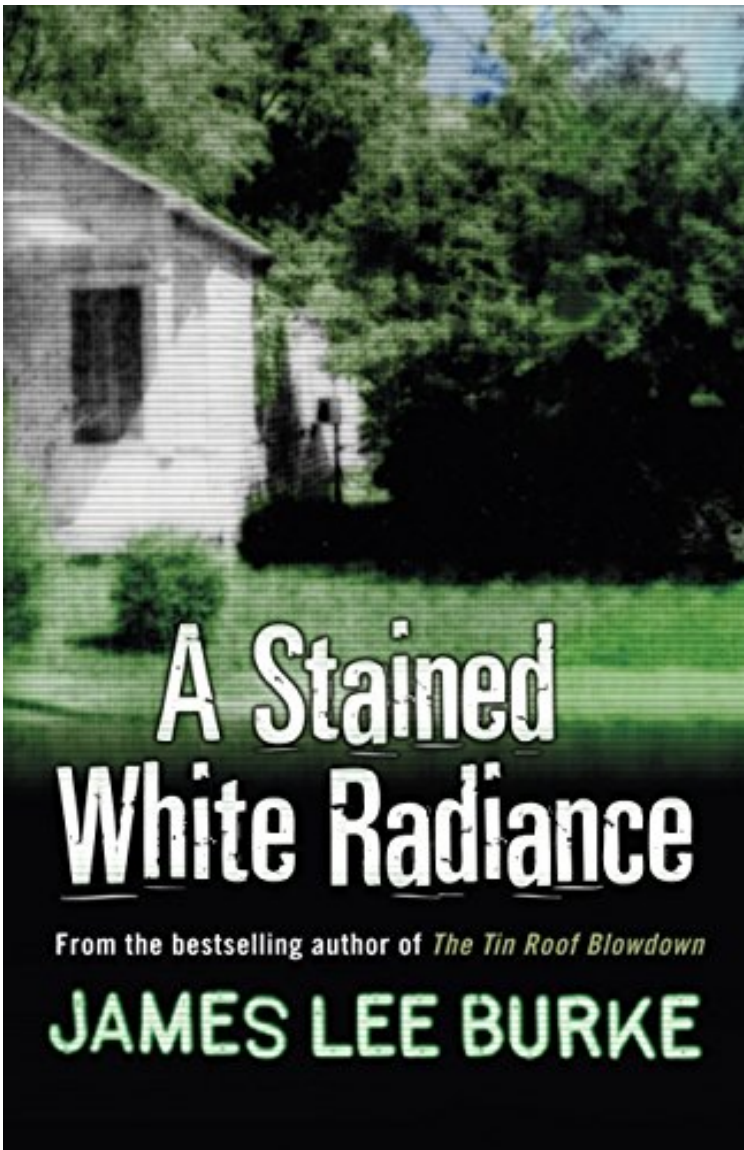


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A Stained White Radiance



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe fifth gripping novel in the highly acclaimed Dave Robicheaux series.A bullet shot through the window of Weldon Sonnier's house propels Dave Robicheaux back into the lives of a family he's not sure he wants to be reacquainted with ... Weldon Sonnier's CIA-influenced past has led to dangerous connections and commitments, including debts to local mob boss Joey 'Meatballs' Gouza. As Weldon puts himself in the line of fire, Lyle Sonnier, television evangelist and faith healer, reveals to Dave a violent family history that intersects menacingly with Dave's own. But overshadowing the manoeuvres of Gouza's gang is the spectre of racial politics, and it is former Klansman Bobby Earl who will prove to be Dave Robicheaux's most elusive enemy.Praise for one of the great American crime writers, James Lee

Burke: 'James Lee Burke is the heavyweight champ, a great American novelist whose work, taken individually or as a whole, is unsurpassed.' Michael Connelly 'A gorgeous prose stylist.' Stephen King 'Richly deserves to be described now as one of the finest crime writers America has ever produced.' Daily Mail

Fans of Dennis Lehane, Michael Connelly and Don Winslow will love James Lee Burke: Dave Robicheaux Series 1. The Neon Rain 2. Heaven's Prisoners 3. Black Cherry Blues 4. A Morning for Flamingos 5. A Stained White Radiance 6. In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead 7. Dixie City Jam 8. Burning Angel 9. Cadillac Jukebox 10. Sunset Limited 11. Purple Cane Road 12. Jolie Blon's Bounce 13. Last Car to Elysian Fields 14. Crusader's Cross 15. Pegasus Descending 16. The Tin Roof Blowdown 17. Swan Peak 18. The Glass Rainbow 19. Creole Belle 20. Light of the World 21. Robicheaux Hackberry Holland Series 1. Lay Down My Sword and Shield 2. Rain Gods 3. Feast Day of Fools 4. House of the Rising Sun Billy Bob Holland Series 1. Cimarron Rose 2. Heartwood 3. Bitterroot 4. In The Moon of Red Ponies * Each James Lee Burke novel can be read as a standalone or in series order * Extrait

Stained White Radiance CHAPTER 1 I HAD KNOWN THE Sonnier family all my life. I had attended the Catholic elementary school in New Iberia with three of them, had served with one of them in Vietnam, and for a short time had dated Drew, the youngest child, before I went away to the war. But, as I learned with Drew, the Sonniers belonged to that group of people whom you like from afar, not because of what they are themselves, but because of what they represent a failure in the way that they're put together, a collapse of some genetic or familial element that should be the glue of humanity. The background of the Sonnier children was one that you instinctively knew you didn't want to know more about, in the same way that you don't want to hear the story of a desperate and driven soul in an after-hours bar. As a police officer it has been my experience that pedophiles are able to operate and stay functional over long periods of time and victimize scores, even hundreds, of children, because no one wants to believe his or her own intuitions about the symptoms in the perpetrator. We are repelled and sickened by the images that our own minds suggest, and we hope against hope that the problem is in reality simply one of misperception. Systematic physical cruelty toward children belongs in the same shoebox. Nobody wants to deal with it. I cannot remember one occasion, in my entire life, when I saw one adult interfere in a public place with the mistreatment of a child at the hands of another adult. Prosecutors often wince when they have to take a child abuser to trial, because usually the only witnesses they can use are children who are terrified at the prospect of testifying against their parents. And ironically a successful prosecution means that the victim will become a legal orphan, to be raised by foster parents or in a state institution that is little more than a warehouse for human beings. As a child I saw the cigarette burns on the arms and legs of the Sonnier children. They were scabbed over and looked like coiled, gray worms. I came to believe that the Sonniers grew up in a furnace rather than a home. It was a lovely spring day when the dispatcher at the Iberia Parish sheriff's office, where I worked as a plainclothes detective, called me at home and said that somebody had fired a gun through Weldon Sonnier's dining-room window and I could save time by going out there directly rather than reporting to the office first. I was at my breakfast table, and through the open window I could smell the damp, fecund odor of the hydrangeas in my flower bed and last night's rainwater dripping out of the pecan and oak trees in the yard. It was truly a fine morning, the early sunlight as soft as smoke in the tree limbs. Are you there, Dave? the dispatcher said. Ask the sheriff to send someone else on this one, I said. You don't like Weldon? I like Weldon. I just don't like some of the things that probably go on in Weldon's head. Okay, I'll tell the old man. Never mind, I said. I'll head out there in about fifteen minutes. Give me the rest of it. That's all we got. His wife called it in. He didn't. Does that sound like Weldon? He laughed. People said Weldon had spent over two hundred thousand dollars restoring his antebellum home out in the parish on Bayou Teche. It was built of weathered white-painted brick, with a wide columned porch, a second-floor verandah that wrapped all the way around the house, ventilated green window shutters, twin brick chimneys at each extreme of the house, and scrolled ironwork that had been taken from historical buildings in the New Orleans French Quarter. The long driveway that led from the road to the house was covered with a canopy of moss-hung live oaks, but Weldon Sonnier was not one to waste land space for the baroque and ornamental. All the property in front of the house, even the area down by the bayou where the slave quarters had once stood, had been leased to tenants who planted sugarcane on it. It had always struck me as ironic that Weldon would pay out so much of his oil money in order to live in an antebellum home, whereas in fact he had grown up in an Acadian farmhouse that was over one hundred and fifty years old, a beautiful piece of hand-hewn, notched, and pegged cypress architecture that members of the New Iberia historical preservation society openly wept over when Weldon hired a group of half-drunk black men out of a ramshackle, backroad nightclub, gave them crowbars and axes, and calmly smoked a cigar and

