Chapter 9

Continent in Flood  *Flood, 1964*

Book I

Chapter 1  Screenwriter Bradwell Tolliver, originally of Fiddlersburg, Tennessee, is driving his white Jaguar to the Nashville airport to pick up Hollywood producer Yasha Jones. He approaches the Seven Dwarfs Motel; its garish decor occupies the spot where something whose nature we'll not learn about until later happened twenty years before, in 1941. He stops for gas and has an unsettling conversation with a young black employee dressed in a grotesque costume appropriate to the theme of the place.

Chapter 2  Waiting at the airport, Brad remembers old Izzie Goldfarb, a Jewish tailor in the Fiddlersburg of his youth who had taken an interest in him, but died when Brad was away at college. Now that a dam is going to flood Fiddlersburg, he thinks he will look for Goldfarb’s grave and take charge of moving it. Yasha Jones appears, preternaturally bald, with a “ghostly continent” of a pink mark running up the left side of his skull. Brad is convinced that he is Jewish.

Chapter 3  Brad has been back in Fiddlersburg for three weeks. We read more of his recollections about his first wife, Lettice Poindexter, and his second, Suzie Martine. He had lived with Lettice in Fiddlersburg and remembers driving her past the present site of the Seven Dwarfs Motel to the train for Reno when that marriage ended.

Chapter 4  Yasha wants to make a film about Fiddlersburg and the impending flood. On the strength of *I’m Telling You Now*, a short-story collection Brad wrote about his hometown when still in college, Yasha has hired him to write the script. They arrive at the town—the river below, the state penitentiary on a hill above.

Chapter 5  Brad’s sister, Maggie Fiddler, plays hostess to Brad and Yasha in the house that Brad grew up in. Lawyer Blanding Cottshill tells of Miss Pettifew’s midnight exhumation of a fetus in a Mason jar in the yard of the house where she used to live.
Chapter 6  In bed the next morning, Brad recalls Telford Lott, the editor who read and liked the title story in I'm Telling . . . (about Israel Goldfarb) and published the book, and who was the matchmaker for Brad and Lettice Poindexter. He recalls, too, his father's casket in the living room and his sister asking how can Brad hate him now.

Chapter 7  Brad takes Yasha to church, where Brother Potts preaches on the text of Amos 9:15. Brad points out the blind but beautiful Leontine Purtle. Yasha later peruses Brad's file on other townsfolk, among them Harvard-educated black preacher Leon Pinckney, who refused Potts's request for a joint religious service uniting all Fiddlersburg residents to say farewell to the town. Maggie brings lemonade and cookies up to Yasha's bedroom and remarks that his (Japanese) robe makes him look like an Egyptian pharaoh.

Chapter 8  Brad reveals to Yasha that Maggie's husband, Calvin, is in the pen on the hill above the town. He doesn't say why.

Chapter 9  Brad tells Yasha about Frog-Eye, who lives in the swamp and had been the companion of his youth, and two anecdotes about his father, Lank Tolliver, who came out of the swampy backwoods to get rich in Fiddlersburg. (1) When he foreclosed on the house of Dr. Amos Fiddler—Calvin's father—he took possession of his extensive collection of books; when young Brad saw him idly tearing up the pages to make spills for the fireplace, he braved his father's blows to rescue the books. (2) Lank would on occasion retreat to the swamp; Frog-Eye once took Brad there to show him his father out cold, with tear-tracks streaking his dirty face.

Brad leaves a social message for Digby, the army engineer in charge of the flooding, in the room he rents at the house of Leontine Purtle and her father. He tries out a subplot for the movie on Yasha, in which Digby, fascinated by her blindness, falls in love with Leontine; Brad gives Digby's character a purple birthmark on his face that he realizes, too late, is based on Yasha's scar.

Book II

Chapter 10  Flashback to Brad's affair with Lettice Poindexter, who had formerly been Telford Lott's mistress. Dissatisfied with his writing, in a burst of idealism (and in search of identity) he volunteers to fight in the Spanish Civil War.

Chapter 11  Flashback continues: Stricken with typhus, Brad must quit fighting, recovers in France, returns, feeling "that all his experience came to nothing." Telford gives him a two-thousand-dollar advance for a novel on Spain. Six months later, unable to write, Brad tells Lott of his failure and of his decision to return to Fiddlersburg. Lettice accepts his proposal of marriage and a life in Fiddlersburg, but (though she
had been faithful during Brad's entire Spanish adventure) has a one-night stand with Dr. Ramon Echegaray, a one-eyed Loyalist veteran on the lecture circuit.

Chapter 12  Brad takes Yasha on a tour of the pen, where Pretty-Boy Rountree, scheduled for electrocution in eight weeks, still has not prayed, despite Leon Pinckney's regular visits. The whole town is anxious to know whether he'll crack.

Chapter 13  Yasha and Brad talk about lonesomeness—the cons', Maggie's; Yasha recalls (to himself) his experiences in the French Resistance.

Chapter 14  Brad's mother had died giving birth to his sister. Her will left money for the children to receive a proper education outside of Fiddlersburg. When Brad announced to his father that he was going to the same Nashville prep school Calvin Fiddler attended, Lank Tolliver refused; but Brad pointed out the clause in the will, and furthermore told him that he had seen him weeping in the swamp and knew he couldn't bear to have his son in the house knowing that.

Chapter 15  Digby's social call (at Brad's invitation in chapter 9) resurrects Maggie's memory of how her husband, Calvin Fiddler, shot another young engineer, Alfred Tuttle.

Book III

Chapter 16  January 1939: Brad goes to Fiddlersburg to prepare the house for Lettice. He stares at the spot where his father's coffin had rested. He has a reunion with his sister, now in a Nashville girls' school. Lank Tolliver had committed suicide in the swamp when his late wife's Nashville cousin, in charge of the children's educational trust, threatened him with financial ruin if he refused to let Maggie go away to school. Upon Brad's return to New York, Lettice confesses her fling with Ramon Echegaray the night before. Brad forgives her and goes ahead with the marriage.

