Chapter 6

Decomposing

Angels  *Band of Angels, 1955*

*Chapter 1*  The story is told by Amantha Starr, who cannot remember her mother's face but can recall the gravestone inscribed "Renie 1820–1844." She has been raised by her father, Aaron Starr, and her black mammy, Aunt Sukie, on a farm near Danville, Kentucky. She remembers the doll Bu-Bula and Old Shaddy, the slave who made it for her, and how her father suddenly sold him when it was discovered that the way he held her in his lap and told her scary stories was about to lose its innocence. In August 1852, when she was nine, her father took her to Cincinnati, where she met “Miss Idell”—actually Mrs. Hermann Muller—who helped her father buy a new wardrobe for her imminent arrival at Oberlin College, where she would begin her formal education.

*Chapter 2*  Amantha spends seven years at Oberlin, where she must defend her slaveholding father’s reputation against the abolitionists, and where she develops a crush on Seth Parton, a theological student. Seth gives her some instruction in Hebrew, that “holy tongue,” and takes her out into the woods to “redeem” a spot made sinful by another couple’s lust, though nothing overt transpires. Amantha learns of her father’s death when Seth shows her a newspaper account of it; he died in Cincinnati, and Seth explains that Aaron Starr had been having an adulterous affair with Miss Idell, whose husband was in prison for embezzlement. Amantha rushes back to Kentucky, arriving at the conclusion of the funeral. She is shocked to see that he has not been buried, as he had said he would be, next to her mother.

*Chapter 3*  Her mother was a slave, it is now revealed, and Amantha therefore is one too. She is sold for debts—her father had gone bankrupt—and is put on a steamboat bound for New Orleans. She survives a feeble attempt at suicide.

*Chapter 4*  Hamish Bond, who walks with a limp and carries a big, silver-headed, blackthorn walking stick, buys Amantha at auction and takes her home, where she is very well cared for by another slave, Michele, and has no duties. Michele is married to the groom Jimmee, whom
she suspects of having fathered a child on Dolly, another household slave, though it may have been Rau-Ru, whom Bond brought over from Africa and put in charge of his plantation at Pointe du Loup.

Chapter 5 Amantha is introduced to Rau-Ru, who speaks an indecipherable tongue with Bond and is treated by him as a son. She also meets Charles de Marigny Prieur-Denis, a frequent visitor at Bond's house who tries to teach her French. She decides to escape on a boat leaving to Cincinnati but crosses paths with Rau-Ru in the street, and comes back. Amantha accuses Hamish of setting him to spy on her. Bond comes to her room later that night to announce that he's booked passage for her to Cincinnati, and that she'll be free. Still later, a dramatic thunderstorm breaks; the windows are blown open and rain rushes in. Hamish comes back to repair the damage and put her back in bed. He joins her there.

Chapter 6 Bond puts Amantha on the boat the next day, accompanying her as far as Pointe du Loup; he gives her a brown envelope containing money and her manumission papers. As he is disembarking, she runs down the gangplank after him, having decided to stay. They live for a while at Pointe du Loup, where Prieur-Denis tries to court her with riding lessons. One day when Hamish is away, Prieur-Denis tries to force himself on her but is prevented by Rau-Ru, who strikes him. Rau-Ru flees, knowing the punishment for hitting a white man. When Bond returns, he tries to kill Prieur-Denis under the guise of a duel, but Amantha prevents it. In Rau-Ru's absence, disorder sets in at Pointe du Loup. Hamish and Amantha return to New Orleans. Fort Sumter has been fired upon; the war has begun.

Chapter 7 As Federal troops approach the city, Bond tells Amantha the story of his past: born Alec Hinks to a mother who claimed to have come from a wealthy slave-owning family and an ineffectual father, he left Baltimore to join the illegal slave trade by signing on with a swaggering captain whose ship and name he stole six years later. He recounts stories of Africans' barbarism and complicity in the slave trade in order to argue that bondage in the American South is an improvement over their original condition. He recounts how he saved the infant Rau-Ru from death in a wartime tribal raid and raised him as a son.

Chapter 8 Hamish definitively sets Amantha free, again giving her the brown envelope with money and freedom papers; she takes a room elsewhere in the city and earns her living embroidering corset covers. A Captain Tobias Sears in the Union army rescues her from an abusive corporal; Seth Parton, now a lieutenant and Sears's best friend, happens upon the scene at the same moment. Sears courts Amantha, successfully; Bond reappears and proposes marriage, but she weds Tobias—even though Parton felt obliged to tell his friend about Amantha's past. Miss Idell, now married to a Captain Morgan Morton, shows up at the reception.
Sears takes command of a black regiment; Amantha teaches school to recently freed slaves.

**Chapter 9** Rau-Ru returns as Lieutenant Oliver Cromwell Jones, and is often a guest of Tobias Sears now that the war is over. At issue is whether blacks will be given the vote gradually or immediately. Radicals in favor of the latter are planning to hold a state constitutional convention of their own; unreconstructed rebels threaten violence; Tobias tries to find a middle way. Seth Parton tries to force his affections on Amantha but she fights him off. He informs her that what he had told Tobias about her past was not the fact of her black ancestry, which he has only just learned from Miss Idell, but the scandal of her father's adulterous affair with the latter. Miss Idell pays a visit and reveals her own gold-digging past, asks Amantha not to tell Tobias about Seth's attempted rape, and says she is going to run away with him (and that she is not really married to Morton). Amantha tells Tobias the truth about her mother, explaining that she thought he already knew. He appears to take it well, but when she later sees his fingers bloody from anxious nail-biting, Amantha angrily says she hates him and tells him to go away. She then goes out to find Rau-Ru and asks to see the scars on his back from the flogging he had received when he was captured after defending her from Prieur-Denis at Pointe du Loup.

