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Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies

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Contributors

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Floyd Collins holds an MFA in Creative Writing and a PhD in Twentieth-Century Literature from the University of Arkansas. He has authored several volumes of poetry, including *My Back Pages: The Teresa Poems* (2022). *The Living Artifact*, a selection of his essay-reviews, appeared in 2021. Most recently *Waking Past Midnight: Selected Poems*, a career retrospective, was published by Stephen F. Austin State UP in 2023.

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Peter Geier's doctor is across the street from Edgar Allan Poe's grave. He has reported and written features for local, national, and international news publications. He reviews films for <http://moompitchers.blogspot.com> His published work includes a profile of a Baltimore neighbor in *LIGEIA*, and a speculative piece in *Lumina* about a plastic earring figurine that comes to life. He is completing a collection of two dozen short stories set in New York.

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Carol Parris Krauss relocated to Virginia after 24 years in Fort Lauderdale. Some venues where she has publications are *Louisiana Lit*, *One Art*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, *Story South*, and *Highland Park Poetry*. She was selected for Ghost City Press’s 2023 Micro-Chap Summer Series. The Poetry Box released her chapbook, *The Old Folks Call It God’s Country* (April 2024). Her next book, *Mountain. Memory. Marsh.*, will be released by Fernwood Press in the summer of 2025.

Justin McKee was born and raised in San Mateo, CA, and is currently based in various locations throughout the Western Hemisphere. He previously served as co-Founder/Publisher/Editor-in-Chief/Errand Boy for *The Raffish*, an offbeat literary journal based in New Orleans, LA, as well as lead ditchdigger, bellhop, farmhand, et al. for assorted ventures in disparate locales. For more information, please visit justinmckee.com.

William H. Pruden III teaches History and Government at Ravenscroft School in Raleigh, North Carolina. He earned an AB in History from Princeton University, a JD from Case Western Reserve University, and master’s degrees from Wesleyan and Indiana Universities. His career teaching American history and government has spanned over four decades and has been complemented by stints as a legislative assistant at the state and Congressional levels. He has contributed hundreds of articles to encyclopedias and other reference works, as well as chapters to such books as *To Can the Kaiser: Arkansas and the Great War* (2015), *Bullets and Fire: Lynching and Authority in Arkansas, 1840–1950* (2017), *The Elaine Massacre and Arkansas: A Century of Atrocity and Resistance, 1819–1919* (2018), and *Race, Labor, and Violence in the Delta: Essays to Mark the Centennial of the Elaine Massacre* (2022).

Matthew P. Rooney received a PhD in anthropology from the University of Florida in 2021 and is one of ten research station archeologists working for the Arkansas Archeological Survey. He has conducted fieldwork in Florida, Mississippi, Alabama, and Arkansas. His research projects tell the stories of Indigenous people and African Americans who lived in the American South, combining archeology with history and cultural anthropology by collaborating with descendant populations. Dr. Rooney is currently the Vice President of Education and President-Elect for Preserve Arkansas, a member of the Board of Trustees for the Arkansas Historical Association, and Associate Editor for the Southeastern Archaeological Conference.

Jacob Reeher earned his MFA from the University of New Orleans in 2018. His work has appeared in *Tampa Review*, *Relief*, and elsewhere. He lives with his wife in New York City.

Anne Richey, a North Carolina native, recently returned to the South after many years of living and teaching in New York City and upstate NY. Much of her first book, *Church of the Robin’s Ha-Ha! John Burroughs’ “Natural Religion,” and Other Poems* (2017), is derived from her special interest in the Catskills naturalist Burroughs, and in the region itself. Now living in Memphis, TN, she is currently assembling a second book of poems and hoping for her first sighting of an indigo bunting.

Dalton Sikes is a West Coast writer, poet, essayist, and former Managing Editor of *Silk Road Review*. His work has appeared in *Shift: A Journal of Literary Oddities*, *Inscape*, *Chaotic Merge*, and *The Heartland Review*, among others. Dalton is an Honorable Mention for the 2024 Joy Bale Boone Poetry Prize. His work ranges from dark to delightful through poetry and prose.

Michael Spence drove public-transit buses in the Seattle area for thirty years, retiring from that job on Valentine's Day, 2014. His poems have appeared recently in *Alabama Literary Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Catamaran*, *Louisiana Literature*, *The New Criterion*, *North American Review*, and *The Southern Review*. New work is forthcoming in *The Hudson Review*, *Tampa Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, and *Terrain*. His most recent book, *Umbilical* (2016), won *The New Criterion* Poetry Prize.

Bridget Starnes is a writer and textile artist who has made northwest Arkansas her home for the past ten years. Originally from northeast Kansas, she attended both Kansas State University and the University of Kansas Medical Center. Her previous work has appeared in *303 Magazine* and *Reductress*.

Joe Watson is an Arkansas native and holds a BA from UALR in English. He lives in Little Rock with his wife Lori.

So-So Grocery

By Michael Spence

—New Orleans, 1963

The address—5050 Downman Road—
I guess inspired Mom to call it that.
The pocked cinderblock felt gritty when I dragged
My fingers along a wall, as if the store
Were painted with a paste of crumbled seashells.
Whiter than its milk that would go bad
Before we finished it, the building gleamed
Bright as a bunker from an arctic war.
But inside wasn't cool—just not as hot
As the steam of this July. Maybe the milk
Soured my mother on the place. She claimed
The meat it sold developed unusual hues
And started to smell soon as she'd unwrap it.
So she drove to the Piggly-Wiggly, its cold breeze
Flowing past the bins that glittered like ice.

The So-So owner loved the holidays—
All the holidays. Equality
Was rare as snow that summer in the South:
The people living there knew people came
In different kinds. But in the display window,
The Uncle Sam who held a firecracker
Big as an extinguisher stood guard
With Santa smiling beside an aluminum tree
Flocked into permanent winter. A turkey stuck
Mid-strut between them like a mutual pet
Seemed to peck a patch of jack-o'-lanterns.
In front of all, as if in command, the crèche.

My mother frowned: He's just too lazy to change
With the seasons. So confused and weird. Nodding,
I fought to keep from grinning. I thought the owner
Was right—holidays seemed parceled out
As if scarce as pardons from the governor
On TV crime shows. I guessed the owner felt
Excited like I did on Christmas morning,
And he could feel that electric every day—
His store would never cease to celebrate.