Chapter 17  The summer of 1939 in Fiddlersburg: Brad and Lettice are deliriously happy; Maggie joins them at the end of the school term and falls in love with young doctor Calvin Fiddler.

Chapter 18  Leontine Purtle invites Brad in, plays him a recording of his early story about Izzie Goldfarb. He doesn't want to hear it; he wants to know what it's like to be blind.

Chapter 19  Brother Potts comes to the house to recite more of the hymn he's been writing for the final Fiddlersburg farewell service; he has found poetic inspiration in Pretty-Boy's spitting on him when he came, with Pinckney's permission, to try to induce him to pray.
Chapter 20  Brad goes wandering through Fiddlersburg in the moonlight and runs into Yasha at the Confederate monument. He tells him Maggie suggested they make Brother Potts the center of the film. Yasha is enthusiastic; Brad had worked on it all night but got nowhere.

Chapter 21  Yasha's recollections (to himself) of his marriage to Lucy Spence and her death in a car accident. She was from a small town in Iowa, about which he used to ask her to recall as much as she could; his interest in Fiddlersburg derives from that.

Chapter 22  Brad visits Calvin in the pen; the latter is jealous of Yasha's interest in his wife.

Chapter 23  At Blanding Cottshill's law office, Brad learns from Pinckney that Pretty-Boy finally broke down and prayed. But this wouldn't have happened had he not spit on Potts's face. Brad asks Blanding for the record of the Calvin Fiddler trial.

Book IV

Chapter 24  In April 1940, Brad and Lettice decide to go to Mexico in the fall, and perhaps conceive a child there. In September, Telford Lott sends Brad an advance copy of For Whom the Bell Tolls, the book Brad might have written on Spain. On the evening of October 5, just after Brad had finished reading Hemingway's novel, he and Lettice, Maggie and their guest, Alfred Tuttle, were dancing. Calvin was in Nashville, doing his internship. Frog-Eye, whose portrait Lettice had been working on all summer, had passed out in a corner. In an atmosphere of increasing eroticism, Brad made Tuttle dance with Lettice, and then with Maggie, before disappearing upstairs with his wife. He had inadvertently put a scratch on a record of "The Continental," which kept repeating the words of its title over and over—until Tuttle could restrain himself no longer.

Chapter 25  Maggie and Tuttle had wound up under the hydrangeas, making love. When Calvin found out, he shot and killed Tuttle. He confessed, though there was a trial anyway, and was sentenced to a term in the pen (he would have been out by now, but a bungled escape attempt had compounded his sentence). Lettice conceived a child that night but had a miscarriage the following spring. When she reads in Time magazine that Ramon Echegaray has been executed by Franco, and Brad is not in a consoling mood, they realize the marriage is over. Brad drives her to Nashville for the train to Reno; she persuades him to stop on the way and make love one last time—that is what he was remembering took place on the present site of the Seven Dwarfs Motel.

Chapter 26  Brad throws away the screenplay based on Brother Potts and writes one that features a man like Calvin married to a woman like Maggie and who escapes from prison. Yasha rejects it as lacking
verisimilitude as well as the feeling for Fiddlersburg that he is counting on the author of *I'm Telling You Now* to produce.

**Chapter 27**  Brad runs into Leontine Purtle, offers her a ride, and winds up in bed with her at the Seven Dwarfs Motel. Afterward, he learns from Mortimer Sparlin, the black attendant, that she comes there often, and not alone either.

**Chapter 28**  Brad pays a visit to Frog-Eye in the swamp and finds out that he had only been pretending to be asleep that night twenty years before, that he had been aware of all that transpired between Maggie and Tuttle and Brad and Lettice.

**Chapter 29**  Back in town, Brad crosses paths with Blanding Cottshill, who is on his way to say farewell to Pretty-Boy, scheduled for execution at midnight. Returning to the house, Brad finds a letter from Maggie: She and Yasha have run off together. The sirens are blasting at the pen; the screen door opens.

**Chapter 30**  Yasha and Maggie have returned. Brad is glad about their happiness, but he accuses Yasha of having rejected his screenplay (detailed in chapter 26) to spare Maggie’s feelings. He himself had earlier abandoned the manuscript of a novel based on Tuttle’s murder for the same reason. Yasha replies that they will go ahead with Brad’s version because it is now apparent that it is where his deepest feelings are invested. Calvin appears, having escaped from the pen. When Brad is wounded trying to knock the pistol from his hand, Calvin suddenly becomes a doctor again, performing an emergency tracheotomy with a ballpoint pen.

**Book V**

**Chapter 31**  Brad recovers and visits the reincarcerated Calvin, who proudly shows him his new medical facilities at the pen (paid for secretly by Yasha). He explains that he had not been able to practice medicine in the pen before because his memory of the information in his medical books would dissolve whenever he was confronted with a patient. But the moment the gun that wounded Brad went off, he could suddenly see his father’s anatomy book as clear as day, and it had been that way ever since.

**Chapter 32**  Maggie and Yasha are happily married, living in Greece. Yasha has abandoned the film, but another producer, Mort Seebbaum, has picked it up and offered Brad a handsome salary to write it.

**Chapter 33**  With the farewell service in the background, Brad reads a letter from Lettice to Maggie that his sister has sent on to him and learns that she has devoted her life since the breakup of their marriage to working for the poor in a Catholic mission in Chicago. She also recounts a dream she had already told Brad long ago: three men try to kill
her; she tries to elude them by hanging herself. Brad tears up Mort Seebaum’s telegram, with its lucrative offer. And he realizes that now he will not have to find Goldfarb’s grave after all.