sipped from a glass of Cold Duck on top of a fence rail while they ripped the old Sonnier house into a pile of boards he later sold for two hundred dollars to a cabinetmaker. When I drove my pickup truck down the driveway and parked under a spreading oak by the front porch, two uniformed deputies were waiting for me in their car, their front doors open to let in the breeze that blew across the shaded lawn. The driver, an ex-Houston cop named Garrett, a barrel of a man with a thick blond mustache and a face the color of a fresh sunburn, flipped his cigarette into the rose bed and stood up to meet me. He wore pilots sunglasses, and a green dragon was tattooed around his right forearm. He was still new, and I didnt know him well, but Id heard that he had resigned from the Houston force after he had been suspended during an Internal Affairs investigation. What do you have? I said. Not much, he said. Mr. Sonnier says it was probably an accident.

Some kids hunting rabbits or something. What does Mrs. Sonnier say? Shes eating tranquilizers in the breakfast room. What does she say? Nothing, detective. Call me Dave. You think it was just some kids? Take a look at the size of the hole in the dining room wall and tell me. Then I saw him bite the corner of his lip at the abruptness in his tone. I started toward the front door. Dave, wait a minute, he said, took off his glasses, and pinched the bridge of his nose. While you were on vacation, the woman called us twice and reported a prowler. We came out and didnt find anything, so I marked it off. I thought maybe her terminals were a little fried. They are. Shes a pill addict. She said she saw a guy with a scarred face looking through her window. She said it looked like red putty or something. The ground was wet, though, and I didnt see any footprints. But maybe she did see something. I probably should have checked it out a little better. Dont worry about it. Ill take it from here. Why dont you guys head up to the caf for coffee? Shes the sister of that Nazi or Klan politician in New Orleans, isnt she? You got it. Weldon knows how to pick em. Then I couldnt resist. You know who Weldons brother is, dont you? No. Lyle Sonnier. That TV preacher in Baton Rouge?

No kidding? I bet that guy could steal the stink off of shit and not get the smell on his hands. Welcome to south Louisiana, podna. Weldon shook hands when he answered the door. His hand was big, square, callused along the heel and the index finger. Even when he grinned, Weldons face was bold, the eyes like buckshot, the jaw rectangular and hard. His brown-gray crewcut was shaved to the scalp above his large ears, and he always seemed to be biting softly on his molars, flexing the lumps of cartilage behind his jawline. He wore his house slippers, a pair of faded beltless Levis, and a paint-stained T-shirt that molded his powerful biceps and flat stomach. He hadnt shaved and he had a cup of coffee in his hand. He was polite to me Weldon was always polite but he kept looking at his watch. I cant tell you anything else, Dave, he said, as we stood in the doorway of his dining room. I was standing there in front of the glass doors, looking out at the sunrise over the bayou, and pop, it came right through the glass and hit the wall over yonder. He grinned. It must have scared you, I said. Sure did. Yeah, you look all shaken up, Weldon. Why did your wife call us instead of you? She worries a lot. You dont? Look, Dave, I saw two black kids earlier. They chased a rabbit out of the canebrake, then I saw them shooting at some mockingbirds up in a tree on the bayou. I think they live in one of those old nigger shacks down the road. Why dont you go talk to them? He looked at the time on the mahogany grandfather clock at the far end of the dining room, then adjusted the hands on his wristwatch.

The black kids didnt have a shotgun, did they? I asked. No, I dont think so. Did they have a .22? I dont know, Dave. But thats what theyd probably have if they were shooting rabbits or mockingbirds, wouldnt they? At least if they didnt have a shotgun. Maybe. I looked at the hole in the pane of glass toward the top of the French door. I pulled my fountain pen, one almost as thick as my little finger, from my pocket and inserted the end in the hole. Then I crossed the dining room and did the same thing with the hole in the wall.

There was a stud behind the wall, and the fountain pen went into the hole three inches before it tapped anything solid. Do you believe a .22 round did this? I asked. Maybe it ricocheted and toppled, he answered. I walked back to the French doors, opened them onto the flagstone patio, and gazed down the sloping blue-green lawn to the bayou. Among the cypresses and oaks on the bank were a dock and a weathered boat shed.