**Chapter 10** A parade of black freedmen marches to join the convention, which is then attacked by the police and rebel sympathizers; many are killed, still more wounded. General Baird's troops should have protected the convention but did not. Rau-Ru, angry at the betrayal, and particularly at Sears for his attempted role as compromiser, tells Amantha she has to be on the side of her own people now, like it or not. He places her out of harm's way in a room she can bolt from the inside. After her solitary confinement there for some twenty-four hours, during which she felt "out of time and out of life" and saw images of her past flow by in a confused but somehow logical way, Jimmee comes—his head wrapped in a turban like the one Old Shaddy wore (from a similar head wound) when he was being sold off her father's estate—to take her into the swamps where Rau-Ru and his men are. After gazing at Amantha, Rau-Ru announces that there is something he has to do. He leaves with some of his men; Amantha manages to sneak away to follow him and finds herself at Pointe du Loup, where Hamish Bond is about to be lynched. Amantha pleads with Rau-Ru to spare him; Hamish laughs and jumps off the wagon to his death. Rau-Ru points out to Amantha that if she hadn't intervened he might not have gone through with it, nor would Bond have leaped.

**Chapter 11** Rau-Ru and his men are captured, but Amantha is allowed to escape. She makes her way back to New Orleans, where it turns out that Tobias has been in the hospital with wounds from the convention mêlée and is unaware of her escapade with Rau-Ru. She
never tells him. In the coming years they live in St. Louis and a succession of miserable Kansas towns, as Tobias struggles to make a living as a lawyer. He publishes poetry and, more importantly, The Great Betrayal, a book in which he denounces the materialism of the Gilded Age. His rich New England father cuts him out of his will "because [he is] unaware of the obligation which wealth entails." In 1888, Amantha thinks an old beggar who has suddenly begun to appear on the street corner in town is Rau-Ru, because she recognizes the herringbone pattern of the scars on his back—until she realizes that she never did get to see those scars on Rau-Ru. The beggar dies in the shack of a local black garbage collector, Uncle Slop, whose wealthy son Tobias aids in locating his father. Amantha visits his grave, wishing she were free of the hold Rau-Ru has on her, then realizes no one can set her free but herself. As Tobias recounts how he helped Uncle Slop's son to honor his father by buying him new clothes and cleaning him up, Amantha suddenly realizes that her father really did love her, and that the reason he had never drawn up her manumission papers was that he could not "declare me less than what he had led me to believe I was."

Band of Angels is not universally admired. For James Justus it is an "aesthetic failure" (236), whose narrator "is mediocre . . . an inept raconteur, short on art but long on ego" (32). For who could really care what happens to this whining narrator? And, he adds, the ending is weak: "too sudden and too unrealized dramatically" (246); it is "forced, hurried and derives from no logical or psychological precedent," according to Allen Shepherd (82). Even Warren has joined this negative chorus, admitting to an absence of sufficient "richness and depth in the experience of the narrator" (RPW Talking, 188).

I must confess to a similar disappointment when considering the book only on its own terms. But when read in the context of Warren's previous novels, and particularly with an eye to the ongoing story they tell, it is not at all disappointing. In this regard Amantha Starr, inept narrator that she is, unwittingly provides a clue to how to read the book: "When you try to tell somebody about a dream, you find in the telling that you are simply having another dream" (3–4). What we have discussed so far in Warren—most recently in Jeremiah Beaumont's dream that seemed to disguise, and thus revealed, what the novel itself was repressing—has taught us to see the analogy in his fiction between dream and narrative and the way each flows into the other. And this statement by Amantha certainly reinforces that analogy, since it declares that to narrate—in this case to narrate a dream—is really to dream. Her words form a regret that a dream cannot be communicated, as its transformation into yet another dream by the telling of it gets in the way. But the truth of this statement could be expressed in
another way: within every dream is another dream, and it is in telling the
first that the second is revealed.

This may not be what Amantha had in mind, but it is true of the
book in which she appears, and of the books that precede it. It is another
way of saying what Jack Burden once declared, that the reality of an event
is not in the event but arises "from the relationship of that event to past,
and future, events." It is in the relationship of Amantha's narrative to past
and future Warren narratives that the reality of the other dream can be
perceived. So there is a narrative dreamed here other than the one about
the Amantha Starr who was sold into slavery and was rescued by Hamish
Bond and later Tobias Sears, who "failed westward" with the latter and
eventually faded into obscurity and middle age in Halesburg, Kansas. And
there is a story here other than the one with the false and sentimental
resolution.

In the context in which Amantha makes her opening statement, the
two dreams—the one she had dreamed and the one she finds herself tell-
ing—resemble, or become, two places: an imagined "picture of a grassy
place, a place with sun, maybe water running and sparkling, or just still and
bright" (3), a spot associated with a feeling of "being light and free" (4),
and a real place, the site of her mother's grave, "a grassy place, no
dream. . . . At the head of the grave there is a little stone, and on the stone
folded wings carved, and the word Renie, and the dates 1820–1844." Like
the dream and its recounted version which is yet another dream, the imagi-
ned place and the real one have a certain sameness: "Sometimes this real
spot and the spot of my imagination, of my dream of freedom and delight,
seem to become the same spot. . . . Why . . . do the two images, with such
poignant excitement, sometimes merge in my heart?"