I first saw Michelle Fernandez in its aisles,
Her hair and face the light brown of pralines.
I bought a couple of Yoo-hoo's for me and her—
They were cold; so chilly they made us shiver.
The frosty drinks cost most of my allowance,
But I liked imagining the chocolate turned
Michelle browner. Those summer afternoons
We'd meet at the store and take our bottles out
To the bench in front. I sipped mine slowly
To make it last. The day I said, I want you
To be my girlfriend, she only smiled and talked
About how hot it was.

So-So Grocery
Never changed when autumn came and Michelle
Went out with Ronnie Ducrose. I'd still go in
To check the aisles; any brown-haired girl
Turned blond or brunette. I quit looking
At the window and its frozen decorations.
The cream soda I bought looked plain as water—
The way a holiday on the calendar
Looks like any other day. I chugged
The hissing fizz, letting it fill up my mouth,
And pressed my lips tight as it scoured my tongue.

Learning to Tell Time with Elvis

By Harvey Huddleston

1

I arrived at book club with some wine that held promise if you could believe that guy behind the counter. She opened the door with Theo next to her doing handsprings like St. John Bosco had performed to become the patron saint of actors. Then, bending down to calm Theo, she looked up at me and said, "I'm so sorry about Herman."

Herman, I thought, now where did that come from?

A few months ago I was leaving my apartment when I'd seen Herman having trouble getting up to his place on the couch so I'd placed a box in front. Then on my return, I found that he'd fallen off the box and his front claws had stuck in the couch. I freed him but saw that he couldn't move his lower body so I lifted him up to his water bowl on the coffee table. I was encouraged when he took some sips but then he still couldn't move and as I watched him it became clear that he never would again.

I made the call and put him in his carrier and took him out into the fresh air which he'd always loved. The car came and we went and when I got back it didn't seem possible that he wasn't with me. I cleaned the apartment as it had begun to smell from his many bowel leaks that I hadn't been able to keep up with. But when it came to his things, I couldn't get rid of them all. His litter scoop still lies on the closet floor, half-way visible.

Herman had spent his first few years in an alley and even though he liked people, the only way he knew how to play was to lash out with his claws. He wanted human contact so badly but something inside him just wouldn't allow for it so I knew how much he'd depended on me. I didn't know though how much I'd depended on him. I still see him in the dim light across the room, peeking at me from around the corner. He's there but not really so I've tried to get on with things like everyone else has had to do since the beginning of time.

But then our host said she was sorry about him and she'd said it with such concern and like it happened only yesterday that I was taken aback. A wave of joy came over me—not the kind that makes you stop to take it in but the kind that propels you forward into the simple act of living. We opened the wine and the other book club members arrived and for the rest of that evening it felt like Herman was there with us.

I wondered where that joy had come from and why it had come at the mere mention of his name. I wondered what might sustain it or if it could be sustained. Then a theory formed in my mind. It seemed that time itself had dissolved in that moment; that is, the distance between now and then contracted to the point where it vanished, leaving only what is and always will be.

2

It was confusing the way some people would look at a clock and make a pronouncement like “I have to be there by eight.” Even my sister who was only two years older than me could do it. I’d ask when Howdy Doody was coming on and she’d answer by just glancing at the clock. It seemed so natural that I assumed she’d been born with this power and some like her had it

while others like me didn't. That was bother- some but what really had me worried was the thought that this might be a permanent con- dition and I'd forever be at her mercy. I decided to ask.

"So how did you know it was fifteen minutes after two?"

"Because that's what the clock said."

"But how did you know what the clock said?"

"I looked."

"But how did you know what it said?"

At that she just looked at me. "Oh, you mean how do I tell time?"

"Yeah."

Now might come the answer I'd been dread- ing but instead she asked me a question, "You wanna learn?"

"... Yeah."

"Come on."

I followed her to the clock and she said there were two hands. "The short hand tells the hour and the long hand tells the minutes so all you have to do is see how many minutes it is before or after the hour that the short hand is pointing to." Then she told me to tell her what time it was so I did.

"See? It's easy."

"What's the skinny hand for?"

"It's for seconds but you don't have to worry about that."

"What does it do?"

Now she was annoyed. "Sixty seconds make a minute and sixty minutes make an hour. That's all you need to know," and then she was gone, leaving me counting the marks around the clock. But then I realized I didn't have to count them because the numbers already said what they were.

It amazed me that not only did we have clocks to tell time but I'd never be confused by one again. I wondered if all those things I didn't understand were because no one had explained them yet. Then I thought that maybe we were supposed to figure things out for ourselves since that was how I'd found out about music.

I knew that music was supposed to make you feel good but what was it supposed to sound like and what kind of good feeling was it supposed to give you? There was Lawrence Welk on TV with his "champagne music-makers" and bubbles ev- erywhere. The way he kept smiling I figured his music was supposed to make you happy but it didn't do that for me. Tommy down the block told me his father said the woman on Lawrence Welk was so pretty that he wanted to run out in the street and kiss her. That seemed like a strange thing for his father to say but even if he did, that didn't mean he was any happier and it sure didn't explain anything about music. So it re- mained a mystery until one night on the back porch.

I'd sit out there after dark when they'd let me and on this night I was watching and listen- ing to the teenagers next door. The teenager who lived there didn't pay any attention to me, but I liked him because of the time he'd walked around on his hands with his feet up in the air.

I sat there watching the reds, blues and yel- lows reflect off their faces. Their faces were all I could see because the hedge between our yards cut off everything else below their necks. And even though I couldn't see it, I knew a jukebox was there the way the colored lights kept shifting and the songs kept changing.

Then it happened.

Don't be cruel, ooh, ooh, ooh,
To a heart that's true.
I don't want no other love,
Baby, it's you I'm thinking of.

I said to myself, this must be music. And that was Elvis. I knew about him because he was from Memphis and had made a big splash on TV. He's telling this girl to not be cruel to him and I wondered what she'd done that was so cruel but he never says and then I realized he didn't have to

because no matter how cruel she was, all that mattered is how much he loves her.

Then it felt like I'd gone somewhere else and whenever after that on a hot summer day with the fan up high and Elvis on the radio, I knew exactly what I was hearing.

3

After first grade we moved to a bigger house in the suburbs and right after that Elvis moved out there too. He was getting more famous and had enough money to buy anything he wanted so I guess that house on Audubon was it. We drove by to see it like everyone else and it wasn't much bigger than ours except only Elvis lived there while our house was for the whole family. You could tell which one it was by the music notes stuck on the fence in front.

