The Maws of Kites

The air hung hot and thick above the river. Apathetic breezes slowly rolled over the cattails, which barely stirred the humid air. The sparse morning fog burnt away against the glare of the bastard sun, turning to a stagnant odor that settled over the city. Marvin walked down the narrow trodden path that burst with honeysuckle and poison ivy on both sides. He kicked up a thin trail of red dust which rose above the trench-like path. He dipped his fishing pole under the arching vegetation. Beside the river a honey locust stood wreathed in thorns.

Gus pulled his Ford into the family’s long driveway. The truck’s lines delicately sloped around the fender and up the roof, stopping suddenly with the long straight line of the bed. Maple trees arched overhead. Leaves glowed brightly, overlapping and nigh impenetrable like a green luminescent basket finely woven around their land. He felt a pang of old childlike fear at the sight of his family home. The brick edifice loomed above him perhaps moreso because he had to break the news. He parked in the large square driveway that surrounded a small grass patch and a weeping cherry sapling he hadn’t seen before. The gravel crunched in the driveway as it always had. He passed the brick fence through the black iron gate, it squealed behind him. He walked up the brick patio to the raised porch that had been overhauled in the past year. It still smelled violently of sliced cedar. His mother sat under a black sun hat under an umbrella.

“August, dearest, look how you’ve been treated down there. You look positively emaciated,” she said at once.

“Hello to you, Mother.”

“Yes, hello darling. I’ve missed you, it’s been dreadful here.”

“Dreadful? It’s been dreadful? How’s Arn?”
“Well perhaps not quite dreadful. Look at that.” She pointed to the carriage house. Her bracelets jingled loosely on her thin, pale arm.

“I knew something looked different,” he said. She was silent. He pulled a wrought iron chair from the table and sat next to her, looking out at the carriage house and down the hill. The land sloped steeply down towards the far band of trees.

“He moved it another four and a half feet away from the house, August. He couldn’t do it himself, of course. He hired a whole pack of workers. He’s acting like some-some conqueror.”

“Arn’ll do some strange things,” he said shaking his head and pulling a red pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. He placed a cigarette to his mouth and struck a match. He held his hands together asymmetrically, one to light and the other to shield from the wind. He leaned close and closed his eyes as he lit.

“Ah, the worker’s prayer. I suppose I gave you those lungs to smoke,” she said reaching over and taking the cigarette. She puffed quickly and sighed, handing it back to Gus. “He’s added four rooms in the past six months, August,” she said.

“The house has seemed to… bulge.” He gestured an inflating balloon with his hands.

“Don’t laugh. August, my garden—”

Gus dipped his head and nodded to himself, his smile fading. He reached over and touched his mother’s back consolingly. It hunched out to one side, sloping harshly after years of work in the garden and scoliosis, though one could only tell by touch. The light was fading down the hill, seeming to run backwards toward the sun dying behind the tall trees. Cicadas whipped their song through the evening, finally synchronised after the day’s confused mumblings.
The Mississippi scrolled by, occasionally lapping languidly onto the dry red riverbank. Marvin walked to its edge and eyed across its slithering path, watching the water lazily slosh around the corner and out of sight. He dipped low and drove a dark cupped hand into the earth by the bank. He clawed the dirt until slightly pink earthworms began to wriggle through. He collected them into an old can layered with dirt and covered in a handful of river water. He took a plump, lively one and threaded it over the hook, pulled back and launched the bait into the opaque, unknown river.

Gus rubbed his head into his hand, deposited his cigarette into a candle on the table and began to rise.

“And you, down there in that other-world— Locust Way or something pestilent like that,” she said.

“Locust Street, yes. Isn’t that more suggestive of famine?”

“Don’t laugh, August.”

“A’right, I’m sorry. I saw you added that little weeping cherry. Brightened up the driveway.”

Suddenly and seemingly without any movement, any visible change, her face glazed over with a veneer. Gus immediately felt distanced from her. She turned her entranced eyes toward the slope of their land. Her profile hid her eyes and showed only the vague indent in her skull that suggested their presence, like a mask.