It may be here, when Amantha senses that there is something going
on of which she is only partially aware, some mystery connected with the
workings of her own imagination, that the reader ought perhaps to wonder
if something like that will take place in his or her own mind, some parallel
blending of images and places that, if it could be discerned, would make it
possible to dream that other dream of the narrative. Something similar
happened in All the King's Men when Jack Burden stared at Anne Stanton
as she lay naked on the bed and was reminded of her floating on her back
in the water—as we were reminded of Willie Stark laid out like a gisant
with his hands on his chest in parallel pose. Jack spoke of a kind of stereo-
scopic vision and of how reality arises from the combination of events and
not the events themselves; Amantha Starr had her own encounter with
Burden's paradox when she witnessed "the task of creation" (13) in the
glow of Old Shaddy's hearth as he assembled her beloved Bu-Bula. Like
poetry, by Warren's own definition, which "does not inhere in any particular
element but depends upon the set of relationships, the structure, which we
call the poem,” Amantha’s favorite doll visibly came to life from inanimate, meaningless fragments: “[P]erhaps one reason I loved her was that I had seen her come into existence. She had been a chunk of white pine, the hank of tow, the snippets of cloth, and I had seen these things take shape, grow together, and suddenly glow with her being.” And in the same way that Warren’s ideal of a poet could make a poem out of anything—“granted certain contexts, any sort of material . . . might appear functionally in a poem” (“Pure and Impure Poetry,” 24)—Old Shaddy “knew everything and could put it into a tale” (13).

The reader who awaits an experience akin to Amantha’s merging of images will not be disappointed if he or she is still waiting for it near the end of the novel, for in those closing pages Amantha stands at a grave in Halesburg, Kansas, that is in several respects the analogue of her mother’s, at whose edge the novel began. Like the first grave, whose headstone bore carved folded wings (as if, like the paradise with whose image it blends in Amantha’s imagination, it were guarded by cherubim), this one also enjoys angelic protection: “There were a couple of stone gate-posts, each surmounted by a decomposing angel” (361). This Kansas counterpart to Renie’s Kentucky grave is not as well marked; it bears an empty inscription, a “scrap of paper” tacked onto a stick saying “in a pencil scribble: Old man, colored, no name” (362). Yet the inscription on Amantha’s mother’s grave is in fact comparably ambiguous, and negative; for what it contains is, as Amantha puts it, not the name but “the word Renie.” Renie in fact is a word, the second-person singular imperative of the French renier, to deny. Not only is this grave part of a double image (of which the other half is Amantha’s dream of her spot of paradise); it is itself a double image, its inscription apt to give its reader double vision, as it transforms itself from a name into an injunction, a text that is almost self-destructive in its ambiguity—for what does it ask its reader to deny but itself?

The project of determining how the Kansas grave may be analogous to the Kentucky one now assumes added importance, for it may make it possible to fathom the ambiguity of that one-word text. The nameless old man in the Halesburg cemetery had been the object of false recognition on Amantha’s part, for when she saw him hunched over in the street she was sure he was Rau-Ru, come back to haunt her after all those years. A quarter-century earlier, she had known him as the mysterious k’la of her owner, Hamish Bond, the infant he had rescued from a burning village in Africa and made a kind of adopted son, putting him in charge of his plantation at Pointe du Loup. It was the “neat herringbone pattern” of whip scars on the beggar’s back, barely visible through the gaps in his torn shirt, that had convinced Amantha he was Rau-Ru, for she knew he bore such marks because of a flogging he had received defending her honor against a white man’s advances. Rau-Ru had been the most insistent reminder of the
negritude she inherited from her mother (she was so light-skinned that even Tobias Sears did not know about it when he married her), as the following exchange (which takes place in chapter 10, when Amantha seeks out Rau-Ru to see his scars) indicates:

“Well,” he said, “whose side are you on?”
I kept staring at him.
“Well,” he said, “if you can't say it, I'll say it for you. You are on the nigger side.”
I felt something closing in on me, to suffocation.
“And,” he said, “I'll tell you why.”
He leaned at me, grinning suddenly with an implacable, glittering malevolence. “It’s because you haven't got any other side to go to.” (300)

So these two graves, like the two decomposing angels on either side of the gate to the Halesburg cemetery, appropriately frame the novel; their occupants share the power to tie Amantha to her blackness.

Rau-Ru, of course, cannot exactly be said to be her father (as the woman in the other grave was her mother), yet she does have more than one father, and these other fathers are at times, as Rau-Ru nearly was, her lovers. Hamish Bond, who was himself a father to Rau-Ru, is the chief example; but even Seth Parton, who eventually marries Amantha's father's former mistress but once courted Amantha herself, is confused with her father in her imagination: “I shuddered with a chill, and shut my eyes, and saw Seth dying on that white bosom—no, it was my father dying there” (236); and later: “I suddenly saw in that same instant, her head on an arm ... over Seth's arm—no, that couldn't be—over my father's arm” (278).

But it's the scrap of paper at the grave of the man Amantha imagined was Rau-Ru that most intriguingly connects him to her father. Its brief inscription is in fact the last in a series of scraps of paper that are for Amantha what Willie's wink was for Jack Burden: an ambiguous, doubtful parental text. Even Amantha appears to begin to make this connection when, on the same page where she speaks of it, she uses the same turn of phrase to describe, disparagingly, the manumission papers Bond gave her: “Hamish Bond—oh, I could hate him for his kindness!—giving me a scrap of paper in the end, offering me love in the end ...” (362–63; emphasis added). The precision of this repetition may signal the presence of two other more extended echoes of the language used to describe the “scribble” on the “scrap of paper” at the grave that had held Amantha's interest because of her misreading of what was imprinted on the body it contained: (1) Seth Parton tells Amantha she ought to learn Hebrew and writes down the name of a textbook: “He was scribbling something on a scrap of paper. He thrust it at me. 'Get this book,' he said” (47; emphasis added); (2) on the night
Bond makes love to her for the first time Amantha realizes that his leg is not as lame as she had imagined: “somewhere back in my head there was the detached thought: *He walks pretty well.* That thought was lying there in my head like something scribbled on a scrap of paper and flung down in a dark closet” (132; last emphases added).