It had a swimming pool in the backyard which we only knew about because of my sister. Her friend in third grade had invited her over and it turned out she lived right next door to Elvis. This friend showed her how she spied on him through the backyard fence and I imagined Elvis in his pool with all these girls swimming around. But then my sister said all he did back there was work on his motorcycle and it was kind of boring.

Pretty soon so many people were driving down Audubon that his neighbors complained so Elvis moved to a new house called Graceland and I wondered what kind of house had its own name. A picture in the paper showed it with columns and a long driveway curving up to the house. There were still music notes on the fence in front but these were big ones on a fancy gate that closed the driveway off from the street.

Then he got drafted into the army and I don't remember much else from then except lots of new music coming out. One day I'm walking past Elvis's old house and this song called "The Locomotion" was in my head. It had this grinding horn and felt like a freight train coming with this girl singer who sounded black and sexy.

Everyone is doing a brand new dance now,
Come on baby, do the Locomotion.
Chugga chugga motion now, let's make a chain now,
Come on baby, do the Locomotion.

Then Elvis was out of the army and had brought back to Memphis with him a young girl he wasn't married to. The paper said she'd come with her father's blessing and was already enrolled in a private school but it was still pretty weird. Memphians though chose to believe the best and then I found out this private school was the same Catholic girls school where my sister went. My sister said she was nice but didn't hang out with them much. A chauffeur dropped her off in the morning and then picked her up in the afternoon but that changed one day when she drove up in a brand new Mustang.

So with Elvis collecting young girls and no one thinking about him much, he starts popping up in the movies. What? I mean I knew he could sing but who said he could act. You didn't just decide one day to start acting and I figured that had to be especially true for this guy from Humes High but that's exactly what Elvis did because then he was starring in more and more movies. He mostly

sang and danced but he had to be doing something right for them to keep making them.

Then around when the Beatles came out he disappeared again and it seemed like a long time before he showed back up for what they called his “Comeback Tour.” His hair wasn’t slicked back anymore and he had these thick sideburns like some motorcycle greaser from the fifties. It was all a big success though and his music came back on the radio but that was different too now, slower and more old fashioned. All I knew for

sure was that it wasn't for me.

One day some friends and I were driving down Bellevue when we saw Elvis out at his gate talking to some fans. None of us had ever seen him up close so we decided to stop but by the time we parked and got over there, the crowd had grown a lot bigger. We stood at the back but then the gates opened up and the crowd began moving inside towards one of the stone walls surrounding the grounds.

In New Orleans once this guy asked what I thought of Elvis and I'd answered, "Just a Memphis hick who made it big," and I'd felt bad about that ever since. I mean, who knew what he was really like but then I thought maybe I could find out if I got up to the front of this crowd. A friend motioned to where two more friends were climbing up onto the stone wall so I climbed up too and followed behind them along the top of the wall to just above Elvis. We all sat down there just a few feet from his head.

He had on a shiny gold shirt and white pants as he sat there talking to his fans. Maybe it was how his dyed black hair was so puffed out but his head looked twice as big as any I'd ever seen. He didn't know we were there and I thought how easy it would be to just smack him. Then I saw a bodyguard type in the crowd watching us and someone else taking pictures and thought what a great shot with the crowd down below and us up above and that's why they were letting us sit there. Then I guess someone tipped him off because Elvis twisted his head around to look up at us and said, "Hey up there, how you fellas doin'?"

I answered, "pretty good," and that's all we said. He then turned back to his fans and we walked back around the wall to climb down. His voice had been that same one we all knew but there'd also been a Mississippi twang to it I'd never heard before. I was glad he'd felt comfortable enough out there in his front yard to not worry about how he sounded. It was like it was hard for him to relax and you felt that from him too. It came off as a sensitivity that made you like him.

He sang everything, love songs, ballads, gospel, jazz. But as his success grew so did his drug problems. During one of his stays at Baptist Hospital with the aluminum foil in the windows, a girlfriend and I were driving down Union when she told me her aunt was his nurse up there and all he did was brush his teeth. He'd brush them and then ten minutes later he'd brush them again. It went on like that all night and the only other thing her aunt said about it was that it was sad.

I'd just turned onto the ramp on I-240 when it came on the radio that Elvis was dead. They hinted at an overdose and the problems that came with addiction. One report said that he'd had a pill doctor who'd given him anything he wanted and that made sense as I knew plenty of those doctors in Memphis.

It was normal for Memphians to mourn him but what didn't seem normal at all was so many people coming from other places to mourn him too. I moved away the next year and watched from a distance as his celebrity grew. At first it surprised me and then I was shocked by how many people traveled there. But then I too, whenever I took a trip back to Memphis, went to Graceland to load up on the Elvis junk that I then gave out back in New York. It was like you just couldn't go wrong with Elvis.

So after dozens of movies and documentaries, a new biopic on him had just come out that's been nominated for several awards. His widow, Priscilla, the same girl my sister went to high school with, and their daughter, Lisa Marie, spoke so highly of the actor playing Elvis that I'd made a point of seeing it. That was during the week before our next book club, the one I'd just arrived at.

4

As usual, some of us liked the book while others didn't. This latter group, of whom I was one, kept our comments mostly to ourselves so as to not dampen the cordial atmosphere created by our host. By that same token, there's no reason I can't say what I thought now. I hated *The Prince* and reading it was just as excruciating as my first time through fifty years earlier. I should have said, "tried" reading because I chucked it aside again just like in the good old days, convinced once and for all that the only reason to read Machiavelli was in its proof that, unlike the cheese our host laid out, he didn't get better with age.

Book club ended in a consensus—which I have to admit Machiavelli had no small part in— that humanity hasn't changed much in the last four centuries. The talk then turned to other things. One of our members hadn't completely recovered from being hit by a car while jogging but she went on to explain that even though she still had some headaches, her doctors expected a full recovery.

Someone asked me about my medical condition. The previous spring I'd spent two weeks in an ICU after my aorta burst. That and the collateral damage had been repaired over the course of four major surgeries but it still had me a bit rattled. Now whenever I'm asked how I am, I usually just say "better." That's all most people want to hear anyway and can't say I blame them.

