

# Cords

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Your wondering species will suspect the last thoughts of  
any dying thing, but this much is plain: it suffers.

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## Cords

The wires, nothing ornamental, not fashioned from the pitch for the high and singular purpose of sacrifice, but electrical cords -- cords that could have been used to run the fan to the porch, boost the car battery, or light the vanity oaks one discarded December -- stripped, for all intents, of their insulation, and with the plugs at times attached to lash about the limbs of a happenstance altar -- *these* are the wires that hold it suspended and suffering in a thousand-kind bush in Congo Square.

The boy Thomas found it, suffering, five colored bodkins stuck in its chest. The cords, perhaps formerly used to liven a tree-house television, to power a freeze-box of beer and swine, to set off the shears for a patio head-trimming -- someone had stripped and wound them so tight around the sacrifice that a grid of flesh had risen from the shape and into the pads of its chest five bodkins with blue marble heads had been worked. It staggers its breath, to bargain the shortest lacerations across the pink of its open muscle, but still, as if to bilk the slavish probabilist out of its ignorance of probability, it breathes.

Thomas bent down to free the dying thing from the wires, but his grandmother Delilah seized his arm and spun him around, "don't touch, don't touch," she whispered, as if they who had bound the rooster were still there to listen. "It's a sacrifice," she revealed by the specter of satisfying explanation, before adding, "they sacrifice roosters in their voodoo ceremonies and you can't touch them." Thomas watched the bird, the blue bodkin heads rising and collapsing upon themselves like reeds bending for the reptile.

He stood even as Delilah gently tugged at the sleeves of his T-shirt. "When," he asked in a polite whisper, "when will they come back to let him go?" -- "They won't," she said ahead of herself, watching Thomas' unease begin to nestle in his small hands, reeling in his fingers to his palms. Delilah, releasing the boy's sleeve, imperceptibly rested her hand on his shoulder, and with the other she waved for help, summoning from across the square Thomas' grandfather, the wise Bernhaud, and Thomas' older sister, just revamped in a single year's deposit in university, the well-meaning Jez.

The three, Bernhaud of a spiraled white button shirt, Jez of a red, black and green leather skirt, and Delilah in her best doomsayers dress skylined over Thomas like the turrets of sagacity. While himself, the young one, watched the bodkins rise and collapse like reeds. Searching for the appropriate reasoning, Bernhaud looked above at the bights of branches and the considerate curtsies of trees, in deference, he had been thinking, to the suffering of slaves not too long ago hawked in the square, and he reached into his pocket and brought out a toothpick.

"Thomas," he said, "what will happen should I throw this toothpick in the air?" Thomas turned to his grandfather and his curious question and wondered how throwing a toothpick in the air will free the suffering rooster. "He doesn't hear you," said Jez.

"Thomas," said Bernhaud, "where will this toothpick eventually land should I throw it in the air?"

"Depends how far you throw it," said Thomas, turning back to the dying rooster.

"Yes, Thomas, that's true, but regardless of what direction and how far I throw it, it will eventually land somewhere on the ground, isn't that right?"

Suddenly the rooster convulsed against the wires as if it had allowed one of the bodkins to dig a fiber further into its muscle. Thomas flinched and turned as quickly to Bernhaud and his amazing parable-telling toothpick.

"And why," continued Bernhaud, "or let me ask you, how many times would it fall to the ground?"

"Always," trusted Thomas.

"Yes," said Bernhaud, "that's right, time and gravity. Time and gravity are two perfect constants in this world, Thomas, and you know that we can cover our eyes and time and gravity remain constant and true."

Thomas only knew the rooster's eyes were black, his tongue purple, and all were falling and rising to the indecipherable beat of the bodkins.

"Time and gravity are to be trusted and we can trust, Thomas, that, when we walk away, time and gravity will help the rooster slip peacefully into another world. And all we are to do," said Bernhaud hopefully, "is to walk respectfully away and trust time and gravity will take care of the suffering."

Thomas watched the rooster, and tried to imagine how a rooster would look in a robe of white and a hundred hens playing harps and a great bearded rooster singing 'Come All Ye Faithful' in the key of dawn. Then the rooster, the rooster at Thomas' feet, the one encrusted in blood and entrapped in electrical wires stripped of their insulation and wrapped by their plugs in a happenstance altar and stuck five times with four-inch bodkins, again convulsed against

the wires and cocked its head and gasped its tongue to the side of its bill. Suddenly, silence\_ a silence the square has known before the chains had slid its tile and the gavel announced its spoil, and then again, again at inconstant beats, the bodkins resumed their slow, halting sway. Thomas bent down to free the bird.