When old man Bascomb went out on his back porch at 2:00 A.M. to shine his flashlight on whatever it was his dog was barking at, he was more than a little surprised to see “a female form, white in the face, clutching something to the bosom” (49). He was even more surprised to learn that it was old Miss Pettifew, who had returned to the backyard of the house she had lived in fifteen years before to dig up the sealed jar that contained “the thing she could not bear to leave lying in the ground, under the weight of water, when Fiddlersburg goes under,” the stillborn fetus that was the secret issue of the one and only love affair of her life. “That, ladies and gentlemen of the jury,” said Blanding Cottshill to Yasha Jones, Brad Tolliver, and Brad’s sister, Maggie Fiddler, “is Fiddlersburg” (50).

“‘Old Izzie Goldfarb,’” Brad will later say to Yasha Jones, “‘he is Fiddlersburg. I have been ten thousand miles away and I have shut my eyes and I have said the word Fiddlersburg, and what I saw was Old Goldfarb’” (164). These two apparently diverse statements about what Fiddlersburg is are ultimately not in disagreement; for Goldfarb is to Tolliver as the fetus was to Miss Pettifew: the body he intends to dig up before the flood arrives. “Would that be another death, a drowning, an eternal drowning, a perpetual suffocation, a crushing weight on the chest that would never go away? Bradwell Tolliver, with a sudden swelling of the heart, thought that he himself, by God, if nobody else did, would take care of Izzie Goldfarb” (18–19). Goldfarb, “crouched in his tailor shop ... pained eyes bowed over the needle that moved slower every year,” had been not only Brad’s friend—the only man in Fiddlersburg who would “speak to you as though you were a man. Later he played chess with you and did not let you win” (16)—but also a source of fascination because of his command of texts to which no one else had access: “Several of Old Izzie’s books were in a language which occasioned some debate in Fiddlersburg—was it Yiddish or real Jew or German or what? But the others were in French,” as Brad knew because he had studied a little French in high school. Brad spent a lot of time with him; in fact, as Barnett Guttenberg observed, he “makes Izzie Goldfarb his surrogate father” (123). From time to time in the course of the novel, Tolliver will wander the town cemetery making less-than-systematic searches for Izzie’s grave—until in the final pages he will discover that he didn’t need to find it after all.

But Yasha Jones, who has come to Fiddlersburg to gather material and get the proper feel for the movie he is thinking of producing about the
disappearance by government-engineered flood of this Tennessee town, has yet a third definition of what Fiddlersburg is. "Fiddlersburg," he says to himself as he sits at the base of the Confederate monument and notices how the buildings on River Street shift and heave in the moonlight, "was a Mystery Spot" (273), a place like one he knew in California, where a buried meteorite emits a magnetic field that causes "a profound disorder of the senses... Perspectives shift, equilibrium is impaired, the gut goes cold."

To a reader of Flood familiar with some of the recurring images traced in earlier chapters of this book, Yasha's simile comes uncannily close to describing what Fiddlersburg is—comes closest, that is, to describing what it is like to encounter once again a haunting fetus (haunting both Miss Pettifew and this reading of Warren), along with a fatherly figure who bears some parallel relation to the fetus—in this instance the need for exhumation. And Yasha's image of Fiddlersburg as a Mystery Spot of meteoric origin points as well to the possibility of a reality beyond the apparent narrative, beyond the world of this single novel, as if the source of its attractive force came from somewhere else in Warren's universe. Images are buried here that exert a disordering influence on these fictional characters, making them reenact rituals whose meaning they may not entirely understand, gestures that may make more sense in a larger context than that of their own story. Flood may provide yet another metaphor for this insistent repetition in the central event upon which its plot turns: a stuck record that keeps saying the same word over and over again.

This repetition eventuates in adultery and murder. Back in 1940, twenty years before Brad Tolliver returned to his hometown with Yasha Jones to make the movie, Brad and his first wife, Lettice Poindexter, were dancing to records in the old Fiddler house (thus named because Brad's father had acquired it by foreclosing on Dr. Amos Fiddler's mortgage) with his sister, Maggie, whose husband, Dr. Calvin Fiddler, Amos's son, was in Nashville doing his internship, and their guest, the young engineer Alfred O. Tuttle, whom they always called "Tut." Brad put on "The Continental" and he never changed it, just flipped the needle back up near the beginning... there was nothing but that same record over and over, saying, 'the Continental—the Continental,' just that one crazy word..." (316–17)—as Maggie was to recall it later. And to make matters worse, "Brad must have scraped it—the record, that is—the last time he shifted the needle back to the start. The record, all at once, was stuck. Stuck in one groove and going on and on, with just that one word: 'the Continental—the Continental—'" (319). Brad had made Tut dance with Lettice, then with Maggie, while he danced with Lettice, "his hand on the bareness of her behind, under that tight purple cloth." The combination of this bold example and the insistence of "that one crazy word" was too much for young Tut. Brad dragged Lettice upstairs to bed, unwillingly, "her left arm straight ahead of
her as though it were a rope Brad was pulling her by” (318), and Mrs. Calvin Fiddler and Arthur Tuttle were left to dance alone. Maggie suddenly heard him make “a sound like a painful, breathed-out groan. It was as though something had given way. . . . Then, in a sort of grinding whisper, he was saying: ‘That God-damned record—if the record hadn’t got stuck—if it hadn’t got stuck . . .’” (319). The drift seems to be that Tut came in his pants, which incontinence did not prevent his subsequently taking Maggie outside to make love “right on the grass under the hydrangeas.” When Calvin found out, he shot and killed him and was tried and sentenced to the penitentiary on the hill in the heart of Fiddlersburg.

These incidents in 1940 are not unlike Yasha’s buried meteorite; for, though deep in the past of these characters, it exerts its influence on subsequent events. In 1960 Maggie is still married to Calvin but has not visited him in prison in all that time, although she has been devotedly faithful to him and has sacrificed herself to the care of his aged and senile mother. When, in the course of his research visit with Yasha Jones, her brother invites another younger engineer, Digby (who is working on the proposed flooding of Fiddlersburg), for drinks one evening, Maggie is painfully aware of the irony of the coincidence. “‘Why did Brad bring him!’ she cried. ‘I hate him for that. . . . It was a long time ago. . . . That other young engineer off the river. His name was Al Tuttle—Alfred O. Tuttle—they called him Tut—and my husband shot him’” (190).

