

CLOD KICKERS

JOHNNY BARNETT

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by

Johnny Barnett

CLOD KICKERS

A Creative Thesis

Presented to the

Graduate and Research Council of

Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters of Arts

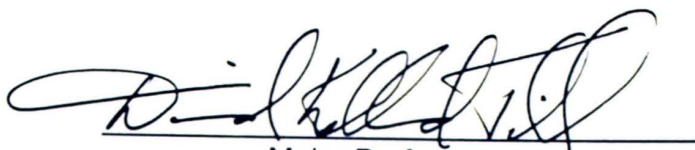
by

Johnny Barnett

December 1994

To the Graduate and Research Council:

I am submitting herewith a Thesis written by Johnny Barnett entitled *Clod Kickers*. I have examined the final copy of this paper for form and content, and I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Masters of Arts, with a major in English.

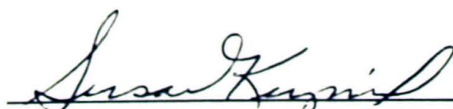

Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:


Second Committee Member


Third Committee Member

Accepted for the Graduate and
Research Council:

 12/19/94
Dean of the Graduate School

ABSTRACT

The short stories and poems to follow represent fragments of time taken from my own life as well as from the lives of friends. In a few instances, I found it necessary to mildly distort the truth in order to make the fiction seem more real.

Clod Kickers is not intending to convey any truths; its purpose is simply to amuse. The first poem of the selection, "The Veil of Maya," is perhaps the exception; however, I wanted to include it in this selection because it represents a change of direction from the comic to the philosophic.

I hope that in your reading you will find a smile. If so, then I too am happy. If you should laugh out loud, then I am made more than happy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. David Till, Professor of English, Austin Peay State University, for the great deal of time and effort he has given to this work. His encouragement, as well as his blatant honesty ("I think, Johnny, that I would throw this one in the trashcan and leave it there"), I will always appreciate.

I would also like to thank Linda Barnes and Edward Irwin, Professors of English, for their invaluable suggestions and criticisms. I am pleased that Dr. Barnes, with her charm and warm-heartedness, and Dr. Irwin, with his sense of style and his manner of professionalism, agreed to share their talents.

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The Veil of Maya

I once thought God in the corn-crib,
calling to me, though it seemed;
he was, however, a very large rat.

I shot him.

On that day

Christ was born.

You tread in fear towards the other world
you wish to join,
and with only a glimpse
you run, you chase after it--
even in your greatest fear,
you chase after it,
not knowing what it is that allures,
not caring--even in your fear--
no thoughts for the power of the thing.

Ahab, in his obsession,
faced the thing,
grappled with it,

and was dragged to his death by it;

but--What is death?

And consider Plato's man--

descending from the blinding light,

returning to a world of shadows,

a world where man is chained to illusion by his ideas--

Is he, too, not truly a dead man?

Bob

I was just layin' there and wonderin' 'bout what it is that a lizard thinks the first time it loses its tail when Lu Lu May hollars to "Come on and get it 'fore it gets cold." Couldn't get it off my mind, lizard tails and all. Just imagine!

After breakfast we was a goin' down to the Wal-Mart for probably ten or twelve cans of hair-spray, some lipstick and all kinds of--you know--neccessities, and some fishin' supplies that I just had to have. They would help to put some food on the table, you know.

Lu Lu May's been bitchin' all mornin'--still a bitchin' when we got into the car. I cranked the motor and--thumpady-thumpady-thump. "Another damn'd cat! Third one this spring." So I got out to see for sure what it was. Lu Lu May a fussin' all the time 'bout how she ain't gonna have time to get her shoppin' done. "Damn woman."

Opened the hood and there it was, at least most of it. It was Bob, Lulu May's favorite. (Bob's a she--grankids didn't know the difference 'tween hes and shes when they named her and we didn't have the nerve to tell them--both of 'em like their daddy--dumber than a piss-elm stump. Told her that before she married him, but no!--you can't tell her a damn thing.) And now Bob looked a might scrambled, runny yoke and all. One of her eyes was a hangin' from its socket, just a-danglin'. The other one--I don't know where it went off to. Guts, some here and some there. Cut off both her ears: one of 'em stuck to the hood, the other

one layin' on the radiator--

terrible, just terrible, awfulest damn'd sight you ever did see. I looked over the hood to the woman: "It's Bob, LuLu May."

She said "Huh?"

"It's Bob!" I told her.

"Huh--"

"I said it's Bob, Goddammya!"

She rolled her window down and yelled for me and all the neighbors: "Is she all right?"

"Let's just say she won't be a shittin' in the flower bed any more. Wanna see?"

"Naw." She didn't want to, so I went on back to the smokehouse and got me one of them IGA grocery sacks, took it back and scraped up what was left of old Bob, put her in the bag and stuck her in the back of the Buick; figured I'd throw her in the dumpsters on the way to the Wal-Mart.

I hadn't no more than backed out of the drive when Lu Lu May set in with her belly-aching: "Munford. Something stinks in here. Why don't you throw them old beer cans out?"

"Recyclin', Lu Lu May. Savin' the environment." That's all I said, just to let her know that I was only tryin' to do my part. Then I just drove on a mindin' my own business, same as always, 'bout another mile and--

"Munford! Something stinks in here! I need to get that hair dryer and

some Tupperware--"

"Bluegills beddin' down to Lanier's--"

"--and don't let me forget to get Ernie some candy, for God sakes."

"Hanson Mart says him and Cubby Farmer filled a five-gallon bucket plum' full with 'em."

"Munford? Munford...something stinks in here right now, Munford."

"Hush your mouthin', woman!" Didn't say nothin' else; still a thinkin' bout that lizard's tail and wonderin' if I was gonna be back home in time to dig fishin' worms before evenin'.

"M-u-n-ford! Something--"

"Goddammit, Lu Lu May, if you take a bath and brush your teeth every now and then, you wouldn' smell so damn bad."

Now let me tell you, that didn't arouse her sense of humor none in the least. She lit in to chewin' on me and was still a chewin' plum' up to when we got to the Wal-Mart. Yea, plum' forgot about ole Bob. Parked 'bout half way back of the parkin' lot, out by where they keep them push-em-out carts. I said, "Lu Lu May, you can hush now, honey. We're here."

She was still a eatin' on me--so, I put my arm around her, see?--took out my uppers (we always take out our uppers before we gum it), leaned over towards her real slow and said, "Lu Lu May-y-y...Baby-y-y." (She started to take out her uppers.) "Lu Lu May Baby...Bite my ass!"

And get the hell behind me, Satan: you'd a thought I'd stomped a corn off

her toe; she come over my tackle box like a mad hornet. I was out that door in nothin' flat with the woman after me. Left her with her hind-end hangin' on the seat and her hands on the yellow line. And upside-down, she was still a givin' me hell. "Well, now," I said to myself: "Ain't no woman a gonna talk to Munford G. Grimes thata way." So, from the other side of the car, I told her right there, "Keep it down, Lu Lu May, honey, be quiet. Everybody's a watchin' at you. Get on outta here. I was just a goin' on with you. You know me, honey. Go buy you some pink panties or somethin'."

Yea, I told her her off real good. You've just got to do that with 'em when they get outta line. Let 'em know who's the boss.

But she was still a cussin' me as she stomped off, callin' me stuff I didn't even know what it was. "Lu Lu May, pull your drawers up, woman."

Then I walked around, after unhangin' my overalls from the mirror, and got ole Bob in the bag out of the back of the Buick and put her up on top of the roof so as she could get some air and wouldn't get to stinkin' too terrible before we could get back to the dumpsters. Then I sauntered on up to the store and stopped out front where the tomato sets and garden stuff was--and just happened to look back towards the Buick (don't know why, just did) and what did I see but this huge, double-ugly Gypsy woman by the Buick. Thought she was stuck!--but naw, you know what she was a doin'? Yea, she was a stealin' my Bob. My favorite pet. What was I gonna do? Call the law? "Uhh...Uhh...Yes, Officer Sir, this one large Gypsy lady has done gone and stole away my Bob," whereas, he

opens the bag and hauls me off to the pokey for animal a-bu-sa-tion. Or--"Lady, uhh...I'm sorry, but I believe that's my dead pussy cat you have in that bag"; whereas, she might just stomp me right there in front of God and the merry-go-round; and one thing Munford G. Grimes ain't a gonna have, and that's some sow-bellied Gypsy woman beatin' hell out him in front of the Wal-Mart. So, I just decided to stay me a spell there by the izalyas and petunias while she waddled on up through the parkin'-lot, makin' her way up to where the rocky horse was a sittin' with two squallin' little shits on it a cryin' "quarter" to their momma. Need they little asses stripped, just exactly what they need.