Between the mudbank and the lawn was a low red-brick wall that Weldon had constructed to keep his land from eroding into the Teche. I think what youre doing is dumb, Weldon, I said, still looking at the brick wall and the trees on the bank silhouetted against the glaze of sunlight on the bayous brown surface. Excuse me? he said. Who has reason to hurt you? Not a soul. He smiled. At least not to my knowledge. I dont want to be personal, but your brother-in-law is Bobby Earl. Yes? Hes quite a guy. A CBS newsman called him the Robert Redford of racism. Yeah, Bobby liked that one. I heard you pulled Bobby across a table in Copelands by his necktie and sawed it off with a steak knife. Actually, it was Masons over on Magazine. Oh, I see. How did he like being humiliated in a restaurant full of people? He took it all right. Bobbys not a bad guy. You just have to define the situation for him once in a while. How about some of his followers Klansmen,

American Nazis, members of the Aryan Nation? You think they're all-right guys, too? I don't take Bobby seriously. A lot of people do. That's their problem. Bobby has about six inches of dong and two of brain. If the press left him alone, he'd be selling debit insurance. I've heard another story about you, Weldon, maybe a more serious one. Dave, I don't want to offend you. I'm sorry you had to come out here. I'm sorry my wife is wired all the time and sees rubber faces leering in the window. I appreciate the job you have to do, but I don't know who put a hole in my glass. That's the truth, and I have to go to work. I've heard you're broke. What else is new? That's the independent oil business. It's either dusters or gushers. Do you owe somebody money? I saw the cartilage work behind his jaws. I'm getting a little on edge here, Dave. Yeah? That's right. I'm sorry about that. I drilled my first well with spit and junkyard scrap. I didn't get a goddamn bit of help from anybody either. No loans, no credit, just me, four nigras, an alcoholic driller from Texas, and a lot of ass-busting work. He pointed his finger at me. I've kept it together for twenty years, too, podna. I don't go begging money from anybody, and I'll tell you something else, too. Somebody leans on me, somebody fires a rifle into my house, I square it personally. I hope you don't. I'd hate to see you in trouble, Weldon. I'd like to talk with your wife now, please. He put a cigarette in his mouth, lit it, and dropped the heavy metal lighter indifferently on the gleaming wood surface of his dining-room table. Yeah, sure, he said. Just take it a little bit easy. She's having a reaction to her medication or something. It affects her blood pressure. His wife was a pale, small-boned, ash-blonde woman, whose milk-white skin was lined with blue veins. She wore a pink silk house robe, and she had brushed her hair back over her neck and had put on fresh makeup. She should have been pretty, but she always had a startled look in her blue eyes, as though she heard invisible doors slamming around her. The breakfast room was domed and glassed-in, filled with sunlight and hanging fern and philodendron plants, and the view of the bayou, the oaks and the bamboo, the trellises erupting with purple wisteria, was a magnificent one. But her face seemed to register none of it. Her eyes were unnaturally wide, the pupils shrunken to small black dots, her skin so tight that you thought perhaps someone was twisting the back of her hair in a knot. I wondered what it must have been like to grow up in the same home that had produced a man like Bobby Earl. She had been christened Bama. Her accent was soft, pleasant to listen to, more Mississippi than Louisiana, but in it you heard a tremolo, as though a nerve ending were pulled loose and fluttering inside her. She said she had been in bed when she heard the shot and the glass break. But she hadn't seen anything. What about this prowler you reported, Mrs. Sonnier? Do you have any idea who he might have been? I smiled at her. Of course not. You never saw him before? No. He was horrible. I saw Weldon raise his eyes toward the ceiling, then turn away and look out at the bayou. How do you mean? I asked. He must have been in a fire, she said. His ears were little stubs. His face was like red rubber, like a big red inner-tube patch. Weldon turned back toward me. You've got all that on file down at your office, haven't you, Dave? he said. There's not any point in covering the same old territory, is there? Maybe not, Weldon, I said, closed my small notebook, and replaced it in my pocket. Mrs. Sonnier, here's one of my cards. Give me a call if you remember anything else or if I can be of any other help to you. Weldon rubbed one hand on the back of the other and tried to hold the frown out of his face. I'll take a walk down to the back of your property, if you don't mind, I said. Help yourself, he said. The Saint Augustine grass was wet with the morning dew and thick as a sponge as I walked between the oaks down to the bayou. In a sunny patch of ground next to an old gray roofless barn, one that still had an ancient tin Hadacol sign nailed to a wall, was a garden planted with strawberries and watermelons. I walked along beside the brick retaining wall, scanning the mudflat that sloped down to the bayou's edge. It was crisscrossed with the tracks of neutrials and raccoons and the delicate impressions of egrets and herons; then, not far from the cypress planks that led to Weldon's dock and boathouse, I saw a clutter of footprints at the base of the brick wall. I propped my palms on the cool bricks and studied the bank. One set of footprints led from the cypress planks to the wall, then back again, but somebody with a larger shoe size had stepped on top of the original tracks. There was also a smear of mud on top of the brick wall, and on the grass, right by my foot, was a Lucky Strike cigarette butt. I took a plastic Ziploc bag from my pocket and gingerly scooped the cigarette butt inside it. I was about to turn back toward the house when the breeze blew the oak limbs overhead, and the pattern of sunlight and shade shifted on the ground like the squares in a net, and I saw a brassy glint in a curl of mud. I stepped over the wall, and with the tip of my pen lifted a spent .308 hull out of the mud and dropped it in the plastic bag with the cigarette butt. I walked through the sideyard, back out to the front drive and my pickup truck. Weldon was waiting for me. I held the plastic bag up briefly for him to look at. Here's the size round your rabbit hunter was using, I said. He'd ejected it, too, Weldon. Unless he had a semiautomatic rifle, he was probably going to take a second shot at you. Look, from here on out, how about

