

## White Out · *J. M. McCool*

AN OLD TERRAPIN of a car sits idly smoking at the junction, its driver looking left and right. His long-bone hand comes up to pat the dash, a skin-smooth spot accustomed to his touch.

Left and right, the road stretches off like a corridor, shouldered high with berry vines, out of which snake occasional tendrils of yellow citron.

Keith Bundsman, well dressed and decorous, checks his tie in the rear-view mirror, and wonders which way.

The old car ticks and belches a lilac cloud. With its long side windows trimmed in curtain lace, it looks like an off-brand hearse. A hearse for the living now, it is Keith's home away from home since his mother died. For all its shoddy exterior, the inside of the car is comfortable and tidy, no speck of clutter.

"Which way?" he says over his shoulder to the child in back. She is singing, and doesn't hear. She has her nest back there, and is no daughter or sister to him, though Keith would claim either rather than the truth.

"If I had time to care," she sings, "it wouldn't be for you."

Keith sleeps on the middle seat, and she in back, her tiny bed nuzzled between two pink-enameled cabinets. She lies there prim and busy in an oval of light from the rear window, filling in the flyleaves of Keith's mother's New Testament with a wormy doodle that is her idea of long-hand. Her patent shoes are shiny new as daubs of hot tar, and in her velveteen dress and crinolines she looks like a new doll. Yet of the two, she is more adult.

"When it's mine to drive," she says to herself, "I'll paint it red shiny candy." She addresses herself, because appeals to Keith on the car's behalf are futile.

She sees him looking back, and adds with miffed punctuation, "And quit its smoke!"

A doll's-dressed child of four, already she has more sense of the car's fragile nature than Keith, who only pats it like some cat, and feeds it gas. He goes without food to keep her like a princess, yet neglects the car, without which they would be no better off than people whose so-called solid ground is really only dirt.

"Which way?" Keith asks again, without impatience. Though he's tall

and dark, Keith is hardly handsome. His darkness has too much of yellow in it, more like a stain than a tan. And, the way his adam's apple bobs out of his neck like a little skull, he looks as though he didn't grow tall but was stretched so. Yet even his gaunt features are made appealing by a pleasant and easy expression, a settled look of ease that says yes, I am twenty-two, but I am content. There is about him none of the restless brooding of youth that has seen a world to conquer but can't find a weapon to do it with. He sits there calm and decorous, obviously comfortable with his plight. And having nowhere to be, he is in no hurry.

The earth out there is his, and today it looks good in all directions. It is all the same spread of running green, varying light or dark whether in corn or tobacco, beans or sorghum, and darker still the clover rows of peanuts. What few pines are left along the property lines poke up gaunt and black, like weirdly seared palm trees.

And yet the day is mild, the sun all veiled and distant in a sky like galvanized tin. 'The one that wasn't one,' the farmers will love to complain of this summerless summer. Usually this late, the days would come on so hot the roads would soften and drool hot tar.

But wait now, Keith says to himself, his long-bone fingers tightening on the wheel. Wait now, 'cause if they think that just by re-paving you . . .

His ears prickle as he suppresses a grin. "And changing your grade," he says aloud, "if they think I wouldn't recognize it was down this very road . . ."

Two years it's been, for all it feels like a geological era. Two years in which he has neither sought nor avoided this place again, but sat up still and let the place come back to him, as chance and fatality wills.

Keith's teeth show now, all fine in line like corn on the cob. But his lips hold taut, as though they know better than to take much pride in such an anniversary.

The child has left her cove, and stands in the back seat now, hands either side of Keith's neck. Against the dark skin his collar looks like chalk.

"Your way," she says without deliberation. "Food way breakfast way. And checking the oiler," she reminds him.

He eases in the clutch, but the old car seems to nose the air before starting. "Food," he teases, "feed you one day, hungry the next. I'd do as well to worm you—wait though."