Other books, plays and movies came up and the new biopic about Elvis was mentioned. Not all of us had seen it but one who had told of the scene where Elvis as a young boy heard Gospel music for the first time and began vibrating with it. I told of some real footage from Elvis' last concert used near the end of the film. "So Elvis is at his piano singing. His face is extremely bloated and his eyes are so glazed you think he might collapse when—"

But then I caught myself, realizing I was about to commit my usual "spoiler" blunder. The conversation then moved to other things but even as I joined in with it, I wanted to finish telling about the "Elvis" ending. So just as I did with Machiavelli, I'll tell it now but first, something about spoilers.

I've never understood them. How can saying what happens in a story ruin it for someone else? If you tell me a person jumped off a bridge, how can that have meaning if I don't know what went before it? And if it doesn't have any meaning, how can it spoil anything? But others don't like spoilers. It really is that simple so I try not to do it. In this case though, no harm was done so for anyone who hasn't seen the "Elvis" ending yet, consider this your spoiler alert because I'm going to reveal it now.

As I was saying, in some real footage from his last concert Elvis is at his piano singing "Unchained Melody." Massive amounts of moisture have welled up on his face and you're unsure whether it's sweat or tears or both. But then, just when it seems that he can't go on, he peeks out at his mostly female audience who are screaming their hearts out in love and adoration. His voice gains strength as he looks out again and then again and we follow along with him to the end of that much loved classic.

Lonely river flows to the sea, to the sea,
To the open arms of the sea,

Lonely river sighs, wait for me, wait for me,
I'll be coming home, wait for me.

Archival footage has mostly been used to fill in the narrative when recreating a scene is prohibitive but that wasn't the case here. Everything in the film up to that point had been recreated but then this real footage is used without any attempt to disguise it. It signals a change in the film and serves as a kind of coda in the way that a su-

perscript is sometimes used at the end to tie up loose ends.

This is our last image of Elvis. And a remarkable image it is indeed; him up on stage doing what he's always done best, singing his heart out with every last bit of heart he has left. Taking that lonely trip with his audience down the river to the sea, to the open arms of the sea, as he looks out again and then again at those women who still embrace him to make sure they're still there. In that moment they are all his mothers and lovers, just as it's always been.

More archival footage is interspersed. In one clip he tells an audience that we need only a song to make it to the end and we realize that "Un-chained Melody" is that song in that moment when he knows better than anyone how close to the end he is.

And time goes by so slowly,
And time can do so much,
Are you still mine?

And every woman there screams back that she is. In that moment, form and content came together for the perfect ending. That was what I was going to say to book club but now I see how it might have been more of a spoiler than I'd thought.

5

Emma was my nurse in the ICU the night before my most critical surgery. She told me about her longtime boyfriend, Dan. He sounded like a nice guy but she seemed unsure about that "rest of her life" part of getting married. They had plans for two destination weddings coming up that summer in the Caribbean. The weddings were only two weeks apart though and she was having second thoughts about traveling to almost the same place twice in such quick succession. It conflicted with her sense of economy and efficiency. But marriage was in the air for her group and she'd begun to feel that it was time for her to kick out at least some of the stops.

Steam was rising from the corner of my cubicle and I saw that it was from a small autoclave as she stacked layers of steaming towels next to it. She then brought them to the table next to my bed and began placing them on my chest. When that steamy heat hit my skin it was like nothing I'd ever felt before. It had been days since anything clean and warm had touched my body. My second surgery had come right after the first and since both had been emergencies no attention had been paid to "niceties." Aside from that penetrating warmth, washing or having it done for me felt almost like healing.

Emma folded half the towel already in place back onto itself before applying the next one to the same area while covering a new area of the same size. In that way she proceeded across my chest, stomach and legs. This solemn progression over my body combined with the opiates in my system lulled me into an almost fugue like state as I savored each second. The parts of my body still untouched seemed to cry out in anticipation of that delicious warmth. It all seemed so masterful and beyond the ability of a normal human that I finally had to tell her.

"Emma, I can't get over how well you do that. Did someone teach you or did you learn it yourself?"

"Hmmm, a little of both."

"Did you always want to be a nurse?"

"I'd always wanted to do something in medicine."

"Have you ever thought about becoming a surgeon?"

"Well, my hands aren't really precise enough for that. But something I've thought about is becoming a sales rep. You've probably seen them out there at my station."

"I have."

"They work for the medical suppliers and are here to make sure we have everything we need, even if they have to go get it themselves. They're good that way. It's interesting and you get to travel so a lot of us end up doing that. You have to know a lot more about medicine than I do now, but then you advance really fast and make tons of money."

"I see."

"So how about you? What do you do?"

"... I'm a legal assistant... and a writer. That's why I came to New York... more than forty years ago now... to get my plays produced. Back then you could get original plays done in other places but you had to be a New York playwright for people to take you seriously."

"So you're a playwright. That sounds inter- esting."

"I guess."

"You know, I saw my first play ever last month on Broadway."

"Really? What was it?"

"The Lion King."

"No kidding, how'd you like it?"

"Oh my God, the theater was packed and Dan and I were there in the dark when all these animals were in the aisle and started coming out of the shadows talking to us. I was holding Dan's hand and I felt his hand squeezing mine and I was squeezing his. Then we looked at each other and started laughing and we were lost in that other world... and it was one of the most fun nights I've ever had... ."

"Wow!"

"And you know the funniest part? It was my birthday and Dan had been trying to decide for months what to give me. And then... for some reason he took a chance and bought those tickets... ."

"And you had one of the best nights of your life. Now you know why I became a playwright."

"I do."

"Sounds like Dan did good."

"He did real good."

She'd finished up with the towels and was collecting them back on the table.

"...Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"... I think I'll sleep now."

"I'll check back."

"... Goodnight.. ."

"Goodnight."

6

In the subway after book club I thought of the time between coming home from the hospi- tal and having to put Herman to sleep. It seemed right that in the same week I'd finally gotten some good news from the doctors, Herman had taken a turn for the worse. It was almost like he'd stuck around for the bad part and then when I was better, he felt like he could go.

A few years back we were watching TV when he'd jumped off the couch and staggered into the kitchen. From my previous cats, I knew it was probably a stroke. But then he was able to eat his late night snack even as he leaned to one side. Over the next few days, he regained his strength and I was sure it had been a small stroke that had now cleared up.