talking to me and leaving Bama out of it? Shes not up to it. I took a breath and looked away through the oak trees at the sunlight on the blacktop road. I think your wife has a serious problem. Maybe its time to address it, I said. I could see the heat in his neck. He cleared his throat. Maybe youre going a little beyond the limits of your job, too, he said. Maybe. But shes a nice lady, and I think she needs help. He chewed on his lower lip, put his hands on his hips, looked down at his foot, and stirred a pattern in the pea gravel, like a third-base coach considering his next play. There are a bunch of twelve-step groups in New Iberia and St. Martinville. Theyre good people, I said. He nodded without looking up. Let me ask you something else, I said. You flew an observation plane off a carrier in Vietnam, didnt you? You must have been pretty good. Give me a chimpanzee, three bananas, and thirty minutes of his attention, and Ill give you a pilot. I also heard you flew for Air America. So? Not everybody has that kind of material in his dossier. Youre not still involved in some CIA bullshit, are you? He tapped his jaw with his finger like a drum. CIA... yeah, thats Catholic, Irish, and alcoholic, right? No, Im a coonass, my religion is shaky, and Ive never hit the juice. I dont guess I fit the category, Dave. I see. If you get tired of it, call me at the office or at home. Tired of what? Jerking yourself around, being clever with people whore trying to help you. Ill see you around, Weldon. I left him standing in his driveway, a faint grin on his mouth, a piece of cartilage as thick as a biscuit in his jaw, his big, square hands open and loose at his sides. **BACK AT THE OFFICE** I asked the dispatcher where Garrett, the new man, was. He went to pick up a prisoner in St. Martinville. You want me to call him? he said. Ask him to drop by my office when he has a chance. Its nothing urgent. I kept my face empty of meaning. Tell me, what kind of beef did he have with Internal Affairs in Houston? Actually it was his partner who had the beef. Maybe you read about it. The partner left Garrett in the car and marched a Mexican kid under the bridge on Buffalo Bayou and played Russian roulette with him. Except he miscalculated where the round was in the cylinder and blew the kids brains all over a concrete piling. Garrett got pissed off because he was under investigation, cussed out a captain, and quit the department. Its too bad, because they cleared him later. So I guess hes starting all over. Did something happen out there at the Sonniers? No, I just wanted to compare notes with him. Say, you have an interesting phone message in your box. I raised my eyebrows and waited. Lyle Sonnier, he said, and grinned broadly. On my way back to my office cubicle I took the small pile of morning letters, memos, and messages from my mailbox, sat down at my desk, and began turning over each item in the stack one at a time on the desk blotter. I couldnt say exactly why I didnt want to deal with Lyle. Maybe it was a little bit of guilt, a little intellectual dishonesty. Earlier that morning I had been willing to be humorous with Garrett about Lyle, but I knew in reality that there was nothing funny about him. If you flipped through the late-night cable channels on TV and saw him in his metallic-gray silk suit and gold necktie, his wavy hair conked in the shape of a cake, his voice ranting and his arms flailing in the air before an enrapt audience of blacks and blue-collar whites, you might dismiss him as another religious huckster or fundamentalist fanatic whom the rural South produces with unerring predictability generation after generation. Except I remembered Lyle when he was an eighteen-year-old tunnel rat in my platoon who would crawl naked to the waist down a hole with a flashlight in one hand, a .45 automatic in the other, and a rope tied around his ankle as his lifeline. I also remembered the day he squeezed into an opening that was so narrow his pants were almost scraped off his buttocks; then, as the rope uncoiled and disappeared into the hillside with him, we heard a whoomph under the ground, and a red cloud of cordite-laced dust erupted from the hole. When we pulled him back out by his ankle, his arms were still extended straight out in front of him, his hair and face webbed with blood, and two fingers of his right hand were gone as though they had been lopped off with a barbers razor. People in New Iberia who knew Lyle usually spoke of him as a flimflam man who preyed on the fear and stupidity of his followers, or they thought of him as an entertaining borderline psychotic who had probably cooked his head with drugs. I didnt know what the truth was about Lyle, but I always suspected that in that one-hundredth of a second between the time he snapped the tripwire with his outstretched flashlight or army .45 and the instant when the inside of his head roared with white light and sound and the skin of his face felt like it was painted with burning tallow, he thought he saw with a third eye into all the baseless fears, the vortex of mysteries, the mockery that all his preparation for this moment had become. I looked at his Baton Rouge phone number on the piece of message paper, then turned the piece of paper over in my fingers. No, Lyle Sonnier wasnt a joke, I thought. I picked up my telephone and started to dial the number, then realized that Garrett, the ex-Houston cop, was standing in the entrance to my cubicle, his eyes slightly askance when I glanced up at him. Oh, hi, thanks for dropping by, I said. Sure. Whats up? Not much. I tapped my fingers idly on the desk blotter, then opened and closed my drawer. Say, do you have a smoke? Sure, he said, and took his package out of his shirt pocket. He shook one loose and

offered it to me. Lucky Strikes are too strong for me, I said. Thanks, anyway. How about taking a walk with me? Uh, Im not quite following this. What are we doing, Dave? Come on, Ill buy you a snowball. I just need some feedback from you. I smiled at him. It was bright and warm outside, and a rainbow haze drifted across the lawn from the water sprinklers. The palm trees were green and etched against the hard blue sky, and on the corner, by a huge live oak tree whose roots had cracked the curb and folded the sidewalk up in a peak, a Negro in a white coat sold snowballs out of a handcart that was topped with a beach umbrella. I bought two spearmint snowballs, handed one to Garrett, and we sat down side by side on an iron bench in the shade. His holster and gunbelt creaked like a horses saddle. He put on his sunglasses, looked away from me, and constantly fiddled with the corner of his mustache. The dispatcher was telling me about that IA beef in Houston, I said. It sounds like you got a bad deal. Im not complaining. I like it over here. I like the food and the French people. But maybe you took two steps back in your career, I said. Like I say, I got no complaint. I took a bite out of my snowball and looked straight ahead. Let me cut straight to it, podna, I said. Youre a new man and youre probably a little ambitious. Thats fine. But you tainted the crime scene out at the Sonniers. He cleared his throat and started to speak, then said nothing. Right? You climbed over that brick retaining wall and looked around on the mudbank? You dropped a cigarette butt on the grass? Yes, sir. Did you find anything? No, sir. Youre sure? I looked hard at the side of his face. There was a red balloon of color in his throat. Im sure. All right, forget about it. Theres no harm done. Next time out, though, you secure the scene and wait on the investigator. He nodded, looking straight ahead at some thought hidden inside his sunglasses, then said, Does any of this go in my jacket? No, it doesnt. But thats not the point, here, podna. Were all clear on the real point, arent we? Yes, sir. Good, Ill see you inside. I have to return a phone call. But actually I didnt want to talk with him anymore. I had a feeling that Deputy Garrett was not a good listener. I called Lyle Sonniers number in Baton Rouge and was told by a secretary that he was out of town for the day. I gave the spent .308 casing to our fingerprint man, which was by and large a waste of time, since fingerprints seldom do any good unless you have the prints of a definite suspect already on file. Then I read the brief paperwork on the prowler reports made by Bama Sonnier, but it added nothing to my knowledge of what had happened out at the Sonnier place. I wanted to write it all off and leave Weldon to his false pride and private army of demons, whatever they were, and not spend time trying to help somebody who didnt want any interference in his life. But if other people had had the same attitude toward me, I had to remind myself, I would be dead, in a mental institution, or putting together enough change and crumpled one-dollar bills in a sunrise bar to buy a double shot of Beam, with a frosted schooner of Jax on the side, in the vain hope that somehow that shuddering rush of heat and amber light through my body would finally cook into ashes every snake and centipede writhing inside me. Then I would be sure that the red sun burning above the oaks in the parking lot would be less a threat to me, that the day would not be filled with metamorphic shapes and disembodied voices that were like slivers of wood in the mind, and that ten A.M. would not come in the form of shakes so bad that I couldnt hold a glass of whiskey with both hands. At noon I drove home for lunch. The dirt road along the bayou was lined with oak trees that had been planted by slaves, and the sun flashed through the moss-hung branches overhead like a heliograph. The hyacinths were thick and in full purple flower along the edges of the bayou, their leaves beaded with drops of water, like quicksilver, in the shade. Out in the sunlight, where the water was brown and hot-looking, dragonflies hung motionless in the air and the armor-plated backs of alligator gars turned in the current with the suppleness of snakes. A dozen cars and pickup trucks were parked around the boat ramp, dock, and bait shop that I owned and that my wife, Bootsie, and an elderly black man named Batist operated when I wasnt there. I waved at Batist, who was serving barbecue lunches on the telephone-spool tables under the canvas awning that shaded the dock. Then I turned into my dirt drive and parked under the pecan trees in front of the rambling cypress-and-oak house that my father had built by himself during the Depression. The yard was covered with dead leaves and moldy pecan husks, and the pecan trees grew so thick against the sky that my gallery stayed in shadow almost all day, and at night, even in the middle of summer, I only had to turn on the attic fan to make the house so cool that we had to sleep under sheets. My adopted daughter, Alafair, had a three-legged pet raccoon named Tripod, and we kept him on a chain attached to a long wire that was stretched between two oaks so he could run up and down in the yard. For some reason whenever someone pulled into the drive Tripod raced back and forth on his wire, wound himself around a tree trunk, tried to clatter up the bark, and usually crashed on top of one of the rabbit hutches, almost garroting himself. I turned off the truck engine, walked across the soft layer of leaves under my feet, picked him up in my arms, and untangled his chain. He was a beautiful coon, silver-tipped, fat and thick across the stomach and hindquarters, with a big ringed tail,

