STRAYS

At night, stray dogs come up underneath our house to lick our leaking pipes. Beneath my brother and my’s room we hear them coughing and growling, scratching their ratted backs against the boards beneath our beds. We lie awake, listening, my brother thinking of names to name the one he is setting out to catch. Salute and Topboy are high on his list.

I tell my brother these dogs are wild and cowering. A bare-heeled stomp on the floor off our beds sends them scuttling spine-bowed out the crawl-space beneath our open window. Sometimes, when my brother is quick, he leans out and touches one slipping away.

Our father has meant to put the screens back on the
windows for spring. He has even hauled them out of
the storage shed and stacked them in the drive. He lays
them one by one over sawhorses to tack in the frames
tighter and weave patches against mosquitoes. This is
what he means to do, but our mother that morning pulls
all the preserves off the shelves onto the floor, sticks
my brother and my’s Easter Sunday drawings in her
mouth, and leaves the house through the field next door
cleared the week before for corn.

Uncle Trash is our nearest relative with a car and our
mother has a good half-day head start on our father
when Uncle Trash arrives. Uncle Trash runs his car up
the drive in a big speed, splitting all the screens stacked
there from their frames. There is an exploded chicken
in the grill of Uncle Trash’s car. They don’t even turn
the motor off as Uncle Trash slides out and our father
gets behind the wheel, backing back over the screens,
setting out in search of our mother.

Uncle Trash finds out that he has left his bottle under
the seat of his car. He goes into our kitchen, pulling
out all the shelves our mother missed. Then he is in the
towel box in the hall, looking, pulling out stuff in stacks.
He is in our parents’ room, opening short doors. He is
in the storage shed, opening and sniffing a mason jar
of gasoline for the power mower. Uncle Trash comes
up and asks, Which way it is to town for a drink. I point
up the road. Uncle Trash sets off, saying, Don’t y’all
burn the house down.

My brother and I hang out in the side yard, doing
handstands until dark. We catch handfuls of lightning
bugs and smear bright yellow on our shirts. It is late.
I wash our feet and put us to bed. We wait for somebody
to come back home but nobody ever does. Lucky for
me when my brother begins to whine for our mother
the stray dogs show up under the house. My brother
starts making up lists of new names for them, naming
himself to sleep.

Hungry, we wake up to something sounding in the
kitchen not like our mother fixing us anything to eat.

It is Uncle Trash. He is throwing up and spitting blood
into the pump-handled sink. I ask him did he have an
accident and he sends my brother upstairs for mer-
thiolate and Q-tips. His face is angled out from his head
on one side so that-sided eye is shut. His good eye
waters when he wiggles loose teeth with cut-up fingers.

Uncle Trash says he had an accident, all right. He
says he was up in a card game and then he was real up
in a card game, so up he bet his car, accidentally for-
getting that our father had driven off with it in search
of our mother. Uncle Trash says the man who won the
card game went ahead and beat up Uncle Trash on pur-
pose anyway.

All day Uncle Trash sleeps in our parents’ room. We
in the front yard can hear him snoring. My brother and
I dig in the dirt with spoons, making roadbeds and highways for my tin metal trucks. In the evening, Uncle Trash comes down in one of our father's shirts, dirty, but cleaner than the one he had gotten beat up in. We have banana sandwiches for supper. Uncle Trash asks do we have a deck of cards in the house. He says he wants to see do his tooth-cut fingers still bend enough to work. I have to tell him how our mother disallows card-playing in the house but that my brother has a pack of Old Maid somewhere in the toy box. While my brother goes out to look I brag at how I always beat my brother out, leaving him the Old Maid, and Uncle Trash says, Oh, yeah? and digs around in his pocket for a nickel he puts on the table. He says, We'll play a nickel a game. I go into my brother and my's room to get the Band-Aid box of nickels and dimes I sometimes short from the collection plate on Sunday.

Uncle Trash is making painful faces, flexing his red-painted fingers around the Old Maid deck of circus-star cards, but he still shuffles, cuts, and deals a three-way hand one-handed—and not much longer, I lose my Band-Aid box of money and all the tin metal trucks of mine out in the front yard. Uncle Trash makes me go out and get them and put them on his side of the table. My brother loses a set of bowling pins and a stuffed beagle. In two more hands, we stack up our winter boots and coats with the hoods on Uncle Trash's side of the table. In the last hand, my brother and I step out of our shorts and underdrawers while Uncle Trash smiles, saying, And now, gentlemen, if you please, the shirts off y'all's backs.

Uncle Trash takes everything my brother and I owned into the pillowcases off our bed and says let that be a lesson to me. He is off through the front porch door, leaving us buck-naked at the table, his last words as he goes up the road, shoulder-slinging his loot, Don't y'all burn the house down.

I am burning hot at Uncle Trash.

Then I am burning hot at our father for leaving us with him to look for our mother.

Then I am burning hot at my mother for running off, leaving me with my brother, who is rubber-chinning and face-pouting his way into a good cry.

There is only one thing left to do, and that is to take all we still have left that we own and throw it at my brother—and I do—and Old Maid cards explode on his face, setting him off on a really good howl.

I tell my brother that making so much noise will keep the stray dogs away, and he believes it, and then I start to believe it when it gets later than usual, past the crickets and into a long moon over the trees, but they finally do come after my brother finally does fall asleep, so I just wait until I know there are several strays beneath the bed boards, scratching their rat-matted backs and growling, and I stomp on the floor, what is my favorite part about the dogs, stomping and then watching them
scatter in a hundred directions and then seeing them one by one collect in a pack at the edge of the field near the trees.