The first instance finds Amantha in a position she will be in twice more, that of being confronted with a language she does not understand. Infatuated with Seth Parton, the religious farm boy who spoke with a prophetic accent at Oberlin—Seth of the “high, hieratic head” (44)—Amantha found that “the under-music of that desire was pitiless even as my mind strove to grasp the thorns of the holy language” (48). When he gave her the scrap of paper with the scribbled name of the book, he also gave her a sample of that sacred tongue, a rush of rhythmic but undecipherable sounds, phatic words that conveyed nothing to her but the fact of their existence: “with no meaning . . . except the exalted intensity” (47). Despite the lessons, Amantha confesses that she has “never known the meaning of those words,” but later, in memory, could see Seth’s “bony face lifted into autumn sunshine of Ohio, and . . . be on the verge, if I could only attend more closely, only strain a little more my intellectual ear, on the verge of knowing the inwardness of that grand, infatuate gabble” (47–48). The combination of hearing the stream of undecipherable words and staring at the high, bony face for some clue to their meaning recalls two moments in *The Circus in the Attic*: the “wild, indecipherable, ambiguous, untranslatable cries” Bolton Lovehart’s mother twice uttered in the title story, and the effort of another Seth to read his father’s face (“I looked up and tried to read his face . . . that impassive, high-boned face”). In both instances, the text to be deciphered is a parental one; the line between lover and father will eventually blur for Amantha in the case of Seth Parton, as we have seen, when he becomes the lover of her father’s former mistress, Miss Idell.

Hamish Bond, whose age and role as protector project him into a paternal role, but who on a particularly stormy night will also cross that dividing line, spoke, like Seth, a language Amantha could not fathom: the African dialect in which he chatted with Rau-Ru, an “outlandish gabble, much like the racket of the provoked master of a turkey flock” (119). Amantha’s pejorative characterization of that tongue seems to stem from the fact that Hamish spoke it as a father to his adopted son (whom he had greeted with an “immemorial gesture of fatherly affection”), and that the “secret gabble . . . made me feel rejected and cut off,” a daughter displaced in her father’s affections by an elder brother who shares with that father a secret knowledge she cannot attain. But despite the abuse she heaps upon what she here terms gabble, her very choice of that word underscores its ultimate connection to the “grand, infatuate gabble” Seth Parton spoke.

The other instance of foreign-language instruction in Amantha Starr’s life involved Charles de Marigny Prieur-Denis, and the language is French.
Like Jeremiah Beaumont, Amantha had known that tongue only in its written form: “my ear was so unused to the spoken language despite my long study of it” (91). Prieur-Denis’s pedagogical method involved the recitation of a memorized phrase (“Je viens doucement comme la rosée de l’aube”) that may have become for Amantha the Gallic equivalent of the rhythmic flow of Parton’s burst of unintelligible Hebrew, a string of sounds she could hear herself say (“I heard my voice saying ...” [122]) yet not, at first, understand. What significance might this French instruction have for Amantha beyond Charles’s use of it as an aid to seduction? If she had known French better, she might have been able to give her mother’s gravestone another reading than what it appeared at first to say; from being a name, Renie could have become a message from the tomb, a command, a directive to do perhaps what she was in fact already doing—an act of prior denial Charles’s own name might have taught her to recognize—to deny her past.

Or at any rate, deny something. But what? The message itself? Is this a text that asks its reader to cancel out its existence in the very act of reading it? What Amantha does in the Halesburg cemetery near the end of the novel suggests that this may be true, for she cancels out the empty inscription on that other grave: “before I left I had leaned over and torn the scrap of paper off the stob at the grave-head, and let it go, and the wind had taken it off across the prairie” (365). She does this having realized, despite what she first thought, that this is not Rau-Ru’s grave after all, that the old man she had seen in the street “crouching on his hams with arms forward over the hunched-up knees and the head bowed forward to rest there in a posture of the last weariness and despair” (354) was not Rau-Ru, even though she had glimpsed “on the half-exposed shoulders and upper back the neat herringbone pattern of old welts and scars.” For standing at the grave Amantha discovers that although the image of Rau-Ru’s scars had preoccupied her for a quarter of a century she had never actually seen them. She had left her husband in the middle of the night in the midst of the New Orleans riots of 1866 to go to Rau-Ru and ask to see the whip marks he had received for having defended her virtue against Prieur-Denis’s attempted rape, but he had not complied. “I had only dreamed the scars” (365). So that, in tearing away the negative epitaph (“... no name”) and letting it whirl away across the prairie into oblivion, she could enact the negation for which she had so longed, the death of Rau-Ru: “Perhaps if I could drive a stake down six feet into the earth, through the old black heart, then I would be safe ... then I would be free” (362). Yet, paradoxically, this removal of the inscription—which gives her some semblance of peace, if not safety: “I felt quiet. ... Well, that was something, to be quiet at last” (365)—can be done only when she knows the grave is not Rau-Ru’s, transpires only as the negation of a negation. Something like this paradoxical logic governed her earlier conviction that the man in the street
was Rau-Ru: “Even at the instant my brain was making denial of the identity of the creature. No, he was larger than this. No, there must be a thousand old Negroes left with scars on the shoulders. No, there is no resemblance in the face. . . . But the assertion was there, deeper than denial, manifesting itself in the very denial, and as yet, only in the denial . . .” (354–55). Convoluted as this logic may appear to be, it makes perfect sense in the perspective from which Amantha’s meditation at the grave of her mother invites us to read the nameless epitaph. For what Prieur-Denis’s instruction in French could teach Amantha was to see that her mother’s tombstone did not bear a name but an assertion manifesting itself in the form of a denial—a denial prior to anything else Amantha could remember. And because the inscription lay at the very origin of her life, the brightest vision of future delight Amantha can conjure from it is the once-lost paradise of which this marker is both the sign and the gate, entry to it denied by those folded wings.

