mean nothing ain't right by yer family."

Brenda stepped out on the porch beside her father. "Pap, I know this here boy. We done talked in Hazard last week. Remember, when I waited for you outside the dentist."

"Uh huh," answered her pa and eased the grip on his gun a hair.

Brenda's hands twisted up in the material of her dress. "All right and proper he acted. He come from a good family, too—the Fugates from up to Carver, not Tolbert Fugate in Jackson, nor that Brecht Fugate, who drinks too much over at Long Branch. Elbert, son to Josiah Elweh, that's this boy's daddy." Her words spilled out in one long stream.

"I remember a Josiah Elweh Fugate. Preacher, ain't he?" Turner said. He remembered the boy skulking after Brenda in Hazard and stalled to gain time to figure out what to do

"Use to be, Mr. Turner," Samuel replied. "He done give up on preaching long ago." He edged across the yard, hesitating at the bottom of the steps.

“Good enough family,” Turner declared reluctantly. He reached a decision. *Better to flush out what young Fugate was up to rather than drive him away straight off.*

Samuel climbed the worn wooden steps onto the porch and extended his right hand.

Turner ignored his greeting. “Best be watching yer manners when talking to me or mine.” He spun about abruptly and re-entered the house.

Glancing at his face as he closed the door behind him, his wife flinched. She and their younger daughter continued canning vegetables and remained silent. Muscles twitched under Turner’s weathered cheek.

Samuel stuttered as he recovered from this harsh reception. “I been...uh...thinking on you a great deal this last week.” His eyes followed Brenda as she moved away from the door to sit on a wooden, hand-made swing. Turner’s lowdown meanness flew out of his mind.

“Ain’t exactly able to find the right words.” His breathing slowed. “Like my tongue been stomped and drug in the dirt.” Confusion drained from his face and he focused the full bore of his broad, country smile on Brenda.

She lifted her head and laughed. Samuel heard the sweet, high trill.

Encouraged, he commenced to gild the lily. “Yer so pretty I’m near on to 100% confused.”

Brenda blushed and lowered her face again. “You be flirting with all them big city words.”

“Flirting,” Samuel repeated indignantly. “I’m telling you nothing but God’s own truth.” He assumed a serious air. “When you be out walking, the sun must git crazy jealous,” he said, dazzled by the piercing blue of her eyes and the pink flush of her pale skin. “What with all them sunflowers turning to follow you while they pay never mind to that old sun.” In the silence that followed, Samuel thought as how that was a pretty good line.

Brenda must have believed so, too. Her lips parted with a slight tremble and she motioned for Samuel to sit beside her on the swing. As Samuel sat, he was conscious of her body heat across the space that separated them. He longed to stroke the silky black hair cascading to her shoulders and gaze forever at the unconscious beauty of her face.

They talked and the glow of Brenda’s cheeks deepened. Samuel pointed to a red-tailed hawk climbing thermals into the sky above the hills in front of them. While they watched the hawk soar, Samuel inched modestly toward Brenda; his knee grazed her dress. When she didn’t move away or say anything, he took her silence to mean she liked him—at least a little. He entertained her with stories about the big northern cities where he’d worked. “People are different up there, for sure. Most everyone’s got drinking water and flush toilets indoors, even poor folk.” Brenda’s eyes grew brighter as he described this wider world she’d never seen.

“You must be hungry,” Brenda said. She entered the house and gathered up a plate of cornbread and jug of milk. As they sat together eating from the same plate, Samuel allowed his

arm, which he'd draped over the back of the swing, to dip casually and touch her shoulder. At the first contact, she stiffened and he removed his arm like it'd been acting on its own.

If he stayed longer, Samuel knew it'd be dark before he reached home, but he wasn't fixing to depart. He never noticed Turner, his eyes hooded like a falcon, staring at them from the window behind the swing, listening to their words and following their movements.

Turner stepped out onto the porch. "You oughter be leaving now." His stare would have made a rattlesnake cringe. "Night ain't going to hole up on your account."

Samuel rose, looking like he had a mouthful of words still bottled up in him. "If'n it be all right, I'd like to visit next weekend," he asked Brenda. Turning to her dad, he added, "Naturally, with yer permission."

Brenda's cheeks dimpled and she nodded yes.

