

33. ONE MISSISSIPPI

When I lived at home, I spent much of my time in my room reading to myself. Now, I spent my days reading to someone else. But he barely responded to me at all. For all intents and purposes, he might as well have been an imaginary friend. If he woke up, then my efforts would be vindicated. All my beliefs would seem justified. But if Cody Brainerd stayed like this, then I would have nothing to show for my work. I would have engaged in one long soliloquy. And my voice would fade in its ever-weakening echo. Even if he heard nothing, I wanted to believe that somewhere in the universe, someone was listening to me. All this energy that I expended could be shuffled off to some giant collector which made a record of everything that I said and save it for posterity.

Part of me suspected that Lee was monitoring everything that I was doing. And it gave me the creeps. But it just didn't make any sense. He had found me randomly at a rest stop. And it wasn't as if I was communicating with some kind of international spy ring. Since I obviously wasn't working for a government agency, what was the big deal?

Admittedly, I didn't want to be spied on. But I didn't want to feel totally alone. I wanted Cody to be conscious and alive. I wanted him to be the emissary to the New World. If he could only wake up, clap his hands, and release some kind of benevolent power.

As I read to him, I took special care. I pretended that there was a lot riding on my inflection. If I mumbled or skipped over a word, my intent would be unclear. He needed to hear the words as they were written. He might not be alert, but my reading needed to have clear authority.

I had passed my time by myself in this internal monologue. I was telling my own story. I simply didn't have an audience. I wanted to believe that my story had merit. This was what it meant to be alive. And I carried on with a deep sense of purpose. Until now, I never realized the full import of my journey. I couldn't pretend that I was giving life to Cody Brainerd. But he allowed me to see deeper into myself. I was no longer reduced by my own bravado. Maybe, he understood nothing that I said. Perhaps, he'd disagree with the basic principles that motivated me. But he would have to take some comfort in my commitment.

My life was always driven by a vision. But I doubted myself. No one understood what I saw. And I couldn't communicate that to anyone. Rose had been the most supportive. She recognized the chaos in my life because it mirrored the same dilemma in her own world. Nevertheless, she did not have the strength to pursue the dream any further. I didn't want to get lost like her. I sought a more profound calling.

No matter what happened, I was meant to be here. Lee had found me accidentally. It could have been anyone. But at this moment, I was giving the event intention. I was authoring my fate. In all these books, there was an understanding of what held together the planets. And it has something to do with the human spirit. For this once, I was taking that destiny upon myself.

At my coronation, I could see Cody wince. Again, I was becoming full of myself. I needed to let go. I turned the page of the book and continued my reading. It wasn't so much the words themselves or what they said. It was the feeling that I was sharing with Cody Brainerd. This wasn't just the beginning of his memory. This was the beginning of human knowledge. If I was going to start the world over again, what would I do?

I did not shrink at my new burden. If the stars shone down on me with the mission of the heavens, I was ready to gloriously sing their lyrics. I realized how to use the contours of the galaxies to emphasize my message. I was gradually becoming accustomed to the vibrations of the universe.

I paused to catch my breath. The emptiness of the room reminded how vain had been my desire. That was not going to stop me. I knew that I would question my own motives. Now and then, this would all seem so silly. But I was doing something that no one could take away. Lee might have walk in here and told me to stop. But I had already charted a course. I could not turn back. Somewhere, out there, there was some kind of testament of what was going on. There was a force that could beat back all the naysayers. The world had spoken.

With each page read, I felt reassured. I was not the first who had come to this realization. These writers may have, on occasion, felt uneasy about their quest. As they progressed in the darkness, they found the enlightenment to keep going. I wish that I had more of an opportunity to leave my mark. I knew that one day, I might sit down and record in more detail this process. But I wanted this moment to be mine. I settled for the revelations offered by the writers. In reading all these works together, I was piecing together a noble tale. That belief alone would be enough to bring Cody to his feet.

These authors collaborated with me on my project. I offered a mosaic that was fundamentally mine. My melodies were the basis of my discovery. And I strung together an opera that was sustained by my personality. What was the great drama that I proclaimed? I could feel the earth move beneath me in rich bass tones. It offered me a needed sense of approval. I continued on.

