He sits in that chair on the second floor of the decaying planation house with the air so thick it fills his stomach. There’s nothing left to explore in Joyce Anderson’s old forgotten house, not since his childhood when the ancient oak hardwood would speak then scream its objections to earless adolescents on adventures. He is alone as his past saturates his mind into remembering and his body gives way to the inclinations of the mind. The man rises gently and steps toward the failing balcony. The fading burning light leaves as an old friend would, departing for a long journey, and the cicadas seem to cheer for its departure. One step closer. His hands now rest on the rotting balcony railing. The silence of that home has almost taken him and the dying light seems to cling. His mind was gone for now, drifted silently away while his own story shook before him. The silence stares into him not blinking.

Soon after but certainly not a minute before noon did she step foot into the muddy glistening streets where hours before were dusty from the foot falls of church goers let loose from the stables of magnanimity from which another week of guiltless hypocrisy would begin. She kept her head low and uninviting to discourage any forced niceties with past acquaintances which she did not feel compelled to oblige. The town would talk now, they would say, “Have mercy, that woman tryna’ eat herself out of house and home? A little less eatin’ and a little more walkin’ to and from church might do her some good.”

Her huge frame shuffled on through the center of that never-known town. The few onlookers stopped and gaped at the sight. “Where she stealin’ way to? She ain’t left that house in twenty years!” Gritting her teeth she moved on down the line as her somber virulent heart beat silently. It was the unforgetting that drove her.

A gaunt sunken-faced man in a once crisp silver tailored suit sits on a decrepit stonewall about as high and wide as a mule. The sun hammers its challenge down upon the gaunt man’s face and he grins back at nothing and in his indifference, challenges the sun in return. A stately and palatial magnolia stands nearby battling the sun’s rays, offering its blessed protecting shade to the extrinsic stranger without ask in return. He does not accept. And he knows when time has asked him to begin.

Joyce Anderson, birthed in the shadow of fear and anguish and raised in it. She had owned that house her father built and died in. It was a house that never became a home because no one wanted to remember that place. She made herself a prisoner there. No light was allowed in to clean the dead darkness which she steeped in abhorrence. She was forever in penance; for her mother’s ignorance and obligatory hate, her father’s indifference, and penance for penance sake. Thrice-over penance. The window’s pale sun-bleached shades perpetually pulled while her languid perception fed agonized brooding. She adjudicated long ago to abide, accepting the darkness hoping the darkness would accept her.

Married a most forgettable man, Temitt Staford, out of convenience to preserve her state. A simple mill worker with a head filled with other people’s thoughts. He was always tired, always wrong, and always sorry. She slowly and deliberately transformed the house into a moldy corruption of walls, which she taught to poison and pull, the walls of a mausoleum. In the clear dirty silence that ear cannot hear but feel, Joyce Anderson repudiated all. The silence, the slow steady in-and-out breath grew that forever-stale stillness. Like a musty shell of confinement, the silences’ only companion, the dead night. A self-restricted solitude with no amount of grace to foul her anguish or quench her quite dark respite of brokenness. She died there.

Once, sitting in her wicker rocking chair facing the open hearth, four or five whiskeys past gone, she spoke. Her soul spoke.

“I ain’t doin’ this fer you.”

And the dingy tarnished clock on the mantle ticked on and the darkness grew a little more. From behind her in the somber hall where no light penetrated, a man sat on the once polished and scoured wood flooring, which now was nothing more than narrow planks, with a gnarled hand resting atop an almost empty jar of clear liquor where shortly before had been transferred to his waiting gut. He heard but did not listen.

It was well after the sun quit the day when the massive figure pulled herself from the thick brush and briars. She emerged and stood before the house. Five steps to the front porch and she stands hesitant before the dark structure while her belligerent eyes accept the weight of the night.

The gaunt man sat at the edge of the black hollow room as the corpulent woman entered. His grey eyes never rose to meet hers. The groan of the protesting wood planks summoned the old man from his black somber reprieve of the balcony. His desperate eyes searched the darkness and found the woman in the doorway and the gaunt man in the corner. He had not heard the gaunt man enter.

“Who are you, sir?”

“I jus takin’ witness,” the gaunt man said. “Don’t pay me no mind.”

“Why don’t you look at me when you talk, somethin’ wrong with you?”

“I reckon the need didn’t strike the Lord to give me what he gave you.”

The old man paused, eyed the woman then returned his gaze to the cadaverous man.

“Well that’s the way of it,” the old man said. “Some people got things I ain’t got and I reckon you got somethings I ain’t either.”

“You’re more right than you know.”

The heavy woman standing under the doorframe took her first step into the room. The room held more people now than it ever had or would.

“I done just walked sixteen miles from Fields,” said the woman. “The road don’t go out here no more.”

The house weighed the strangers and watched, listening and absorbing then repudiating. Perfect silence surrounded them, penetrated them. The gaunt man smiled his joyless grin looking into the night as if seeing something the others could only feel.

“You used to be beautiful, Molly.”

“The world has a way of taking things from you.”

The old man nods slowly.

“Why here?”

“I don’t know. Maybe hope... For something.”

“In this place?”

“In you.”

“You ain’t gunna find it here or in me.”

“No, you’ve got somethin’—contempt. Contempt for anything that ain’t you,” said the old man.

“And you’ve got too much pride. You’re grieving just like me,” said the woman.

“No. I’ve lost my pride. It was somethin’ I inherited. Took me a long time to realize and even longer to loose.

“I’m not doing this. What do you want?”  
“Somethin’ I know now that you ain’t got.”

“Well ask him.” The woman motioned to the gaunt man blanketed in the blackness. “Maybe he got something to give that I ain’t.”

She turned toward the door but then hesitated. She could feel now more than ever the slow never thunderous beat of her aching heart that time never healed.

“I’m going to burn this place.” The woman said. “It’s long past its time and it never had nothing to give. Go home, Timothy.” Then she stepped from the room. The old man turned his eyes to the gaunt man but the gaunt man was not there.

The fight of that empty night left the old man silent and hollow. He could scarcely find his own shallow breath. He silently left the room and descended the stairs. He walked the long hallway to the heart of the house and entered Joyce Anderson’s ancient bedroom and shut the door.

He went to be quiet, to be one with the quiet, to finally end together with the quiet. So he laid his tired body and torn soul down in that final darkness while the black rejoicing smoke poured under the closed door. The hum of life that he had never felt came to his ears and a final smile graced his face. The awakening at last he was going to live. Like being a child again climbing the magnolias in the sweet warm spring, away from home, where not one man could tell him *no.*

As that never-home object of pessimism burned, the gaunt man wept his rage and the obese woman walked back through the thicket. As the sun rose, the gaunt man sang:

*A promise once made beneath the magnolia shade,*

*You’ve been marked and I’ve been souled,*

*The lose of grace and the hickups of fate,*

*It’s only time, It’s only time.*

*Waiting ain’t half as bad as fightin’,*

*Cause fightin’ ya ain’t guaranteed to win.*

*But when the time is up and the waitin’s gone,*

*You might not remember what my memory does.*