

Southern Gothic, ca 2001

Troxell slowed his truck and when he found the mailbox with the faded *SENS.* hand-painted in red he turned onto the rutted driveway across the road. The land was poor – patchy overgrazed pasture and cedar thickets, multiflora rose grown up in a ragged hedge along both sides of the drive. In the fields, a few skinny cows of some Angus mix stood ruminating. Past a warped wooden gate lay a barn and several tin-roofed sheds, and beyond those, a two-story wood frame house, its clapboard walls holding a faint wash of ancient white, as if it had been scraped for new paint and then left to weather.

The farmer, a Mr. Sensabaugh, had said the pigs were in the barn. Troxell parked and got out of his truck. A cow lowed repeatedly from the pasture along the driveway and the air stank of rotting flesh. Nothing was moving in the late summer heat. A cicada's thin buzz pulsed from a grove of old sycamores leaning over in a creek bottom below the house.

At one end of the barn, a wooden sliding door hung from its metal track by one rusted wheel. He shoved it open and stepped inside the cool, dim aisle, waiting a few seconds for his eyes to adjust. The first stall was crowded with big round haybales, but in the next he found slop buckets and straw bedding strewn on the floor, a smell of urine and rancid garbage. Outside, a dead mule lay near a fence at the far end of a dry grassless paddock, one stiff hind leg pointing at the sky.

When he approached the house, a dog crawled out from under the porch and ran to the sagging woven-wire fence. It stood quietly, wagging its tail. Troxell called out.

“Hello? Mr. Sensabaugh?”

The dog barked once and pranced its front paws. It was gaunt and long-haired like an oversized collie, black with a white star on its chest. Through the screen door an excited male voice narrated a professional wrestling match on television. Troxell unlatched the gate and the dog barked again and crept up to him whining and cringing, wetting dark puddles in the dust. He watched as it sniffed at his pant legs and boots.

An old man walked out of the house and let the screen door slam. The dog ran to him.

Troxell forced a smile, raised his hand in greeting. "Mr. Sensabaugh?"

"Yep." The man stood on the porch, working his jaw, mending a wad of tobacco in his bilged cheek without spitting. A line of brown sputum leaked from the corner of his mouth. He was short and bent and wore faded blue coveralls.

"My name's Tolley." He'd picked the name from the local phone book. "I called about the pigs."

"Ah know't. How many'd ye catch?" He gave a short cackle and moved his lips again, showing his gums, whitish and flecked with tobacco. The big skinny dog lay across his feet, its head on its paws. He stooped to scratch behind its ears.

"I didn't see them. There aren't any pigs in the barn."

Mr. Sensabaugh considered, blinking slowly. His eyes were small, rheumy, set deep in his wrinkled face. He pointed a crooked finger toward the paddock.

"Go'n look about that horse," he said.

Troxell frowned, turned and glanced back. He'd parked his truck so it couldn't be seen from the house. It was early evening now and cooler air, heavy with carrion stench, was beginning to move among the buildings.

“The dead mule?”

Mr. Sensabaugh nodded once, an almost imperceptible dip of his chin. Troxell opened the yard gate to go, but the man called out. “Y’all kin to ol’ Stevie? Come out Ar’sh Crick?”

Troxell turned. “Excuse me?”

“Your name’s Tolley.”

“That’s right, but I’m not from around here. No relatives here.” Good God, he thought.

He walked to the paddock and leaned against the unpainted board fence. The lot was empty except for the mule. He opened a gate and went in, breathing through his mouth. As he approached the carcass, green-bottle flies swarmed and then quieted. There was a scuffling sound, and the vertical leg seemed to twitch. The mule’s face was unreadable, its eye plucked out by crows and the lips drawn away from big square yellow teeth in an ambiguous expression, not grin or grimace but something else. As if it had been to a place and seen things unimaginable and that was what had killed it.

He reached with his boot and kicked the mule’s dusty back. A thousand flies lifted into the air with a noise like singing. Muffled squeals from inside. He kicked again, harder, and three shoats smeared with blood and shit came out shrilling as if birthed from the mule’s open belly and ran across the paddock to the stall.

The piglets quieted once they were inside and for a moment he stared after them, stared at the dark stall doorway. The flies settled again on the carcass of the mule, and the earth spun ponderously on its axis, traveling in its accustomed arc around the sun, and Troxell believed he could sense that motion in his bones. Continental plates ground and shattered against each other and far away the sun lifted water from the oceans and rained it back onto the land. Life squirmed

and sprouted, inhaling, exhaling, it spoke and wept, hatched and died. Troxell wondered if anyone could ever have dreamed this world.

When he returned to the house, the black dog came to the fence as before.

“Mr. Sensabaugh?”

There was no reply. Only the inane jingle from a television commercial. “Mr. Sensabaugh the pigs are too small!” he yelled. “Do you have any bigger ones!” The dog lay prone at the fence, brushing its tail back and forth in the dirt. The old man didn’t appear. When Troxell turned his truck around and drove away, the dog was sitting at the gate, ears pricked forward, watching him go.