And here Gypsy was a totin' Bob like he was a sack of over-ripe Georgia peaches, and me a wonderin' all the while what was gonna happen when she peeked in on Old Bob. I was 'bout to pee down both britches legs; ain't been so excited since Lu Lu May...well, we won't get in to that now.

That big Gypsy went traipsin' in like an old sow come to see 'bout her litter. I stayed 'bout twenty some-odd steps behind, not scared, mind you, but just curious, wonderin' what was gonna happen: when and where was she gonna take care of her 'spishuns? Then she stopped and was 'bout to look in on Old Bob when this sprout of a gal comes up--couldn't of been no more than 13, maybe 14--and asks, "Can I help you, ma'am?" And as I peered out from under the Fruit of the Looms, Boys: size 10-12, she answered, "I am looking for some pajamas for my little Tammy."

"Right over here, Ma'am." And there went Gypsy.

From a distance I watched. She didn't get no 'jamas. Instead, she went over to the loungelette section, picked her out one of them sexy see-through negligehs, a size 6, and heads off to the try-it-on stall.

Reminds me: Lu Lu May used to have one of them nighties. She'd put it on and prance through the house and old Buford would stand up so pretty-like. Yea, ole Buford--he don't run no more. Lu Lu May didn't mind it so much at first; then, she says to me somethin' about it not being so bad when your old man can't do it twice once, but it's a right triflin' when he can't do it once twice. What could I say?

And I was still a watchin' as I moved across to the women's feminine-care products, and I spied to the bottom of the try-it-on stall as she lowered old Bob's sack to the floor. And then here comes her dress, and girdle, and stockin's, and all sorts of other stuff that I didn't even know women wore. And I'm a thinkin', "What if Lu Lu May catches me here a lookin' at women's ankles in the try-it-on stall?" And then I get to wonderin' 'bout diggin' fishin' worms and how it is that this huge Gypsy woman is gonna get that size 6 nightie over her size 24 head.

There I was, a standin' by the women's particulars, "for those extra heavy days," when Gypsy picked up Bob's sack and next thing I knew, she'd done let out a scream curled the paint on the walls and scared the hell right out of me. Next thing I knew 427 boxes of Kotex were flyin' up in the air and down the aisle. God only knew that everybody in the store was a watchin' me, so I tore out of there, and at the same time here Gypsy comes fallin' out through the curtain and

lands face down right there at my feet, nekkid as a bull-frog. All she had on was that nightie hangin' 'round her neck, and let me tell you, that woman done lost her bowels everywhere--stink the buzzards off a gut wagon. And I never saw so much ass in all my life.

And here this little red-headed girl with freckles runs up, sights down her finger at Gypsy and says, "She's squished her pussy cat, Mama! She's killed it! She's killed it!" And commenced to cryin' right there.

And sure 'nuff, there was two of Bob's legs and one of his eyeballs hangin' out from under Gypsy's belly. The little girl started in to pullin' on Bob and hollarin' at this dead Gypsy to get off her poor pussy cat.

Manager comes sidlin' up and asks, "Is this your wife and daughter, Sir?"

"Hell, naw! Ain't never seen 'em before."

He said, "The ambulance is on the way."

'Bout that time here they come, two of 'em (I know it didn't take 'em long. Seems that they were just across the street at the Burger King when they got the call). The one in the front, name of Herman, said, "Shooo," and then the other one, "Damn', she's a big one." 'Bout then Herman put down the gurnie and hollars for me to come over and give 'em a hand. I let him know right quick, by my hand movements, that I was a deaf mute. He takes hold of Gypsy's arms and at the same time says to his buddy, "Forget him. The damn dummy can't hear." 'Bout that time Gypsy came alive just for a second, jerked her arm and pulled ole Herman down on top of her. His buddy started in to laughin', slipped in the

stench, and landed beside Herman on the floor. He tried to get up, slipped and fell down in it again. That floor, I'll tell you, was slicker than cum on a bed-post. His partner had big tears rollin' out of his eyes as I walked over to him, looked down, and said, "Now, reckon who's the damn dummy?"

'Bout then's when the manager came over and helped to roll Gypsy on to the gurnie, and as they lifted her up, the little red-headed girl picked up what was left of Bob and laid her on top of the Gypsy. And there they went: one large nekkid Gypsy woman with a mangled pussy cat layin' on her belly, and two ambulance drivers soaked in shit.

As they drove off, I stood there, a thinkin' 'bout Gypsies, and little red headed girls with freckles, and diggin' fishin' worms, and lizard tails, happier than two coons a screwin' in a roastin' ear patch.

Yesterday

When I was three, maybe four years old, I'd sit out on the back porch, my legs dangling just above the ground. There were small pebbles in the wash where the rain water ran off the roof and splashed away the dirt. I could hold the edge of the porch with my hands, lean back and stretch my leg, grabbing the pebbles between my toes. I would sit for hours throwing those pebbles with my feet at the ducks and chickens.

The porch was surrounded on three sides by chicken wire up to about my waist. It was nailed at the top to a two-by-four that spanned from one cedar post to another. The posts were worn smooth and had long ago been painted green. The wire was torn down on the south side where I would sit. My grandfather had ripped it down in the early spring. Daddyfred backed out the door with an old green couch, torn and stinking. Mama said for him to "just wait a shittin' minute," but he wouldn't, for Daddy wasn't in from the mines. He always was like that, not wanting any help, not waiting on anybody.

Daddyfred tore that end of the porch out when he and the couch stepped on the rooster and went right through the fence, flying out in the backyard. He threw the couch off him and called the chicken in no uncertain terms "that goddamn-good-for-nothing-cock-suckin'-son-of-a-bitch of a chicken," and grabbed the then-crippled and dying chicken by the legs and beat his head over the well house. I knew then that my Daddyfred wouldn't be afraid of a bear; he was the

best cusser in the world. He pitched it up on the porch to Mamalynn and said, "Cook the bastard." She burned it because she was mad. My grandfather was all right.

The only time he ever went to the doctor was a couple of years ago when he was helping build my father's house and fell through the subfloor onto the concrete basement floor with a screaming skillsaw. It cut half-way through the bone of his leg. I hollered, "You all right?" And he answered, "Lost my goddamn cigar." He wrapped a rag around the blood and said that it would be all right, but my mama held the back door open on the Dodge and said that he could get in the car on his own or that she would put him in herself. She is the only one I ever heard raise her voice to my grandfather. (He's doing pretty good. Works nearly every day. Still smoking a carton of Swisher Sweets a week.)

It was sometimes a mess after that on the back porch, especially when the ducks would get on it. I spent what sometimes seems an eternity sitting and thinking about stuff, leaned up against the smooth green cedar post.

There weren't any other kids around to play with, it being a ways out in the country. My best friend Greg lived almost in town. They had a television set, but the picture never would come in. I told him to hold his hand on top of it because that's how we had to do our radio for the station to come in, and then it would fade out during the best part of the game.

Finding something to do, however, never was a problem. If I wasn't riding down saplings or sticking green apples on a long stick and throwing them over

the barn or digging tunnels in the sawdust pile, I was probably with my best-ever friend, an imaginary friend by the name of Big John. I had a thousand conversations with Big John, and I still haven't forgotten him, although sometimes I wonder if he knows. I would sit for an hour or so; after a while, Mama would come out to see if I was okay. "Just thinking," I would say, and she would nod and go back through the screen door, shooing out a fly on her way...

Gravy's

Three of 'em sat back off in the corner of a dim lit room, half surrounding an old black pot-bellied stove which cracked and popped from the sassafras like two old women on a party line talkin' about their preacher. Best I could tell, these old cusses were just sittin' there watchin' the hairs grow out of the ends of each other's nose while tobacco juice oozed from the sides of their mouths. It might well have been a race, and right now it looked a powerful lot like the tobacco juice was a gonna win. The youngest of the men was Puss Cat. Most people call him Puss for short. He got the name 'cause of what a cat did in his cap a couple of seasons back, burley cuttin' time. One thing about Puss, he come up coon huntin', and nobody questions that he's the best around.

Gravy Putman, the owner, on one side of Puss, was a whittlin' and lettin' the shavin's fall in a coal bucket full of ashes right alongside the tobacco spit; Gravy's a coon hunter too, but he's never had a dog worth killin' and he's always been jealous of Puss 'cause of how everybody's always goin' on about him and his Black and Tans.

Curly Cansler, the other old man, the one with the mule ears and the wart between his eyes, was tellin' the same story for the second time about how his ole Blue Tick hound killed three coons and whupped old Craddock's bitch all in the same night. Weren't nobody listenin', not even the hams on the walls.

Beside of old wart-face, sittin' on a RC Cola crate and leaned over in his

grandpa's lap was a good-lookin' young boy, somewhere around five or six year old. He was about half asleep, limp as a worn-out dishrag, and by the looks of his lips he'd either been drinking a peach Nehi or sucking on a sick sow's tit. Soon as Curly shut up with his story, Gravy looked over at Puss and asked, "Gettin' any on you, young man?"