a black mask, and salt-and-pepper whiskers. I opened one of the unused hutches, where I kept his bag of cornbread and dry cracklings, and filled up his food bowl, which was next to the water bowl that he used to wash everything he ate. When I turned around, Bootsie was watching me from the gallery, smiling. She wore white shorts, wood sandals, a faded pink peasants blouse, and a red handkerchief tied up in her honey-colored hair. In the shadow of the gallery her legs and arms seemed to glow with her tan. Her figure was still like a girls, her back firm with muscle, her hips smooth and undulating when she walked. Sometimes when she was asleep I would put my hand against her back just to feel the tone of her muscles, the swell of her lungs against my palm, as though I wanted to assure myself that all the heat, the energy, the whirl of blood and heartbeat under her tanned skin were indeed real and ongoing and not a deception, that she would not awake in the morning stiff with pain, her connective tissue once more a feast for the disease that swam in her veins. She leaned against the gallery post with one arm, winked at me, and said, Comment la vie, good-lookin? How you doin yourself, beautiful? I said. I made toufe for your lunch. Wonderful. Did Lyle Sonnier get hold of you at the office? No. He called here? Yes, he said he had something important to tell you. I squeezed her with one arm and kissed her neck as we went inside. Her hair was thick and brushed in swirls, tapered and stiff on her neck and lovely to touch, like the clipped mane on a pony. Do you know why hes calling you? she said. Somebody took a shot at Weldon Sonnier this morning. Weldon? Whod do that? You got me. I think Weldon knows, but hes not saying. The older Weldon gets, the more Im convinced he has concrete in his head. Has he been in trouble with some people? You know Weldon. He always went right down the middle. I remember once he got caught stealing food out of the back of the poolroom in St. Martinville. The bartender pulled him out of the kitchen by his ear and twisted it until he squealed in front of everybody in the room. Ten minutes later Weldon came back through the door with tears in his eyes and grabbed a handful of balls off the pool table and smashed every inch of window glass in the place. Thats a sad story, she said. They were sad kids, werent they? I sat down at the table in front of my smoking bowl of crawfish toufe. The roux was glazed with butter and sprinkled with chopped green onions. The white window curtains with tiny pink flowers on them rose in the breeze that blew through the oak and pecan trees in the sideyard. Well, lets eat and not worry about other peoples problems. She stood close to me and stroked my hair with her fingers, then caressed my cheek and neck. I put my arm across her soft rump and pulled her against me. But you do worry about other peoples problems, dont you? she said. Under it all Weldons a decent guy. I think its a contract hit of some kind. I think hes going to lose, too, unless he stops acting so prideful. You mean Weldons mixed up with the mob or something? After he got out of the navy I heard he flew for Air America. It was a CIA front in Vietnam. I think that stuff involves a lifetime membership. I clicked my spoon on the side of the toufe bowl. Or maybe Bobby Earl has something to do with it. A guy like that doesnt forget somebody dragging him through the tossed salad by his necktie. Ah, a big smile on our detectives face. It would have made wonderful footage on the evening news. She leaned over me, pressed my head against her breasts, and kissed my hair. Then she sat across from me and started peeling a crawfish. Are you busy after lunch? she asked. Whatd you have in mind? You cant ever tell. She looked up and smiled at me with her eyes. I am one of the few people I have ever known who has been given two second chances in his life. After investing years in being a drunk and sawing myself apart in pieces, I was given back my sobriety and eventually my self-respect by what people in Alcoholics Anonymous call a Higher Power; then after the murder of my wife Annie, Bootsie Mouton came back into my life unexpectedly, as though all the years had not passed and suddenly it was once again the summer of 1957 when we first met at a dance out on Spanish Lake. Ill never forget the first time I kissed her. It was at twilight under the Evangeline Oaks on Bayou Teche in St. Martinville, and the sky was lavender and pink and streaked with fire along the horizon, and she looked up into my face like an opening flower, and when my lips touched hers she came against me and I felt the heat in her suntanned body and suddenly realized that Id never had any idea of what a kiss could be. She opened and closed her mouth, slowly at first, then wider, changing the angle, her chin lifting, her lips dry and smooth, her face confident and serene and loving. When she let her hands slide down on my chest and rested her head against mine, I could hardly swallow, and the fireflies spun webs of red light in the black-green tangle of oak limbs overhead, and the sky from horizon to horizon was filled with the roar of cicadas. I stopped eating and walked around behind her chair, leaned down and kissed her on the mouth. My, what kind of thoughts have you been having this morning? she said. Youre the best, Boots, I said. She looked up at me, and her eyes were kind and soft, and I touched her hair and cheek with my fingers. Then she looked out the window toward the front road. Whos that? she said. A silver Cadillac with television and CB antennas and windows that were tinted almost black turned off