I had formerly been surrounded with my detractors. Their voices had tried to drown out my natural plaint. But their feeble performances were hardly sufficient for this new stage. I would find my audience and rise to the heights.

“Cody, are you listening?”

He nodded in assent. I needed his reassurance.

“Here goes!”

I breathed deeply. My whole body resonated with the richness of tone that was now characteristic of my voice.

Sure, there had been an army of critics who had stood in the way of my associates. But the pen was always mightier than any pathetic sword. And they could reach for their trusty weapons in time of crisis. As they pushed out into the nether world, they again viewed an impediment to their craft. They could push aside all the doubters who had slowed their progress. But they knew that they would have to save their energies for this ultimate confrontation.

I was no less worthy for the task. This was what separated greatness from the also rans. I could get caught up in the petty quarreling that surrounded me. But I needed to assert myself. This was not to be a matter of simply being an entertainer. I would have to balance the candle in the darkest night. I could not let the appeals of ignorance distract me from what was truly necessary.

I gripped the book firmly as I turned the page. Knowledge brought with it temptation. Lesser souls had succumbed to the pleasures of the moment. This was where the writer could prove her metal. I was one with that ambition.

I had been accustomed to modest means. And I had observed June as she danced her waltz in front of the mirror. Her conceit had filled her head and possessed her body. Others might find this art seductive. It sickened me. Cody Brainerd had lived in a world of precious rewards. And he had carried on to the brink. All that mattered little. He now clung to his life. What had seemed important now was without meaning. He had faced a more serious judgement for his years on the earth.

These books told me how the writers had accustomed themselves to a time of reckoning. This was not a confrontation with a divine magistrate. Instead, the moment was rooted firmly in the abilities of the mind. It was what linked the words to the page, and gave the witness its power. The writer needed to learn how to listen. In the conflicts of the human spirit, in the verbal clashes of opposing souls, they invigorated an inspired search. Man toiled with the uncertainties of nature. And he gave a path to his creative urges. I needed to identify with such a recognition on the part of the writers.

The writing was very concrete in its delivery. The words were elemental and derived their strength from a connection to primitive emotions. And the mechanics of the modern age liberated the self to resound these rudimentary harmonies. Even in the cacophonous collision of screeching machines and grinding metals, there was an urge to break out of the imprisonment of the soul.

The genie could not be returned to the bottle. Freedom once granted could not be withdrawn. So the writers breathed life into the human spirit. And the readers could use that awakening to rattle the shackles of their routine. They were living in grand theater. It was a wisdom that they had known all along. The writers simply gave them license to grant authenticity to their feelings.

I wasn't perched on the fire escape of a rickety tenement. And I wasn't holding on to a mast in the midst of coming storm. I simply rearranged myself in my chair. I did my best to maintain my concentration. I entered a world where risk was the watchword. Cody Brainerd was no longer directly imperiled like the characters in my books. His end had digressed well beyond the fleeting hope that was the stuff of real adventure. And I existed on the opposite side of the tumult. My situation seemed the least threatened by the maelstrom. In narrating the tales, I threaded the connection among all of us. These fictional crises introduced me into a place of self-examination which had all the uproar of the crashing seas upon the deck. That was the intent of the writers. Not only did they offer this universality to the human drama, they also invited the reader into the internal counterpoint of the soul.

What did I have to fear? Today, I was not reading a tale of horror. There were no hobgoblins darting up and down the stairs. There was no crazed killer beneath the floorboards. There was no monster locked deep inside of me waiting for the impassioned moment to realize my madness. Such stories of the macabre offered eventual resolution to the dilemmas of the psyche. The bloodletting was all part of the eventual sacrifice to the gods in the zeal of expiating a weighty transgression. I had no bloody dagger to bury in the front yard.

What did it mean for that feeling of unease to linger among us? Why could I not quiet my demons? What had these books done to me to make it impossible to let up? I watched Cody as if he was stricken by a nightmare. He was bearing the brunt of this conflict.

I again closed my book. I sat there silently. The story had stopped, but the feeling

remained. It was not the books themselves that kept it all going. They had simply propelled something that was part of me. It was my fervent belief that this anxiety was shared between the both of us. Churning inside that brain of his was the same tempest that twirled me around the room.

“Cody, you miserable bastard!”