Turner said, "Time to git you gone now, Fugate." He choked on his fury and the acid bile it released. He'd overheard Samuel seducing Brenda with fancy words, touching her body wherever he wanted and leering at her like he was removing her clothes one article at a time. In the warp of his imagination, he witnessed Samuel's hands descend stealthily from Brenda's shoulders to cup her breasts. Turner clenched his fist with ferocity and the snagged edges of his fingernails bit into his hands as he envisioned Samuel, triumph in his eyes, mounting Brenda.

Turner stalked to the back room. When he looked down, he saw blood seeping from his fists. *He defiled my baby.* His pupils expanded like a mountain lion hunting at night. He reached for his cherished thirty-aught-six hanging on the wall and stole out the backdoor. On deer tracks, he loped at an angle to the path he knew Samuel would follow until he reached a high point above the trail where the undergrowth was thin. He sank to one knee behind an alder and concentrated to slow his breathing. The muzzle of his gun rested against the trunk of the tree as if he was waiting for a big buck to burst into the open. A noise jerked Turner to attention. Samuel appeared, walking briskly and whistling "Ghost Riders in the Sky."

The click of the trigger was soft and Samuel never turned. He fell without a sound. As the echo of the gun died, Turner stalked down the hill. He stared at the blood pooling below Samuel's head. With a shake, he broke from the spell that held him. He grabbed Samuel by the heels and dragged him off the trail, ripping the body free from the brush that ensnared it as if he was wrestling a dead deer out of the thickets onto the butchering ground. Under a copse of young maples, he rolled a small log out of the way. With his buck knife, he sharpened a stick into a crude tool. For half hour, he dug a hole with steady scoops. Then, mouthing *dust to dust*, he dumped Samuel into the trough. On hands and knees, he pushed the soil into the hole and covered the body. Using a leafy branch, Turner scuffed the tracks to hide where Samuel had fallen on the trail, the marks his head and torso made skidding across the ground, and where, in the end, his body was planted in the earth.

After Turner brushed the blood off the trail, he marched to a little feeder stream flowing into the Tawasset and cleaned his hands and clothes. Slowly, he checked his body to determine if

it was free of stains. Then, he washed his hands again, using silt and small pebbles from the stream to scour from them the evidence of what he'd done.

When he reached home, Turner didn't talk. But his family had heard the sharp echo of his hunting rifle. His wife asked in a voice which faltered, "Was you out hunting, Joe?"

"Been watching a family of squirrels in that stand of trees over by the ridge," he said. "Tired of nothing to eat but fried baloney, beans and gravy." After a pause, he added, "Missed the little bastards, though."

Brenda listened, ashen and shaking, as her father talked. The others looked away. In the stifling quiet which followed, Brenda helped her mother prepare dinner. The family ate without speaking and went to bed early.

Before dawn the next morning, Turner set out for his winter hunting camp, high in the hills several miles and ridges from home. "Nobody interferes with my family or other possessions," he muttered. He knew death compelled revenge. There were a number of men in the Fugate clan. Just as it had been his duty to shoot young Fugate to protect Brenda's virtue, it was now their obligation to take his life in return for the boy's. They would come for him, of that he was sure; but they could not exact retribution from him, if he was not there. And the code they all lived by didn't sanction hurting women or children.

At first light, Brenda pulled herself into the kitchen. A morning chill still dominated the room. She watched her mother tuck a hank of washed-out blonde hair behind her ear as she loaded the stove with fresh coal and opened the damper. Suddenly, she realized that her father had disappeared. "Got to see what Pap's done." She jumped up. The rest of the family heard the front door slam behind her like a rifle crack.

Brenda ran down the trail, searching desperately for what she hoped not to find. At a point where the ground seemed to have been swept, she pulled up suddenly and her heart stuck. A crow cawed its warning as it lifted from the ground. She knelt at a stain near some disturbed leaves on the trail and rubbed the dried but sticky red dirt between fingers. She recognized the decaying, metallic smell of blood.

Racing back to the house, she howled. "Pap done killed that boy for no reason other than he done come to see me." She dropped into a chair, sure all happiness had forever vanished. "He's laying dead in some secret place in them woods." She hugged her knees beneath her and wondered how life could contain such sorrow. A hint of red lurked beneath the rust-streaks of the cast-iron stove, but Brenda felt no warmth. Brushing the damp blackness of her hair from her eyes, she asked her mother, "Why?"

Her mother looked out the window into the dreary gray of the morning as if she had not heard.