To understand Amantha’s gesture at the grave of the unknown black, it may help to compare it to a similar removal, a few pages earlier, of a memorial to a nameless deceased, her husband’s poem “The Dead Vidette.” Tobias had succeeded in getting it published in the Atlantic, and Amantha had cut it out, framed it under glass, and hung it on the wall, pleased to point it out to guests. Its subject, and that of Sears’s other Civil War poems, was the “hero of the hundred names, or namelessnesses, who had died into the hundred graves” (354) of the war. Embarrassed, perhaps, by this indulgence, and by a poetic career that had not lived up to its promise, Tobias removed it one night, for the next morning Amantha noticed it was gone—its absence made almost tangible by the “pale rectangle” (342) it left on the faded wallpaper. Tobias’s choice of a title for the poem is intriguing, perhaps revealing, for vidette (a common nineteenth-century misspelling for vedette) is, like Renie, a French funerary inscription rich in meaning. The unknown soldier in Tobias’s poem is a sentry, from the Italian vedetta, “observatory,” deriving from vedere, “to see.” The videttes Sears thus memorializes are observers, seers; the first line (aside from the title, all we know of the poem) confirms this punning identification of the poet with his subject: “I who, alone, through night and cedarn glade” (345).²

Yet another incident in which a person is reduced to a piece of paper and then discarded may make it possible to find the ultimate connection between what Tobias does to “The Dead Vidette” and what Amantha does to the paper epitaph at the grave of the unknown former slave. Seth Parton, arguing with Amantha at Oberlin about the immorality of her father’s owning slaves, had reinforced his point with a theatrical gesture that would resonate later in the novel. He held his arm up against the sky, and his hand opened: “all at once, at the end of his gesture, as though it released something, and flung that thing away. I had the distinct image that the hand flung
my father away, my father so little and shriveled and pitiful that he was crumpled in the palm of that hand, like a wad of paper, to be flung away, to whirl across the snow, forever" (37). It is not difficult to see that what Amantha later does in the Halesburg cemetery is very nearly the same thing: "I... let it [the scrap of paper] go, and the wind had taken it off across the prairie." But did she mean to imitate Seth's gesture, and, if so, was that graveside gesture directed, as was his, against her father? The context that immediately surrounds the death of the man whose epitaph she flung away suggests that it was. The beggar she had seen crouching in the street and who she thought was Rau-Ru had shared lodgings with a local character named Uncle Slop, Halesburg's garbage collector. The beggar's death coincided with a spectacular instance of filial piety that Amantha envied but knew she could not imitate (or could not imitate at the moment she stood at the grave). Uncle Slop had, years before, "abandoned his son, going West, to freedom, to success, to gather garbage" (373). But that son, Joshua Lounberry, succeeded in tracing him down and came to Halesburg to restore him to his affections and a considerable fortune. Amantha's response was to compare that paternal abandonment to the one she had suffered from "my father, how he had betrayed me and how I hated him... I suffered a dry, gnawing envy of Mr. Lounberry, who could honor his father."

Aaron Starr's abandonment of his daughter had been quite shockingly revealed to Amantha when she stood at his grave in Danville, Kentucky, and Cy Marmaduke claimed her in payment for her father's debts. First the sheriff asked if she had any papers.

"Papers?" I echoed, in question.
"Yeah, papers!" the Sheriff said. "Papers yore pappy give you. Didn't he ever give you papers? Spent all that money and sent you up North and all, and he's bound to give you papers." A trace of outrage was coming into his tone. (58)

No wonder Amantha's anger toward her father—and her displaced revenge at the grave at the end of the novel—took the form of reducing him to a piece of paper and then flinging that paper away. It was a kind of poetic justice for his not having bothered to write out the piece of paper that would have spared her the horror of being sold into slavery at the foot of his grave. And no wonder she saw the love which Hamish Bond tried to offer her in compensation for an inadequate father as "a scrap of paper." The whole problem of her existence was this missing text from the father, the manumission papers Aaron Starr never had the heart to draw up, as they would have acknowledged the truth his love for her made too hard to bear. What Aaron Starr did to Amantha was make her identity dependent on a nonexistent text. It is a remarkable variation on what we have learned to recognize as a consistent theme in Warren's fiction: the text from the
father with which the son (or daughter) must come to terms in order to live his (her) life, even though the very existence of that text is placed in question. It is certainly in question here, since Aaron never wrote it; yet it does have a kind of negative existence, for everyone, including the sheriff, assumed that he had written it. And this variation on the theme is joined in *Band of Angels* by another parental inscription, the *Renie* left by the mother (though it was presumably the father who had it carved), which appears to be a simple statement of fact but may be more.

Perhaps we are now in a position to better understand that other instance of something scribbled on a scrap of paper, Amantha’s realization that Hamish Bond “walks pretty well” after all, that thought “lying there in my head like something scribbled on a scrap of paper and flung down in a dark closet.” When he had rescued her from the auction block on the Rue Royale, she had noticed that “he had some kind of a limp, a stiffness of the right knee, and that in walking he set the blackthorn down with deliberation for each step” (89). Whatever irregularity there might have been in his stride was countered by the “metronomic precision” (90) with which he set down his walking stick as he walked. That Amantha should be intrigued by the question of whether or not Hamish had a genuine limp is more than a little like Jack Burden’s wondering if Willie Stark winked at him or just had something in his eye. Willie’s eye did close for a moment; the question was whether he meant anything by it. Hamish behaves as if he has a limp, tapping his stick metronominically wherever he goes; the question for Amantha is whether he does it for show or for real. It is an ambiguous message from a fatherly figure in the same sense Stark’s was—is it a sign or not?—and Amantha’s response is, curiously, to compare her awareness of it to a text of her own, scribbled on a scrap of paper and flung down in a dark closet. Whether or not the limp originally was a sign, a text she was meant to read, it is one now. What happens to Hamish’s limp may be what Amantha fears happens to a dream when you try to tell it: “you find in the telling that you are simply having another dream”—it may take on a reality it did not originally have. But, then, reality, after all—as Jack Burden learned, and as Amantha witnessed when Old Shaddy made Bu-Bula—arises from the combination of events that are not in themselves real.