Sure enough Keith sees it now, the plume of blown dust coming on too

fast. "Girl better batten down, here comes one out of hell. They've gotta go fast, why don't people just get an airplane. Look at 'em blow the dust."

But for the signal flicker of its windshield, the oncoming car is quite invisible, its plume of dust more like smoke blown up from a quick-burning fuse.

The child cranks up the back windows, now piles over the front seat to stand beside him and watch. Two heads turning on the speeding car, neither resembles their circumstances. The child is fair, with hair a dark wine red. Her gray eyes are flecked with foil, and in certain light they shine like the scales of a fish. She is ever flicking her head, self-conscious of a little scar that parts the hair over one ear.

Keith's hair and eyes are tarry black, and, with his sienna skin, no one would mistake him for this child's relative, nor perhaps even a member of the same race. In his neat tie and white shirt, he looks too clean for a perpetual traveler, clean enough he could be on his way to preach on the grace of starvation.

And in her velveteen dress and patent shoes, Bathis Kay Bundsman could be on her way to bear flowers in some wedding of local royalty.

But their only destination is the next good town with a library, and though Keith affects an urgency, it is only for appearance. Whether they get there this evening or next week, it is all the same. They really have nowhere better to be today than here to watch this car scream by, too fast even to tell its make.

In the cockpit of the speeding car the air is alive with shimmering dust, set awirl in the mad vibration.

The man wears airplane coveralls, and, though his hands are huge, his trunk is so short he sits on double cushions to see over the wheel. He has a kind of puffy handsomeness, and bronze hair ducked back over his ears in great oily wings. His right foot is nowhere near the floor, though the windshield sings in its frame, a high wild buzz that shows a hundred miles an hour better than any speedometer.

Seve Waller has every gauge but, and beside him, strapped in like some willing Sabine, a woman quite asleep despite the shrieking of the motor. Where any mortal, the driver included, is buzzed senseless by the din, Morgan Lee lolls legs out and head back as upon some vibrating chair. She is dressed just like the driver, her wrists and ankles poking white out of

blue coveralls. And she has the looks, so much so folks often stare after them in disgust that a small blonde ape like Seve could be in the company of this startlingly pretty woman. She awakes to him shouting over the roar:

“Stay put Ole Smokey! I’ve had my turn tearing it up.” His hand poises huge on the shifter, though his foot goes down harder on the gas.

“Don’t pull that turtle in front of me, just lemme by. Give Mr. Watts his chance.”

It surely does look like a turtle. When the woman squints, she sees it’s just an old station wagon. She seeks sleep again, though her sea pool eyes lie open as they pass the car, too fast to see her own daughter waving in the front seat.

“That’s it, see you last century,” Seve Waller says. “Now go,” he coaxes, “just go like you know how.”

His puffy lips are wide with satisfaction, for here is the consummation of two years’ work. An ecstatic tearing sound envelopes the car, as though its prow indeed has achieved some longed for deflowering, the taut membrane of the world spreading open either side of it.

Seve leans into his harness, his road-burnt eyes spotting for the bad stretch he remembers. “Graded and re-paved, like they were expecting us,” he brags, though the motor drowns him out.

The woman lies back asleep, and so doesn’t recognize it yet as the same stretch they’d wrecked this same car on two years ago. A tire had blown, and the car had flipped, and the child had been launched free, their only mementos an empty diaper, and a little bobble of scalp, torn off when she’d passed the wing vent post.

They never found a body, and Lee—to keep from going mad with grief—chose to cling in secret to a belief that her baby had survived, sprouted gills and reverted to a fish. She’d kept the bobble as a talisman, reasoning that it was no worse to cling to a little light lunacy than to believe her daughter dead. Surely miracles happened other times and places than just the Bible.

Seve lets off the gas today, and the open cutouts blare like a diving plane. He mashes down hard now, to bring up the nose in case there is a bump. But the ramp is smooth as paper up to the new concrete bridge that two years back was a bumpy strand of rotted pilings.