It is not Digby, however, but Yasha Jones who comes closest to re-playing the role of Maggie’s seducer, Tut (not that Digby will not have a role of his own to play in the working-out of the implications of Brad’s scratching needle). For the reasonably happy ending of the story is that Yasha wins Maggie away from Cal, although not without very nearly sharing Tut’s fate at the hand of a gun-wielding, angry husband.

Some hint that this is going to happen occurs early on when Maggie makes a mistake concerning Yasha Jones’s bathrobe. She enters his bedroom bearing a tray of refreshments and remarks how Egyptian he looks in what is, in fact, a Japanese kimono. “‘It’s a very pretty robe,’” she says. “‘It makes you look like pictures in the Old Testament, Egyptian, you know—like Pharaoh, or something.’ ‘Just dig up,’ I said” (95), suggesting she thinks he looks like a recently exhumed mummy. Later that evening she tells everybody else the same thing:

“You know,” she said, “I most indecently stumbled into Mr. Jones’ room this afternoon . . . and there he was propped up in an Egyptian robe, like a Pharaoh in the pictures in the Old Testament part of the Bible, and there—”

“Japanese,” Yasha Jones interrupted, “the robe, I mean.”

She ignored him. . . . (100-101)
And still later she will persist in her error:

“I thought you were an Egyptian,” Maggie said. “In your robe of state I thought you were an Egyptian Pharaoh.”

“No,” he laughed, “not even the mummy of one.”

She laughed too, but a very peculiar thing, even before she laughed, had happened to Yasha Jones . . . he suddenly thought of himself . . . lying on the big tester bed, the bed where, he remembered, that strongly made, thick-skulled man there had once grappled, in darkness, with a tall, slim, yearning girl who happened to have had a CP card. He thought of himself . . . lying there in late afternoon light . . . wrapped in that russet and black robe . . . with, somehow, the head of Maggie Tolliver quietly on his arm. (104)

The thick-skulled man was Brad and the tall, slim Communist, Brad’s former wife, Lettice. What Yasha is doing here, without in any way realizing it (for Maggie has not yet told him the story of what happened twenty years ago), is to fantasize himself into Maggie’s arms, in the same way Tut had done that evening when Brad led his wife up to bed and left him alone to do the same with Maggie. It is a bit more understandable that Maggie should keep insisting that Yasha looked Egyptian, for it makes him like Tut—as in King Tutankhamen, the mummy of a Pharaoh, whose discovery had been big news several years before (1922). But the resemblance that their nicknaming of Tuttle made possible had to wait twenty years to find its realization in the person of Yasha Jones in a falsely Egyptian robe.

However, the fullest realization of that resemblance lies outside Flood. For Yasha, in his “russet and black Japanese robe of coarse silk” (88), looking Egyptian, remarkably resembles Bogan Murdock in Warren’s second novel, who likewise wore “a Japanese robe of russet silk” and, what is more, displayed “an Egyptian delicacy of bone,” looking “like a carved figure on a tomb, or . . . a dead body laid out ceremonially” (182-83). The likeness is striking, and at the very least it is a reminder that Yasha was right in saying that what happens in Fiddlersburg is like the magnetic effect of a hidden object from another world—in this instance from another novel. One could also point to the underlying connections in At Heaven’s Gate linking Murdock to the other mummies there, those Sweetwater envisioned when he thought of their resemblance to certain exhumed fetuses. The most promising avenue of inquiry, however, is to pursue how it may be that Yasha Jones is to Brad Tolliver as Bogan Murdock was to Jerry Calhoun—that is, as fatherly employer to sonlike employee.

One does not have far to look. Yasha, of course, is the man who hired Brad to write his movie. Brad has to write a text—the script, the treatment—that will please Yasha; and that is by no means an easy task, as Brad
learned when he tried out a scenario that called for a "son in prison, rather like Calvin Fiddler," to be married to a woman "rather, I suppose, like Maggie," who stays home to care for the son's father (rather like Calvin's mother). A "dam will flood them out. . . . Then the prison break. The husband, crazed by rumors—" (342)—in other words, what really will happen later when Calvin escapes, arrives at the Fiddler house brandishing a pistol, and finds Maggie and Yasha in love with each other. Brad wrote his script in four days and five sleepless nights and left it under Yasha's door. When Yasha came down to talk it over with him the next day, he was once again "wearing the black Japanese kimono" (341), a costume whose appropriateness is only now fully emerging. He tells Brad that despite the fact that he has never read anything more "expert," and that things do have a way of happening like this, the plot just does not capture the feeling of Fiddlersburg, in particular the feeling Yasha remembers from *I'm Telling You Now*, the book of short stories in which Brad had lovingly detailed life in the town of his youth, and of which the title story concerned old Izzie Goldfarb. What Yasha Jones wants is a repeat performance.

The editor Telford Lott had played a similar role at an earlier stage in Brad's writing career, though his seemingly uncritical acceptance of what Brad had written but did not like was troubling. Tolliver had come under Lott's aegis while in college, when Lott arranged the publication of a collection of his stories to follow up the success of "I'm Telling You Now," his story about Izzie Goldfarb. It was Izzie's death, and Brad's guilt over not having gone to tell him goodbye before leaving for college (hence the title), which had awakened his literary gift. Telford, on his part, saw in Bradwell Tolliver a son, "a way, however modest, to touch the future" (61). However, Brad was at least dimly aware that his memories of a Fiddlersburg boyhood were not going to be enough to sustain him as a writer. Feeling the need for some lived experience, and caught up in the ideology of the Loyalists, of which his involvement with Lettice Poindexter—Lott's former mistress—had provided a heavy dose, Brad went to fight in the Spanish Civil War. "His fear of having no story was one of the motives that impelled him. . . . He did not yet know that the true shame is in yearning for the false, not the true, story" (68). When Brad returned, Telford gave him a handsome advance to write a novel about his experience. Six months but only eighty-three pages later, Brad was in terrible shape and unable to write his assignment with any conviction. He was suddenly seized by the impulse to return to Spain, thinking, "with a flash of elation, of killing a faceless enemy. Then in that split second, the faceless enemy wore the face of Telford Lott" (145). He went to Fiddlersburg instead and married Lettice, hoping to start a new life and resume a writing career untrammeled by Telford's sincerely meant but unwanted assistance.