I considered taking him to the vet but decided against it. Even though he was almost twenty, he'd only been a few times. The last time about ten years earlier they didn't let me in the examining room so I'd watched through the door window. Two assistants wearing shoulder length gloves held him with his stomach turned up while another gave him an injection. I almost couldn't believe it when I saw a stream of piss shooting straight up from him and splashing all three. After he was back in his carrier, the Vet told me they usually keep cats overnight but that wasn't such a good idea with Herman. The last thing he said was, "Take Herman home and

enjoy him,” and that was exactly what I did.

So there’d be no Vet since nothing could be done anyway and just going there might traumatize him enough to cause another stroke. It went on like that for another year until his next stroke which was a lot like the first except that he moved more slowly afterward.

When he was younger I’d roll him around the apartment on my desk chair. He’d hunker down on the seat while I pushed him up and down the hall faster and faster before ending it with a few good spins. But after his first stroke I was afraid that might cause another one so I stopped. The only thing I still did like that was when he’d come up onto my chest I’d hold him over my head and rock him down like he was hanging from a parachute. But then one time I was letting him down when he yelled in my face, “No! I’m too old now so you can’t do this any- more!” Whenever he came up after that I’d just let him settle down with his head on my shoulder.

When I got home from the hospital Herman was still doing fine. Then in the summer he didn’t want his late night dry snack which had always been his favorite ritual. Then he didn’t want his dry food at all anymore so I replaced it with wet food. With his habits changing so fast, I knew that he was getting worse and then in the fall I saw that he was losing weight.

I’d always had strict rules for him because when he’d first come to live with me that was the only way to keep him from ripping me apart but now all those rules were broken. He was eating, or at least tasting, four different kinds of wet food a day and getting constant attention. One day we were watching a basketball game on the couch and he seemed so happy I couldn’t help but think he knew what was happening to him. It occurred to me that this was how it should be for everyone. Herman was simply enjoying the time he had left. That day with Herman began taking on more importance as I thought it might hold an answer to something I’d asked myself in the hospital.

It was just before they came to get me for a surgery that I knew I might not come back from. I’d soon be under anesthesia so I looked around for something to be the last thing I’d see but couldn’t find anything. I wondered if I’d had a wife or a kid there would it have helped and decided that it would but I also knew that in my case, it wouldn’t be enough. So what would? All I knew for sure was that it had to do with accomplishing something. It wasn’t the fact of having accomplished it but feeling like I had on some basic level, like the way Herman had been that day on the couch. To be so completely there that no matter how the surgery turned out, I’d be okay with it because I already had what I needed. I told myself that if I came out of this surgery I’d live every second after it to be able to say that.

I thought of what happened before leaving book club earlier. I was in the living room when the NBA playoffs came on TV. Our host’s daughter was watching and it surprised me that she was a Milwaukee Bucks fan as I’d never met a Bucks fan before. I asked her why and she said they had some rookies she liked but since the Bucks had already been eliminated she was looking for another team to follow. Then she began listing different players from around the league and I was impressed that she had such definite opinions. She talked about talent, character and maturity, this last being especially surprising given her young age.

It reminded me of something that happened that night in the ICU with Emma. This guy out in the hall was going past my cubicle when I heard him say something about basketball. I commented on it to Emma so she ran out and called down the hall for him to come back. In a few minutes three extremely tall ex-basketball players were in my cubicle discussing the upcoming play-

offs. When I told them who my team was, they looked at me like I'd looked at our host's daughter as these guys had never met a Grizzlies fan before. But then I told them I'd been a New York Knicks fan back during the Starks era and that gave me some credibility as they'd all grown up with that team. We reminisced about our favorite old Knick players and then they asked if I thought the Griz actually had a chance to win the championship. I knew none of them did so I decided to play my ace.

"Well, I saw Jordan and even Bird back in the day and I was in the Garden just last month to watch Ja when the Griz were in town. That's all I'm saying." "Wait, you saw Ja in the Garden?"

"I did."

"Live and in person?"

"I did."

"So let's hear it."

I let an appropriate silence settle in before answering.

"I'll put it this way. It's impossible to even describe how good he was."

At that, their hoots and laughter shook my small cubicle. Now these guys had all played at a high level plus they were huge NBA fans. They knew more about basketball than I ever would but their favorite players were the big stars from big city markets like LeBron and Steph, not this new guy, Ja, who might be talented but still ain't won shit. Then one of them named Corey spoke up in his quiet way.

"Your man, Ja, I'll give you. He's good but he's young and playoffs are a whole different animal."

The other two then threw down. "Damn right. You listen to Corey cause he knows."

And he did too because the Griz ended up losing in the second round just like Corey said. But what I remember most about those guys was them stopping back in that night a few more times. And they didn't do it just as a favor to Emma. It was like they came back to share in the intensity of my situation. Maybe for them it was like being back on the court in a close game with the clock ticking down and all that matters is making that shot. To be completely in that moment when everything else falls away...

That's what I'd wanted that day before surgery, to be like Herman had been on the couch when all that mattered was just being there. If I could truly take in a moment like that, then that's all there would ever have to be. All the rest, the what-ifs, half-lies, half-truths, recriminations and regrets, none of it would matter. And there wouldn't have to be anything beyond it either. It had already been done so it wouldn't have to be done again. Anything extra would just be icing on the cake.

And that brings me again to that last scene in "Elvis." He's singing to his adoring fans while knowing that the end is near. That's why he keeps looking out at those women who still embrace him. He's simply taking it in while all the rest, even the possibility that he might not get up from that piano, drifts away. He's already paid the price a thousand times over so he's going to enjoy that moment and take refuge in it and revel in it for as long as it lasts.

It reminds him of when the world was young and held unlimited possibility. Not like now when each new day brings only new problems and new pain. How much will it cost to go on? And does he want to pay that price even if he could? If all the lights were suddenly shut off or even if the whole world hated him and tried to take it all back, it wouldn't matter. He's already paid in full so it's his

now. That's what his grin is saying. He sees those faces out there filled with such love for him that he knows he already has everything he needs and will ever need again right there with him.

A Toast

by Jacob Reeher

4.

