

Salvage

We go to a salvage yard in Birmingham not too far from the center of downtown, where the banks rise up, big impressive sculptures rooted in the gray asphalt, good to look at from a mile away or right down on the sidewalk with the panhandlers and the secretaries going out to lunch in navy skirts and bright white blouses, not looking up or at the vagrants, but only at each other. Not at us either, waiting for the light to change in my pickup, two graybeard geezers in a shabby truck.

The light changes and we go.

The salvage yard is back behind the blocks of deserted warehouse/empty lots/abandoned brick factories. It's quiet and vacant, wide cracked streets with only tractor trailers kicking up dust coming from someplace where they must have been loaded up and going to someplace else. They fit perfectly.

The salvage yard is wide and long, filled with parts of things stacked up and scattered without pattern, surrounded by a metal fence I'm partial to - aluminum siding tacked to oiled railroad tie posts with barbed wire strung in loops along the top. We parked the truck and started up and down the rows looking for the dog that roams around the lot, snuffing and panting happy as a hog. He must have had the day off.

No one knows who owns the yard and every time I've been there someone new is sitting in the lawn chair outside the battered aluminum Airstream they use for an office. Today it's an old guy in a cheap mesh Braves cap. He's dipping snuff and has a couple of fingers missing, old forearm tattoos faded to the color of veins. He's looking at a tattered car magazine and just waves when we walk by heading to the back where they keep the scrap metal.

We're looking for something, we don't know what, that can be bolted and welded together so that it becomes something else. At the very back next to the fence we find a stack of bicycle wheels rich with spokes and rims. I can see them turning into planets or sunflowers or something. I don't have to know yet.

I start back to the Airstream to get one of the carts they keep there when Jim points down behind the stack. There's a man lying flat on his back both arms outstretched like Jesus on the cross. We go around to get a better look and for a second or two I think he's dead, but he stirs a little and lets out a bubbly snore. He smells like wine or beer or something else. He's stretched out next to a shallow depression in the dirt he'd (or someone) dug at the base of the fence, just enough space for a thin man to squirm under. He's wearing overalls but no shirt or shoes.

Jim and I look at each other and go to get the cart, being quiet and respectful. We lift the wheels gently, careful not to cause a commotion that would wake the old gent. There are eight wheels, all the same size. I feel an idea coming to me, which is the start of the process and is very satisfying, even though I don't yet know what the idea is. We push the loaded cart gently away. Jim stops, goes back and leaves a couple of dollar bills on the man's chest.

We go back to the Airstream. The man minding the store gets up from the lawn chair. He has a mechanics shirt with Kenneth stitched across the pocket.

'What'chu got there boys,' he says.

'Bicycle wheels Kenneth,' says Jim.

'The name's Hank', he says, counting the wheels. 'I think them wheels is a buck apiece.'

'I bet you just made that up, Hank,' says Jim.

Hank grins. He's got about eight stained teeth in a staggered row in his mouth.

'Maybe and maybe not,' he says, 'but it's still eight bucks.'

'Pay the man,' I say. Jim hands him some cash and says:

'You know there's an old boy sleeping off a drunk back there?'

'Yeah, I know.'

He doesn't say anything else, just sits down and picks up his magazine. He doesn't look upset or offended. I think he's just done talking to us. Jim says to him:

'See you next time', but odds are we won't see him again, and one or the other of us gets down there every couple of weeks. We throw the wheels in the pickup and drive off down the rough concrete street. Jim twists around to look back. He says:

'I wonder what happens to all them salvage yard attendants,'

Then he says:

'You owe me four bucks for your share of the wheels.'

'What about the money you dropped on that man?' I say.

'Forget it. That one's on me.'