Brad's rage at Telford Lott may well have had its origin in his editor's
demanding a text he could not produce. Given Lott's paternal role in Brad's life, this was not only an oedipal rage but also an interesting, and new, variation on the relationship among father, son, and text that has so consistently undergirded the plots of Warren's novels. Here once again the plot turns upon a paternal text. Not, as before, one written by the father for the son to read, but one the father demands the son write. Yet, once produced, it will become the father's text because the father has paid for it. Telford had given Brad a two-thousand-dollar advance on the novel about Spain; Yasha Jones will pay him handsomely for the script of the Fiddlersburg film. And the very first text Brad Tolliver wrote literally embodied just such a paternal demand:

On good evenings in spring, when the light began to hold late, Abraham Goldberg—Old Abie, with his stooped shoulders, pale brow, paper-thin nose and dark pained eyes—would come out of the tailor shop on River Street, and prop himself in a split-bottom chair to read. . . . What does an old Jew sitting in front of his tailor shop, alone in a lost town . . . think as he stares in the red sunset?

I do not know. Now I shall never know.

All I know is that, when the time came for me to go away from that town . . . I did not tell you goodbye. But I am telling you now. (230)

"I'm Telling You Now," with its self-referential title, is precisely what it says it is, the text that must take the place of the goodbye not spoken in time. It is the least the writer can do. He owes it to the man who had been such a father to him.

This may go a long way toward explaining why it is that when Brad meets Yasha for the first time at the airport, knowing him only from his photographs, he is convinced he is a Jew (a mistake Yasha clears up later [103-4]) and is reminded of Israel Goldfarb. Waiting for the plane, Brad knew he “was enough the true-born son of Fiddlersburg to carry the image of a Jew in his head as the archetypal image of all exoticism, especially of that exoticism of secret wisdom and slightly sinister learning. . . . So the image that came into his head now, after that of Yasha Jones . . . was the image of little old Mr. Israel Goldfarb . . . ” (15). For Goldfarb, with his books in languages that no one in town could even identify, perfectly embodied that archetype of secret, and sinister, wisdom.

Brad's relationship to his biological father was overshadowed by a desperate struggle over texts. Having foreclosed on Dr. Amos Fiddler, Lancaster Tolliver had come into possession of the house and its furnishings, including Amos's extensive collection of books. Young Brad had acquired the habit of going into the house's library and reading everything he could
lay his hands on, but one day he discovered that his father had a different use for the books—he was tearing out pages and rolling them into spills for the fire. Thirteen-year-old Brad walked over to take a book out of his father's lap. Lancaster snatched it back, tossed it into the fire, and struck his son a glancing blow on the head, all in the same gesture. The son slid to one knee to save the book from the fire. The father took another from the shelf and repeated the process, and everything happened as before. On the fourth attempt, the boy, dazed, could no longer get up. The father "leaned over and thrust his own hand into the fire and jerked out the book. He stared at the book very curiously. It was as though such an object were preposterously strange to him. Then he flung the book to the floor, in front of the crouching boy, and with no word, was gone" (117). Lank Tolliver then fled to the swamp, as it was his habit to do, not to return for days. The son had won, in a way; he was to win again, more dramatically, when he discovered something about his father's flights into the wilderness. It was from Frog-Eye, a veritable swamp creature whose one good eye bulged like a frog's, that Brad learned the truth about his brutal, but not omnipotent, father. Frog-Eye led him "to the spot where Lancaster Tolliver lay in the mud of the deep swamp, unconscious, with the marks of tears yet on his cheeks" (176).

Like Ham in the aftermath of the story of another Flood, Brad has had the privilege, and the burden, of gazing on his naked, drunken father (it was in emotional, if not literal, nakedness that Lank Tolliver lay in the mud). Although he "could not bear the knowledge that his father, in his brutality, could lie in the mud and weep," he turned what would have been Noah's curse into, if not a blessing, at least a tactical advantage. For when the time came for Brad to try to enforce that clause in his mother's will that stipulated a sum to be used to educate her children "at some institution of standing, not situated in Fiddlersburg," he was ready. He coolly made it known one morning at breakfast that he was going to the Maury Academy in Nashville in the fall. It was with some measure of joy—he was "exhilarated with the image"—that he saw "the purple rush of blood to the father's face," for he knew that this time his son had the perfect answer to the expected refusal, the revelation of what he had learned in the swamp.

"I have seen you crying," the boy said.

The man stared at him. The purple of the face was, all at once, streaked with white. But the hand was still raised.

"Yes," the boy said. "I've seen you lying in the mud, in the swamp where you go to cry. You had been crying."

The man's hand was quivering in the air. (177)

The father's face would turn purple once more, and for the last time, when the banker cousin on Brad's mother's side who managed the children's trust fund in Memphis told Lank it was time to fulfill the mother's bequest for
Maggie's schooling. He hinted at Tolliver's imminent financial ruin, and Brad's father once more fled to the swamp, this time for good. His body was found two days later, rather as his son had found it the time before, "sprawled face down in the damp black earth" (198).