“He’s upstairs, probably converting the size of the sunroom into cubits or some nonsense” she said without looking at him. “He wants to pave the driveway next.”
He walked up the stairs, which swept up the side of the foyer grandly. The white stairs and gold chandelier gave everything a potent stillness like that of a faberge egg. He walked down the main hallway past rows of rooms. In each one, the door stood resolutely closed and gave no indication of its contents, as the face of one dreaming. He walked to the end of the hall where little light from the foyer reached. He knocked and tried to turn the handle but it was locked. After a moment, the door opened. The doorway was so dark the door appeared to have opened itself.

“Hello, Mister Dorst. Your daddy right here.”

“Is he awake, Sandra?” he asked in a whisper.

“Gus, come in,” Arn said from the darkness. He said it with no emotion as he would command a dog.

Sandra pulled a chair from the desk and set it by the bed and Gus sat. Gus stood again.

“That’s goddamn bright,” Arn said. Gus turned off the bedside lamp again and sat, trying not to sigh.

“How’s it going, Arn?” Gus asked. Arn grimaced, perhaps attempting a sardonic smile, and sharply exhaled, his head bobbing slightly from the pillow.

“How’s it look?”

His father was a natural athlete as long as he could remember. His broad angular shoulders had seemed so capable. His arms were thick throughout the wrist and his strong fingers appeared as smaller facsimiles of his arms. Gus recalled the hours spent playing catch in their sprawling yard. Now he looked grey in the halflight. His broad shoulders seemed to stick bare out from his torso as if flayed of muscle. The once proud and straight posture became a curled angular mass on the bed, like a bunch of corn stalks tossed aside at harvest.
Gus spoke after a long pause. “I just wanted to see how you were, to talk to you.”

“You didn’t come here to see about my health, boy. You know what’s happening here.” Arn rolled to position toward Gus. “Out with it.”

“No, you’re right,” Gus said while nodding and looking downward. “I wanted to tell you that Mom is really upset about all of this renovation: the new rooms, the deck, moving the garage four feet. Arn, her garden is all she wants.”

Arn reached for a glass on the nightstand and brought it to his mouth, craning his neck up. He sighed heavily and looked back at Gus with his sharp, perpetually narrowed eyes.

“O Gus, be a man. You didn’t come here to tell me that. You didn’t even know about the fucking renovations until you got here, I’d imagine. Look at me, not the ground. You know I don’t have time for games like this.”

“A’right, Arn.” Gus inhaled and closed his eyes, swallowing the childlike fear of punishment, “I got fired.”

Arn winced and appeared anguishéd. Then he rolled his eyes to the side to give a slight knowing look.

“I worked so hard to get you that job, Gus.” His light seemed dimmed, the fiery passion that once would have furnished his words glowed as weak coals behind his eyes.

“I know, Arn. I was working on it and—”

“The Arch,” Arn interrupted.

“Yes, the Arch, and you know about those protesters that have been buzzing around the whole time?”

“I may have heard something on the radio,” he said rubbing his eyes.
“Well you’ll never believe what a couple of them did, Arn. They climbed the legs. No ropes, they just climbed right up!” There was a long moment of silence. Arn finished rubbing his eyes and placed his spectacles back on. He let out a subtle sigh through his nose, more to himself than to Gus.

“What ever effect would a couple of darkies climbing a monument have on you working there, Gus? Do you know how much the union asked of me to hire you?” Arn hissed. Gus fumbled his words.

“You know how I am about heights, I just—I just wondered what could drive two men, young men, to do something like that. Has to mean something if they’d do that.”

Marvin almost imperceptibly shook the worm on the hook, working it closer to the shore where he could see the silver flash of bluegill reaching the edge of their world and retreating back to the depths. The line twitched slightly with each nibble, but Marvin had lost too many bluegills to hunger and impatience to pull early. The day crept on. One finally gulped the gnarled worm whole, bending the tip of the rod slightly. Marvin stirred and jerked the rod out to his side. The hook set and the fish started to run a bit. The fish was still under the water but its tail licked past the surface occasionally. It felt like an other world down there, the membrane between made more impassible by Martin’s aversion to swimming. The only connection he had to it was the tenuous strum of the fishing line. He pulled the fish out and sliced its sharp fins off, replacing the worm on the hook with the fish. He pulled out a lead weight from his pocket and attached it to the hook with a piece of fishing line so it hung below the bait. He reached back and sent it into the depths again.
“So, what then?” Arn asked.

“What do you mean?”