Still, there is something real behind Bond’s limp, though that prior reality is itself a kind of inscription akin to the hieroglyphic marks of herringbone lines Amantha thought she could read on Rau-Ru’s back even though she never actually saw them. There is the scar on his thigh made by the African amazon from whom he rescued the infant Rau-Ru—the scar Amantha discovered after she noticed that Hamish walked pretty well after all, when she awoke with him asleep in bed with her the night they first made love. Amantha learns to read another mark in Bond’s house, the hieroglyphic “wavy line looping between the peaks” (103) under the letter B on
his napkins. And she even learns how to inscribe, to embroider, that mark herself, under Michele's tutelage. "It is the sea," Michele tells her, as her finger traces the wavy line, alluding to the years Hamish spent on shipboard. Amantha "looked down at the bold initial, as though it might divulge something." The hieroglyph may divulge more than Michele allows or Amantha acknowledges, for though the reader is never given a definitive answer to the puzzle it poses, its combination of peaks (or points) and loops ("the wavy line looping") makes it almost a rebus for the name Bond chose for the plantation he entrusted to Rau-Ru's care, Pointe du Loup. (Here I assume an Americanized mispronunciation akin to that which made beeches out of Beauchamp.)

But the initial may have yet another connection to Hamish's k'la; for what Amantha was to imagine all those years as written on Rau-Ru's flesh, a text that she had invented out of whole cloth and that caused her to misread what she glimpsed through the tattered shirt on the half-exposed back of the hunching beggar, does not escape a certain resemblance to the hieroglyph she learned to replicate in Hamish Bond's house. For what she thought she recognized on that back was another kind of embroidery stitch, a "neat herringbone pattern"—a transmuted version, perhaps, of the pattern she had tried to imitate ("I plied my needle, trying to imitate Michele's meticulous art, tracing out, thread by thread . . . some sort of wavy pattern" [99]). Having learned to reproduce that puzzling pattern at will, Amantha may have projected it onto a surface she had never seen for reasons she did not fully understand.

There is more, however, to the Halesburg beggar and his herringbone back to justify Amantha's false recognition scene, to us if not to her. When she had first described what she thought must be on Rau-Ru's back, years before, she twice made reference to its humped quality: "I saw it in my mind, the healed-up scars . . . humping out, interlacing mathematically . . . [the] humped, corded scars" (271-72). Beyond anything Amantha could have known, the peculiar way in which Rau-Ru's back is humped recalls another, more genuinely humped back: the Grand' Bosse's in World Enough and Time: "The shoulders were very large and the head was thrust forward from the pillows by a swelling or hump, not unlike the hump of the bull of the buffalo. . . . He was hump-backed" (429-30). Jeremiah Beaumont at that moment remembered that Dr. Les Burnham—who had appeared propped up in a wagon in a way that likewise reminded him of a buffalo . . . propped in the lashed-down chair that was big as a bed" (395-96)—had taught him enough French to recognize that bosse meant hump, though Jeremiah had trouble realizing it when he heard the word spoken. In response to a bystander's question "That yore pappy?", Jeremiah had remarked that Burnham was "like a father to me." That the Grand' Bosse could be a grotesque double of this paternal figure may explain why he and Rau-Ru
are linked through their association with humped backs, for just as what Amantha saw in the hunched beggar was Rau-Ru, what she saw as she stood over that nameless grave was her father. Band of Angels renews the inquiry into the word Jeremiah first found so puzzling—bosse—by offering a meditation on its English version, for underlying Amantha’s confusion is a linguistic connection linking her description of Rau-Ru’s humped back with her description of the beggar’s hunched posture (“He was crouching on his hams with arms forward over the hunched-up knees”). Despite the fact that the beggar was not humpbacked, there is a certain substitutability between hunch and hump, for the hunch is in fact “to arch into a hump,” a hunch can be a hump, and a hunchback and a humpback are really the same thing. So there is good reason for Amantha’s feeling that she had seen that hunch before.

We have seen it, too, and her false recognition scene prompts a recognition for the attentive reader of Warren’s novels that I hope is not false. Would we be as misled as Amantha if we thought that in the “hunched-up” figure in the Halesburg street we saw “the little hunched-up creature” that Jason Sweetwater imagined under the mound of Sue Murdock’s abdomen and that reminded him of “the way certain primitive tribes buried their dead. Hunched up like that”? Would it be wrong to suppose that the mysterious figure Amantha encounters here is actually the fetal mummy that haunts Warren’s novels?—that her moment of false recognition is meant to provoke one of our own? that the attempt to tell the dream of her narrative makes us dream one too?