Round midnight quiet enough for to hear my watch tick. Three hundred make five minutes. Twelve times over make an hour. The moonlight tune my eyes, the room go blue like nighttime the movies. Five hooks the door, seven empties the dresser, four big two little cracks the ceiling, eight cigarettes the pack my nightstand. I sit up and smoke one minus a minute for to conk out. The lighter torches my night vision and smoke spins my head, but come three hundred more ticks I'm wide awake again. When I can't sleep, I hate it. My kid self lay up all night, times, stared bedroom corners' pitch black shadows, saw things weren't there. Raked a man's yard and bought a nightlight. Then for the reflection couldn't see out the window. Felt watched. So opened it, but were plenty shadows outside too, the grass, the woods further. So raked another yard and bought a flashlight, pointed it shadows whole nights, till neighbors complained and my parents took the light away. Dark stopped scaring me, but from habit I never sleep easy. Last six or seven years liquor help. Why I can't sleep tonight. Ain't drank since day before yesterday. Plenty nights I fall asleep still hung over. But dead sober, like tonight, hardly any use to crawl between sheets. Ain't on no wagon. Drunk myself broke. Happens regular, every couple months. Night at the bar swings into the next, the next, picks up steam. All a sudden pay day's next week and ain't got dough enough for a pint malt liquor. So I can't sleep, and I hate it. My watch ticks still. Open my window for the bugs to drown it out. Air's warm and wet from rain hours passed. For the moon the yard's lit clear, so the woods' shadows is darker. Dark stopped scaring me, but still I watch it careful. All a sudden, quiet as nothing, goddamn horse bound out the woods into the moonlight. Trot the middle the yard and look back the shadows it come from, like expect something after it. Skit around my birch tree and whinny, settle, take to the grass. Pale blue as a ghost and saddled, but no rider. Slip out my window. Got a door, but won't take eyes off this horse. I whistle and he look up. Watch me, sniff my outstretched hand, then back to munch grass glistening cool for dew. Saddle ain't bad. Leather's clean, worked western-style with curvy bramble patterns like on a bandit's bandanna. Horn's curved tusk-like. Brass buttons everywhere. No expert, me, but I bet this saddle for to ride joyful, not for to rustle. The stirrups hang low. The rider ain't there, he tall. "Where's your man, Caballo?" I say. Give me a hoot, to name animals their Spanish words. Caballo ain't answer. I pat him the ass and he flick his tail like for to shoo a fly but ain't stop munching my lawn. Over by them woods Caballo come from, I look the dark. No sign nobody. Maybes are three. First is Caballo's man saddled him up, opened the gate and went to bed. Second, Caballo saddled himself and elab-

orated an escape. Man fell off and somewhere in the woods is hurt the third. First two being unlikely, I guess to round up a search party of me, myself, and I. Sleep ain't mine tonight anyways. Tie Caballo up my birch and go inside. Use the door this time. Put on jeans off the floor and boots and a flannel for the bugs. Find a flashlight the junk drawer and I'm as ready I'll ever be. Now besides I ain't no special tracker, to traipse in dark woods with a horse in tow be tougher than without. But I find this guy, and find him hurt, to get him safe be simpler with a horse than without. So I untie Caballo and lead him back way he come. Dark stopped scaring me long time ago.

3.

Thought I was getting away with something. Late-night watering hole, crowd, money every- where. Somebody threw two dollars' tip down next to me. Sat there five minutes. Bartender ain't looked at it even, seemed. So I slid it off the bar like a hand Texas Hold 'Em and with it bought beer nine. Worked so sweet, when nine was dry I waited for another blessing. Soon enough saw Lincoln eyeing me, and palmed him too. Abe bought me couple fingers rail. Ain't exactly remember happened next. Can guess some eagle eye across the room ratted. Maybe lost my wits in the sauce, chanced too long a stretch. Course luck just run out some- times. Anyway, was some shouting and I pin- balled fist to fist out the door. Came to crossing the bridge out of town. Only bridge around but I needed a minute or two for to orient. Lit a cigarette and watched the water below. For clouds, river was pure black, but high and fast enough to hear rush against the stone. "Don't do it," someone said. I turned round. Truck idled on the bridge. Lady inside, her hair under a cap, looked me from behind pair glasses. A collie sat the pas- senger seat, tongue hanging out its head. "Do what?" I said. "Jump," said the lady. I squinted, closed an eye. Her face wrinkled, like from smoking decades. Knew her from some- wheres. Rather knew she knew me from some- wheres, as she ain't looked concerned or scared. Eyed me like a mom, and if I jumped I'd get it. Made me want to lock eyes and fall over back- wards. "What's a matter?" I said. "Scared of the dark?" She sipped from a mason jar. Jerked her thumb to the truckbed. "Get in," she said. "I'll take you home." Tossed my cigarette the river and crawled over the sorry wall kept sidewalk from road. All a sudden was flat on the pavement, wind knocked out. Collie whimpered down from the window "I'm all right, Perro," I said. "Get up and get in," Lady said. "Car com- ing." I hauled up and rolled into the truckbed. Kneeled behind the cab with my arms on the roof. Lady pulled out of town, turned the way my house like she knew. I stared the dark beyond the headlights, prayed for to hit it like a brick wall.

5.

Find Caballo's trail no trouble for mud, but he ain't easy leading. Woods is dark, gets him skittish. Every root our way I got to teeth the flashlight and pull him, both hands. Fall my ass for the slickery mud. This rate, won't find Ca- ballo's man till he's dead thirsty, starved out in the dark. I stop, light a cigarette, pat Caballo the neck.

"Only ways I know get a horse to move" I tell him, "is carrot or stick. Well, ain't got no carrot. Sticks plenty around, but ain't about beat no horse's ass out in no dark woods ain't nobody know I'm in. Get my nuts busted or my face kicked in, wind up a shape like your man." Worse, I mumble on, worse shape for no- body to look for me. Might could be missed round lunch o'clock Monday. Quintin at the plant pop open his bag potato chips, ain't hear me beg for none, say who's seen Greer. Vick say who cares. Sam say thought work gone quicker today. Wednesday Swanson fire me and maggots take up the sockets my eyes and Mitch down the pub ain't yet thought to ring. Ain't no town favorite, me, nor mystery why. I skimp on tips, stink up bathrooms, borrow money I ain't pay back, work slow, drink fast, without even a pretty face to half make up for it. But life ain't never give me much besides shit. Shit family, shit grades, shit jobs for shit pay. So I ain't give much back. Used to hear could do anything I want, be anything I want, I set my mind to it. Set my mind to drink, be drunk, I guess. Caballo lead easier, I talk. He like my voice the dark. By now we retraced his hoof prints half mile, three quarter. Looking back hardly see my porch light through the trees. Ahead the woods spread couple mile. Shine my light straight the dark and squint, pull Caballo along. All another sudden, so I'm damned I ain't seen it sooner, a boot, old cowboy kind, upright the grass, like is stood in by a ghost ain't had but one leg. Wave my hand over the boot make sure weren't none, then pick it up, show Caballo. "Know this boot?" I say. Caballo snort. "Ought to rib you the heel," I say, "see it feel familiar." Caballo snort. I pat Caballo so he know I kid. Like the sad- dle, boot is good polished leather, ain't stood there long. Must come from Caballo's man. Pic- ture he fell, dragged a ways till his foot slipped out the boot, and the boot fell out the stirrup later on. Strange it landed upright, but strange things ain't so uncommon really. What's impor- tant, we're on the trail. I grab Caballo's reigns for to lead him on. Ain't know what to do with the boot, so set it back the ground, upright like was found. After a while look back, the dark already swallowed it.