Delilah, before he could nick a cord, again grabbed his shoulder and pulled him around. "You don't understand, my child!" she screamed, and damned if they who had bound the rooster weren't there to listen. "Bad things could happen, very bad things, Thomas. You mustn't meddle, I know. I know that very bad things can happen to, to curious people who meddle, who meddle in voodoo!" She looked around her, and found it within her to regain herself, and then came out with, "I know stories! Stories, child, a child shouldn't hear!" She proceeded, "about men, men who have fallen and passed out dead after staring in the eyes of the drunken priestess; ladies, ladies and children! who have fallen Terribly Sick after tossing out or playing silly games with their pillow bags of mad potion -- the gray wolf! the gray, tall, and hideously thin wolf of the swamps who looks like a man, who punishes those who trespass their lands, or -- or those who interrupt their ritual! Oh Thomas, I don't tell you this to frighten you, but to protect you, from harm. You know we don't believe in voodoo, it's not in our religion, but I know things happen. Things do happen, and we mustn't meddle. It's best we walk away, so that these things don't happen -- so that these things don't happen to us."

"Besides," offered Jez, swooping down at last to assure her younger brother, "we must try to respect other people's ways, even if it seems to us strange."

"Of course," said the wise Bernhaud, "you understand, Thomas, there are many, many different people, and many people who believe in many different things, and it is to the credit of wise people that they don't disrespect each other's beliefs, lest their own are unfinished or wrong." Bernhaud took his grandson's hands in his. "Thomas, remember, remember how you used to walk backwards in the dark to fool the two-legged crocodile who followed you at night?" Thomas allowed his grandfather into his eyes. "Well, if you didn't think to believe in what we believed -- that the two-legged crocodile doesn't exist in our world, you would still be walking backwards in the dark."

"Yes!" exclaimed Jez, catching Thomas in her arms, "the two-legged crocodile doesn't exist in our world!"

Bernhaud grinned and gently padded Jez's shoulder to begin leading her, with Thomas securely in her arms, away from the coiled bush and back toward the black metal gate of the square. Delilah, still shading the dying rooster, crossed herself thrice, walked backward seven paces, and rushed up behind them.

"A tricky lesson you've learned today," said Bernhaud, the four now out from under the rubber-necked trees and the bygone heads of bronzed jazz singers. "The world is greater," he published, "and more difficult to understand than our skull-bound minds can even start to scratch and climb up its side, and who knows what happens in the distance of time for what we do in its present."

"Especially," Delilah warned, "for what we do in areas we shouldn't try to understand."

"Thomas," chorused Jez, "think about it, knowing what we know concerning our own beliefs, you wouldn't have gone and pulled suffering Christ from

the wires, would you? Think what that would have meant for us down the road!"

At this his grandmother Delilah softly swept the tears of sweat from Thomas' neck and into the back channels of his shirt collar, and concluded with all the harvest of human wisdom, "Thomas, this is it: there are things we'll always have to consider, things we shouldn't upset, and things we're never meant to understand in the first place."

"Okay," said Bernhaud, the four of them turning the corner and into the mechanical rhythms that people assume when people live together, "now what flavor of ice should we get you?"

Thomas looked across the street at the women setting up their stalls for their predictable fortunes. "Lemon," he said. "Oh, good," said Delilah, but before she could join up with a "that's my favorite too," Thomas interrupted, "Lemon -- that's too, too sour for the tall thin gray wolf that looks like a man or the two-legged crocodile that follows me at night. Lemon," he clasped his hands.

"Okay, then" exclaimed his grandfather, "lemon it is for such a wise and curious man your age," as Bernhaud and Delilah too, while Jez set off for a pocket-change of fortune, scanned the street for the ice man who usually sets up his dirty white cart with the pale stick of old, stripped advertisements of ices of archaic flavors and comical prices, while behind them, beyond the periphery of their watch and expanse of their expectations, Thomas slipped away - - and through the obscene valleys of storied houses and unction of aged spirits and paste of animal fat, past the cemetery of voodoo priestesses and misogynist mayors and boys who died too young and not knowing, and under the maniacal grins of bygone jazz singers and trees who know too much, Thomas

worked to set the dying thing free. Cords to the bush, bodkins to the tile.

And when, in a drip of ice, it struck the three that Thomas had fled, they each knew what it was that Thomas had fled to undo, and each in the peculiarity of their own vocabulary wondered what kind of dread was sprung in the freeing of a dying rooster.

"Poor, simple child," she whispers.