It would seem that the unconscious memory of the purpling of his father's brow that had so "exhilarated" Brad on one occasion and presaged his father's death on another had something to do with the extraordinary embarrassment Brad felt when he suddenly realized that the purple scar with which he endowed a fictional character in an imagined scene for the movie was in fact based on the very real scar Yasha Jones bore on the side of his bald head. When Brad had first laid eyes on Yasha at the Nashville airport, he did not at first realize who he was, even though he was the last to get off the plane. "But no: this couldn't be Yasha Jones—not this figure in the tousled nondescript gray suit, nondescript gray hat..." (19). But the "instant the hat came off, it was, of course, Yasha Jones. The skull was not merely bald. . . . On the left side . . . was a strange irregular shape, outlined in the faintest pink tracery on the tan skull, lying there on the bulge of the skull to suggest a pale, bleached-out, pink, ghostly continent on a somewhat elongated parchment-colored globe. Within that continent, almost imperceptible lines ran crisscrossing, faintly crazing and hatching the surface..." (20). Now the birthmark Brad invented was not pink, like Yasha's scar, but purple (like the flush he liked to see on his father's brow). Yet Brad was painfully aware of where the idea came from and was afraid that Yasha would take offense. Brad was imagining Digby, who in reality lived in a rented room in the Purtle household, falling in love with the blind but beautiful Leontine Purtle.

"Here is the gimmick. The guy is a perfectly decent-looking guy. But for one thing. He has a——"

He stopped.

He found that his glance had fallen upon Yasha Jones. Yasha Jones was not wearing his hat. His left side was toward Brad Tolliver, who, in that instant, with a sickening swoop of his guts, saw the scar on the skull and thought: Christ, that's where I got it! Christ, he'll know I got it there.

"Yes," Yasha Jones was asking, courteously, "a what?"

"A birthmark——" Brad said.

And thought: Did I come in fast enough?

Saying: "——a hell of a thing, purple, on one side of his face. It comes up under the eye, too high for a beard to help . . . a hell of a thing——" (125)

Perhaps he was going to say pink, and caught himself in time. But that he said purple made it resemble the discoloration of another father's face (and
we remember what was fatherly about Yasha Jones—and Telford Lott, and Izzie Goldfarb).

But although the scar on Yasha's skull (along with the color of Brad's enraged father's brow) lay behind the birthmark on Digby's fictive face, it is quite likely that something else lies behind that pink, ghostly continent of a scar crazed by almost imperceptible lines—that is, behind the words Brad uses to describe it. That something else is what, borrowing Yasha Jones's terminology, we could call the buried meteorite of the story: Brad's inadvertent scratching of the surface of the record to which he and Lettice, Maggie and Tut were dancing so that all it did was repeat "just that one crazy word," the Continental; continental as in "pink, ghostly continent"; continental, too, as in content—so that, thanks to what Brad accidentally inscribed on the record with the stylus of the phonograph, the name of the song ("The Continental") becomes as self-referential as the title of Brad's first story, naming its own content (the only content it had left after Brad was done with it).

That the novel is concerned with such things is evident from another scene with a record, a record from which, in this case, the title has been removed, in contrast to "The Continental," of which only the title remained. Leontine Purtle has enticed Brad to come to her room so she can show him a surprise. She tells him to close his eyes and puts on the phonograph a recording of his famous short story "I'm Telling You Now," taking care to start the needle after the announcement of the title, so that it will start precisely at the first line of the story and thus not spoil the surprise. This is no mean feat for someone who is blind. Brad does not like hearing his own story read back to him but is nevertheless amazed at what Leontine can do with the needle. "'I'm damned if I see how you got that thing started right off. No title, and all' " (230).

If we pursue the coincidence of these needles, they point us in the direction of not only another needle but possibly the original one, the needle plied by Fiddlersburg's fatherly tailor: "little old Mr. Israel Goldfarb, crouched in his tailor shop on River Street . . . pained eyes bowed over the needle that moved slower every year as the arthritis did its work" (15–16). Its gradual retardation and eventual stop may or may not have anticipated the stasis Brad's phonograph stylus achieved in its eternal return to the same, but Goldfarb did teach Brad something he was eventually able to put to good stylistic use, as Leontine was clever enough to point out:

"And that part where you go back to the grave. I could just cry. The first time or two I played it I did cry."

"I'll tell you something to dry your tears," he said. "I never went back. I just made that up. I had to end the story some damned way. . . . [W]hen you are writing a story or doing a
movie script, you hit some logic, and it is that logic, not the heart business, that drives you to a certain end. It is like chess, and—"

"Old Mr. Goldfarb," she said softly, "he left you his chess set—you, that part of the story is—"

"To hell with Goldfarb," he said. "What I'm trying to say is—"

But she was looking at him from the serene, blue, forgiving distance.

He shut up. (213)

In calling attention to the gift of the chess set Leontine may still be reacting, in her untutored way, to "the heart business," although her esthetic is not that far removed from Telford Lott's penchant for being "moved to tears by fiction presenting images of generosity or of human suffering patiently borne." But it is from the mouth of Brad himself that we learn that the logic of narrative is like the logic of chess, and that he learned the logic of chess from the old tailor to whom he is also indebted, in another way, for his first successful fiction. If Goldfarb is a father who demands a text from his son, he also is a father who gives his son some instruction in how to write it.

Brad learned logic from the tailor and transferred its relevance from chess to writing stories. But he also may have learned how (or how not) to ply a needle, the tailor's implement that, in the form of a record stylus (a term that sounds like a writing instrument), he made yield up the record's empty, self-naming content. Of course, it also put into train the disastrous events that drive the plot of the novel: Maggie's infidelity, Tut's death, and Calvin's incarceration—perhaps even a stillborn fetus, Brad's counterpart to the one that had haunted Miss Pettifew. For when he led Lettice up the stairs, leaving Maggie and Tut with the repeating record, they conceived, for the first time, a child. That action was not directly caused by the scratching of the record, but it was of a piece with it, in that both were the result of Brad's drunken frenzy. "'I told you,'" she complained to him later, "'as soon as you dragged me upstairs. I struggled with you. I told you I wasn't fixed'" (328). The miscarriage, however, was evidently brought about by the stress of Calvin's trial, as it occurred three days after the sentence (332)—and thus could ultimately be attributed to Brad's abuse of the needle.