Puss just sat there a-grinnin' and didn't say nothin'.

Gravy laughed real low, trying not to get strangled on his tobacco juice, and continued to rag Puss as he sliced off another shavin', "When I was your age, I didn't cull nothin' but men and mules; and it had to be a mighty damned ugly mule at that."

Puss, still a-grinnin', said, "That was yesterday, old man."

Gravy answered, "Don't mean I still can't get it."

Puss said, "Shrivelled up as your old pecker is, you'd have to stick your finger up your butt to ever find it."

Gravy just cussed and shook his head, laughed real low, and spit at the coal bucket.

Everbody was still laughing when the cow bell on the front door went to clangin'. Gravy raised up his head and hollered towards the back, "Hey, Mom!" Right away I heard footsteps, and soon to follow was this beady-eyed, plump, little-old-Miz-Emily-lookin' woman, who everybody was too scared of not to like. Couldn't none of 'em make out who the stranger was just yet, so they hushed up their talkin' and stared off in the direction of the creakin' pine floor until he

rounded the corner where all the Purina dog food was stacked and walked up to the meat counter where Mom was awaitin' for him. It didn't take 'em long to size him up by the smokey smell of dark-fired and the sight of all that tobacco gum on his hands. He passed their inspection and right away the spittin' and the lyin' did recommence.

As Mom come out of the back room she was wipin' her hands on her apron and lookin' over at her old man, "Got dinner on the table. Get on in there and eat 'fore it gets cold." Gravy looked over at Curly and said, "I reckon the Old Master had a good reason for 'em, but I'll be damned if He's gonna tell anybody what it is." Then he got up, pulled down the door on the stove, spit a big cud of Mammoth Cave into the fire, gurgled up some more tobacco juice, spit agin, shut the door, reached back to the stove pipe and closed down the damper. Then he walked through the back door into what I guessed to be a kitchen, and in just a few seconds he came back through the door with a can of Spam and a plate full of crackers.

Mom says to the stranger, "What can I do you for you, son?"

"A couple of baloneys with salad dressin', please."

"Don't warnt no cheese?"

"Naw, ma'am."

"Warnt to warsh them filthy hands, do you? Where you from anyway?"

Stranger answered, "Just get dirty again. Duke's Ridge."

"Suit yourself," she was sayin' as she took out a roll of baloney from the

meat freezer.

The stranger turned and stuck a nickel in the pop machine, pulled the lever, and got out a Double Cola. As he opened it he looked over toward the stove and said, "How ya'll be makin' it?" Both Norris Barnes and Curly Putnam, still lookin at the black stove, just nodded.

Old Man Putnam pulled out a whit-rock and started sharpenin' his knife as he stared at the stranger's hands. Still staring at the stranger's hands and realizin' the sorry state of most tobacco crops this year, Putnam asked, "How's it lookin', young man?"

Stranger answered him, "Oh, it's got a good color but other than that it ain't worth a shit," and in the same breath, he looked over at Mom and with his tail tucked between his legs, he said, "Excuse me, ma'am."

Mom then raised up real slow-like from spreadin' salad dressing and she was a lookin' fearsome.

I thought I heard the stranger under his breath: "My God, she's a Babtist."

Mom took that big, long shiny butcher knife, pointed it at the stranger, and just about the time he got that "Excuse me, ma'am" out she said, "Ham! By God, you said you wanted baloney and baloney is what you're gonna get!"

The stranger, he just stood there lookin' real dumb--you know the way that strangers look?

Gravy looked over at Curly, slapped his knee and said, "Ha, got me some kind of real woman, ain't I?"

The Conception of Our Daughter

Early in the morning while lying in bed

Breaking the stillness of silence

She whispered, *"I wish I had some orange-juice."*

To which I replied, *"I wish I had some tail,"*

paused and *"Wouldn't that make a great poem--*

Juice for Tail?"

She blushed, smiling and, *"Hush, Billy."*

To which I replied, *"Just who the hell's Billy?"*

She answered, *"Gotcha."*

To which I replied, *"Well, do I go and get the juice?"*

She answered, *"No poem?"*

So I got the juice

And we named her Lisa.

Adam

O vile and cunning, cursed and crawling
creature of this cold and creviced earth,
thou art he who tempted,
who drew down dreadful scorn of Divine Creator--
you who among all creatures
harbors the curses of man--

and he, Adam,
ate of the forbidden fruit
and in shame did hide his nakedness
from the eyes of the Lord God Almighty;
in turn the Lord spake unto him:

"You're smarter than a damn'd hog, you know that?

What are you thinkin' with anyway, your balls?

Give you everything but a Nintendo and what do you do?

Yeah, screw it up!"

Adam jumps up on a hickory stump.

"You call that an ass-eatin'?"

The Lord zaps Adam to the ground;
as Adam slowly raises his eyes,
he sees standing beside him--WOMAN.

"No, Lord! Please no, Lord! I'll do anything, just say it!"

On hands and knees, Adam weeps as the Lord glides away.

The Lord spake once more unto his creation, man:

"Save your tears, sucker,

I've got you a teenage daughter on the way."

The Baptism of Saralizabeth

Yesterday Sunday, ol' preacherman

'bout drowned my Saralizabeth.

When everybody was a-lookin' at their

new shoes, here he went,

just waded off in that big ol' horse tub,

dress and all, a-pullin' her in with him;

but I see'd 'im and stood up

a-fixin' to jump out and

run up there and bite in to him

when my Mama caught hold to me just

as I was crossin' ol' Ms. Crabtree's

lap and put her hand over my mouth,

but it was too late:

"Let her go, you ol' sissy preacherman!"

But I couldn't get a-loose

'cause of how she was holdin' tight

and fat ol' Ms. Crabtree was a helpin',

so I bit my momma's hand and kicked

ol' Crabtree in the stomach

and was 'bout to jump when I felt

my daddy grab my butt, and I said,

"Let's get 'im, Daddy!"

But he done had me and headin' for

the back door when ol' freckle-face

Squirelly Shirley, in her little ol' sissy curls,

shameyed me with her finger, and

my Daddy see'd her too and grabbed my ol' kickin' leg,

so I just had to spit on her;

then he squeezed me 'til my eyes 'bout popped out,

but I see'd 'fore I had to go,

ol' Deakon Wright reach in after the preacherman

and make him raise Saralizbeth up

(she was 'bout drowned all over),

and everybody was a-sayin' amen,

and praise the Lord, and blessed child,

and smilin' at me 'cause of how

I got her saved,

and my Daddy!--

he whupped me anyhow.

My Girl

She was the first to tell me she loved me. She said that I was "handsome" and that she couldn't help herself. When I asked her what was a handsome, she just hit me, and she and her girlfriend, Dottie Thomas, giggled the way that girls giggle. Betsy's hair was dark and straight, and she always wore it in a ponytail; when she set, she would slang her head to the side trailing the long dark hair behind her seat so as not to sit on it. Her eyes were cat-green, and in her words, she was "petite," but, being the careful observer that I was, I pointed out to her that she was "skinny as a pole-cat."

I didn't like her much at first because of how she could stay within the lines better than I could, and on our first coloring assignment she got a G while I got a P. Although I knew bananas were yellow, red had always been my favorite color. The teacher didn't understand a thing like that. "Follow the directions!" she said. Only a few days later, when we were out to recess, I found that I could run faster than Betsy; this heart-lifting revelation made me feel a whole lot better about our relationship.

She was the first, the first to ask me if I kissed with my tongue in or out of my mouth. I told her, "I don't kiss nothin' 'cept my dog, and I keep my tongue in my mouth 'cause she's got ticks and fleas and her breath stinks." Yeah, I had me a way when it came to talking to the women.

Me and Betsy were pretty tight plumb up to Christmas time of the second

grade; that's when Walter McKnight made his move, infringing upon my beloved. It happened just as the Bluebirds were finishing "The Little Engine That Made It," and the Redbirds were taking their chairs. That's when old sly Walter grabbed my Betsy's hand and slipped a big two-carat diamond onto her finger. She melted, and I felt for the first time that harsh reality of losing at love, but somehow, through the pain of it all, the only thought that held my mind was finding that bubble-gum machine where Walter got that big ring. It must have been a nickel machine, or maybe even a dime one!

Later in the day, a short time after lunch, Walter's mother flies into the room, red hair and curlers, fat legs and shorts, face all evil-looking. She storms over to Walter, says something or another, jerks him up by one of his big ole mule ears (I always wondered about how they got so big), hauls him over to where Betsy's looking like she's a fixin' to catch an M&M in her mouth, and Mama Walter yanks that huge diamond off Betsy's cold red thumb, turns around, and marches Walter out of the room.

When I raised back up in my chair and saw Betsy crying, that's when I knew: I had her back!

