



THE STRANGE FAMILY OF THINGS

Your spirit will spread little by little through the whole great body of empire, joining all things in the shape of your likeness. —SENECA

Henry Forge, Henry Forge!”
How far away from your father can you run? The boy disappeared into the corn, the green blades whisking and whispering as he raced down each canopied lane. The stalks snagged him once, twice, and he cried out like a wounded bird, grasping his elbow, but he didn’t fall. Once, he’d seen a boy break his arm in the schoolyard; there had been a bough-like crack of the thick bone snapping and when the boy stood, his arm hung askew with the bone protruding like a split ash kitchen spoon—

“Henry Forge, Henry Forge!”

Number one, I am Henry Forge.

His father’s voice echoed across the warped table of the earth, *domine deus omnipotens, dictator perpetuo, vivat rex, Amen!* The thick husks strained their ears toward the sound, but the boy was tearing across the tillable soil, soil that had raised corn for generations and once upon a time cattle with their stupid grazing and their manure stench. He was sick to death of cattle and he was only nine.

Number two, curro, currere, cucurri, cursus. I am forever running.

Silly child, he couldn’t know that the plants announced him, the flaxen

roof of the corn dancing and shaking as he passed, then settling back to coy stillness, or that his father was not in pursuit, but stood watching this foolish passage from the porch. On the second story, a window whined and a blonde voiceless head protruded with a pale, strangely transmissive hand making gestures for John Henry, John Henry. It pounded the sill twice. But the man just remained where he was, eyes to his son's headlong retreat.

The young boy was slowing now in the counterfeit safety of distance. He boxed the corn, some daring to feint and return, some breaking at the stalk. He didn't care; his mind refused to flow on to some future time when redress might be expected or demanded. There was fun in the flight, fun borrowed against a future that seemed impossible now. He had nearly forgotten the bull.

Number three, Gentlemen of the jury, I am not guilty!

The corn spat him out. His face scraped by the gauntlet, he clutched handfuls of husk and stood hauling air with his hair startled away from his forehead. Here the old land is the old language: The remnants of the county fall away in declining slopes and swales from their property line. The neighbor's tobacco plants extend as far as the boy can see, so that impossibly varying shades of green seem to comprise the known world, the undulating earth an expanse of green sea dotted only by black-ship tobacco barns, a green so penetrating, it promises a cool, fertile core a mile beneath his feet. In the distance, the fields incline again, slowly rippling upward, a grassed blanket shaken to an uncultivated sky. A line of trees traces the swells on that distant side, forming a dark fence between two farms. The farmhouse roofs are black as ink with their fronts obscured by evergreens, so the world is black and green and black and green without interruption, just filibustering earth. The boy knows the far side of that distant horizon is more of the bright billowing same, just as he knows they had once owned all of this land and more when they came through the Gap and staked a claim, and if they were not the first family, they were close. They were Kentuckians first and Virginians second and Christians third and the whole thing was sterling, his father said. The whole goddamn enterprise.

Number four, Primogeniture is a boy's best friend.

He heard the whickering of a horse around the wall of the corn and sprang to the fence that separated Forge land from the first tobacco field belonging to the Osbournes. He scrambled over the roughcut rails. Casting

back over his shoulder, he saw the proud bay head of a Walker turning the corner and darted to the first plants risen waist-high and crawled between two, prostrating himself on the damp, turned bed. His face pressed against the soil, which was neither red nor brown like bole when it stained his tattered cheek with war paint.

The horse and the man rounded the corner. The Walker was easy and smooth, head and neck supremely erect, its large eyes placid as moons with the inborn calm of its breed. It scanned its surroundings out of habit, slowing its pretty pace near the fence, then prancing alongside the timbers. A high tail jetted up like a fountain from a nicked dock, then streamed down overlaid pasterns almost to the ground. The tail trembled and betrayed the faintly nervous blood that coursed through the greater quiet of the horse.

“HmMMM,” said its rider, loud enough for the boy to hear in his low, leafy bower. Filip.

Number five, This race was once a species of property. It says so in the ledgers.

The man sat as erect as the horse, his back pin-straight as if each vertebra were soldered to the next. One hand grasped the reins, one rested easy on his thigh. A bright unturned leaf obstructed the features of his face, but the boy could see the high polish of the head under dark and tight-kinked hairs. That head was turning side to side atop a rigid back.

“Aw,” said the man suddenly, then reined left, and with one dancing preparatory pace, the horse took the fence with heavy grace, and the startled boy breached the plants like a pale fish, diving deeper into the tobacco field. The horse didn’t follow, but paused at the lip of the field, dancing sideways, her ears perked for her rider’s voice.

“Mister Henry,” said Filip.

Henry scrambled away on his hands and knees.

