

Change and the Inability
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I.

I call my grandfather—my mother’s father—and he answers on the fourth ring. I know, at his house, the calls echo straight through to outside: sharp and shrill and impossibly loud so that my elderly grandparents can hear them. Any cousin who still has their hearing walks past the amp hiding their ears. My papaw’s voice is not sharp or clear, but instead, deep, and cloudy, closed-throated to keep out unwanted objection.

“Mmm, yellow?” he answers, hum begun in the pit of his stomach and wormed out into the open air to make way for a rounded interpretation of the word “hello.” The hum always lasts longer than the word itself, a baited extension, a lingering moment to prepare himself for a conversation he hadn’t expected to have. It would not matter if he were speaking to a child of his own or to a child of the President of the United States; he answers, “Mmm, yellow?”

I have been hearing my grandfather speak throughout my life, hearing his stories, his anecdotes, his epithets, and he is a man of repetition. He is a man of preparation, a man of structure. He speaks the language he knows in the way he learned it seventy years ago, and it has not changed. My mother tells me an anecdote of her own: she calls her father’s father, and he answers, “Mmm, yellow?”

II.

I am driving roads I do not know, but do, and they are the same as ever: slate gray asphalt riddled with potholes, some filled, some not. Either way, the drive is rough, throwing me to one side or the other, wracking me with jolting cracks my tires cannot absorb. I am driving slowly through the church zone—the whole state is a slow church zone—but soon, I’ll be home. Home

is my grandparents' house, Mathiston, the only stoplight on Highway 82, the only town to straddle Choctaw *and* Webster County. The earth is wet and grassy, and when I am home, I hike out to the old railroad tracks behind the house. In 1888, those tracks gave birth to Mathiston, or "Mathis Town," eighty acres of land bought and owned by Bill Mathis for \$400. Today, that's just under ten thousand. One single semester of college costs more than that, but he could have paid millions for that town, and it still would not have been enough.

Mathiston has changed since 1888, and it hasn't. It is no longer a mere eighty acres, but the tracks still cut through the ground, dividing home from Trace-Way Restaurant, the friendliest hole in all of Webster County, and dividing home from Oldies but Goodies, an antique store in a blue-paneled building. It cuts apart the best florist in all of Mississippi, the grocery store my nana still calls "Gilliland's," and the ghost of a factory affectionately called "Red Cap," for its red roof. Mathiston is run down and dusty and where I learned to ride a bike and drive a car and love until I thought my heart would burst. Bill Mathis bought home for \$400, but I am driving these roads, roads I know even when I don't, and \$400 is chump change.

III.

My grandparents have turned the same stretch of that Mathiston earth since before I was born: forty acres of pasture and pine and a small algae pond on the edge of the woods that has not produced fish since Katrina. For my grandparents, the land is nothing but a crimson seeder plow stuck deep in the soil, pulling out weeds and roots and forgotten tomato twines while the earth it turns comes up hard and unforgiving. Outsiders may rave about the fertile Mississippi soil, but *we* know the dirt outside of the Delta is brittle, dry.

My papaw used to rise at four in the morning to hitch the tractor and dig out rows, knowing every summer day would go to begging the dirt to soften and to fortify. My nana used

to carry water to the garden one pitcher at time, pouring the first on the first zucchini vine, the second on the second, and continuing, on and on, until she had watered all the zucchini, the squash, the tomatoes, making her way to the house and back again and again to refill her pitcher with tap water. Though my grandparents can now afford a water hose of their own, they don't farm like they used to. Instead, they grow their zucchini and tomatoes in a circular bed lined with cracked and chalky red bricks, and Nana keeps sun-yellow petunias in the kitchen windowsill. When they turn the earth now, it is kind and soft to their life-calloused bodies. They break it apart with only their hands, but my grandfather still does not sleep past four, and Nana still waters the plants with a pitcher. I think it reminds her to be grateful.