Ode To a Booger

Just after the singin' stopped

I picked one out and rolled it around

until it got real hard.

My Momma, she looked down

one of them terrible looks

and made me roll it off on the floor.

But when that old man

started in to talkin' to the Lord

and everybody was shuteyed and a-lookin' down,

I snuck me out another one.

It was still kind of mushy when the

amen came, so when I thumped

it up on Mrs. Robinson's purple hairdo,

it just stuck there.

'Bout then I saw the preacher eyein' me

and sure 'nough, after church let out

and all the "good folk" was a-lyin' to him

'bout how good a job he had done,

he shook my daddy's hand,

turned and looked down on me

and told me that the Good Lord

didn't like for me to be a-doin' that,

and I told him,

"The Good Lord don't like much of nothin',"

and my Momma, she squeezed my hand so hard

I 'most peed all over myself.

The Finger

When the screen door slammed
on Sister's hand, it just come off;
fell right in the coal bucket.
Sister took off to runnin'
and I picked it up and
asked my mama, "*Can I keep it Mama?*
Oh, let me keep it."
She started in to yellin' real big,
come over and grabbed it,
just took it plumb away from me.
Then she washed it off and
threwed it up in the freezer
whereas I couldn't get a hold to it.

On our way zoomin' to the 'mergency place'
Mama remembered leavin' it there
in between the ice-cubes and strawberries.
That's when she yelled: "*Shit!*
I forgot the finger."

Some time later,

I climbed me a chair

and found it again,

asked my Daddy,

"Can I take it fishing, Daddy?

Oh, let me take it fishing!"

And he said,

"Boy! What's a-wrong with you?"

Old Man

He had chewed Beech Nut ever since I can remember, and years ago when he helped my grandfather and great-grandfather house tobacco, he'd always have a piece of Juicy Fruit for me whenever I'd ask him for a chew. Bowstun would reach and grab my hand and lift me high into the air and then back down to the wagon where he handed the tobacco up in the barn to my grandfather, who worked the bottom tier. Bowstun never worked the barn because of his fear of heights and wasps; he's say, "O' Mosters made Bowstun's foots to wald on the ground." I'd stand on the edge of the wagon and hand him the ends of the tobacco sticks so that he wouldn't step on the tails of the tobacco and bruise the leaves. Sometimes I'd catch him with a stick of tobacco over his head and would grab his foot and bite his big toe. Bowstun would take his foot and hold me down while he rolled me around tickling me in the ribs. I never remember seeing Bowstun wearing a pair of shoes. He had the blackest toes I'd ever seen, or for that matter, had ever bitten.

Everybody called Bowstun Honey, except for me; I called him Honey Sir, and in return, he'd call me Honey Child. My grandfather told me that Honey was so old that he didn't know himself how old he really was. Whenever I would ask him, he'd answer, "Oh... 'bouts a hunnerd or mo'."

And I'd come back with, "You gonna die for long, Honey Sir?"

And very quickly, in his ever-so-slow way, "Naw, Sir. O' Bowstun's ain't a

gonna neva' pass."

Bowstun and I always got along in a very special kind of way, except for the time when Bowstun was hoeing dark tobacco in a hot August sun and I was taking him what was left of my bottle of Peach Nehi. And as I walking along beside of the fence row smelling honey-suckle and watching the dust fly up from my peppered steps, I noticed out of the side of my eye a small green snake in a buckberry bush at the corner of the patch where Bowstun was hoeing. He had his back to me and humming some sad old tune, tobacco about waist high and me crawling what seemed to be a mile and a half just to drop that poor snake over O' Bowstun's shoulder. And when I did he about died. I never saw a man move so fast in my life, and when he had settled down and that little green snake had become fifty littler green snakes, Old Bowstun turned on me with that hoe still in the air and lit in on me, "If'n youz ever dos Bowstun that again, Bowstun's gonna strip him a little white ass!" I throwed my Nehi at him, called him "nigger," and run back to the house scared to death of O' Bowstun. He had the biggest, the whitest teeth that I'd ever seen.

When I got to the house, I asked my mamma what a nigger was and she turned red and asked me where I had heard that word and I told her that Billy Dulin told me that his daddy said that Bowstun was a nigger, and she told me never to say that word again. I asked her if it was a "cussin' word," and she said that it was much worse than a curse word, and that if Bowstun ever heard me say it, his feelings would be really hurt (I didn't tell her). She said Bowstun was a

black man, and I asked her if I would get like him if I quit putting soap on my wash rag, and she laughed and said, "Probably." I was looking at my arms when she told me to go and ring the dinner bell so that Bowstun and my grandfather, who were putting tin on the barn, would come and eat.

When Bowstun got to the house he didn't pay any attention to me as he took off his long-sleeved shirt and wrung the sweat from it. I watched from behind, wondering what it felt like to be big and black and sweaty. He didn't eat nothing much for dinner, and mamma asked him if was feeling well because he always ate a huge dinner, and Bowstun just said, "Yessum, Miz Isabel, O' Bowstun's feel right; just a might hot's all." And after dinner, Bowstun was sitting out under the shade tree with his arms wrapped around his knees tamping "Albert" into his pipe when I came up and asked him if he wanted a bite of my apple, and he slowly shook his head no and I told him, "I already bit the worm out," but he just continued shaking his head as he attempted to light his pipe for the third time. I slowly sat down with Bowstun and shortly scooted up against him and said, "You ain't no nigger, Honey Sir. You just the same as me, only you black, and big." And then he ran those huge fingers through my hair and picked me up and sat me down between his knees and I laid back against him and asked, "Honey Sir, what's a nigger?"

And Bowstun, hanging his head and holding his pipe to the side of his face, in a low and thoughtful and drawn-out voice answered, "Well, sir, speakin' the truth, Honey, Old Bowstun don't rightly know." And then, staring off into the

distance, he took a long draw from his already extinguished pipe, exhaled, and we watched together as an invisible smoke rose to what was to be no more. His left arm hung over my shoulder in a lifeless manner and his knees held me close, my dirty white feet propped upon his dirty black feet. A bob white called out to his mate, and very far away, she answered, and there in the heart of silence, I knew.

A few years later, when I was "near grown," I would ride my bicycle past Old Bowstun's house going to and from school. His paint-peeled house was located on the edge of my grandfather's farm. By now Bowstun didn't have much hair but the little he did have perfectly accented the very white of his deep socketed eyes. In the evenings, I'd look for his wave and a word as I passed his house. Many afternoons, on my way home, I would ride up in Bowstun's yard and he'd say, "Get off an' hitch ya hoss," and follow with, "Lor-dee, Honey Sir, youz near grown. O' Moster's been good, yes." And I'd get off my bicycle and sit in the swing right up against him. We'd sit there together and Old Bowstun would tell me for the umpteenth time those tales which I had heard so many times before. He kept Dr. Peppers in the ice-box and 100 proof Mellow Corn in the cabinet. He'd tell me to go and get us a Pepper and to "Pour O' Bowstuns just a little bit of Corn to cut the bite," and would say, "Them Peppers a might stout for an old man to drink straight." And when I'd get back he'd spit his chew out in his left hand and lay it on the right arm of that old swing, spit four or five times, clear his throat and spit again, and then we would drink our drinks, and I would ask the

questions, and he would tell the tales.

O' Bowstun could always be found in the evenings sitting motionless in that dilapidated, army-green porch swing, someone else's junk thrown away years before that he had dragged up out of the dump just as contented with it as if it had come straight from the Sears and Roebuck Company. For what seemed to be an eternity, he would sit with one leg crossed upon the other, his left hand lying limp in his lap and the other hooked above the inverted Y of the rusting chain. Three of his fingers were drawn tight into the palms of each of his hands, purple-veined and crippled by the passage of time: what was once a big man had now become a hollowed figure of bone and sunken skin, bruised and pained. He sat alone in only his long-johns because the pain of changing clothes had proved too much for too little. He would always sit on the right side of the swing, the side he had tied to one of the pillars on the front porch to keep the wind from blowing it into the side of his house. Never once do I remember him sitting on the left side. Once I asked and he said it was "her side."

Towards the end I didn't visit Bowstun as much as I once had--girls and ball and already having heard all those retold tales. But from my house, I could see him there in his swing, still in his long-johns, still holding on to that rusting chain with those three crippled fingers. I've watched him watch a thousand sunsets ebb and give way unto the darkness, and each time always to bring the morrow. He would sit and stare and I would wonder at his thoughts and think back, back to chewin' tobacco and falling off his front porch, knocking my bicycle

down, and the look in his face saying, "Youz alright, Honey Child," and my
dusting off and walking away, pushing my bike and waving, "So long, Honey Sir."

It was just the three of us:

Her and Him and Me

Early one morning.

Me just come in with the eggs;

Her just took the sausage off;

And Him, he just sit there a-lookin'.