“Martha White can catch you,” Filip said. “Think she won’t?” He waited, then, “I’ll catch you on my own two feet. Think I won’t?”

Henry could no longer tell where he was in the endless tobacco. He curled around the base of a plant and yelled, “I didn’t do it!”

“Oh, I know you ain’t killed that bull!” Filip hollered back.

“I swear!”

“I know it, you know it. Some other fool done it,” said Filip. “Now get out of them plants.”

“No!”

“Come on now . . .”

Henry rose on unsteady feet, looking like a refugee wader in the sea. “Father’s angry at me.”

The man shrugged a stiff shoulder. “Set him straight. The reasonable listen to reason.”

“He didn’t send you after me?”

“Nah,” said Filip. “I seen you light out like a fox on the run, and I made after you.”

The boy bit his lip, fiddling with the last tailings of his reserve, then picked his way through the plants to the edge of the field. Filip stared down over the sharp rails of his cheekbones, but did not incline his head as he reached down his large hand, fingers unfurling. White calluses stood out on his skin like boils.

“Where will we go?” said the boy, all suspicion and still calculating the odds of the gamble.

“Where you want to go to?” the man said.

“Clark County,” Henry said, the first place that came to mind.

“That right?” Filip said, and a dry laugh scraped out of his burleyed throat. The boy could not make out the meaning of that laugh.

“Step up,” he said, and Henry did.

Number six, If you live, you gamble. A necessary evil.

Swung up by Filip’s strength and his own leap, he scrambled his way onto the man’s lap, straddling the withers. The short, wide neck of the horse shuddered and trembled under him like a dreaming dog. From where he sat, he could see straight down over her black cob and nose to her broad velveteen nostrils.

“Let’s go,” he said.

“Not yet. I’m going to roll me a cigarette first. Hold this,” said Filip, who drew a foil packet out of the breast pocket of his plaid shirt. “Huh, I ain’t got no papers,” Filip said, patting his pocket. “Want to ride to the store with me?”

“Sure,” Henry said, pressing tiny drops of blood from his knees into the bay’s neck. He painted them in with one finger and they disappeared into the body of the horse, which was red as deep as wine.

Filip gathered the reins, and Martha White backstepped and squared the fence.

“Up on her now,” said Filip, and when the horse sprang from its quarters, the boy clutched up high on her neck in alarm as the man inclined toward the boy’s back, and they sailed the fence.

“Don’t take me by the house!” cried Henry.

Filip reined hard to the left, and the mare switched back, so they followed a faint trace around the far side of the cornfield along the grassy farrow that separated the plants from the fencing. Henry could just see over the tops of the corn, which reached to his own chest and over the bobbing head of the horse. The tufted tops were plumed and entirely still save for one roaming breeze that grazed the surface like an invisible hand, meandering down from the house to the tobacco basin behind them. To their left ran the zigzagging split rail fence and in its shadow, the remnants of its predecessor. Built seventy years before, the fence had rotted down until it was subsumed by grass and soil. Now it showed only a faint sidewinding mound behind the younger fence.

Henry patted the mane of the horse. “Make her walk fancy,” he said.

Filip clicked twice and adjusted the reins and set the mare to a running walk, so her front legs appeared to labor, reaching and pulling the unbent back legs that boldly followed, her head rising and falling like the head of a hobbyhorse. The natural urge to run pressed hard against her stiff limbs, and in that dynamic tension her back neither rose nor fell, so her riders glided forward on her restraint as if on the top of a smooth-running locomotive. Henry leaned back against the wall of Filip’s chest.

“Does her head hurt?” said Henry, noting the jerky treading of her head before him.

“Nah.”

“Does she want to run?”

“She ain’t never said.”

“She’s like a machine.”

“Huh.”

Number seven, Living beings are just complex machines.

They rode on in silence to where the creek discoursed about the southern edges of the property, forming cutbanks and small sandy half-submerged

shoals amidst weeds and tall grasses and cane. Broad-trunked walnut and alder sprang up from the creek bed to shade it and to form a secret lane of the rocky waterway.

"Let's jump the fence and ride down in the water so they can't see us," said Henry.

Filip said nothing.

Henry twisted his neck to find the man's face. "Do it," he said.

"Martha White don't want to get her feet wet."

The end of the field was approaching, the house loomed.

"I don't want to go to the store anymore," Henry whined just as, with a sudden gripping motion, Filip slapped the reins hard, his arms fitting over the boy's like a brace over muslin.

"No!" But the Walker was bearing down into a gallop and the boy, unprepared, bounced painfully against the protruding pommel as they swerved hard around the corn's edge to where his father waited on the far side. Henry cried out, struggling as the horse pulled up before John Henry, neck extended and ears flattened away from the kicking, flailing passenger on her withers.