The tires strike the expansion joint with a slap, and the racer floats up

and sings across the bridge so fast there is a moment of zero gravity before it settles back on its springs.

The woman wakes with a start, hands out grasping a child who isn't there. She settles back in her harness, looking with a pained smile at her empty hands.

"Should have thought we'd have to pass the very spot," Seve Waller yells over the motor's wail. He hopes by naming his offense to placate her.

Lee keeps her eyes forward. Though she's choking, she manages to yell, "You never mentioned it was here!"

Hot pressure fills her throat, scalding the backs of her eyes. She clenches her jaw to stop the tears.

"Lee honey I did!" Seve feels it too, the rise of those emotions, as if the wreck weren't two years back but has only just happened. He paws at her, his great hand clumsy as an ape's for comfort.

"I know I told you it was Karl Watts," he begs, his puffy lips twisted in a placative grimace. "I told you he's the one buying it."

"Maybe you did," she pleads back, "you never mentioned it was here—Christ don't wreck us twice."

Seve barely shies the wheel. "My lane, Homer!" he shouts, now compensates for the change of draft as a blue pickup whips by them.

Despite emotion they both smile at its driver's terror stare printed in their minds.

"But Lee honey here is where he is . . . not here hell but Tiply."

"Damn you Waller, here? Knowing it was bound . . ."

"Lee honey I just should hope, after all this—"

But she has turned her head from the recollection, and her hand comes up to stop them both. "It's silly of me," she says. She keeps her tears to herself, and drowns a sob in the motor's wail.

"When was I superstitious? She wouldn't still be around here. Swum her way back to the Gulf by now," she says, her head still turned. Her hair—it is that same blood burgundy as her child's—moves with a liquid quality to the car's violent motion.

From under the hood comes a violent whirring, now a mad flapping sound, as though a bird has flown into the engine. On the dash two lights wink on, like ruby eyes. Seve lets the clutch out fast, his head cocked to listen. "Please Judas not the goddam timing chain . . ."

"Started out in a bag of seawater," Lee persists, "now she's gone back. I never ask you to believe it."

The child waves the racer by, and Keith Bundsman ticks it off in his mind: one more wingless plane.

"If it was only themselves they endangered," he says, and lets his mother's car ease out onto the fresh tarmac. "My way, the lady said—."

But the old car has swallowed a piece of the racer's blown dust, and can't spit it back up. It bucks about three feet, now dies in a belch of lilac smoke. The child's eyes are wide, her teeth fixed in her underlip.

Keith cranks again, now holds the gas down till the engine clears its throat. His relation with the car is more organic than practical. He pats it as though it were alive, and feeds it with his confidence. And, since it is worrying that brings on disease, he's never risked one moment's worry on the car. It is the child who worries.

So he feigns solemnity, his voice all grave, "One day we'll bust a fly-blower, have to just shoot her."

Car teasing is the worst, and her mouth draws up at him like a little purse with the strings pulled tight. To see folks forlorn beside a stranded car, its hood up like an alligator's maw, gave Bathis the most awful sinking feeling. At the prospect of being stranded so today, her gray eyes are ringed with desperate light—as if their aimlessness is not a kind of stranding too.

But it is fine, the earth is wheeling by again. The child looks back her way through the oval rear window.

"'My way,' I meant to mean," she says, too late to change her mind. Worrying has aged her, and those high gray eyes are all knowing, a certain sense that all adversity is like water, and everywhere seeks itself.

Keith strains ahead, as if to keep that racer before his eyes. Its blown dust still hangs in the air.

"Keith is crazy," Bathis declares primly, but with a trembling voice. "We don't better catch 'em, please."

He realizes he's being drawn after them, the contagion of speed. He eases the gas.

"That's so. That kind'll catch themselves. And here's one so new we're the first to cross it," he says as their dropsied tires slap the expansion joint. The bridge makes a soft singing whine under the tires.