Her cracked open the third

And then the fourth,

'Cause Him likes two.

And that fourth was too much an egg,

Almost-a-chicken;

Fell out right there in the skillet--DEAD.

Her stomped real hard and yelled "*Shit!*"

Him looked at Her and said,

"Don't say shit, honey."

Her come over to the table real slow-like,
Got down right close,
About three, maybe four inches from Him's nose

SCREAMED!

The way that her does sometimes:

"Shit--Shit--Shit--SHIT."

Him looked over at me, agrinnin';

Her slammed through the screen-door

With the frying pan and the Almost-A-Chicken

And Me poured a little more milk on the oatmeal.

It was late August and had been steamy hot for over two weeks, ever since the last rain. The day was one of those lazy days, a lot you could do, but not much you really wanted to do. I was hanging around the house getting on mama's nerves. She'd done been onto me for throwing rocks at the passing cars. I explained that I was only throwin' at their hubcaps. Knock out one little windshield and they never let you forget it. Buddy was working down at the mill. He and a neighbor of ours, Clarence Carter, ride back and forth together. Mr. Carter's formal nickname is Bonehead, but most everybody calls him Bones. When I asked Buddy how Mr. Carter got his nickname, he said that it was because he was built like a bean-pole and his head was as hard as a billy goat's.

By now I was getting plenty tired of doing nothing so I asked Mama if it would be all right if I went up to Justin's for a while. She said I could, just as soon as I got her in enough tomatoes to start canning on. Justin is Bone's boy. He's only in the fourth grade and a whole bunch smart aleck, but his sister surely is pretty.

When I got to Justin's house, he was out back a-ways, helping Bones cut their tobacco. I hollered and asked, "Can you go swimming back to the pond?"

He turned to Bones and Bones answered, "You get Billy to help you finish dropping those sticks, then you all can go. It won't take the both of you long."

Three and a half hours later, tired and arms full of splinters, we were

wading through the cattails. We didn't swim too long--just long enough to get the pond good and muddy. We were both getting hungry, but we didn't want to get back up to the house before Bones and his hands had finished laying the tobacco down; so after we got our clothes back on, we sat down under a willow and talked for awhile.

I asked Justin which teacher he would have when school started back. He told me he got Miz Clabore's room. "You got old Sour Clabore?" I asked.

Justin sighed, "Yeah."

"That's one crazy woman."

Justin said, "What are you talking about, crazy?"

"Well one time when I had her, she told me to go down to the office and get the science kit; I said, 'Yes ma'am.' Then I went and got it. When I came back into the classroom, there she was, drawed back like Willie Mays, with fire in her eyes. I said to myself, 'This woman's mad at somebody.' Bout that time she frailed me right up side the head, 347 pages worth. I went around the rest of that day with Sears Spring and Summer imprinted on the side of my face. I dreamed about garden tillers and lawn-mowers for the next two weeks. Now you tell me that woman ain't crazy!"

Justin just sat there bumfuzzled. I got up and said, "Come on, let's see if they're done yet." We walked over to the fencerow and I climbed a small sassafras to see over the thicket while Justin sat down at the edge of the field with his feet in the edge of a plow-fur, sucking juice out of honey-suckle

blossoms. After I had seen that they were spiking back through on the last two rows I slid back down and we walked over to the barn. It wasn't long before Justin's daddy heard their ole sow snorting and blowing; he hollered down at us. We threw our last two corn cobs and then headed on up to the house.

When we got to the house, all the hands were coming up towards the porch. Bone told Justin's mama to go get the checkbook and the two older men (30 or so) came and sat on the edge of the porch. The two teenaged boys were washing up and throwing water on each other. I was needing to go, but I stayed a little while longer hoping for a dollar or two for the sticks I had dropped. Well, Old Bones paid everybody except me, then told 'em he wanted 'em back in three days. "Gonna let it cure a little, and get some of that weight off and maybe the dew will take some of the burn out," Bones said, as he went in the back door.

I was hoping that it would rain for a week and all of it would rot in the field. Didn't even get a thank you, least not from Bonehead. I told Justin, "See ya," hung my head and started home. As I rounded the front of their house, Sharon came out of the door, red short-shorts and a tee-shirt. "Lord have mercy."

She said, "Hey, Billy, thanks for the help."

I whistled all the way home. Maybe I would have another dream about her tonight.

That night while we were eating supper, Moose called and asked if he could come over and spend the night. I asked Buddy if it would be all right and he said, "I guess so, but you boys better not be getting into anything." Buddy

knew Moose pretty good. Moose always had a good idea for something to do. And if you ever got into trouble with him, he would stick right with you and never say a word to anyone. I guess that's why I liked him so much; I could run faster than he could too.

When Moose arrived, just a little after dark, we went out into the front yard and sat down under the big maple tree with the tire swing in it. We were just sitting there listening to the crickets and telling lies when we began to hear voices coming down the road. We slid around behind the tree and watched. One dog started to bark, then another and another, just like a chain reaction. Before long every dog in the country was barking. With only the light of a half-moon we couldn't tell who the men were. What we could tell was that each of them had a watermelon on his shoulder. As they passed by I recognized their voices from their laughter. It was the two teenage boys who had been helping Bones cut his tobacco. And it was Bones' watermelon patch that they had been into. When they were nearly out of sight, a car was nearing us. We saw the two running into the corn field beside the road. When they came back out after the car had passed, one of them seemed to be mad about something.

Moose looked at me and said, "I've got an idea."

I said, "Oh, no, I ain't stealing nothing. Buddy would cut my arms off."

Moose said, "It's not like stealing; they're just all going to lie up there in the field and rot if nobody gets 'em. Come on. It'll be so much fun!"

I sat there listening to Moose talk, thinking back to the supper table about

what Buddy had said to me: "But you boys better not be getting into anything."

As I sat there with my arms wrapped around my knees, I suddenly became painfully aware of the splinters left from dropping those old tobacco sticks.

"Well, what the heck? It ain't really stealing."

We named it Mission Possible and made our plans.

It was about a half mile to Bones' house and the watermelon patch lay directly behind it. There was a cornfield which bordered the patch on two sides. First I checked to make sure that everyone had gone to bed. Then we listened to make sure that there were no cars coming. After deciding it was all clear, we started off in a dead run for the cornfield. As I ran into the cornfield, I had gnats in both my eyes and one crawling up my nose. I ran up into the rows and stopped suddenly and started trying to pick that one out of my nose when here came Moose! Plowed right into the back of me. Run my finger plum up behind my eyeball. I don't know if I got that gnat out, but he wasn't crawling anymore.

We got up and started off again, trying not to make so much noise. Just in a little bit we were in sight of Bone's house. They must have been in bed. The only light on was the back porch light. We got down on our knees and started to crawl the rest of the way. I'm telling you I had corn cuts all over me and my toes were raw from the sawbriars.

When we got to the end of the corn rows, we lay down on our bellies and began to crawl, side by side, into the watermelon patch. Lightning bugs broke the darkness while the only sounds being made were the crickets, one old

whippoorwill and two bullfrogs croaking back and forth across the pond. I felt like the whole world was watching me, and I could tell that Moose felt it too. The edge of the watermelon patch was grassy and damp from the heavy dew. We didn't go any farther than we had to. The first melon the moonlight showed us, we headed for. Both of us grabbed for the melon at the same time. Just as our hands laid hold of it, it was just as though someone had turned off the switch. No crickets, no whippoorwills, no bullfrogs; even the moon went behind a cloud. We paused and looked at each other before breaking the vine. I had a bad feeling.

Just as we rolled that watermelon over and began to break it loose, a nesting covey of quail flushed up. We had crawled right into the middle of them. Scared the hell out me and poor ole Moose, he just lay there all spread out with his face in the dirt. I leaned over and whispered in his ear, "Ain't this fun?" Ole Moose, he just lay there. My stomach began to rise into my chest. I leaned over again and said, "Hey Moose, you ain't dead--are you?"

Moose slowly rose up and with dirt stuck to the side of his face he said, "No, but I think I've done peed all over myself." Backing away I said, "Let's get out of here." We rolled the watermelon back into the cornfield, picked it up and headed for home.

After getting home we took it to the garden behind the house and cut into it to find it green and white and pink inside. So what? After all the trouble we went through, we weren't about to let that stop us. After we had eaten it all, we buried the rinds and the seeds.

I asked Moose if he was about ready to turn in. He told me that he thought he would go back home; he said that he wasn't feeling very well.

Well, to tell you the truth I was glad of it. I really liked Moose a lot, but he was beginning to stink. I believe he done more than peed when those quail came up.

Come morning I was sick all over: corn cuts on my face, saw briars in my toes, sore nose and I'm here to tell you, I had a case of the scours like you wouldn't believe. I stayed between the bed and the bathroom all day, at least up to about 4:00. That's when Buddy got home. I was afraid he would suspect something. He always had a way of knowing things like this. I've often wondered if he could read my mind.