We both laughed. Indeed, I could believe anything. This was not my imagination getting the best of me. This was me making the best of my creative skills. If Cody had been totally alert and sitting across from me, he would be engaged in the exact same wonder that occupied my interest.

For all the progress that I seemed to be making, I was afraid that I might slip back into a state of lethargy. I would continue to read to my companion. But I would not be able to bring any of the stirring drama to my performance. The lackluster presentation would render my actions useless. I understood how the melody of the voice could lull us without imparting the actual meaning of a passage. For my part, I seemed to be tapping a secret reservoir. Here, language spoke with a deeper voice. That was the significance of my reading. I was achieving something more urgent. I needed to maintain my vigilance. Nevertheless, it was not always easy.

At this point, I was struck by a severe case of reader’s block. I tried not to let on to Cody what was happening. I just felt as if I was turning pages and not remembering anything. If the book was failing to register on me, what was happening to him? A worse fear dawned on me. Had I actually been reading out loud? Or had I drifted into my own trance?

I figured out what was the source of my problem. My reading had finally touched a nerve within me. And I needed to follow that path until I could make more sense of what was going on. I pulled myself together and accepted the task at hand. My full voice now rendered the passage alive. I was just playing a role, but I needed to do my best.

I was shocked how easily I had been upset. I knew that this work would be all-involving at times. But I did what I could to maintain some kind of distance from the stories that I read. I acted like a teacher. My role seemed even simpler since my student couldn’t interrupt my lectures. Nor could he try to involve me in some kind of distracting discussion. I felt in control of the situation. But here I was going off the rails.

“How do I see the world, Cody? I see it sneaking up on me. Entering me through the air that I breathe. It is taking hold of me. It is shaking me up. The world is inside me. It is too much me to tell you about. So I share it with you in dots and dashes. I give it to you as I feel it. Immediate and slapping me in the face. How do you see the world, Cody Brainerd? Old and useless. Weighed down by its material conceit. Not radiant like the stars. You have stopped seeing the world because you are off on some planet of your own making. You are really out there. You are alone in your world. And you like it like that. You don’t want to come back today. You may never make it back. That is your prerogative. I can’t save you. They didn’t bring me here to save you. I am just watching you do your thing.”

I thought about not reading to him today. Who would know? Lee wasn’t watching over me. The nurse was nowhere to be found. It was just me and the man. And I did not want to cater to his whims. I never thought that I felt any kind of resentment towards him. But I did. So I felt like exercising my independence. It sucked that I couldn’t keep up my resolve for very long.

I survived by pretending to get a reaction from him. And I told myself that he lived for those countless hours that I spent next to his bed. I made him feel as if he had a reason to live

“What do you want me to say? Cody, what would you like to hear?”

I had been reading to Cody for a couple of weeks already, and I had expected more to happen. Sure, I recognized that I may have been unfair to the process. But how else could I have felt? For a while, I did what I could to test the boundaries of this experience. Now it was no longer a matter of pushing the envelope. Whatever I did, I got the same result over and over again. I expected a miracle.

If I had been brought here to witness his demise, this only made me feel more helpless. I had little medical knowledge. I wasn't a faith healer. I wanted to believe in the power of the words.

Before the mighty Mississippi rolled through these lands, the fiercest winds had blown across the earth. They had rearranged the terrain. They had sculpted the mountains. And with the rains, they made their intentions known to the land. The mighty rivers carried on the tale. They dug deeper and deeper in their effort to tell the story. I could still stand on the shores of the Mississippi and see all the fury that had started this narrative. In the breeze my words were taken from me and restored back to their source. They lost their focus but renewed their power.

I wished that I had the scope of the writers that we encountered. They could face down the mighty river with their muscular intent. When I attempted to do the same, my words only reflected my own pride. I braced myself. I reached deep inside. But I could not bellow with the same ferocity. Meanwhile, Cody called on every ounce of his strength just to stay with me. I used his inspiration to continue my attempt. If he ever was going to wake up, he was now moving forward ever so slowly. I could sense him inching along. And I needed to bring time-lapse photography to bear on his progress. Great writers had the patience to take them through their endless task. The river was increasing its momentum. I kept watch.