"Who'd ever know this place?" Keith remarks.

Four plank bridges had once crossed and recrossed this black meandering slough. In the name of flood control the Corps of Engineers has fixed all that.

Keith watches Bathis for any spark of recognition. When they cross the actual water, it is all held up in a concrete channel. There is no swampy coven of cypress as he recalls, but only the black trace of the waterway, running south where the slough had been. It is vast, all concrete, with corn planted right up to the rim.

“Moses have to wash up in a flying saucer.”

“‘Moses in the rushes,’” Bathis quotes, “‘and Venus in the mud.’”

He wonders how much she remembers. “Ever recollect your prior circumstances?”

Her fingers trace the story in the air. “A piece of the sun broke down and landed in the mud and you found it and now we’re us.”

“Bathis ever remember otherwise?” Despite his attachment, — she is absolutely all he lives for — Keith can’t resist poking till she is upset. He isn’t happy till he can regret having gone too far.

The child has no real recall, yet seems to understand, for her smile turns down and her eyes go off, as though piercing the fog of some former sadness.

“And whose are you now?” he softly says, drawing her in to him.

She smooths the lake folds of her dress and says, “My own,” adding with a miffed smile, “whose are *you*?”

“That’s right,” he says, and smiles his pride. “Romulus and Remus didn’t need parents, just nurture. And I want anybody to say I’ve not done right by you.”

He’d like to show some flyboy who knew no more than to drive so on the public roads how well he’s done by her, whom he doesn’t want endangered by some go-faster.

Keith has been driving quite a while, but ‘go fast’ is one thing he doesn’t need to do. Going fast only gives you more time, of which Keith has plenty already.

Content as he is now, at ease with life, as he passes this place of sorrow and deliverance, Keith can’t help recall that it was not always so.

He was a young twenty when his widowed mother died. She’d conditioned him deeply in the belief that he was one of those natural princes who need never work for a living. So when she was gone, he’d had no more thought of looking for a job than he should have. And in one of those weird whims of the dying, she’d made him vow not to squander any of her money on college. So he’d cashed his inheritance check, moved into her car, and took off.

Of course being free like that entailed much more empty time than Keith could fill. And he had no one to test his ideals on but gas station attendants and short order cooks. It took barely two seasons of fried food and aimless cruising for suicide, the refuge of impatient idealists, to loom attractive in his mind.

He'd come down this same way two years ago, ready to drown himself in a much better version of this slough which the Corps of Engineers has since ruined by fixing.

He was hunkering down in this very water, ready out of stubborn boredom to suck down a good pint — when a miracle saved him the trouble.

A metal rumble shook the air, and then something plopped and skidded in the ooze behind him.

Drowning had its flaws, — things kept nipping under water at what was hardly their proper bait — being mauled to death held no romance whatsoever. But when he'd turned in dread, it was no alligator Keith saw, but two yellow buttocks, two yellow heel knobs, bobbing out of the ooze.

In relief, he'd hoped it was a doll, pitched from a passing car. He soon found by weight that it was not. And when he drew it out, the ooze made a sucking sound and closed back over the spot with a cloying smack.

"If I'd just gone on and drowned, not be alive now to find such!"

About twenty pounds of dead baby, its little face was smeared yellow with clay, its dead eyes bulging through yellow rheum. And there was a glutinous weep of blood from a shallow gash above one ear, as though some Cherokee had taken a sample swatch.

"Who could have done such!" he cried. "And look, too!" he cried louder, looking all around for someone to appreciate how much worse that it was a baby girl.

But the car she'd been hurled from had crashed around a farther bend in the slough, and its occupants still lay unconscious. Keith was as alone in the world as before — more so, for the baby was dead.

The coven of cypress trees that has since been removed stood shoulder to shoulder that day in their long beards of moss, gazing down in mockery: you think the earth cares one jot for your puny desolation? Get on with it, boy: your soul's loss won't cleft Christ's palate. Go do it, boy: you'll find no better spot.