I had my bed made and was listening as he came through the door. Mama said, "How was work?"

Buddy said in an ill tone, "Where's Billy?"

Mama answered, "I think he's in his room."

I was wondering whose side she was on.

When I heard him coming I jerked a Bible out from under my bed, wiped the dust off, and started to read. As he came through my doorway, I said, "Just studying my Sunday School lesson; Ole Moses was something wasn't he?"

Buddy said, "Let me see that Bible."

I gave it to him; he let it fall open, looked at me and said, "Thou shalt not steal."

A big knot came up in my throat.

He asked me, "What's that busted watermelon doing out in the road at the edge of our field?"

I said, "Don't know."

Buddy said to me in a stern voice, "Bone told me today that he saw two boys in his watermelon patch last night around nine o'clock. He's got a lot of vines torn up and three or four watermelons mashed. Were you and Moose in Bone's patch last night?"

I choked, "Yes, sir."

Now I know that one of those older boys had dropped his watermelon when he ran into the corn field. All that planning and we still got caught. I thought to myself, "This ain't going to be too bad. I'm too old to get a whipping. He's probably just going to give me a good chewing."

Buddy said, "Come over here and sit down...."

Now that I'd gotten my chewing I can tell you it was a whole lot closer to an eatin'--made me feel lower than a piss-ant. I was fighting to hold back the tears.

After he had finished, Buddy said those two words, which stand out so vividly in my head, from several past experiences: "Bend over."

I asked, "Huh, sir?"

He answered, "Bend over!" and by now he had his belt off.

I wondered if in his excitement he had forgotten how old I was, so I told him. "I'm twelve years old."

He said, "Thanks, I believe about two licks for each year ought to do it."

Me and my big mouth.

I bent over my bed and held on. Every time he hit me I thought I was going to lose my bowels. That green watermelon was working on me. One thing for sure, my throat wasn't hurting anymore from holding back the tears. Soon as I counted twenty-four I made a beeline for the bathroom. Couldn't hold it no longer, but couldn't sit down either. Now, there I was, stiff-arming the commode seat, big tears rolling down my cheeks, hind-end on fire, and a case of diarrhea something furious. I was wondering what Sharon would think if she could see me now.

"Lord have mercy."

When I made it out, there he was.

"Get you some money. Your mama's going to take you over to Coy Adams so that you can buy Bones another melon. When you get back, take it up to his house and apologize."

"Well, horseshit!" All the money I had was in a little ceramic bank shaped like a cucumber. And whoever made it must have been wealthy cause they didn't put any plug in the bottom to get your money out. I'd been wanting to bust something anyway, so I made believe that the cucumber was Bone's nose, laid it down gently and stomped it. Couldn't keep from grinning when I thought about all those silver boogers lying there in the floor. If ole Bones knew how much money was in his nose he would have all his fingers worn down to nubs.

I picked up some change and went to get in the car. Didn't say anything to

Mama going over to Mr. Adams's house. I was mad cause she had told Buddy where I was.

Those were the biggest watermelons I'd ever seen. I thumped and squeezed every one of them. Mr. Adams thought that I was looking for a ripe one--really I was looking for a green one so that it would make Bones just as sick as I was. I hoped he shit yellow for a week.

We got back home about sundown. Hardest thing I'd ever done. Sorries don't come easy, especially for someone you don't care for. Sure hope I don't get those hives again. As the moon began to light up, my thoughts reflected the night before.

On the way to Bones' house I rehearsed what I would say. Nothing seemed to sound quite right. It was almost dark as I got to the back porch and my arms were cramping from the weight of the watermelon. I could barely see over the top of it. I walked up to the screen door and knocked with my foot. Miz Bones hollered and told me to come on in. I walked in, turned the corner into the kitchen, and there they were, all of 'em--sitting there at the supper table and staring at me. I wondered if they were already in on the secret.

First one I looked at was Sharon. She was embarrassed for me but she smiled and went back to eating. Justin sat there just a-lookin' stupid and grinning. There was a silence as everyone was waiting for me to say something. I forgot everything that I was going to say and when I opened my mouth, didn't nothing come out. Did you ever pray for an earthquake?

Bones reared back in his chair, looked down his nose at me and said, "What can I do for you, Bill?"

He knows I hate that name.

I mustered up all my courage and said, "Brought ya'll a watermelon."

Mrs. Bones perked up and said, "Why you didn't have to do that, Billy. We've got a whole field full," as if I didn't know.

I said, "Yes ma'am, but I borrowed one of yours last night and I just wanted to bring it back."

Bones said, "Just stick it over there anywhere you like, Bill."

Well, now I'll tell you where I would like to have stuck it.

I glanced over at Sharon as I laid it down. It felt as though I had thrown down a sack of fertilizer after walking across a plowed field. My arms were trying to float into the air.

Bones said to me, as I was leaving, "Anytime you want a melon, come up here and we'll pick you one out."

Now he tells me! "I'll see ya'll later," as I looked back over my shoulder. I got to the edge of the porch and jumped high as I could; next thing I was lying on the ground.

Walking home I sure was glad it was over. The switch was back on. A whippoorwill, crickets, bullfrogs, lightning bugs, and no diarrhea--almost like heaven. Stepping high and talking out loud to the moon I said, "Now, God, I want to get this straight with you right now: When I die and meet up with St. Peter or

whoever that is up there, and he asks me if I ever stole a watermelon, I'm gonna look him right in the eye and lie like a dog, 'cause I've done paid in full."

Occurrence at Elwood Cranor's Barn

"Even when it's gone, it's on its way back--comin' and goin', the way with things...but--"

"You gone off again, Leonard?"

"Naw, just thinkin' out loud. Gimme 'nother worm, Eugene."

"Night-crawler or what?"

"Just a worm."

Handing Leonard the can of worms: "What say we pick up another six-pack and head up to Cranor's barn tonight?"

"Is Wanda up there again?"

"Naw; got one of them healin' preachers a comin' in from Buzzard's Roost, puttin' on a revival. Ain't never seen no healin' preacher 'fore."

"Does he do warts or what, Eugene?"

"Say, he can do 'bout anything."

"Can he pull a calf?"

"Dammit, Leonard! Quit your goin' on. He's a preacher, not a horse doctor. You gettin' worser than Benny."

"I'm not foolin' with you Eugene. Elwood's got a heifer up in the barn, and he was tellin' down to the mill that she's a fixin' to drop any time. Now, how are they gonna put on a revival with her up in the barn?"

"Well, they're gonna, that's all I can tell you. Wanna go or no?"

"You know how I feel about preachers, Eugene. Onlyest reason you want to go is to get him to heal that itch you got from Wanda."

"Naw, it ain't. Used Raid and I ain't a scratchin' no more. Damn near took the whole can."

"Throw me my shoes, Eugene, and let's get on out of here; fish ain't a-gonna bite, that's for sure."

Now here's how it is: Leonard and Eugene leave the fishin' hole and go down to Leonard's house to cool it for a couple of hours before goin' to the meeting up to Cranor's barn. Leonard still lives with his grandparents, Junior and Jo Nell Johnson. Leonard's folks cut out some four or five years ago when they found out for sure about Benny, Leonard's little brother. Actually, that was only part of it. They'd been on the outs for some time any way on the cause of Rufus's accident. He was out beside the barn a-doin' his do when up flies this ground-hornet and stings him right on the end of his doer (Rufus called it a devil from hell, but Ethel said it was an angel of mercy). Rufus never put his doer back up, but was seen by Harper Blakely, skippin' sideways up to the house and screamin' in pain; it had done swelled 'bout two, maybe three times its size. Anyhow, when Ethel saw him she grabbed ol' Rufus and yanked him through the screen door and neither one of 'em was heard nor seen for days on end.

And then, after the swellin' went down, it was told that Ethel got mad at Rufus and kicked him out of the house cause of how he wouldn't go back out to

the barn and stick his doer back in the hornet's nest. Shortly after Rufus left town, Ethel went runnin' after him, leavin' Junior and Jo Nell with the raisin' of Leonard and Little Benny.

Something strange got into Benny as a young child, and as far as anybody can tell, it's still in him. Nobody's for sure what it is but old Doc Crawford said something 'bout it bein' in his jeans, but, best I can recollect, he was off a long time before Ethel and Rufus ever bought him any jeans. All these chemicals, I tell you....

Something else though: I heard tell that when Ethel was big with Benny, she got kicked by the Holstein one morning while she was a-milkin'. Also heard Rufus talkin' 'bout the time, a couple of weeks later, when Ethel fell out of the hayloft after drinkin' two jugs of blackberry wine and smokin' a bunch of Elsworth Cranor's horseweeds. Now that's the one I think got Ol' Benny. He ain't so bad off though. Mostly just thinks he's Jesus. Won't answer to nothin' else; Leonard will be the first to tell you that the bread and fish always come in handy at the end of the month.