As the river created, it also destroyed. I couldn't let my craft be so haphazard. I had one goal in mind. I couldn't let it slip away. Nevertheless, I found it difficult to deal with the disappointment. I concentrated on my reading. This gave me a positive attitude. I was aware of the formidable odds. I just couldn't face them all at once.

Once things got moving, I could sense the process being taken out of my hands. I had gotten it all going. But I could not direct it in its full force. I had already faced this dilemma. I was helping Cody. I was not bringing him back to life. I was not his creator.

I couldn't let go of the fact that I felt instrumental in the process. Without me, would he ever have the ability to escape this forlorn state. I wanted to believe that my intent was critical in his recovery. The river could be chaotic, but it had a direction. I had to use it for my own purposes. I didn't feel as if I was interfering in his life. If Cody had been awake, he would have welcomed my efforts. I didn't want to believe that he had given up. He had been holding on to this point. He was waiting for a rescuer. Even as I was throwing him a life line, I wondered if I was also in need of rescue. I had analyzed my own experience. But I couldn't predict the future.

Somewhere in New York or Paris or Milan, one of the great fashion houses was putting on a runaway show. These designers were already plotting the future for some fashion maven in Omaha, Nebraska. Even before one of these events, the actual creator sat with her designs and prognosticated a time to come. At each stage, the artist recognized her designs would radiate out

to the buying public. And a line or a flourish would determine history. The most trivial change could alter the price of fabric from Sri Lanka or buttons from Malaysia. Those at the knitting looms might attempt to resist such radical changes. All the while, the designer fought for her vision.

Lee Tate had been accustomed to such geopolitical motives. He was totally aware that he was creating the future. That made him so zealous to maintain his view of the world. His whims were meant to be the foundation of great shifts in public opinion. At times, he felt that he was serving the democratic impulse. But down deep, he knew that he was ultimately subverting the will of the people. How were imposters like this successful with their nefariousness? It wasn't simply an ability to isolate push button issues. Lee was aware of all the dirty tricks. He could access loads of information online that would embarrass even the most upright Sunday school pastor. That was his stock and trade. He could pet small dogs and coo at little babies, but beneath that gregarious exterior was a heart of stone. And he wasn't the sort to hang around and let people observe his other side. When he meant business, that was that. His casual tone with me was part of his front. And he was always testing me out.

June believe that she was controlling her own life. But she was totally responsive to every ripple that fluttered through the fashion world. Milan had her number until her dying day. Worse, Lee Tate had the whole package figured out. Not only could he provide every detail about her life, but his method also allowed him to predict how her descendants would act unto perpetuity. I was unsure if I fit in his grid.

For all these predictive model offered their user certainty, they could also back fire. Somewhere in Arizona they were marking down those cute little winter outfits that never really caught on in their moderately warm January months.

Literature seemed to offer a permanence that resisted these trends. Every serious writer believed that he was offering a legacy to future generations. He sought to erect a monument that would withstand any human attack or any natural disaster. That seemed to be my defense against Lee. I wasn't getting caught up in the trivialities. But that was no assurance of my success.

The novice assumed the pen gave him the right to say whatever came to mind. He allied himself with a questionable sort so that he could make a name for himself. And he gave them the forum to document their prodigious achievements. Whatever he said was OK. People were hungry for a little gossip. The writer could incite their voyeurism. They would digest his tales of salacious trysts. He was exposing the perverse for an upstanding audience. They were willing to explore orgiastic impulses without any bounds.

Tribute to the emperor once meant nothing less than a total surrender in mind and body to his dominion. When the writer got carried away by his own delusions of grandeur, he gratified that same imperial whim. It was only natural that he felt the need to satisfy that urge. Thus, he was driven to catalogue his imaginative exploits. And the submissive reader acquiesced to his seeming prowess. This was not to say that he was taking the easy way out. He did what he was allowed. And if his rewards were plentiful, it would be wrong to begrudge him his just desserts. Nevertheless, if his personal discovery ended with such a public avowal, what could be made of his overall project. He was a writer. He couldn't help himself; he had to display his own acquisitiveness. But the hope was that he would use the opportunity to do more than just exaggerate his own personal charm.