It was in imagining a love life for Digby—the young engineer who, in Maggie's eyes, came uncomfortably close to resembling the other young engineer who had been so moved by Brad's accidental editing of the recorded song—that Brad realized he was projecting the image of Yasha's pink, continental scar where it did not belong. But he was really doing for Digby what he would like to have done, and eventually did do, for himself.
He imagined Digby as being fascinated by Leontine Purtle's blindness, and asking her what it was like to be blind; this is precisely what he himself asks her the day she plays him the record on his own story. And he will in fact sleep with her, at the Seven Dwarfs Motel, in a scene in which he once more encounters the paternal mark of Yasha's pink scar. On a bed with a pink chenille bedspread, "made pinker by the pink-shaded bed lamp" (359), "he saw the scar. It was, clearly, the scar from an appendix operation; expertly done, old, healed. There was only the faintest line and slightest pucker against the motionless perfection that glimmered opalescently in that dimness" (362). As the "faintest line" of a scar seen in a pinkish light, this expert result of a surgical procedure recalls the "faintest pink tracery" of "almost imperceptible lines" on Yasha's skull. But why in the world would the distinguishing mark of the movie producer show up here, on the belly of a woman whom our hero is about to enter?

The answer lies in the other surprising thing Brad notices about Leontine. She is not as inexperienced as he first thought. This begins to dawn on him when, to his considerable surprise, he encounters her diaphragm: "In that cold burst of awareness in which everything had exploded into meaning, he felt his erection sag. "'For Christ's sake...'" It was confirmed when Mortimer Sparlin, the black attendant at the Seven Dwarfs, later asked "'Tell me, Mac, how do you like blind tail... Sure, everybody knows Miss Purtle... Lots of boys, it would seem, like blind tail'" (363, 364).

Now the discovery of the appendectomy scar goes hand in hand with the revelation of the truth about Leontine Purtle. She is not, as it were, without blemish. And it is significant that the discovery of the scar comes as his hand is reaching for something else: "he... touched a forefinger to the upper swell of the right breast, and traced the curve down the narrowing, gracile sweep of the waist to the swell of the right hip. His hand was shaking. He felt that his breath was not coming right. Then he saw the scar" (361–62). What the scar tells him and what he is soon to learn from other sources is that someone else has been there before him. What the striking continuities between this scar and one we have seen before tell us is that the predecessor is the father.

The scar, "expertly done," is the mark of the father. The mark, for example, of the kind of work Brad Tolliver, under the guidance of the fathers for whom he had produced the texts they demanded, had himself proved capable of achieving. For it was precisely because Yasha Jones had referred to Brad's story (the one that had someone like Calvin Fiddler escaping from the pen, the one Yasha rejected) as expert that Brad was so upset that he went with Leontine to the Seven Dwarfs Motel:

"I wrote what is called a treatment—that is the story you later make the scenario from—and I showed it to my dear colleague
Flood

and employer, and he says it stinks. He says, in fact, that it is
expert.”

“But that—” she began. . . . “But expert,” she began again,

“That's a nice thing to say.”

“But the way Yasha Jones says it.” (353)

Brad should not, perhaps, have been too surprised to find a paternal inscrip-
tion on the body of the woman he is about to bed, since if he had realized
what he was doing when he signed the motel register he would have seen
that he came close to adopting the name of one of his fathers, Telford Lott:

“Bradwell Tolliver scribbled something that looked like Redfill Telffer . . .”
(357).

The particular expertise, of which the scar on Leontine Purtle is an
example commanding Brad's respect, belongs to a domain of paternal tex-
tuality that is the oldest Brad knew, as well as being of greatest importance
for the resolution of the plot of the novel. The texts for which Brad
struggled with his father over the fire had belonged to Calvin Fiddler's
father, Amos, and Amos was a doctor (while a verse from the text of the
biblical Amos serves as inscription to the novel). The climactic scene in
which Calvin, as Brad had predicted in the text rejected by Yasha Jones,
breaks out of prison, confronts Yasha and Maggie, wields a pistol, and un-
intentionally wounds Brad in the neck when he tries to grab the gun, is
given a satisfactory resolution because of the intervention of a paternal,
surgical text. Calvin was a graduate of The Johns Hopkins Medical School
but had lost his ability to practice medicine in prison because he could not
remember his medical texts. So, unfortunately, he could not perform the
kind of operation Leontine Purtle had once needed, and which Calvin's
father evidently did. As Calvin recounts the event:

“There was a man up here with a ruptured appendix and they
couldn't get a doctor in time, and I just let him die because I
didn't have the nerve—or something. Night after night, I'd lie
up here in my cot and shut my eyes and try to see the pages of
my old medical books, the way I used to before an examination.
Well, at night, here in the pen, I'd see them clear as could
be. . . . But when daylight came it would all disappear. . . . But
as soon as that gun went off, it was different. I stood there and
looked down and saw the wound in the throat, and at the same
instant I saw a page in the book—the big old chunky, falling-
apart, red Anatomy, by Piersol, the book my father had used,
the book I always used because he had used it. Yes, I saw the
page right there . . . and it said: 'Digital compression may be
used in the case of a stab wound. . . .’” (410)
And so he was able to perform an emergency tracheotomy on Brad with a ballpoint pen from Yasha Jones's coat pocket (398). If there were any doubt about whether it is legitimate in the context of Warren's *Flood* to equate the surgeon's scalpel with the writer's pen, it is surely negated by this detail.7