In the morning right off I recognize the bicycle coming wobble-wheeling into the front yard. It's the one the colored boy outside Cuts uses to run lunches and ice water to the pulpwood truck Mr. Cuts has working cut-over timber on the edge of town. The colored boy that usually drives the bicycle snaps bottlecaps off his fingers at my brother and I when we go to Cuts with our mother to make groceries. We have to wait outside by the kerosene pump, out by the tar-papered lean-to shed, the pop-crate place where the men sit around and Uncle Trash does his card work now. White people generally don't go into Cuts unless they have to buy on credit.

We at school know Mr. and Mrs. Cuts come from a family that eats children. There is a red metal tree with plastic-wrapped toys in the window and a long candy counter case inside to lure you in. Mr. and Mrs. Cuts have no children of their own. They ate them during a hard winter and salted the rest down for sandwiches the colored boy runs out to the pulpwood crew at noon. I count colored children going in to buy some candy to see how many make it back out, but generally our mother is ready to go home way before I can tell. Our credit at Cuts is short.

The front tire catches in one of our tin metal truck's underground tunnels and Uncle Trash takes a spill. The cut crate bolted to the bicycle handlebars spills brown paper packages sealed with electrical tape out into the yard along with a case of Champale and a box of cigars. Uncle Trash is down where he falls. He lays asleep all day under the tree in the front yard, moving only just to crawl back into the wandering shade.

We have for supper sirloins, Champale, and cigars. Uncle Trash teaches how to cross our legs up on the table after dinner, but says he'll go ahead and leave my brother and my's cigars unlit. There is no outlook for our toys and my Band-Aid can of nickels and dimes, checking all the packages, even checking twice again the cut crate bolted on the front of the bicycle. Uncle Trash shows us a headstand on the table while drinking a bottle of Champale, then he stands in the sink and sings "Gather My Farflung Thoughts Together." My brother and I chomp our cigars and clap but in our hearts we are low and lonesome.

Don't y'all burn down the house, says Uncle Trash, pedaling out the yard to Cuts.

My brother leans out our window with a rope coil and sirloin scraps strung on strings. He is in a greasy-fingered sleep when the strings slither like white snakes off our bed, over the sill, out into the fields beyond.
There’s July corn and no word from our parents.

Uncle Trash doesn’t remember the Fourth of July or the Fourth of July parade. Uncle Trash bunches cattails in the fenders of his bicycle and clips our Old Maid cards in the spokes and follows the fire engine through town with my brother and I in the front cut-out crate throwing penny candy to the crowds. What are you trying to be? the colored men at Cuts ask Uncle Trash when we end up the parade there. I spot a broken-wheeled tin metal truck of mine in a colored child’s hand, driving it in circles by the Cuts front steps. Foolish, says Uncle Trash.

Uncle Trash doesn’t remember winning Mrs. Cuts in a card game for a day to come out and clean the house and us in the bargain. She pushes the furniture around with a broom and calls us abominations. There’s a bucket of soap to wash our heads and a jar of sour-smelling cream for our infected bites, fleas from under the house, and mosquitoes through the windows. The screens are rusty squares in the driveway dirt. Uncle Trash leaves her his razor opened as long as my arm. She comes after my brother and I with it to cut our hair, she says. We know better. My brother dives under the house and I am up a tree.

Uncle Trash doesn’t remember July, but when we tell him about it, he says it sounds like July was probably a good idea at the time.

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It is August with the brown, twisted corn in the fields next to the house. There is word from our parents. They are in the state capital. One of them has been in jail. Uncle Trash is still promising screens. We get from Cuts bug spray instead.

I wake up in the middle of a night. My brother floats through the window. Out in the yard, he and a stray have each other on the end of a rope. He reels her in and I make the tackle. Already I feel the fleas leave her rag-matted coat and crawl over my arms and up my neck. We spray her down with a whole can of bug spray until her coat lathers like soap. My brother gets some matches to burn a tick like a grape out of her ear. The touch of the match covers her like a blue-flame sweater. She’s a fireball shooting beneath the house.

By the time Uncle Trash and the rest of town get there, the Fire Warden says the house is Fully Involved.

In the morning I see our parents drive past where our house used to be. I see them go by again until they recognize the yard. Uncle Trash is trying to bring my brother out of the trance he is in by showing him how some tricks work on the left-standing steps of the stoop. Uncle Trash shows Jack-Away, Queen in the Whore-house, and No Money Down. Our father says for Uncle Trash to stand up so he can knock him down. Uncle Trash says he deserves that one. Our father knocks Uncle Trash down again and tells him not to get up. If
THE ICE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE WORLD

you get up I'll kill you, our father says.

Uncle Trash crawls on all fours across our yard out
to the road.

Goodbye, Uncle Trash, I say.

Goodbye, men! Uncle Trash says. Don't y'all burn
the house down! he says, and I say, We won't.

During the knocking-down nobody notices our
mother. She is a flat-footed running rustle through the
corn all burned up by the summer sun.

HER FAVORITE STORY

IN INDIAN, this place is called Where Lightning Takes
Tall Walks. I figure that to be about right. What hap-
pens here is this is the first landfall those water-heavy
thunderheads make when they quick-boil up from
across the bay. Long-legged stretches of bone-white
light come kicking through the treetops of the tallest
shortleaf pines, ripping limbs and splitting crowns.
When they leave past, your ears are ringing from the
thundershots and there is the smell about of electric-
seared sap. It is a heart-racer to have happen around
you in the day, and at night you still have coming to
you the cracking hiss and branching swish in the whole
dark of crowns falling so heavy unseen and so close