John Henry stepped to the horse, his lips pressed together so they looked like pale scars.

"You tricked me!" Henry cried, twisting around in the saddle to strike Filip with the point of his elbow but baring his neck as he did, so his father snatched him off the saddle by the ruff of his shirt like a runt puppy, and he hung there, suspended, making a strangling noise, his hands grappling up for his father's hands. He was dropped unceremoniously as the bay skittered to one side, sweeping Filip away.

"Nigger!" Henry cried.

"Be still!" said John Henry.

Number eight, Niggerniggerniggerniggerniggerniggerniggerniggernig

Filip reined toward the stables, and the mare sauntered away slow and sinuous, and though Henry's eyes were filling with tears and he could barely see, his mind scrambled for an association, the horse was like, the horse was like: something, someone, he couldn't name how it moved away on its widemold hips, ass dimpling with sinuous inlaid muscle, though he knew it was feminine, yes: it moved like a woman from the rear.

His father yanked him up, his hands an old story.



“I didn’t do it!” Henry cried, but his mouth formed words he was not really thinking, his mind having been startled by the strange family of things.

“Up!”

He would not up; he made himself be dragged, forgetting the horse now, forgetting Filip’s lying, begging until his voice rose so high that his words destructed into a bleating cry.

Father dragged son across a broad swath of grass to the post by the old cabins, all the while unfastening his black belt with one hand. He struggled to cinch it around his son, but the boy puffed out his belly like a horse tricking a girth strap loose. John Henry just turned him around, face to the post, so all the air expelled in a woof.

“Undo that belt and believe me you will regret it,” John Henry warned. The boy’s hands sagged at his sides without any more fight, and his head fell forward, cheek scraping the post. He cried without moving.

John Henry placed one hand firmly on his son’s crown. “Do you realize you might have died today? The foolish thing you did . . . I’m going to let you stand here a while and think about what that would have done to your mother.”

Henry said nothing.

“When I come back I’m going to whip you,” his father said, “but not until you’ve had a chance to stand here and think. Do not touch that god-damn buckle, boy.”

“But I didn’t do it,” Henry parleyed.

John Henry narrowed his eyes and said with thorny quiet, “You’re a liar, and that makes you an embarrassment to me.”

The boy went to cry or speak.

“I gave you that mouth. I’ll tell you when to open it.”

He puckered his lips in a tiny sphincter of sorrow, and then his father was gone.

The scotched and furrowed pole had stood for more years than the boy could count. It was half as tall and nearly as thick as a man, long debarked and burnished by the years, its length seasoned by tears and blood and weather, but oh what did it matter, he was strapped like a pig to a spit, but he didn’t do it, he didn’t go onto the Miller property, where the bull stood with its

Number nine, Man shall rule over all the animals of the earth.



head turned away, utterly still, as if sleeping on its feet the way a horse does, not moving an inch—not for Henry’s creeping along the tall grass, not for his striking of the match—until the firecracker burst with a pop and a scream. Then the bull took one startled step forward and slumped stiffly to the ground, its chest seizing and its back legs twitching like electric wires, breath hissing out of its lungs like air escaping a tire.

John Henry was back, standing over him, casting him in shadow. He was broad and red to the coppery blondness of his son, but they were clearly of a kind, bound and separate as two pages in a book.

“I want you to listen to me well,” he said, the tart tongue of a crop gathered up in a hand lightly freckled by middle age. “I have a duty toward you, just as you have a duty toward me.”

“Father . . .,” low, imploring.

“No son of mine would ever lie to me.” He set his feet apart. “I don’t care, Henry, that you killed an animal today. An animal is just unthinking matter. I’m not sentimental about that. But you didn’t just kill an animal, you destroyed another man’s property. Bob Miller’s family has lived on that farm for three generations. Do you think he values his land? Ask yourself if we value ours. If he places value on land that bears an animal as relatively worthless as beef cattle and milk cows, how much more then do we value the land we’ve stewarded twice as long? Our crop is our family. So when you behave in a manner that’s beneath us, when you act the fool, then you shame a long line of men that is standing behind you, Henry, standing behind you watching you always.” Then he said, “I can only hope you’re listening to me. You have no idea what a man sacrifices for his son.”

He reached down and tugged the shorts from the boy’s hips, so they pooled in a khaki heap around his ankles. His white underpants were sweated through, and the crack of his bottom showed a dark line through the cotton.

“Today I’m not whipping my son, just an animal. Because that’s how you’ve behaved.”

Henry pressed his torn cheek to the pole, his eyes bugging behind the lids. But the blow did not come. His father, ever the attorney, asked, “Do you have anything to say in your own defense?”