the dirt road by the bayou and parked next to my pickup truck under the pecan trees. The driver cut the engine and stepped out into the yard, dressed in a suit that was silver-charcoal, a blue shirt with French cuffs, a striped red-and-blue necktie, and wrap-around black sunglasses. He pulled off his sunglasses gingerly with his right hand, which had only a carved, half-moon area where the two bottom fingers should have been, widened his eyes to let them adjust to the light, and walked over the layer of leaves and pecan husks toward the gallery. His black shoes were shined so brightly they could have been patent leather. Is that Bootsie began. Yeah, its Lyle Sonnier. He shouldnt have come out here. Maybe he tried at the office and they told him you were home. It doesnt matter. He should have arranged to meet me at the office. I didnt know you felt that way about him. He takes advantage of poor and uneducated people, Boots. He used the Ethiopian famine to raise money for that television sideshow of his. Look at the car he drives. Shhhh, hes on the gallery, she whispered. Ill talk to him outside. Theres no need to invite him in. Okay, Boots? She shrugged and said, Whatever you say. I think youre being a little too hard. Lyle grinned through the screen when he saw me walking toward the door. He had the same dark Cajun complexion as the other Sonniers, but Lyle had always been the thin one, narrow at the shoulders and hips, a born track runner or poolroom lizard and ultimately one of the most fearless grunts I knew in Vietnam. Except Vietnam and pajama-clad little men who hid in tunnels and spider holes were twenty-five years back down the road. Whats happenin, Loot? he said. How are you, Lyle? I said, and shook hands with him out on the gallery. His mutilated hand felt light and thin and unnatural in mine. I have to feed the rabbits and my daughters horse before I go back to work. Do you mind walking with me while we talk? Sure. Bootsie isnt home? He looked toward the screen. On the right side of his face was a shower of shrapnel scars like a chain of flesh-toned plastic teardrops. Shell be out directly. Whats up, Lyle? I walked toward the rabbit hutches under the trees so he would have to follow me. He didnt speak for a while. Instead he combed his waxed brown conked hair in the shade and looked out toward my dock and the cypress swamp on the far side of the bayou. Then he put his comb in his shirt pocket. You dont approve of me, do you? he said. I opened the chicken-wire door to one of the hutches and began filling the rabbits bowl with alfalfa pellets. Maybe I dont approve of what you do, Lyle, I said. I dont apologize for it. I didnt ask you to. I can heal, son. I looked at my watch, opened up the next hutch, and didnt answer him. I dont brag on it, he said. Its a gift. I didnt earn it. But the power comes through my shoulder, through my arm, right through this deformity of a hand, right into their bodies. I can feel the power swell up in my arm just like I was holding a bucket of water by the bail, then its gone, from me into them, and my arms so light its like my sleeve is empty. You can believe it or not, son. But its Gods truth. I tell you another thing. You got a sick woman up in that house. I set down the alfalfa bag, latched the hutch door, and turned to look directly into his face. Im going to ask two things of you, Lyle. Dont call me son again, and dont pretend you know anything about my familys problems. He scratched the back of his deformed hand and looked up toward the house. Then he sucked quietly on the back of his teeth and said, It wasnt meant as an offense. Thats not my purpose. No, sir. What can I help you with today? Youve got it turned around. You went out to Weldons, but he wouldnt tell you diddly-squat, would he? What about Weldons? Somebody shot at him. Bama called me right after she called yall. Look, Dave, Weldons not going to cooperate with you. He cant. Hes afraid. Of what? The same thing most people are afraid of when theyre afraidfacing up to the truth about something. Weldon doesnt impress me as a fearful man. You didnt know our old man. What are you talking about, Lyle? The man with the burned-off face that Bama saw through her window. Ive seen him, too. He was sitting in the third row at last Sundays telecast. I almost pulled the mike out of the jack when my eyes got focused on him and I saw the face behind all that scar tissue. It was like holding up a photographic negative to a light until you see the image inside the shadows, you know what I mean? By the end of the sermon sweat was sliding off my face as big as marbles. It was like that old son of a buck reached up with a hot finger and poked it right through my belly button. He tried to grin, but it wasnt convincing. Youre not making any sense, partner, I said. Im talking about my old man, Verise Sonnier. He was gone when I went down into the audience, but it was him. God didnt make two of his kind. Your father was killed in Port Arthur when you were a kid. Thats what they said. Thats what we hoped. He grinned again, then shook the humor out of his face. Buried alive under a pile of white-hot boilerplates when that chemical factory blew. Somebody shoveled up a pillow sack full of ashes and bone chips and said that was him. But my sister Drew got a letter from a man in the San Antonio city jail who said he was our old man and he wanted a hundred dollars to go to Mexico. He paused and stared at me a moment to emphasize his point, as though he were looking into a television camera. She sent it to him. Im afraid this has the ring of theater to it, Lyle. Yeah? Why would your father want to hurt Weldon? He looked away into the trees, his face shadowed, and brushed

idly at the chain of scar tissue that seemed to flow out of the corner of his eye. He has reason to want to hurt all of us. After we thought he was dead, we did something to somebody who was close to him. He looked back into my face. We hurt this person bad. What did you do? Ive made my peace on it. Somebody else will have to tell you that. Then I dont know what I can do for you. I can tell you what Weldon did to him. Or at least what the old man thinks Weldon did to him. He waited, and when I didnt respond he continued. When we were kids the old man had this obsession. He was going to be an independent wildcatter, a kind of legend like Glenn McCarthy over in Houston. He started off as a jug hustler with an offshore seismographic outfit, roughnecked all over Texas and Oklahoma, then started contracting board roads in the marsh for the Texaco

Company. After a while he was actually leasing land in the Atchafalaya basin and buying up a bunch of rusted junk to put his first rig together. A geologist from Lafayette told him the best place to punch a hole was right there on our farm. Except the old man had a problem with that. He was a traiture, you know, and always claimed he could cure warts, stop bleeding in cut hogs, blow the fire out of a burn, cause a woman to have a boy or a girl, all that kind of white witch stuff. But he also told us there were Indians buried in an old Spanish well in the middle of our sugarcane field, and if he drilled a hole on our property their spirits would

be turned loose on us. He was afraid of spirits in the ground, all right, but I think of a different kind. My uncle got drunk once and told me the old man hired this black man for thirty cents an hour to plow his field. The black man ran the plow across a rock and busted it, then just lay down under a tree and took a nap. The old man found the busted plow and the mule still in harness in the row, and he walked over to the tree and kicked this fellow awake and started hollering at him. That black fellow made a big mistake. He sassed my old man. The old man went into a rage, chased him across the field, and broke open his skull with a hoe. My uncle said he buried him somewhere around that Spanish well. What does this have to do with Weldon? Are you sure youre listening to me? As greedy and driven to be a success as he was, the old man was afraid to drill on his own property. But not Weldon, podna. Thats where he built his first rig, and he cored right down through the center of that Spanish well, I think just to make a point. A floorman on that rig told me the drill bit brought up pieces of bone when they first punched into the ground. Ill keep all this in mind. Thanks for coming out, Lyle. You dont look upon it as the big breakthrough in your case? When people go about trying to kill other people with forethought and deliberation, its usually over money. Not always, but most times.