2.

Knew I could beat the son bitch, so called double nothing and stuck my last quarters the table. While he racked and broke I got another shot and beer. Mitch brought them with my check. "Not closing out," I said "Damned if you ain't," Mitch said. Pointed Snodgrass. "Before he takes all your money." I knocked back the shot, took my beer, left the check the table. He ain't knowed I ain't walked in with dough enough to pay my tab. What the hustling was for. "I got Snot-grass right where I want him," I said. "You just ready me up a victory round." Back the table Snodgrass chalked like a big man, grabbed the cue by the ass and shoved it in the chalk his other hand. Made himself a fool, like he always done. Back in school he'd set over- unders on himself at thirty, forty points, then ride the bench whole games. And welch, course. Jersey'd still get him laid. He blew chalk off his tip, said was solids. Table spread favored me. Tapped nine the side pocket, sailed down the rail to nudge thir- teen the corner. Then, without sighting, ham- mered a shot across the table, sank twelve the opposite corner. Missed the next shot, but

weren't worried. Was drunk enough for to play on feel, instinct. Game was mine. Snodgrass ain't had no shot, tried for to bank, scratched. Set me up for to knock down ten and fourteen. Left just the eleven, the eight. I finished my beer and called a smoke break. "You serious?" Snodgrass said. I rattled my pack I walked away, said, "As death." Outside rain wet the streets jet black. From a bench a lady, cap on her hair, stared down the storm and scratched a collie. I sat down next her and lit up. Collie came up for to sniff me. I scratched his ears, shook his head a bit. "Hello, Perro," I said. "Speak Spanish?" Lady said. She took my lighter and torched another smoke. "Naw," I said. "There some Mexicans work down the plant, but they speak English good enough." I shoved Perro out my crotch and he flopped down next his lady's feet. She hanged down her hand for to bat his tail. "The meat plant," she said. "Knew I knew you from somewhere." I looked her face, wrinkled from smoking decades. All a sudden I remembered it behind glasses, big and round, looking at me from out a crowd of fresh pale faces. "You was on that field trip," I said. "You teach." "I'm a teacher's aide," she said. "You kill cows." "I am a cow killer," I said. "Known far and wide, every barn and pasture. Feared by calves, bulls, heifers world over." "I can smell it on you," she said. "The death." I leaned at her and sniffed good. "On you," I said, "I smell dipshit kids." "Don't like kids?" she said. "I ain't feel nothing about no kids," I said. "Except they ain't should be around me. That one blacked out?" Lady ain't said nothing first. Lifted her leg was crossed over the other, stuck her boot out for the rain to fall on. Wet spot the leather goes dark, clean. "She never saw nothing die," she said. "Better she ever was, guess," I said. But I ain't really wanted to discuss it, so I stubbed out my cigarette. Was near smoked any- way. Said I had a game of pool to clinch, but be happy to buy her a drink she wanted to join me for to celebrate victory. Inside Snodgrass chalked again like it helped him. And damned if I didn't drop the eleven and the eight shooting from the hip, count my win- nings in shots and beer. How I wish, anyway. Could be Snodgrass welched like usual. Could be I lost, welched myself, skipped my tab again. All I remember's I shot at eleven, then woke up the morning home, still drunk and with not a dollar.

6.

Goes darker and darker. My flashlight's dying. Were out the woods the moon be enough to see. Under the trees I need my torch. Dark ain't scare me no more ain't mean it can't kill me. Trip on a rock, Caballo step my head. Dead gone dead. Course ain't never been dead, but I bet against a light the end a tunnel. Soon flashlight's useless yellow and dim. Can't follow Caballo's trail no further. I squat, back against a tree, poke inside my pack for a smoke. Empty. Curse the luck got me waiting for dawn miles from home with not a cigarette. Ca- ballo snort like get up, let's go. "No point, Caballo," I say. "Can't see." A stomp, another snort, like he ain't give a shit. He whinny, start to walk who know where.

Figure the dark got him skittish, so I tie him up and grope the area for twigs and sticks. Bout everything wet, but with my empty pack for to kin- dle I get a fire lit. Caballo ain't calm down none. So I feed the fire to roar. Bigger it gets, the easier I find sticks, and can be damp some. Soon the woods dancing in firelight far I see. And Caballo still stomp and whinny, pull the rope. Damned if I know his problem, I look off where he try to get. Edge the firelight's a shadow ain't seen before. Man shaped, but look taller till I see the feet ain't touch the ground. When my kid self saw things weren't there, sometimes tried for to stare them away. Other times tried for to blink gone what weren't there. To stare, to blink ain't worked never. Was always the light. So when first I stare down this shadow and next blink myself dizzy, no use, I pile sticks the fire till it burn higher than me. Like to burn down the forest for to see this thing ain't there.

1.