“What do you want?”

“I wanted to tell you,” Gus said. Arn frowned and scratched himself roughly. When he noticed himself doing so he stopped and let his hand lay flaccid on his chest.

“You haven’t been here in almost a year. You didn’t just drop by to give me that piece of information, Gus. What do you want from me?” He spoke the last words slowly, annunciating each syllable.

“Well I haven’t even told you the whole story yet.”

“Of course not,” Arn said, rolling his eyes and deflating into the bed.

“You see, these two guys climbed up the work ladders. And they were just sort of sitting there holding on—”

“Nobody could find a long pole? Firehose?”

“Come on, Arn, no one wanted them to get hurt.”

“They seemed to want it just fine.”

“So they’re just sort of wedged up there and the police came and started trying to talk them down. The protesters were all swarming around like someone kicked a beehive. Then the vulture reporters came and all that. And there I was, up in the top of the North leg. I saw those guys just hanging there like spiders. I can barely even look out the window up there. Hell, when I saw the shirts on their backs tremble in the wind my legs damn near turned to jelly. But the two guys didn’t tremble at all, even in the wind, Arn.

“Then I just couldn’t focus. I was wiring up the tram controls and I did the whole thing backwards. Backwards, Arn! I can’t explain it. Can you imagine a group of visitors coming to
see the view and having to press down to go up and up to go down? And that’s how it would’ve been if my supervisor hadn’t caught it.”

“So, you screwed up. You buck up and be more careful,” he said with some tone of finality.

“No—no, it was more than that, Arn. I was sweating bullets. Every time I went back to make a connection or read the voltage or something it was like my hands couldn’t do it, and the bitch of it was that I didn’t even care! So Rotham, the big boss—”

“I know him well,” Arn interjected.

“Right, of course. Well he comes up at the end of the day, which was strange because it usually takes a pry bar and some scotch to even get him up from his chair. He takes one look at the junction I was working on and fires me on the spot.” Gus was speaking with his hands as well as his voice. They fluttered like moths around Arn as he lay arrested. Arn’s eyes followed them as if he were preparing to clap them dead in the air.

Marvin sat beside the river as the sun slowly rolled down the sky. The weight lay on the riverbed with the dismembered bluegill twitching above it at Marvin’s command. He felt the braille of the river as he dragged the weight around vegetation and through the mud. He knew cats dug deep into the bottom around the river grass, feeling with their whiskers. Gradually, the mosquitoes began to swarm like ashes in the sun. He waited patiently by the water hyacinths, blooming, almost weeping, until he felt a tentative tug on the line that gradually grew stronger. He pulled back a bit then jerked out to his side to set the hook. The fish thrashed deep under the water. The sun’s light faded behind low clouds.
“And when was this?” Arn asked.

“That was today, actually.”

The room seemed to pulse weakly as the curtains stirred the faint light that reached around the edges of the windows. Long moments of darkness were roused momentarily by the grey of light suppressed. Arn stirred and lifted himself slightly, holding himself up with his elbows. He held one hand up and picked at his long rippled fingernails with his thumbnail.

“Now, what were those protestors protesting, Gus?” Arn jested.

“Something about lack of colored jobs building the Arch.”

“Well, looks like you’re out of luck, boy. Oughta find a job out of the union since you sympathize with the Negroes so. You know I can’t help you there.”

“I can find another job. I don’t know if it’ll be electricity or what but I’ll find one. I actually came because I had another favor to ask, dad.”

“Here it comes, strumming that chord again. Well I’m all out of tune, boy.”

“Arn, I just need a loan. I know you’ve handed me enough already but I just need to pay my rent until I can get on my feet, now I know you don’t want me coming back here so I figured—”

“O, you figured, did you? Well that figures. How much does rent cost down in your slum? Give me that figure.”

“I think I need about seventy-five dollars in all. This caught me off guard, of course. I think the whole thing threw everyone for a loop, Arn. Life has a way of doing that, as you know. A-and you know I intend to pay it back as soon as I’m able.”