Percy Munn had his dream of a fetus, Sweetwater his daydream of one, Jack Burden his vision of the “sad little fetus” within, Rachel her stillborn ones—and Amantha Starr her Bu-Bula. In the unpublished, unfinished novel “God’s Own Time,” Warren, listing the prizes available at a rural carnival, once dwelt on dolls’ fetal qualities (and at the same time placed Indians and fetuses side by side, a juxtaposition Sweetwater was subsequently to make with his recollection of fetally crouched American Indian mummies): “leather pillow covers with the imbecile profile of an Indian in warpaint, great foetal baby dolls sitting with outstretched arms in the gloom” (35–36). “[H]ow,” Amantha wondered in the opening pages of her story, thinking of the way the paradisiacal place of her imagining and the actual site of her mother’s grave strangely merged in her heart, “can that be, when the place in my dream is a place of beginnings and the place in my true recollection has a grave, the mark of endings?” (4). Warren’s linking of birth with death in the figure of the fetus poses precisely this question, and Bu-Bula’s very name incarnates one of the two terms of that merger, as we are reminded at the foot of Amantha’s father’s grave: “‘Yes, there’s a will,’ he was repeating, ‘and you gentlemen know how a will begins—you all being the kind of gentlemen having estates to set in order before taking
out for the *Beulah* shore” (58–59; emphasis added)—Beulah Land being, in a Bunyan-influenced topography, the Elysian rest at the end of life’s journey.

Bu-Bula’s creator, Old Shaddy, shares with Rau-Ru the distinction of being “recognized” by Amantha when he’s not there at all. Twice she sees him in the person of Jimmee, a slave in Bond’s house, the second time really believing it is him: “the head preternaturally big with swathing of white cloth, like a turban, all familiar, terribly familiar. Then I knew. Shaddy, it must be Old Shaddy, Shadrach, with his broken head bandaged like a turban.... [T]hey had broken his head, and now he had come back to me, he would show me the head” (310). Amantha’s déjà vu will be matched by ours, if we remember how Slim Sarrett claimed that his father had come back to show him his head, one that also had a piece of white cloth attached: “How his head,” Sarrett said, “just his head, with something hanging out of the neck like a hank of dirty white clothes-line—would come drifting through the air toward me.” Shaddy was in fact a father to Amantha (and, like her other fathers, a seducer as well), who became in his cradling arms a kind of double for the doll he made: “I would be holding her,” Amantha said of the doll, “and he would be holding me. . . . Now and then he would joggle me and Bu-Bula, the way you joggle a baby” (13).

As for Jimmee, there was a certain paternal mystery attached to him: was he or was he not, Amantha long wondered, the father of Dollie’s baby (120)? He was husband to Michele, as Old Shaddy had been to Aunt Sukie back in Kentucky; in these two triangles Amantha might have seen in the appropriately named Dollie a double of herself, the childlike woman with whom Jimmee/Shaddy may have committed adultery, with his wife’s knowledge. For it was in carrying his games with Amantha a little too far that Shaddy got his turban: “It was an old game, with a thousand variations, but one night it was, all at once, different. . . . Aunt Sukie . . . just looked quiet at Shaddy and said: ‘That chile gittin too big, you to fool her up that a-way’ ” (14). When Amantha’s father found out, he sold him downriver; it was in trying to escape that Shadrach received the blow to the head. Seeing him being carted off, Amantha “could see a big bandage about Shadrach’s head, like an untidy turban” (16). When Jimmee appears in his turban, he has come to take her to Rau-Ru, who at this juncture in the story has fled to the swamp to escape prosecution in the wake of the New Orleans 1866 riots.

Just as Jimmee’s turban reminds her of someone else, so does the posture he instructs her to assume on her journey across the water recall the hunched-over position in which the Halesburg beggar crouched: “Jimmee ordered me to cover my head against the gallinippers. ‘Git yore dress up,’ he said, ‘up over yore head, jist so you kin breave.’ I bowed forward and drew the skirt up over my head, holding it close to create my own airless,
inner darkness, and be safe in it” (315). Byram B. White had found a similar safety in his inner darkness, “drawing himself into a hunch as though he wanted to assume the prenatal position and be little and warm and safe in the dark.” And Jack Burden could imagine himself in something like the same situation, faced with a yellow envelope that he didn't want to open—and that presaged the yellowing brown paper package of Cass Mastern papers as well as the brown manila envelope containing the truth about Judge Irwin: “huddled up way inside, in the dark which is you, inside yourself, like a clammy, sad little foetus you carry around inside yourself... [I]ts eyes are blind, and it shivers cold inside you for it doesn't want to know what is in that envelope.” Amantha Starr, however, does not assume this position because she wants to hide from anything, but because she was told to do it, and her assuming it in the boat in the swamp has more to do, perhaps, with images of death (with Jimmee as Charon in this ferry crossing) and watery (re)birth.

Yet Amantha is, like Jack Burden, trailed by a brown envelope that she keeps putting off reopening—and, like Jack’s, it is consistently brown. (“He withdrew a big thick brown envelope” [137]; “From the drawer he took a metal box, unlocked it, and took out a brown envelope” [217].) It is the one piece of paper Hamish Bond can offer her that will do her some good, the missing text her father should have provided but did not, the manumission papers: “I went to rummage in a valise and take out the papers, the manumission papers, that Hamish Bond had made out so long ago... They had been in the brown envelope... But that first night at Pointe du Loup, I had laid the envelope on the table in the hall. That was the last I ever saw of it until the morning in May... He gave me the envelope then” (209).

Amantha’s forgetfulness is understandable, for to pay attention to those papers would have been to acknowledge something she would rather forget. The fact that her father had neglected to write them out in the first place was due to a similar desire to deny, as she finally realizes at the end of the novel: “[I]t was, in a funny, sad, confused way, his very love for me which made my father leave me to be seized at his grave-side. He had not been able to make the papers out, or the will, that would declare me less than what he had led me to believe I was...” (373).