Surely, I wasn't advocating the *Memoirs of Casanova*. But such a view of literature did have its adherents. The haughty narrator strove his best to convince his readers that the world was his oyster. His fans were ready to relinquish their virtue for a taste of future majesty. This was not a tale of the eighteenth century boudoir. These con artists sharpened their skills in the investment banking houses. And they branched out to entertainment and self-help. The most self-aggrandizing braggart learned how to advance himself by donning an air of refinement. He let his privilege do the talking for him while he stayed in the shadows. In the electronic age, information pushed his product. And he let the cameras roll around him to record the fireworks. His audience was ready to make a fool out of itself just so that it could get closer to the source.

This was the key to his self-advertisement. The writer needed to convince people that he was, in fact, the source. His rivals resented this level of success. They mocked his talent. But the writer only wanted his readers to repeat his words. He had learned how to turn a phrase. He was in the business of selling something. And people used his words to describe their feelings.

Ultimately, this had nothing to do with anything real. It was only ritual. The writer was all about telling stories. If the reader saw through his intent, then his motives could be observed in full view. It would be like exposing a nerve. Everything would seem too familiar. The writer would appear to lack skill. The audience would see the magician inserting the rabbit in the hat; the trick would only be a silly joke. The writer knew about his own vulnerability before his readers. He needed them to concentrate on mystery. They had to suspend their disbelief and enjoy the story. Even if it was a fantasy, they had to believe that the emotions were authentic. The tale was able to evoke something in their own experience. Perhaps, a personal tragedy.

The writer was accustomed to this form of public confession. Of course, every wayward choir boy imagined himself to be James Joyce. Often, the confessions flowed to excess. The more that he appeared to be making things up, the more that he was in danger of losing his audience. But once the magic took form in the consciousness of the reader, she was ready to accept any lie. The writer needed to learn how to work this balance in his favor. For the time being, the reader would put everything else out of her mind. She was living the story. It colored everything else in her life. The writer knew the gamble. His life seemed to be all a matter of public consumption. The reader was a voyeur of the writer's pain.

Total belief in the myth meant that the reader could have anything that she wanted in the world. She admired the writer's nonchalance. She sought to imitate his style. Once the reader believed that she was on the right path, she would jump at anything offered her. She would kiss the frog on the lips in the hopes that he would turn into the legendary prince. However, some level of believability was essential if the reader was going to keep playing along. No writer could get by constantly insulting his reader. Here the deal turned devilish. Public confession depended on a spate of private offenses. Some writers felt it their duty to indulge their own depravity. They thought that a conscientious reader could tell if he was just making things up. The writer was believing his own myth. He had become a total dupe.

His audience was hot on his trail. And they tasted blood. No one could survive such scrutiny. The writer habituated himself to martyrdom. He counted on resurrection to lift him from his darkness.

If the writer only engaged the reader in his own perversity, how could he be much good to Cody? Sure, there may have been some kind of lesson in observing his mistakes. Was it enough

simply to taste sin? Or did the reader have to explore her own motives to the fullest? Thus , Cody's demise was a sign of his own inability to admit the true nature of his own work. And Helen had confronted him about his ruthlessness.

I was letting my interest in gossip take over the importance of my education of Cody. I was getting side-tracked by one of the small tributaries of the river. If Cody expected forgiveness, he would have to go a lot further to achieve an agreement with himself. Only then could he involve others in his transformation. I told myself that he was struggling with his doubts about himself.

Perhaps, Helen had no idea what had been transpiring with her husband. She was bored. He had stopped caring. And she was unwilling to wait for him to come around. Even before the accident, he was living in a coma. She felt that she could shock him out of his deep sleep. Her gambit only made things worse. She wasn't able to contain his anger. She could see that he was headed for disaster. And there was little that she could do. The accident was almost expected. He wanted to get back at her in the worst way.

It was going to take a lot more than sheer desire to revive Cody. I assumed that the great writers had charted a course that he could follow. And this belief was based on his acceptance of their incredible journey. But if he saw this all as an elegant ruse, then my efforts were all for naught. Lee didn't have time for fairy tales. They gave too much credibility to the weak in their efforts to overthrow the ruthless. Lee accepted connivance as a way of life. He had allied himself with Cody under those terms. When an enterprising sort like Cody had faced the total vacuousness of his own ambitions, his ego had totally collapsed. There may have never been an accident which made him this way. It may have been complete exhaustion. Or it might have been an overdose of pills. I was making Cody more responsible for his fate. This was just another overblown fairy tale.