"Why?" Brenda repeated.

“Men got their sense of honor....” Her mother started to answer and then seemed to have forgotten she was speaking.

Brenda’s eyes pierced into her mother.

“Women, children...we suffer.”

Brenda’s wail interrupted her. “My life’s over.”

“Suffering’s never over.” Her mother stared at the door with a look of terror.

II.

When Samuel didn’t return from in Turner Hollow that first night, his family remembered what had been said before he went courting. “Crazy people living down there,” Josiah Elweh stood beanpole tall with dirty, straight hair parted in the middle. He’d fixed watery blue eyes on Samuel, his favorite grandson. “Kill ye for looking crosswise, easy as spit on the ground.” He’d released a long stream of tobacco juice over the porch rail and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Gramp, I know ye got to be careful with those Hazard folk. But this Brenda I’m fixing to visit is a true black-haired beauty,” Samuel had answered.

Josiah had shrugged; he’d said all he intended to on the subject. Two years earlier when his wife died, he’d gone three days without eating and sleeping. “Better to have taken me first,” he had hissed, pacing the floor until he collapsed. When he could speak again, the left corner of his mouth quivered without moving. After this, whole days passed without a word. What he said was often odd; his stare distant as if fixed on some unavenged lapse of justice. His words tumbled out in rambling parables, ruptured by long, swollen silences. Josiah’s voice developed a fearsome flatness and he became a stranger at the center of the family. They respected his position as patriarch, but were bewildered by what he said and did.

Elbert, Samuel’s father, had looked uncomfortable and remained silent as Josiah Elweh spoke his forebodings. Since Josiah Elweh had changed, Elbert seemed unsure how to chart the family’s course.

Samuel’s brothers and sister had smirked at the thought of him smitten by a young woman he barely knew. “All worked up over her, ain’t ye,” teased his sister, the baby of the family.

Shaking his head so his thick black hair fell over his forehead, Aaron, the youngest of the three brothers, had glared at his sister. “Leave it alone, now,” he said. But his eyes revealed his discomfort.

While listening quietly, Samuel’s mother had kept her eyes focused on the ground. “Stick with yer own,” she’d whispered.

By morning, the family's fear had hardened to despair. They waited with resignation for word of Samuel. Shortly before noon, the Fugates heard from the mailman, who'd obtained information from a woman with a sister living at the mouth of Turner Hollow. Samuel had gone down the creek to Joe Turner's house and never come out that evening.

"What we ought to do?" Elbert asked his father.

"Best go straight down there," replied Josiah Elweh.

The men of the family hitched horses and drove their wagon over old dirt mining roads winding through the hills to the entrance of Turner Hollow. Nobody talked much. Elbert sat alone up front and drove the team of horses. Behind him, Josiah sat in a chair facing the direction from which they'd come. He braced himself with the butt of his old double-barrel shotgun.

Josiah rode in silence, recalling better days when he was a young man barnstorming the hollows and towns of eastern Kentucky on foot, preaching the word of God. He'd taken up his mission when he was twenty-five, fortified by the love of his eighteen-year old bride. "Can't promise you love, nor happiness," he preached to his converts, writhing in ecstasy and fear under the whip of his words. "Eternal justice, that's what shall be yers," he shouted and his congregation answered in tongues.

Aaron and Raymond, Samuel's younger brothers, hunkered in the bed of the wagon. Leaning against the driver's bench, they gripped their hunting rifles.

It was near dark when the Fugates reached Turner Hollow. The men conferred until Josiah Elweh announced it was best to wait until morning to confront Turner. Elbert walked with the boys into the hollow to investigate.

Josiah Elweh remained alone, seated in the wagon like a stone idol while they searched. "I known suffering. Two of my babies turn blue before dying on me." He spoke bitterness to the breeze rising before nightfall. "When the coal cart crushed half my thumb and index finger, the bosses turned me out like I was dirt somehow stuck to their boots." He choked under the injustice. "All my life, lived poor, but worked hard."

As he stared into some middle distance, the image of his beloved wife wavered before him. "Done right by God and man. Expected the same in return." He spat these words along with a mouthful of tired chaw into the dirt beside the wagon.