Amantha’s early reluctance to hold on to the brown envelope Bond gave her reemerges at the novel’s close in the dislike she ascribes to her husband of carrying a package in public: “Tobias could bring a parcel home. No, I couldn’t make him do that—not with his face the way it always was when he had to walk down the street carrying a sack of groceries, his face stiff and averted” (355-56). The ultimate significance of this otherwise trivial household concern becomes clearer when she applies this observation to how she imagined he must have felt when he drove Uncle Slop and his
newly discovered son into town in his surrey: "I thought how his face must have been stiff and distant above the leers of Main Street, the same thing as when he had to carry a parcel, but worse" (369). The manner in which the mysterious, sudden appearance of the Halesburg beggar is intertwined with the story of Lounberry and his father encourages a completion of the comparison: Tobias's shame at carrying a parcel home resembles his "shame" at being "a Jehu to coons" (369), though this shame exists only in Amantha's mind, in the projection of her own shame onto her husband, for as Tobias later reveals, he really took considerable delight in playing the role of intermediary in the Lounberry matter. This "shame" of Amantha's itself recalls her horror of being discovered by Rau-Ru, of having any connection to the man whose scars she left her husband in the middle of the night to inspect—her shame, in short, of acknowledging the burden of her past. If Uncle Slop is a parcel for Tobias, the man with the herringbone-humped back is a parcel for Amantha that, like the brown envelope she kept leaving behind, she does not want to carry.

A curious anticipation of this episode took place when Amantha first laid eyes on Tobias Sears on the New Orleans street where a Union officer claimed to have found her in violation of General Order Number 28 (which forbade women to make insulting remarks to occupying troops), and from whose insolence Tobias rescued her: "I was carrying a parcel in my hand. The parcel contained some fine linen undergarments, two corset-covers, to be exact, which I was to embroider. . . . [T]he corset-covers I carried were to conceal the rigor of whalebone that held in place the loyal Unionist bosoms of ladies of Federal officers" (205). How remarkable that the eventual contents of the coverings of which this parcel is the package should be a variation on the pattern Amantha thought she saw on that rejected "parcel" in the Halesburg street, the bony innards of "fish"—whalebone for herringbone.

But even more remarkable is the way this scene of her first encounter with Tobias Sears seems teasingly to allude to the origins of her husband's first name. The first Tobias was the biblical one in the Book of Tobit in the Old Testament Apocrypha. Given the evocative associations of other names in Warren's fiction (we shall later see how significant a choice "Perse" was for his first novel's protagonist), it is not surprising that this name should recall some of the circumstances of the story in which his namesake was involved. Tobias Sears is indebted to the virtues of something that comes from inside a "fish" (a whale) for the chance to meet the woman who becomes his wife, for to embroider the undergarments that depend on that commodity for their support was the reason Amantha was on the street that day. Now the original Tobias was likewise indebted to what comes out of a fish for the chance to meet his wife—specifically, to the viscera of a
fish that leaped out at him from the Tigris River and that the angel Raphael instructed him how to use to win the hand of the woman God had planned for him to marry.3

The Book of Tobit abounds with blindness and burial. Tobias's father, Tobit, was almost obsessively devoted to burying corpses no one else would touch; it was in undertaking one such burial that he lost his sight. Ritually unclean from having touched the corpse, he could not come home until he had purified himself at sunrise. Thus he spent the night out-of-doors, sleeping on his back near a courtyard wall where birds had perched, whose droppings consequently fell into his open eyes; a strange but necessary detail of the story is that he evidently slept with his eyes open—as fish are said to do because they have no eyelids. What Tobias, at the angel's instruction, later finds inside the fish eventually restores his father's sight and wins the hand of the bride. Band of Angels, which begins and ends with a graveside meditation, is also concerned with the proper care of the dead: Amantha had always wondered why her mother's grave was not near the rest of the family and when her father died was scandalized, until she learned the truth, to see that her father was not being interred where he belonged. "My first awareness was not the renewal of grief, it was an impulse to cry out, 'No—no—that's the wrong place—come over here—over here to the cedars!' For that was where my mother lay. She lay there because there she would be closer to the house, and to him, my father had said, and he should be buried there with her" (55). A similar concern for proper burial is apparent at the end of the novel, when, like father Tobit (or like the elder Tobias, in the Latin Vulgate version, where both have the same name), Tobias Sears assumes responsibility for the burial of the nameless black beggar, the one Amantha thought was Rau-Ru. It was Tobias who discovered the body and who arranged for the coroner to take the remains to the Bended Head Undertaking Parlor. They found almost enough money on him, thanks to Amantha's generosity when she had passed him on the corner, to pay the expenses; Tobias evidently made up the difference.

A remarkable parallel lies in the fact that Amantha had at one point thought that, like his biblical namesake, Tobias had been temporarily blinded. It happened when she returned to him after the time she spent with Rau-Ru in the swamp during the convention disturbances in 1866. Tobias had been seriously wounded in the riots, and when she first sees him in the hospital, she says, "I thought he was blind—one of the blows had been to the head—and with the awfulness of that thought I had some fleeting, submerged sense, like the white flash of a fish-belly in deep water, of fulfillment, of vindication: I should lead him, always, by the hand" (336). The principal elements of the biblical scene are amazingly reunited here: blindness, the fish, Amantha leading Tobias—as did the angel—by the hand.
The poetic structure of the biblical text of the Book of Tobit is erected on an uncanny resemblance between the father's obsession with putting the dead below ground and the son's panic at seeing a fish leap up from the surface of the water; both would rather such things stayed below, where they belong. Now it happens that this equivalence of fish and corpse is reenacted at the Halesburg cemetery in the person of the corpse with the herringbone marks. What Amantha most fears as she stands at the grave is that its occupant may rise and reappear, and that, in the very act of drawing breath, she will have to recognize her identity with what was buried—a fear she expresses by gasping for air like a fish out of water: "I stood there a minute or two, looking down at the grave. Well, there it was, and I had seen it, for whatever reason I had had to see it: to prove to myself, perhaps, that it was dead, was under the earth, that I was free. . . . I took a gasp of breath, like a fish" (362).