Well, a man hears when its time for him to hear. Is that right? I was never a good listener. At least not till somebody up on high got my attention. I dont fault you, Dave. Do you know what passive-aggressive behavior is? I never went to college, like you and Weldon. It sounds real deep. Its not a profound concept. A person who has a lot of hostility learns how to mask it in humility and sometimes even in religiosity. Its very effective. No kidding? You learn all that in college? Its too bad I missed out. He grinned with the side of his mouth, his teeth barely showing, like a possum. Let me ask you something fair and square, with no bullshit,

Lyle, I said. Go ahead. Do you hold your last day against me? What do you mean? In Vietnam. I sent you into that tunnel. I wish wed blown it and passed it on by. You didnt send me down there. I liked it down there. It was my own underground horror show. I made those zips think the scourge of God had crawled down into the bowels of the earth. It wasnt a good way to be, son. He flinched good-naturedly and raised his hands, palms outward, in front of him. Sorry, its just a manner of speaking. I looked at my watch. I guess thats my cue to go, he said. Thanks for your time. Say good-bye to Bootsie for me, and dont think too unkindly of me. I dont. Thats good. Without saying anything further, he turned and walked through the dead leaves toward his Cadillac. Then he stopped, rubbed the back of his neck hard, as though a mosquito had burrowed deep into his skin, then turned around and stared blankly at me, his jaw slack with a sudden and ugly knowledge. Its a disease that lives in the blood. Its called lupus. Im sorry, Dave. Gods truth, I am, he

said. My mouth fell open, and I felt as though a cold wind had blown through my soul. THE NEXT MORNING was Saturday, and the sun came up as pink as a rose over the willow trees and dead cypress in the marsh and the clouds of mist that rolled out of the bays. Batist and I opened up the bait shop at first light, and the air was so cool and soft, so perfect with blue shadows and the smell of night-blooming jasmine, that I forgot about Lyles visit and his attempt to appear omniscient about my wifes illness. I had concluded that Lyle was little different from any other televangelist huckster and that somebody close to Bootsie had told him about her problem. But regardless I wasnt going to clutter my weekend with any more thoughts about the Sonnier family. Some people were born to take a fall, I thought, and Weldon was probably one of them. I also had a feeling that Lyle was one of those theological self-creations whose own neurosis would eventually eat him like an overturned basket of hungry snakes. After we had rented most of our boats, Batist and I seined the dead shiners out of the aluminum bait tanks, poured crushed ice over the beer and soda pop in the

coolers, and started the fire in the barbecue pit I had made by splitting an oil drum with an acetylene torch, hinging it, and welding metal legs on the bottom. By eight o'clock the sun was bright and hot in the sky, burning the mist out of the cypress trees, and on the wind you could smell the faint odor of a dead animal back in the marsh. You got something on your mind, Dave? Batist asked. He had a head like a cannonball; a pair of surplus navy dungarees hung on his narrow hips, and his wash-torn undershirt looked like strips of white rag on his massive coal-black chest and back. No, not really. He nodded, put a dry cigar in his mouth, and looked out the window at a tangle of dead trees and hyacinths floating past us in the bayous current. It aint bad to have something on your mind, no, he said. Its bad when you dont tell nobody. What do you say we season the chickens? She gonna be all right. You gonna see. Thats what they got all them doctors for. I appreciate it, Batist. I saw Alafair walk down through the pecan trees from the house with Tripod on his chain. She was in third grade now, a little bit fat across the stomach, so that her old gold-and-purple LSU T-shirt, with a smiling Mike the Tiger on it, exposed her navel and the top of her elastic-waisted jeans. She had shiny black hair cut in bangs, skin that stayed tan year-round, wide-set Indian teeth, and a smile that was so broad it made her dark eyes squint almost completely shut. Nowadays, when I would pick her up, she felt heavy and compact in my arms, full of energy and play and expectation. But three years ago, when I pulled her from a crashed and submerged plane out on the salt, one piloted by a Lafayette priest who was transporting illegal refugees from El Salvador, her lungs had been filled with water, her eyes dilated with terror as we rose in a rush of bubbles toward the Gulfs surface, her little bones as thin and frail as a birds. Tripod thumped out on the dock, rattling his chain across the board planks behind him. Dave, you left the bag of rabbit food on top of the hutch. Tripod threw it all over the yard, Alafair said. Her face was beaming. You think thats funny, little guy? I said. Yeah, she said, and grinned again. Batist says you brought Tripod down to the bait shop yesterday and he got into the hard-boiled eggs. Her face became vague and quizzical. Tripod did that? she said. Do you know anyone else who would wash a hard-boiled egg in the bait tank? She looked across the bayou speculatively, as though the answer to a profound mystery lay among the branches of the cypress trees. Tripod zigzagged back and forth on his chain, sniffing the smell of fish in the dock. I rubbed the top of Alafairs head. Her hair was already warm from the sunlight. How about a fried pie, little guy? I said, and winked at her. But you and Tripod show some discretion with Batist. Show what? Keep that coon away from Batist. I brought a tray of seasoned and oiled chickens out of the shop and began laying them on the barbecue grill. The hickory wood I used for fuel had burned into hot, white coal, and the oil from the chickens dripped into the ash and steamed away in the wind. I could feel Alafairs eyes on the side of my face. Dave? What is it, Alf? Bootsie told me not to tell you something. Maybe youd better not tell me, then. I turned my head to smile at her, but her dark eyes were veiled and troubled. Bootsie dropped a fork on the floor, she said. When she picked it up her face got all white and she sat down real hard in a chair. Was that this morning? Yesterday, when I came home from school. She started to cry, then she saw me looking at her. She made me say I wouldnt tell. Its not bad to tell those kinds of things, Alf. Is Bootsie sick again, Dave? I think maybe we need to change her medicine again. Thats all. Thats all? Its going to be all right, little guy. Let me finish up here, and well get Boots and go to Mulates for crawfish. She nodded her head silently. I hoisted her up on my hip. Tripod ran in circles at our feet, his chain clanking on the wood. Hey, lets buy you some new Baby Squanto books today, I said. Im too old to read Baby Squanto. I pressed her against me and looked over the top of her head at the shadowed front of my house and thought I could feel my pulse beating in my throat with the urgency of a damaged watch that was about to run out of time. I WASNT ABLE to keep our weekend entirely free of the Sonniers after all. That afternoon, after we drove back from Mulates in a rain shower, the phone was ringing as we ran from the truck through the pecan trees onto the gallery. I picked up the receiver in the kitchen and blotted the rainwater out of my eyes with the back of my wrist. I thought Id check in with you before we left town, the voice said. Weldon? Yeah. Bama and I are going to visit her mother in Baton Rouge. Well probably be gone a week or so. I thought I should tell you. Why? What do you mean why? Thats what youre supposed to do when youre part of a case, arent you? Check in with the authorities, that sort of thing? You werent cooperative yesterday, Weldon. I think you have information youre not giving me. I have my doubts about our level of sincerity here. I get the feeling I shouldnt have bothered you today. Your brother Lyle paid me a visit. He told me a long story about your father. Lyles a great entertainer. Did you know he had a zydeco band before he got hit with a bolt of religion? He said the prowler your wife saw was your father. He said hes seen the man in his TV audience in Baton Rouge. Years ago Lyle put so many chemicals in his head it glows in the dark. He has hallucinations. Was Bama hallucinating? Youre poking a stick in the wrong place, Dave. Before I spoke again I waited a