Eugene, he's another head scratcher. He's one of them free-loader types. Ain't got no family; just seems to belong to everybody, even though don't nobody want him. A body really wants to feel sorry for Eugene, but something dark and lurkin' deep down inside just won't let you. Eugene and Leonard took up, one with the other, during their freshman year at Carter High, and they've been tighter than two blood-suckin' ticks ever since.

Elwood Cranor, puttin' on the revival, lives about a mile and a half back up in the woods off of Waverly-Hill Road, just after you cross the Tradewater Bridge. Elwood's wife, Elwanda, and her boy, Elsworth, by her third marriage, raise "horseweeds" (at least that's what they call it) for grocery and Christmas money. They've been holdin' a lot of revivals up there for the past few years. God-fearin' folks, yes they are. And there's always a big bunch of neighbors that go up, regular like, and everybody always seems to enjoy themselves very very much--if you know what I mean. Oh yeah, 'bout forgot Elwood: he runs a sawmill somewhere back in the woods--least-wise he says so. Funny thing: he don't sell no lumber or buy no logs. Lot of smoke back up in them woods. I reckon it must be one of them new diesel-powered mills?

* * *

When the boys get to Leonard's, Benny is out in the yard chasin' butterflies. They watch as one butterfly lands on a pile of dog mess, and just about the time Benny grabs for it, the butterfly flies away, leavin' Benny with a big hand-full of fresh hound-dog shit, and lookin' as though he'd done swallowed a bullfrog. Eugene falls on the ground in a fit of laughter; Benny sees Eugene on the ground and holdin' his stomach laughin', tears up mad, runs over to Eugene and smacks him right in the face with the hound-dog shit. Just then, Jo Nell comes out of the house to see what the commotion is, and Eugene, still a laughin', runs onto the porch, grabs her and kisses her up good--dog turd and all. Jo Nell flies in to Eugene with the mop and Eugene falls backwards off the porch

still in tears from the hysterical fit of "uncalled for" laughter. Meanwhile, Benny sits on the ground playin' "Patty-cake Patty-cake Baker's Man." Jo Nell then calls on her old man for back-up: "Junior Johnson, get out here!"

And Leonard's grandfather answers, "What the hell is it now, Nell?"

And Jo Nell, in disgust, throws her head high and hollars, "Jesus Christ!"

And Benny, pattin' his hands in contentment and not lookin' up yells, "What the hell is it now, Nell?"

And Jo Nell, in a fit of passion, warps Eugene up side the head with her mop, then warps him one more time for good measure and stomps off into the house talkin' out loud to herself, "Craziest damn bunch..."

Leonard, just a-grinnin' up against the fence post, looks over at Benny and says, "Come on over here to the well and let me clean you up." So Benny, along with Eugene, saunters over to the well and gets the stink off before gettin' ready for the preachin'. Benny, with one free hand, catches a striped lizard runnin' down the rock well-casin' and puts it on his shoulder.

Eugene, watchin' closely, says to Leonard, "Think that preacher can cure Ol' Benny?"

"There's nothing wrong with Benny. Best cow counter in the county, maybe the state, and ain't never missed at witchin' a good well of water."

"But Leonard, he thinks he's Jesus, and howls like a sick pup. Everbody but you knows he's crazier than a cooty bear."

Benny sits in contentment at the edge of the well with the lizard on his

shoulder and watches as a woolly worm crawls up his arm. The lizard runs off his shoulder and Benny grabs him and puts him in his pocket.

"Hush it up, Eugene, you're gonna hurt his feelings again. Besides, we need to see Wilson and get him to pick us up something to drink." And lookin' down at Benny, "Get on in the house, Jesus, and get ready for the preachin', and remember, Mama Jo ain't a fixin' to put up with none of your foolishness."

Benny puts the woolly worm on the end of his nose and watches cross-eyed as it moves down and over his mouth and chin. Leonard picks Benny up by the arm, rubbin' his hand in Benny's hair and repeats, "Get on in the house, now, go on!" Benny thumps the woolly worm off his bare shoulder and walks slowly away with the other hand still in his pocket

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A deep red Georgia sun hangs low in a cloudless, moonless sky, presiding over a pair of cooing doves calling out evening songs in perfect cadence with ten-thousand crickets joining in for the chorus as Eugene, Leonard, and Benny cross the Tradewater Bridge on their way to Cranor's barn to hear the big-shot healin' preacher what's come up from Buzzard's Roost to bless and to heal the poor and afflicted sinners of Pleasant Hill. Eugene's walkin', talkin' to nobody but the trees. Benny, he's catchin' grasshoppers and early-evenin' lighnin' bugs and holdin' tight to his new-found-pet-lizard friend, which he's named Ezekiel, and Leonard, he's just a-walkin': "Stand Him on a cloud. Give him a throne. Put him in a damn tree; it makes no difference. Just keep him away from me: keeps us safe. It's the

"You gone off again, Leonard?" A black and tan Ford sedan dusts by.

Leonard says, "There goes Wanda, Eugene. Just thinkin' out loud...thought you said that itch was gone."

"Well, I reckoned it was. That Raid always worked before."

"Maybe if you'd explain your situation to Gravy, he'd refund your money, Eugene."

"Quit your goin-on, Leonard. I ain't in the mood."

"Stay away from, Eugene, Jesus; he's got bugs."

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Just as the boys get in sight of Cranor's barn, Jo Nell and Junior Johnson drive by in the truck. They walk into the barn and take the last two sinner seats. Leonard leaves Benny there in the back with his grandparents sayin', "You'll have to stay here in back, Jesus. Sit down there in the floor and listen to your Mama Jo."

Now, Leonard and Eugene go on up to the mourner's bench, where an old woman in a wheel chair rolls up beside of Eugene and a young mother with her baby sits down next to Leonard. The tension in the room intensifies as a low rumble of mingling voices fills the air; Leonard looks over at Eugene and with the brim of his hat wipes the sweat from over his brow as the man in black descends from the hayloft. The only sounds sounding are the soft hum of an electric generator just outside the barn and the labored breathin' of Cranor's heifer not

more than ten steps away.

"Be obedient unto the Lord and the spirit of God will guide you." (A quick "amen" rings out.) Preacherman continues preachin' scripture for about ten minutes, and then, out of nowhere: "They're talkin' about gun control and I'll tell you they're not gonna take my gun. They ain't, no they ain't a-takin' mine! I haven't never killed a man but I'm not gonna stand up here and tell you that I'm not gonna kill a man tonight. No, brothers and sisters, we are living in that day when the Lord said that things are only going to get worser and worser, as it was in the days of Lock. And when it does I'll be ready for 'em with my 44 magnum. Ain't no cut-throat, no-good-for-nothin' gonna force Satan down my throat.

"Repentance: people don't like that!" ("Amen" from the crowd of gentle listeners.) "They reject the preachin'. We are livin' in the days of form. You had better thank God that we are livin' in the days of form ("amen" from the bewildered crowd). You all ought to be out there rejoicin' ("amen"). You ought to be out there runnin' 'round that telephone pole rejoicin' and shoutin' the word of God--just like me. The Lord said that in these last days there would be a great fallin' away. We are livin' in those days of fallin' away. Preach about fornication and somebody'll get mad at you ("amen"). Preach about denyin' the faith and somebody'll get mad at you" ("amen"). Preach about adultery and somebody'll get mad at you ("amen"). Preach about drinkin' corn liquor and somebody'll get mad at you. Preach about stealin' and somebody'll get mad at you ("amen"). Preach about smokin' marijuana and somebody'll get mad at you. We are livin' in

the days of the fallin' away."

Preacherman walks over and puts his hands on the wheel-chaired old lady's head and: "Blessed are the children of Israel and all those who believe--", and then: "You are healed!", shoves her head backwards so hard she flips upside down with the wheel chair comin' over right on top of her. Old woman jumps up and grabs the preacher with tears of thankfulness in her eyes and everybody was a sayin', "Praise the Lord," and Eugene looks over at Leonard as if to say, "Bugs no more," but the Preacherman walks right past Eugene and grabs hold of Leonard's head like it's some kind of mushmelon with them big hands bridled in those black sleeves, and with Leonard a squirmin' and tryin' to get loose:

"Blessed are the children of Israel and all those who believe--", and then: "You are healed!", shoves Leonard backwards plum' off the bench, and when Leonard's body catches up with his head: "Goddamn preacher, it's Eugene what's got the crabs! Ain't nothin' wrong with me."

A red-faced Eugene cowers in shame as a hush falls on all those assembled in His name. Meanwhile, Benny's come in from the outside; been catchin' lightnin' bugs and pullin' off their tails and stickin' 'em all over his face. The crowd, still in suspense, watches the big preacher from Buzzard's Roost as he homes in on Eugene: "Son, you are a sinner in the eyes of the Lord."