"That's so," he'd said, "here's one to show me how."

The baby's head bobbed limp when he let it go to lave water onto her



face, to see what she looked like. When he caught it up, it jerked back against his fingers.

"Maybe drowned, I can go on to college—."

Keith knew dead frogs jumped by reflex, but still the suddenness of the child's movement made him shake, which made her jerk again. Then she held her head up, and her mouth came open, a pink gullet gagging ochre clay.

"May God be good, what have I found, honey it's your chest, stamped flat." The outline of her ribs was embossed into her flesh, the great bruise already bluing over her nipples.

He held her up to look into her bulging eyes, from which the clay film had been baptized away. They looked dilated dead, yet she kept blinking in appeal, her pupils bulging like the heads of tadpoles.

"All that fall from the sun, it's your breath, poor thing, punched right out of you."

His voice encouraged her, yet she couldn't take air. Never dreaming there might be splintered ribs to puncture her heart and lungs, he'd decided to blow her back up.

"Easier wouldn't it, if we'd both been dead already?" he said, spreading his mouth over her face.

Her teeth had felt like seed pearls under his tongue, his tongue pressing hers down to keep the passage open. He blew until her chest filled out. Then, to make her exhale, he inhaled, hard, sucking a little taste of her, all hot with the fumes of her insides.

"That's how," he sobbed, "and you know it don't you: who just saved who!"

She pushed his mouth away and breathed on her own, her fingers grappled in the meat of his chest. With her first breath she let such a terror wail the sound of it frightened her, and collapsed her chest again.

"Darling, just save it." He was thankful then there was no one around to see him kissing her for dear life.

Keith smiles today, recalling how she'd wanted so to cry, her little hands frantically batting the air. But she didn't have enough breath, so he'd cried softly for her, "Ooh sugar, what to do with such a little you?"

He'd known at once and was thrilled at being handed such a reprieve. But his mind had shouted lunatic, go on finish what you started, before some long arm comes down and accuses you of putting in more than just

your air. That you left your clothes in the car so you could commit suicide's a little hard to swallow unless you follow through, fool! You can't go play parent.

"Parent!" he'd laughed, holding her up to heaven.

Things like this don't happen, his mind insisted, too selfish to be ignored. How will you manage, without eating up your principal? 'Cause that kind use it up at both ends. They need things you can't dream of in money.

But he did not hesitate to carry her to the car, his body already dictating the economics of it. He had his mother's frugality, and if he'd learned anything six months out, it was that food is one highly overrated thing. "I'll just ease back on it some. Two can live as cheap as one if one don't eat . . ."

So he kept her. Keith had never had a girl of his own, so he just kept her, and renamed her Bathis Kay. Whatever wrong his reason insisted he was doing, the rightness of it had sung that much louder. "Parents!" he'd said in derision to that spoiled child of his mind. "She had 'em, look what it got her . . ."

To keep bad thoughts from tainting his deliverance, he left off condemning what breed of folks could discard their own baby like a sack of kittens and made of her origins a better myth. Surely Moses held no patents.

Six thousand sedately aimless miles since then, his mother's car still smokes about as well, and rides a little lower on its springs.

"And you a big girl, the milkfat all burned off."

The child muses, as though she's been watching him remember. Fingering that scar over her ear, she looks back out at the green earth that for two years has been her dominion.

Fields give way now to larger and larger stands of pine. Here comes a line of them marching right down to the road. They all appear to wear chevrons: tin trays to catch the weep of rosin for the turpentine trade.

Higher up are little slats, tacked on to read in sequence: NOT YOUR BIGGEST STILL YOUR BEST DON'T MISS TIPLY'S CHICKEN NEST MOSQUITO-PROOF DINING.

The child can't quite sound all the words, but up ahead she sees the patchwork roofs of a town. That means food, and people's faces, maybe even a public library. Anticipating breakfast, she preens the lake folds of

her dress and compares her legs, which she can't believe were ever fat.