As they penetrated deeper into the hollow, Elbert and his two boys sniffed the air and studied the forest about them. They noted leaves scattered cross the path in an unnatural manner. Mixed with the forest's cloying smell of fertility and rot, they detected the harsh odor of dried blood. A forlorn croak startled them and they looked up at a congregation of crows circling over some twisted undergrowth surrounded by sparse maple trees. They pushed through the brush under this malignant flock and discovered a place where dirt was loose. Digging with hands and sticks, they uncovered Samuel. He was stiff and you could recognize only part of his face.

Elbert moaned.

“Going to kill that bastard sure now,” Raymond said.

Aaron waved off black flies rising from their feast. His knees buckled and he felt suffocated. *Life’s falling apart*, he thought.

After nightfall, Elbert and the boys returned and placed Samuel in the wagon. Josiah Elweh lurched back to awareness. He faced upward and moaned. “Now, Ye done took my dear boy from me.” He lowered his head and stared straight ahead. “He who pollutes the land, shall harvest the whirlwind. And the third angel poured out his vial upon the rivers and fountains of water and they became blood.”

The Fugate men huddled together under the wagon to wait for morning. Aaron remembered how Samuel had confided in him. “To find a good woman ain’t simple as pulling apples off a tree. Fugates related one way or another to most families living in Carver.”

Aaron had understood the pressure on Samuel to find a wife from their own rolling hills, but he’d wished his older brother had been able to see further. “You’ve worked in Cincinnati, Chicago and Dayton. There’re plenty more women in this wide world than only this little patch of Kentucky.” As if in a fever, Aaron dreamed of Samuel smiling at him from a distance before he disappeared suddenly into a furious flash of lightening.

At first light, Josiah Elweh led Elbert and his two grandsons single file up little Tawasset Crick to its east branch, and then on to the Turner home. As they marched, Aaron’s thinking wavered between the grimness of the present and thought of the future. He didn’t want to become like his father, living his whole life in the county where he’d been born.

Elbert had only left Kentucky once. “When the Japs bombed that place in the Pacific, I joined up.” He loved to tell stories about his adventures. “Put us on a train out of Lexington bound for New York.” He scanned the faces of his sons to be sure of their attention. “I prowled round the streets of that city like a cougar at the end of winter. I ain’t lying.” He grinned with satisfaction at the coming punch line. “Got to staring up at all them tall buildings so bad I got sunburnt on the roof of my mouth.” Aaron knew this story, its words and cadences, from frequent retelling.

As they walked, shadows lurked in the slanting light of morning. The low moan of wind ruffled half-naked trees. Autumn leaves spiraled to the earth to start their slow decay. Aaron felt the obligations of the code by which his people lived slowly squeezing the youth from him. He wanted to be out in the world, not trapped in this small corner of southeastern Kentucky. Dreaming of the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, he imagined Hank Williams crooning “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry,” a song he often heard on radio WSFA. Aaron felt like the whip-poor-will of that song—“too blue to fly.” But if he wanted to escape Carver, where who he was and what he did were preordained, he knew he must learn to fly.

At nineteen, Aaron was a year younger than Raymond, but he had light in his eyes where Raymond had only dull acceptance. Although he understood the conventions of their life, he feared where retribution might lead and where it ended.

The trees thinned as they approached the house. The air was still and there was no noise from inside. “We come for ye, Joe Turner,” Elbert shouted as they entered the yard. Raymond, Aaron, and Josiah Elweh fanned out in a semicircle facing the porch on either side of Elbert with their guns prepared for whatever might take place.

Mrs. Turner opened the door, looking gray from crying. As she stepped outside, Brenda, her face also streaked, fell in silently beside her. “Be ye the Fugates?” asked Mrs. Turner. The men nodded in grim affirmation. “Joe’s up in them hills somewhere and we ain’t seen him since the evening fore last.”

They didn’t notice Josiah Elweh lurch forward at the left of the line, his eyes ablaze from some internal source. He tightened his grip and pulled the first trigger on his double barrel. The blast spun Mrs. Turner half-way around and she toppled to the porch. Frozen in astonished horror, the others stared as Josiah Elweh scrambled onto the porch like a huge and malevolent spider. He fired his next shot into Brenda, who had stepped in front of her mother’s body, trapped between her fury and her fear.

“What ye doing, Pap?” Elbert yelled at his father.

Josiah Elweh roared, “Blood debts must be paid.”

“But they’s womenfolk,” Aaron screamed in disbelief.