Arn scratched his unshaven face for a moment and pursed his lips tightly, pulling color out of them. Something appeared to spill over inside of him.
“Boy, who raised you? Did I ever ask for a handout? If I’d asked my father for five dollars he would have knocked me across the room. Did I ever do that to you? Did I so much as lay a hand on you? Hmm? Then why are you asking me for something when I’ve given you everything? I moved heaven and earth for you to have an opportunity to work, work. Not to go to the library every day so you can recede further into yourself like you did at school, not to come up with all these big vague ideas of life that go nowhere but bounce around inside your skull. By god, you think that something is owed to you and I’ll never understand it. Wasn’t my doing I sure as hell know that. It must have been all that bullshit slung by your mother in the garden everyday about growth and regeneration and resplendence. It makes me sick.” Arn seemed to have that lost fire for a moment, but it died down to that desperate ember glow as soon as he shut his mouth. Gus looked at Arn’s head turned aside and saw nothing. Black pools formed in the pits of his eyes in the dead light. Gus was taken back by the monolithic stillness that his father invoked, as if all ties had been severed.

“Get out of my sight,” he hissed. “Sandra! Where is that lumbering negress?” Arn refused to look at Gus. Gus felt his hand tighten, his nails digging into the flesh of his palm, forming indented crescents. He began to speak quietly.

“Given me everything. Is that what you think? You never laid a hand on me, yes that’s accurate. You never hugged me, you never held me, you never even patted me on the back when— when I cried after my first baseball game, when my first lady friend kicked me to the dust, when I moved out of this mausoleum to face the bare world. You barely even looked in my direction, Arn!” His voice was growing to a crescendo. “All you ever did was drink up the world until it was left dry, drink it up until you turned into this yellow smudge on the bed. You gave me everything. You drank it all up for yourself and let it drip down your chin and maybe I
was there to catch a drop or two but don’t delude yourself into thinking that everything you’ve done was for me, or for anyone but yourself.” Gus looked Arn directly in the eyes now, the same shade of blue glinting through the void, as a lighthouse disappears far into the distance. Their eyes both sharp, their mouths both thrust ahead of them.

“Mister Dorst, you call me?” Sandra appeared in the doorway, silhouetted against the dim light of the hall. Gus stood and walked to the door. He stopped a moment and turned his head slightly to speak through clenched teeth.

“If you pave that damned driveway— I’ll come back and I’ll dig up your whole godforsaken empire, until it’s nothing but a mound of turned earth.” He marched past Sandra in the doorway and slowly walked down the stairs and out the front door.

Gus kissed his mother and told her to call him if Arn tried to do anything else that would hurt her garden. He realized that he had to write his number down for her. He walked to his Ford, and left the driveway, turning around the weeping cherry that stood in the center, young and perfectly straight upright.

Gus pulled out to the intersection. The pair of traffic signals hung red in the air, menacing. The evening sun raged in the distance, half-submerged in the earth. The maw of the road gaped open underneath the signals, screaming against the soundless night. The lights flipped green and Gus pulled through into the mouth and down the road to the highway.

He pulled through the sweeping highway interchange that connected East from West, North from South. At the height of its curving ramp lay the deposited residue of years’ worth of shattered car windows pushed to the margins by time and tire. The glass glittered in the last moments of that May sunset, like a road terribly blessed.
Marvin walked home, past the bank, past the path bordered by poison ivy and honeysuckle, past the honey locust, the trek made more difficult now in the ghostly glow of the light that refused to die with the sun. Two skinned catfish bobbed over his shoulder. He walked the mile and a half up to his house, whistling the whole way. When he entered his apartment the house was dark and still. He turned on a light and battered the catfish. Once they were fried, he put them out on a bed of greens and waited a half hour for his wife to come home. When that had passed and the dinner had become sufficiently cold, he ate with only the sound of the clinking fork punctuating his meal. When around an hour had passed his wife opened the door, put up her bag and collapsed into the chair at the table. Marvin handed her a plate and sat down beside her.

“They sure kept you late.”

“Lord, sure was hard today,” she said

“What happened there, Hon?”

“Those white folks as crazy as they are rich. Their boy came home today, saying he was gonna tear up his daddy’s house. Then he just runs out of there. They made all kinds of noise! That poor woman weeping in her garden, that crazy man screaming in his bed. They got their ways and I mine, I suppose. How about you?”

“Terrible day.” He put his hand on her arm and watched her as she ate. He bit his lip tensely and exhaled. “Hon, Some fool of a boy got me fired. Wired up a whole damn junction backwards.”