"Where was I fat?"

Keith isn't listening but is thinking still of the spoiled child of his mind: how ready it had been to spite itself, how brimmed with bad excuses. Just tell me, it had whined like a spoiled child, what's the point of being alive?

The answer was that there was no answer. There was only being alive, and nurturing life. And if there is no more aim to his going than before he'd found the child, at least now he puts on a good appearance. For all their shabby landau, these two travel in state.

"Keith say, where was I ever —."

"Don't look there!" he laughs, "It's Mr. Go-faster. Already caught yourself." Keith is a little ashamed of sounding so pleased.

There is the racer, for all its roaring bluster quite inert now, lying in the shade of three trees with its hood up. A small man in blue coveralls is leaning into its open maw. The child cringes to see it.

And Keith lets off the gas! "No Keith!" she wails. Her hands fly up, as though to shoo the sight of it.

"Now where's my big girl? Breakdowns aren't contagious. Anyway you know this one's immune," he whispers, patting that skin-smooth spot on the dash. But she stands tight against him when he leans across to roll the window down.

"I don't know cars, friend," Keith yells to the man, "but is there anything . . . ?"

The man stands out from under the hood of his racer. When he sees their old terrapin of a car, he can't help smiling at the irony. Smoke is pouring out from under it so nicely, they might have stopped over a campfire.

"I admit to making a little fun of y'all back up the way. Last laugh."

As pretty as his racer is, there sits a woman in it even prettier. But she hardly glances at them. The man is so short he hardly has to bend to look in their window.

"Appreciate your stopping, the little I deserve it."

"There's a place coming up," Keith offers, "if we could take you on?"

"I thank you, but I'd as soon not leave it," Seve Waller says, and feels his mind pause.

Sometimes even an unobservant person can't help realize he's been granted a peek into another world. Seve Waller stares, his anxiety about

the racer receding to a lesser part. And the way this little fancy dressed doll stares right back makes the hairs go up on his neck.

"Well all right," says Keith, and eases the clutch in. He's grown wary of this stranger's penetration. And Bathis stands so tight against him he can hardly get his breath. "We'll wish you luck then."

Sensing he has offended them, Seve Waller clings to the car, smiling apologetically.

"You might oblige me," he says, stepping along with them, "if you wouldn't mind stopping? There's a Mr. Karl Watts: tell him but for want of a fan belt which I'll someday learn to carry a spare of his racer's ready. He runs that Amoco on the left, I'd be grateful."

"Our pleasure," says Keith as they draw away, "even if somebody forgets her manners . . ."

Seve Waller waves the old car on, now climbs back in the racer, anxious to communicate this sensation:

"Now there was a pair. Had her doll bed all frilly in back of it, and him on a Nazi diet plan . . ."

But the woman's eyes are fixed, her mind ranging elsewhere. A melancholy smile heightens her attraction.

"That day we lost her," she says, musing, "I never told you, but the air went all white, everything, like snow. And I remember thinking, it's not a blackout like they say; death's a pure white. Only we didn't die, did we? Waller's never once thought, has he? What if she weren't killed, but swum off somewhere else to live? Is it so wrong of me . . .?"

"Lee, honey, don't," Seve says, sighing. And again his face takes on that frustrated placative grimace. "All this time . . . such a thing to cling to . . ."

But she doesn't begrudge him his skepticism, and her smile is all soothing as she takes his great hand and holds it in her lap.

Reality is malleable, and in the finding and the keeping, the losing and the weeping, it is as true for Morgan Lee that her child somehow sprouted gills and swam back to the Gulf as it is for Keith Bundsman that she had fallen from the sun.

The old car crawls on in its haze of lilac smoke. Seve Waller stares after it, trying to retain that sense of other. But anxiety has the stronger hold on his mind.

"My God, if Watts ain't even there today . . ."