moment and looked out the screen at the rain falling through the limbs of the mimosa tree in my backyard. So theres nothing to Lyles story, then? I asked. As a matter of fact, there is. But its not anything you might be interested in. The truth is that Lyle takes money from a lot of pitiful nigras and po white trash who think heat lightning is a sign out of Revelation. But after the television cameras are off and the audience goes home, my brother has problems with his conscience. Instead of dealing with it, hes developed this obsession that our old man is back from the dead and is trying to thread our souls on a fish stringer. How long will you be gone? A week or so. Give me your mother-in-laws address and phone number. I wrote them down on a notepad. Did you make plaster casts of those footprints by the bayou? he asked. Were a low-budget department, Weldon. Also, plaster casts usually tell us that the suspect wore shoes. Let me explain something to you. Theres not a lot of interest down there about your shooter. Why is that? you ask. Because when the intended victim acts like Little Orphan Annie, with wide, empty eyes, its hard to get other people to bite their nails over that persons fate. If you want to let a hired gumball cancel your ticket, maybe we figure thats your business. In my minds eye I could almost see his hand squeezing on the receiver. What do you mean hired gumball? he said. People around here usually kill only their friends and relatives. They usually do it in bars and bedrooms. A long-range shooter, a guy probably using a scope, a guy who got in and out without being seen, I think were talking about a contract killer, Weldon. There was something else I didnt tell you. Our fingerprint man didnt find even a trace of a print on that shell casing. In all probability that means the shooter wiped each shell clean before he loaded the rifle. It sounds pretty professional to me. Youre a smart cop. I didnt answer and instead waited for him to speak again. But he remained silent. You dont want to tell me anything else? I said. Its a story that involves a lot of players. You couldnt guess at it. When people get into trouble, its over money, sex, or power. Always. Its not a new script. This one is. Its a real stomach churner. I waited again for him to continue, but he didnt. How about it? I said. Thats all I have to say, except Im not going to do time and Im not going to get clipped by some gumball. If that doesnt float with somebody, or if they want more information on that, they might try dialing 1-800-EAT SHIT for assistance. Hows that sound? Who said anything about doing time? Nobody. I see. Have a nice trip to Baton Rouge. Tell me, though, before you hang up, how bad did you and Lyle hurt your fathers friend? What? What did you say? You heard me. Yeah, I did. You listen to me, Dave. You stay out of my goddamn familys history. It doesnt have anything to do with this. You understand that? Are we clear on that? Call back when you have something of value to tell me, Weldon, I said, and softly replaced the receiver in the telephone cradle. I suspected that I left him with knives turning in his chest. But Weldon was one of those who became interested in the cathedral only after you barred its entrance to him. SUNDAY NIGHT IT rained again and Bootsie, Alafair, and I drove to New Iberia and had dinner at Dels on East Main, then went to a movie. Later, it stopped raining, and the moon rose over the freshly plowed sugarcane fields in a sky that looked like black ink wash. I was restless and couldnt concentrate on the book I was reading or the movie that Bootsie was watching on television, and I told Bootsie that I was going back into town to drop off some overdue bills at the post office. Then I drove out to Weldons place. Why? I cant say, reallyexcept that I suspected he was involved in something that went way beyond the confines of Iberia Parish. Over the years I had seen all the dark players get to southern Louisiana in one form or another: the oil and chemical companies who drained and polluted the wetlands; the developers who could turn sugarcane acreage and pecan orchards into miles of tract homes and shopping malls that had the aesthetic qualities of a sewer works; and the Mafia, who operated out of New Orleans and brought us prostitution, slot machines, control of at least two big labor unions, and finally narcotics. They hunted on the game reserve. They came into an area where large numbers of the people were poor and illiterate, where many were unable to speak English and the politicians were traditionally inept or corrupt, and they took everything that was best from the Cajun world in which I had grown up, treated it cynically and with contempt, and left us with oil sludge in the oyster beds, Levittown, and the abiding knowledge that we had done virtually nothing to stop them. I parked my truck on the blacktop in front of Weldons house and looked at his flood lamps in the mist, the lighted chandelier that he had left on in the living room, the lawn that sloped away toward Bayou Teche, his boathouse, and the dark line of cypress trees along the bank. The shooter had probably come before dawn, maybe in a boat, and had crouched behind the brick retaining wall until he saw Weldon enter the dining room. So the shooter knew something about the layout of Weldons house and property, I thought, and maybe about Weldons habits as well; perhaps he even knew Weldon and had been in his house. If not, the person who hired the shooter was probably on familiar terms with Weldon. It wasnt a profound theory, nor was it that helpful. I drove back home with the heat lightning flickering whitely over the southern horizon, then lay

in the dark beside Bootsie and tried to fall asleep. Why did I preoccupy myself with Weldons troubles, I asked myself? The answer was not long in coming. I rubbed my hand lightly over the curve of Bootsies back, kissed the smooth grain of her skin, stroked the short-cropped stiff hair on her neck, and wondered in awe at how the flush of health in her complexion could be so successful a part of natures masquerade. I had fantasies in which we changed the blood in her whole vascular system and rinsed disease out of her body; saw faith and prayer drive the red wolf from her like an exorcised incubus; or simply awoke one fine morning to discover that a new drug as miraculous as penicillin or the polio vaccine had been invented, and that all our cares and worries about Bootsie had been illusionary and ultimately forgettable. So when you have a problem that has no solution and you can no longer drink over it, you get psychologically drunk on somebody elses woe, I thought. And maybe I even resented and envied Weldon for what I thought was the simplicity of his problem. The moon made a square of light on Bootsies sleeping form. Her white silk gown looked almost phosphorescent, her bare shoulders as cool and bloodless as alabaster. I put my arm across her stomach and drew her against me, hooked one leg inside hers, and buried my face in her hair, as though anger and need were enough to hold both of us aloft, safe from the dark spin and pull of the earth beneath us. Two days later I would learn that Weldons problems were not simple ones, either, and my involvement with the Sonnier family would become much more than a dry drunk.

Revue de presse James Lee Burke is the heavyweight champ, a great American novelist whose work, taken individually or as a whole, is unsurpassed. (Michael Connelly) A gorgeous prose stylist. (Stephen King) Richly deserves to be described now as one of the finest crime writers America has ever produced. (Daily Mail) The gentle giant of US crime writers, Burke always ensures that his Louisiana detective Dave Robicheaux grapples with hot topics as much as with his own inner demons. (i newspaper) There are not many crime writers about whom one might invoke the name of Zola for comparison, but Burke is very much in that territory. His stamping ground is the Gulf coast, and one of the great strengths of his work has always been the atmospheric background of New Orleans and the bayous. His big, baggy novels are always about much more than the mechanics of the detective plot; his real subject, like the French master, is the human condition, seen in every situation of society. (Independent) The king of Southern noir. (Daily Mirror) His lyrical prose, his deep understanding of what makes people behave as they do, and his control of plot and pace are masterly. (Sunday Telegraph) One of the finest American writers. (Guardian) When it comes to literate, pungently characterised American crime writing, James Lee Burke has few peers. (Daily Express)