The contrivance is remarkable: Calvin combines his reading of his father's text with the instrument with which Yasha Jones—paternal in his own way to Brad—writes; his reading, furthermore, of a paternal text whose author's name says it can *pierce all*, in a novel in which the working tool of another father figure is a piercing needle, and in which the father's mark which the son finds on the woman he wants to bed appears, not only in the form of a scar met on the way, but even in what he finds when he gets there. Brad reveals this second sign when he thinks back to Suzy Martine and her “orchidaceously blossoming, brown-petaled, self-offering, immolation-inviting, crimson-winking, crimson-hearted slash” (420; emphasis added). It's the wink that catches one's eye, if one has seen it before, in *The Cave*, when “you-know-what winked like glory” (20). And in case one still does not identify it, Warren will tell us, as plainly as can be, in the poem “Homage to Theodore Dreiser”: “the cunt / Winks.” But how can it be that the wink the father ambiguously flashes in *All the King's Men*, and elsewhere, now emerges from the essence of woman? Because it is the result of the father's piercing penetration—because it is his mark.

It is perhaps significant in this regard that Brad Tölliver should have found himself in the bizarre situation of wanting to communicate with blind Leontine Purtle through an exchange of winks, a clearly impossible feat: “He had the crazy impulse to wink at her. To wink at her because it was a joke. . . . And she would wink back, because it was sure a joke” (231).

Now Mortimer Sparlin, the black gas station and motel attendant who clearly knew so much about Leontine Purtle that Brad did not, does know how to wink. As Brad was about to drive away from his first visit to the site of the Seven Dwarfs Motel in chapter 1, “ 'Yassuh, boss,' the man in the trick pants murmured, and looked up at the enormous black face on the second sign, with the bloated minstrel-show lips; and winked” (11). Sparlin is not what he seems—not the obsequious black servant the sign represents but a graduate student in literature. And he has a pretty good idea what it is like to lie with someone like Leontine Purtle in a bed in the Seven Dwarfs Motel. For example, there had been the woman with out-of-state plates who propositioned him when he brought ice and Seven-Up to her motel room at 1:00 A.M., and whose looks were improved by the characteristically pink light that would later shine on Leontine Purtle's scar: “the face promised to be acceptable, especially with the only illumination that from the pink-silk-shaded bed lamps cunningly arranged by the management of Happy Dell” (11). When Brad was on his way to the motel office to pay for the room he had enjoyed with Leontine, he came close to sparring with
Sparlin when the latter asked him how he liked blind tail and, when Brad started an irate response, "with a motion like a flick of a cat's paw, had knocked him down" (363).

Brad suffered at the hands of another man with a one-eyed look in the person of Dr. Ramon Echegaray, who was literally one-eyed—one eye covered by a black patch, the other "black as the hole in the muzzle of a gun" (148)—and who was responsible for the collapse of Brad and Lettice's marriage. We recall that Echegaray was a veteran of the Spanish Civil War with whom Lettice had a one-night stand just before she and Brad were to be married. She confessed to Brad, who forgave her. But later, when Brad finds her grieving over news of Echegaray's death in an outdated issue of *Time* and does not share her sadness, they know it is the end of their marriage (all this in the aftermath of Calvin's conviction for murder).

Now Echegaray, with his "black hole" of an eye, is, I believe, a version of the one-eyed father—the father who has a prior claim on the son's bride, as winking Mortimer Sparlin had on Leontine Purtle. For that black hole is also, precisely, all that is left of the father who is God, "the black hole in the sky God left when He went away," of which Brad speaks when he tries to explain Fiddlersburgian theology to Yasha Jones (166). And on the very night when Lettice back in New York was having her adventure with the man whose single eye was a black hole, Brad was venturing downstairs in his boyhood home in Fiddlersburg in the dark with his flashlight to gaze upon the black hole in the library his father left when he went away, "the spot where the coffin had rested on its trestles" (196). He wept, but could not understand why.

If Mortimer Sparlin's surname seems to echo his boxing talent (he "danced back in his boxer's crouch, grinning. . . . 'Skip it, Mac—I'm high-rated in Golden Gloves'" [363]), his first name aligns him with the last text-demanding father Brad Tolliver will confront in the novel, Mort Seebaum, the Hollywood mogul who wants to hire Tolliver for the Fiddlersburg script after Yasha Jones's resignation. On the next-to-last page, Brad finally breaks free from the constraints of all these paternal texts (those demanded by Yasha Jones, Telford Lott, and even Israel Goldfarb) by tearing up the telegram in which Mort Seebaum confirms his offer: "With a sudden motion he thrust his left hand into the inner pocket and seized the telegram. . . . He grasped the telegram in both hands and tore it across. He carefully laid the yellow halves one on top of the other, and tore again. He let the pieces flutter away from him, to the grass . . ." (439). This decisive gesture is soon followed by the realization that he is absolved, too, of another paternal obligation: "he knew that now, at this moment, he did not need to try to find the grave of Israel Goldfarb."

In other words, Brad will not have to perform the work of yet another Mortimer, the one who gave notice of his intent to take charge of the
physical burial of Israel Goldfarb (the one that took place when Brad was away in college, a quarter-century before) through the same kind of message Brad tears up here, a telegram:

Mr. Goldfarb, he heard later, had got a bang-up funeral. On the wall above the cot where he slept in the back of his shop they found an address pinned to the wall, some Goldfarb in Cincinnati, and the Methodist preacher . . . had telegraphed. The answer had been prompt:

PLEASE HOLD BODY TILL ARRIVAL ALL EXPENSES GUARANTEED

MORTIMER GOLDFARB

(17)

Tearing up Mort Seebaum’s telegram and desisting from the search for Goldfarb’s grave are intimately related: Brad is both refusing to be Mort’s (Seebaum’s) son and refusing to become a filial Mortimer (Goldfarb). As either Izzie Goldfarb, who knew the language well, or Yasha Jones, who successfully assumed a Frenchman’s identity in the Resistance, could have told him, “Le père est mort.”