“They lived with the devil and known what he done and could do.” Spittle clung to Josiah Elweh’s face as he stormed.

Rapidly, Josiah Elweh stepped over the lifeless bodies and entered the house. The bolt snapped shut behind him. “Boys, stop gramp before anyone else gets kilt,” Elbert barked while they ran toward the house. As they crashed against the door, the brace held strong. From inside, they heard the shotgun reload. One discharge cut short a high-pitched wail; another pierced a cry of terror. Spent shells hit the floor followed by another blast. When they finally broke down the door, Elbert and his sons saw blood weeping from three small corpses.

Sweeping the kerosene lantern off the table, Josiah Elweh stumbled outside, face convulsing. He rounded on Elbert. “Don’t be gawking; I did what you oughter done yerself.” Fluid from the shattered lamp spread rapidly over the floor. Josiah Elweh commanded, “Out, now.” As Elbert and the boys cascaded out the door, he struck a wooden match and flicked it behind them. The room burst into flames.

Elbert, Raymond and Aaron stared into the consuming fire while Josiah looked on with dour satisfaction. “Our work here’s done,” he said. “Joe Turner can live with what he’s wrought, or come looking to me for satisfaction.” He spat. “Don’t make me no difference.” His stained teeth contorted in a bleak grin.

Elbert started out of the hollow. Raymond followed. Aaron trailed. The chill of what they’d witnessed engulfed them. They walked as if carrying a heavy load.

Shunned by the rest of the family, Josiah Elweh hung back, looking smaller and slumped as his rage slowly dissipated. He tilted his head upward. "Have not Ye ordained that the iniquity of the fathers shall be visited on the children?" When no sign manifested, he lowered his eyes and slowly surveyed the carnage around him. Recognition flickered momentarily in his confused mind. He started to mouth a benediction for the burning house and the corpses within. As the walls collapsed, his eyes twitched and this small tremor of doubt vanished. He turned to start out of the hollow behind the others.

Before he descended to the river, Josiah turned back as if in response to a call. Through the smoke and flames in the distance, he thought he saw a man. He imagined Turner choking on the cinders of his family and home. As he disappeared into the trees, Josiah sought confirmation. "Has not the full mete of justice now been paid, Lord?" He scowled when the silence from above remained unbroken. Moving briskly, he hurried to catch the rest of the family.

As he walked out of the hollow, Aaron remembered how his grandfather had taught him to skin squirrels, wrestling their pelts off with one long pull. The man in blood frenzy back at Turner's was not the stern but fair gramp of his memory. What happened here ain't right and never can be made right, Aaron thought. He looked with revulsion at the blood on his shirt from the five bodies they'd left behind.

Aaron knew he must escape the harshness of the life which surrounded him. By the time he reached the head of the hollow, he had surged to the front. "I pray never to see this place again," he muttered, "nor remember none of what happened here today." In a half-run, he crossed the bridge and by-passed the wagon holding Samuel's body. Without looking back, he raced toward the highway to hitch a ride south into Tennessee. A groan of loss ripped from deep within him. He knew he would never see his family again.

When he reached the wagon, Elbert spoke in a flat tone. "Now Aaron done left us." His voice broke.

Josiah, who had just come up, said: "It's God's will."

With hollow eyes, Elbert stared at his father. Slowly climbing onto the driver's bench, he was silent as Josiah hoisted himself up to sit beside him. As they travelled, the heat of the Indian summer afternoon shimmered off the dirt in the distance. Sweat pooled, dripping off Elbert's face and back. Without looking at his father, Elbert finally spoke to the space between the horses. "Why kill the women and children?"

Josiah Elweh snorted and did not respond at first. Finally he broke his silence. "Turner's to blame; he abandoned his family to pay his blood debt."

Elbert did not acknowledge this answer. He looked at the road ahead as if it disappeared into endless darkness. They rode from that point without talking.

When they reached home, Elbert lurched past his wife and daughter, who stood like silent sentinels at the door. As nobody told him what to do, Raymond remained on the wagon guarding his brother's body. Anguished screams broke like waves against the walls of the house and then subsided to muffled weeping.

Josiah Elweh staggered into the yard to seek answers from the mystery of the darkening sky. The fury of the day had purged him like a devouring tongue of fire. He stood without motion, listening to the faint echo of his pulse. Certainties ebbed with the slowing of his internal tide. Total isolation descended on him like a shroud.