Given the opportunity, I didn't think that I would spend countless hours trying to rehabilitate June. She was incorrigible. That had 't stopped her from trying to brainwash me. A lot of good that did. Time had only supported my feeling about her. Couldn't Cody be just as mean-spirited?. In his case, I believe that he was being given a clean slate. But he may have been rotten to the core. I barely knew him so I gave him the benefit of the doubt. June could be so charming when a person first met her. First impressions could be a killer

I had created this pristine image of Cody. I had absolved him of all his offenses. Down deep, I believed that he was a good man. Circumstances had gotten the best of him. Lee would take my concern as a further sign of weakness. But Lee depended on my assent to his plan. He relied on my belief.

Had the novelist's significance gone the way of the gods of earlier lore? Did man have no need for confusing tales spun by delusional egotists? Writers really thought that they could capture the rich panorama of the world in a tiny book. They acted like the new gods. And I myself was attracted by the same psychosis. It was a classic disorder: mistaking the part for the whole.

Once the audience sorted things out, they would realize that they were just being sold their own lives in a new package. Why live it in a book if you could live it for real? Books were dry and boring. There was none of the pleasure of real life. The fans wanted more stimulation. VIP privileges and bottles of Dom Perignon.

Without books, the old standard returned. We could judge a man based on his deeds not his talk. But we were right back to Casanova's wager. The bettor was constantly ready to raise the ante. Extraordinary action was no longer sufficient. The adventurer again let his imagination run away with him. Except this time he pledged to act out the most obscene scenarios. Inevitably, it was all a big scam. When an actor made such fantastic promises, no one could practically do what he promised. But that did not stop him from boasting of his skill. At their worst, these extremes resulted in mayhem and tragedy. However, these were men of their word.

The shameless roué understood that his time had come. He was living a movie. Simply to capture every detail of his tawdry lifestyle would take volumes. But he was too embroiled in the action to do the job himself. He begged for a chronicler of his moral outrage. Again, it wasn't enough to depict the events faithfully. The audience hungered for lurid detail. And if the reality itself didn't supply its share, it was suitable to make things up.

At the same time, the actor accepted his role in the mischief. He scoured the seedy night clubs and chic beauty bars for partners to perform unspeakable acts. It was not enough to embarrass himself. His intent was to push so far out there that forgiveness would be impossible. He would shock even the most benevolent and caring deity. Could such scandal grace the pages

of the literature of the damned? The remaindered writer now found his services in demand. He could tease the player into more and more fantastic portrayals of their superior skills

It wasn't enough to document their misspent hours. He needed to explain their motivation for turning their back on the bounds of human decency. Literature naturally depicted the two faces of the divided psyche. And these noble creatures made ever effort to erase the depravity from their minds. That only made them more subject to their own perversity.

Thus observed, the player made it his business to dominate the weak-willed. He admitted to having no control over his appetites. He was ready to indulge a taste for the pain of others. He sought subjects ready to accept his tortuous terms. Such a detailing of chapter and verse gratified the pornographic imagination. In contrast, a more cathartic approach respected the classic dramatic unity. Decorum required just enough description to induce moral outrage.

Somewhere in this confusion there was an attempt to renew the promise between the reader and the writer. The writer had gotten into trouble for trying to produce a reality out of thin air. Like a magician who can make a carnation appear in the boutonniere of his subjects, he sought a material representation to advance his viewpoint. In this fashion he constructed a game of tug of war that he knew how to win. He could argue his position based on the reader's emotional identification with the picture that he had created. This was nothing less than moral propaganda. He made the reader upset about the human suffering that he created himself.

It wasn't enough to get caught up in these household dramas. The writer needed a breadth of expression. This lofty urge connected him with the natural phenomenon of the planet. He was ready to speak in a voice that extolled the power of the mighty river. For all its blessings, the river brought with it the tragedy of spring floods. There was no possible way to excuse this random slaughter.

The writer focused on a capricious deity who was ready to withdraw his love at will. A psychologist would have a field day with this territory. Under these terms, man would do everything that he could to appease these restless gods. He would turn to literature for solace all

the time realizing that the author found it his duty to extol the very rejection that the reader railed against. How could the novelist expect to give voice to his reader's frustration? He was holding the audience up to incredible expectations. Some readers took this as a sign that the writer was only about his own advancement. Readers tried to swear off these master narratives. They didn't want a therapist; they wanted their freedom respected.