Eugene looks the preacher right in the eye and says, "No shit!" (A pin drops.)

And Preacher, unbroken, continues: "And if any man fall unto the

vengeance of the Lord, let him shield his eyes unto his neighbor and let him be banished from the Lord's church unto the hills unto forever" ("Amen" and "Praise the Lord" from the crowd, and Leonard, a smilin', waves bye-bye to Eugene), and during this time, Benny, still in the back, takes out old Ezekiel and imparts him onto Nora Dyer's shoulder. Just as she raises her arms in the triumphant glory of her most gracious and loving Lord and in full agreement to banish old sinnin' Eugene, Ezekiel takes the notion to dive down the back of Nora's dress. Old Lady Dyer screams and tears away at her dress tryin' to get at Ezekiel, whose tail, it just so happens, breaks off and drops on down, a wigglin', into the crack of Nora's very wide hind-end. She shouts and jumps four rows of benches, grabs hold to Preacher and pisses all over him. All the commotion scares the old heifer into a kickin' fit and she kicks one of the outside planks off the wall of her stall, and it falls against the fuel switch of the generator, shuttin' it off. And darkness prevails in the land of unknowing.

Widow Lungtree, thinkin' Nora Dyer has been seized by that great and powerful spirit of her long forgotten and revenging Lord, shouts out in this desolation of darkness: "Blessed Lord! Oh speak to me, blessed Jesus!"

Yeah, you guessed it: up pops Benny knockin' over two milk cans and glowin' green from the fire-flies (a terrible, terrible God-forsaken-sight), and with all eyes on his glowin' face, the triumphant Benny: "What the hell you want, woman?"

Four, maybe five spirit-filled ladies of the flock fall out right there, colder

than a gizzard's liver. Don't know if they're dead, just a-restin', or what. Big-city preacher from down to Buzzard's Roost, in disgust at this lost flock of God's children, hangin' with woman, whispers aloud and to himself: "Well, fuck me a-runnin'"; and in a fit of passion from out of the corner of the crowd jumps Wanda, throws Old Lady Dyer across two bales of hay, and downs the preacher right there in the straw. In this dark and abysmal abode of Cranor's barn, one can only imagine.

Henry Ledbetter durin' these past few stressful moments of unknowing has recovered a bale of hay (actually "horseweeds") from the side of the barn and has set fire to it. Now in the smokin' and slightly flickerin' light of that small but powerful illuminator, Truth made manifest itself unto the whole: sure 'nough, big-city preacher was pinned beneath Wanda, his eyes rolled back in his head and nekid as a turnip green. Eugene was there a starin', Benny was a rubbin' the new-born calf as its mother licked it clean, and Leonard was just a wonderin'.

My daddy come in from work, and they was a-flyin' everywhere. Two, maybe three done dead--some more just a-kickin' around in the dust. Daddy run in the house and told my mama, "You or them goddamn chickens of yourn--one of you has got to go." Now, I don't care a whole lot for chickens either--just throwin' rocks at 'em. Big John says he don't care one way or the other about chickens, but he don't stink his daddy's car up in the winter when he gets in on Sunday morning and his daddy turns on the heater and he has chicken shit on the bottom of his shoes. Big John don't ride in cars. Big John can fly.

Big John's mama, she's a bear, a big black bear, the biggest, blackest bear in the whole wide world. She ain't mean though; Big John told me she weren't. And on Sunday mornings she don't spit on him and scrub his face with her handkerchief and tell him to warsh behind his ears--"even if nobody is gonna look." Bears don't go to church. Big John don't even have to use soap--cause he don't ever get dirty. He don't have to do anything he don't want to do. And when he wants to blow his nose, he just blows it out on the ground, takes his sleeve and wipes it off. His Mama, she don't care. And if Big John did go to church and he had to blow his nose, he'd do it the same way, and his daddy woodin' take him out back even if the preacher did quit his hollerin' and give him a mean look. Big John ain't got no daddy, Indians killed him--thousands and thousands and hundreds of 'em. He told me all about his daddy and them Indians and I told him

about how come I didn't like churches 'cause of how you have to sit still and not go to sleep all at the same time, and how you couldn't pick your nose, and if you did sneak one out they would make you roll it off in the floor and woodin' let you thump it up on top of Old Miz Robinson's purple hairdo.

The preacher, he seen me do that one time, and after church he told me that the Good Lord didn't like for His little boys to be a doin' such as that, and I told him that the Good Lord didn't like much of nothin' and my mama squeezed my hand till it hurt so bad and she said, "Johnny!" I told 'em, "Big John thumps his boogers." And then my mama said bad things about Big John and I started to cry. The preacher, he shook my daddy's hand and said how glad he was to see us all at church today and my daddy told him to be sure and come visit.

After dinner when I was alone, I asked Big John why it was that people were always a-sayin' things at church that they never did mean. He told me that he didn't rightly understand grown-ups. Big John, he's bigger than a grown-up.

Me and him, we got to rememberin' the last time the preacher came over. We were sittin' out back and we heard my mama hollar and ask my daddy who that was pullin' up in the drive. My daddy looked out from over his paper and said, "My God, it's that damned preacher." Me and John laughed and my mama, she got real mad, but by the time the preacher got to the door she was unmad and Big John, he went back to the woods--he can fly--and the preacher said he would be glad to stay and eat with us; you know what my daddy says? He says, "That shittin' preacher eats like a damn horse."

While mama finished up the cookin', the preacher and my daddy set out on the back porch talkin' about all the Lord's brothers and Lord's sisters--there was a mess of 'em too, ain't no wonder He had to leave home.

After I got tired of listenin' and behavin', I went around front and shelled a couple of ears of corn, and when I was through, I ran around back of the house, jumped up on the porch and yelled at my daddy, "Daddy! Daddy! Get your gun daddy! Goddamn chickens on Preacher's new truck." He jumped down from the porch, broke off a peach limb, and while the preacher tied his shoes, my daddy whooped my butt good. I didn't cry much though.

After supper they got to talkin' 'bout heaven and hell and ghosts and spirits and such stuff, and I asked the preacher if them people up there would let little boys in and he patted my head and said, "They sure do, my son." Then I asked him if they would let me bring Big John. The preacher said that he had to be born of the blood. That's when I started to cry, and my mama asked me what the matter was and I told her that Big John was born of a bear, and they all started to laugh at me and I got real mad and kicked the preacher and told him that I wasn't his son and I didn't want to go to heaven nohow, and my daddy took his belt off and I cried plum' till I can't remember. And John, he came and got into bed with me and my Teddy and told me that he would always be with me no matter where I went. He was the bestest friend ever I had.

Big John was with me when I won Teddy last year at the fair by knocking down three pop bottles with a baseball. I didn't get them all the first time, but the

man what was wearin' the apron was talkin' to a pretty girl so he didn't see me when I kicked the third one over. I told him to give me that big brown one up there in the corner. Late that night, after we got home, Big John was real big sad and he asked me why I had done what I done and I told him that I didn't get caught, but he went away and didn't come back for the longest forever. I got so most alone my throat hurt. The next morning I woke up in the dark and climbed up on the hayloft and seen the biggest sun and I yelled loud as I could yell, "I ain't never gonna do it agin." I hoped Big John would hear me and he did, 'cause he come to see me that tomorrow. I shore wished I could fly.

I 'most nearly did one day when I tore my daddy's plantbed plastic in two and took it up in the hayloft and hung it on three nails two times and swung down on top of my daddy's big green truck and unhanged it both times and stepped on the yellow light on the top and broke it out. After I got it all up in the loft, I went to the big end that was open and nobody could see, held on to that plastic, stretched my wings and flew straight to the ground. Hurt my ankle too, but I didn't tell nobody. But my mama, she knowed it somehow and when she asked me how come I was walkin' the way I was, I told her how that old Hampshire sow had throwed me off agin and hurt my foot. She told me not be ridin' them sows any more cause of how they were a-fixin' to pig--and they did.

One day me and Big John had 'em all hemmed up in the corner of the hog lot and we were shootin' 'em with our corncob bullets and run out of bullets and they charged us back to our fort and Big John, he held 'em off while I climbed up

on the water trough and jumped the fence. Then I got some more corncobs and told Big John to run for his life. When Big John was safe, we went around the outside of the fence to where that old Hampshire was down. She was layin' in a puddle of blood. She had seven little ones a-suckin' and she was eatin' another one. I got so scared and run to the house, without spreadin' my wings, to where my mama was hangin' out clothes and grabbed hold of her and she asked me what the matter was and I told her about what me and Big John had seen and asked her if she ever thought about eatin' me up and she got down and pulled me so close and told me that she loved me so much, "and yes, your Old Big John too." The wind blew cool across my face and I felt so good my throat hurt, and my mama, she took her apron and wiped my eyes--and I was a wishin' that I could fly.