The writer would battle back by claiming the sanctity of his quest. He was willing to give his dying breath so that he could impart a nugget of wisdom to his audience. The people believed that they could find liberation in the sweet perfumes of a summer garden. The storyteller suggested a different version. In his vision, he was able to pluck a most exquisite Cherokee rose from the bed of his imagination. No actual rose could ever compete with the elegance of this specimen. I felt that I was again attending to June and her game with the mirror. She was the fairest of them all. No wonder I had been banished to the darkness. I made my sacred entreaty to the writer to give me salvation.

"Who do you think that you are that you can offer salvation to your reader? This is blasphemy."

Indeed, the writer could not help but extend his reach. He had practiced this move over and over again. And when he was prompted, he had to reach for the stars. This was no idle boast. He needed to grasp what he reached for.

Together, we observed the mighty Mississippi. We listened to the breeze hum the river's haunting melody. And then we turned inward and heard a poetic meter that vibrated with the frequency of the soul. In these rhythms were the patterns of centuries. And if the writer paid attention, he could catch the prophecy of centuries of human interaction.

Both June and Lee claimed such marvelous powers. The closer that they got to success, the more incumbent it was that I tried to escape their watch. I didn't want to give them the ability to predict my every move. For now, I needed the consistency of being able to come to Cody's room every day and read. But this was nothing that I could base my life on.

As I read to Cody, I wondered what it would be like if he knew that this was his last day. Would he be getting his things in order? What if he could get up and walk around the house? I wanted to accompany him on his rounds. In a sense he was previewing my eventual encounter with death. It freaked me out. In running away I had been burying part of myself. But this was way more intense. I had been feeling self-destructive. And this pushed thing to the brink. I couldn't even think about it. I needed Cody to jump up like Lazarus.

"Death, stand behind me!"

We sat together at the table of a fortune teller. She was ready to reveal the future mysteries of Cody's life. He held up his hands to stop her. He wanted to be able to influence the outcome of his life by himself. He didn't need her interference.

The tightly wound fabric of the physical world suggested a predictable end to every natural process. A person couldn't move his hand without engaging a whole set of complex reactions to what he was doing. Between these eddies of time, there were gaps. I could reach inside this void and stretch my arm. If Cody ran fast enough, he could escape the phantoms who tried to fence him in.

I closed the book and put it on the table. I had enough make-believe for one day. Cody let the fairy tale flit around the corridors of his mind. We had encountered writers who had

striven for greatness in the gesture of the pen. And the printing presses had banged away their stories for millions to read. They inspired their readers to seek a dramatic moment to help resolve the contradictions that assailed their lives. I would finally have my day in court with June. Cody could stand up to Lee. We all would live our lives like swashbuckling heroes. But behind the bravado our knees were shaking. We felt powerless. We had missed our moment. I snuck out of my parent's home in the middle of the night

Had I been unable to summon my courage? I had no intention of returning home for a future showdown. Whatever my future, that was my past. I wasn't going to cry about it. I couldn't regret my time spent there. I had so much to worry about in my future.

Cody didn't know what he could expect. He was facing incredible odds in trying to rally his will. He was doing what I could not. And I was making up for an earlier failure. Would he bless me for helping him? The belief in the river was mine. I had tried to impart that understanding to Cody. But he needed to be ready for my inspiration. I had no idea what he was holding back. It wasn't as if I had answered an ad for a faith-healer. I wasn't even the author of the books that I read.

To what degree did these authors need my voice. Many were long dead. But their words still ran louder with each passing day. This was not like a hit song whose honey-flavored melodies would fade with the setting sun. We were singing together with a thousand suns. Our earthbound nature was not an impediment. It was our starting point. Formerly, we had prepared our craft to navigate these sunkissed waters. On this leg of our journey, we were floating on the water until we dissolved within and became part of the river.

"Cody Brainerd, you are the might river!"

"One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi! Come out, come out, where ever you are. If you don't come out, I'm coming in after you!"

Maybe we were just coincidentally ending up at the same destination.