Hung up my bolt hammer, unzipped my coverall. Quintin strung up the cow by her haunches, Vick slit her throat. Blood poured like it does, over the white concrete floor and down the drain. Quintin and Vick unzipped coveralls, peeled off gloves. Bled out, cow swung down line on the crane. "Lunch o'clock," I said. "No shit," Vick said. "That what that bell means?" Never could say nothing but Vick or Quintin had some to say about it. Was almost stripped to street clothes when the door from the shop opened. Shuffled in Swanson himself, and a dozen zit-faced kids and a couple bag-eyed teachers behind. Me and Vick and Quintin stood like dummies. Hoped maybe they ain't seen us, moved on, and us free for lunch. No such luck. Swanson waved at us, held up a finger like for to tell a dog to stay. "This is the killing floor," he told the kids they settled. Explained I knock out cows for Quintin to hang and Vick to bleed. Kids stared him, eyes horror-swoll like they rather anyplace else be. Rathered they that, me. Ain't none them looked sixteen, their braces, pimples, some their baby fat, some their skinny legs. A ribbon the hair one girl, even, like dressed her up her mom. She ain't should been there. None these babies ain't should been. Were I bet still scared the dark, all them. Swanson quit his talk and turned us like take it from here. We stared back, played more dumb. "Okay," Swanson said. "Any questions?" Hands went up. Brunette asked we still eat meat. Jock type asked how many cows we kill a day. Boy in black asked how long worked here, asked we like our jobs. Never heard no dumber questions, me. The meat we got the store weren't the same these animals. We ain't counted the cows we kill, the years we spent to kill them. And ain't made no difference to like a job, not like a job. Job just thing you work. Work just thing passed time the night come. Them kids ain't knowed the day just time for to wait the dark come. They ain't knowed a thing about nothing, and they was better for it. I ain't remembered a long time life once been more than death, weren't so always. The questions dried up, we all of us stood moment silence. Like for to remember some- thing. Teacher coughed, looked Swanson. Swanson coughed, looked me and Vick and Quintin. Three us played bit more dumb, Swanson pointed the next cow. Vick sighed and zipped up his coverall, pulled his gloves back on. Quintin too. Ain't felt like to demonstrate. Ain't wanted to show no death to no kids. I coughed my own cough, looked for backup. One four-eyed teacher, woman a cap her head, face wrinkled like from

smoking decades, mouthed sorry. The rest them just looked me. So I zipped my coverall and grabbed my bolt hammer. Opened the gate for next cow to waddle in, climbed up the pen for to stand over her head. Lifted the bolt hammer and felt breath come out the room. Looked the girl a ribbon her hair. "She ain't feel nothing," I promised, and swung the bolt hammer for to nail her between the eyes. Every one her twelve-hundred pound dropped like that. Boys laughed and fought for to see better. Most the girls squealed. Ribbon girl turned green as grass. Quintin hooked the cow, strung her up. He done so, I climbed down and slipped Vick's knife out his hand. Weren't to let nobody else show them kids something was mine. "Mind the smell," I said, and cut her throat. Blood poured out like it does. Whole class, teachers too, pinched noses. Girl the ribbon her hair fainted. The lady the glasses and cap slapped her gentle for to wake her up, and the cow swung down line. Quintin and Vick peeled gear, but I ran off the killing floor still my work clothes, plus the knife my hand. Ain't could wipe my face the filthy coverall sleeve. Not now that girl a ribbon her hair know a thing about nothing, I wanted get good hard drunk.

7.

Under his stocking foot's a bottle whiskey, half-drunk. I picture it dropped time his neck broke. Held on to the end. I relate. Caballo nudges him, swings him back and forth, then munches grass under his feet. Back behind the fire snaps and twists. His pants is wet. Ain't know his face. No surprise. Ain't know many faces I ain't see at the plant, the bar. Since been nowhere, only seen faces come my way. And this man, his face ain't come my way, sure. White man, white hair, dressed a suit like for to give his daughter away. Tie catching the breeze. Ring on his finger. Was kind enough for to cap the bottle before he kicked Caballo out under him. I pick it up, swig. Ain't nothing like it, liquor, except sex. It's good, it's great, it's bad, it's good, ain't had it a while, it ain't matter. Feel it my arms first, warm down my veins. Swig again, let my knees buckle. Look up to the dead man. Ask him the differ- ence between him, me. He ain't answer. Ain't expect him to. Ques- tion still stands. I ain't had much, never. Ain't expect to have much never. Lived thirty years this earth, hardly memories enough for to count my fingers and toes. Few fights, some won, some lost. Few lays, some good, some bad. Few arrests, some bullshit, some fair enough. Thirty, forty years more to live and I ain't got barely hope for another good lay, much less a friend, good work. Somebody love me. But damned if ever I thought much about a stunt like this man pull. Cross my mind, times, sure, but always go its way. Swig again to him, bra- vest man I ain't never knowed. On my back now. The leaves above brushed by wind, tickled by firelight. Eyes closed, even, still ain't total dark. Caballo munches still. Hear the grass rip, feel it almost. Swig the last, toss the bottle. Fall asleep.

Poems (in Memory of Richard Wooten)

by Floyd Collins

Richard Wooten: 1952-2024

Red mercury inches up a thermometer we nailed Hard to peeling birch bark, and it's noon before It
dawns on us that the glass bleb threatens to pop Under the sun's relentless gaze in Red Banks,

Mississippi. Last night cicadas chattered like pressure Cookers in the August heat, and our palms
festered With blisters despite the leather gloves we wore, Rick, Gouging post holes in the gritty
ochre marl each day,

Our biceps and pectorals flexing from sunrise to dusk. We fenced three acres with barbed wire that
summer, Passing back and forth at night a mason jar that clinked With ice and blended whisky
stolen from your father's

Liquor cabinet. Our throats moved like a roan pony's, His muzzle dunked in the starlit trough. The
full Moon bluer than a blood-gorged tick, you'd conjure Slices of layered lemon cake we once
wolfed amid

Pink mimosa blossoms. It took hours looking for Coke Empties, still green in those days, before we
had coins Enough to taste of the baker's sugary confection. Sated in our arboreal retreat, we
listened to a thrasher's

Sliding treble before bicycling home for dinner. By now we'd seen eighteen summers wither In their
pride and deemed ourselves too manly For those idylls of our first youth. Still, we both

Nurtured cravings for home-made ice-cream, The sweet ache of grinding rock salt and ice Until the
green wooden tub paid out smooth Scoops of vanilla. Cynthia spun far-fetched

Yarns about ghosts, hobgoblins, and witches, While we both watched for the firefly's electric Stroke
in the wild plum orchard. Those tales Wouldn't impose on a ten-year-old but we were
Only eight. Rick, you never graduated high school But chose the lumber that would build your
home On Briscoe Road from basement to gable. The deft Staccato of your hammer counter-pointed
the small

Repairs of a yellow-billed sapsucker in the pines. Your power saw's adenoidal whine ate through
burl And knot until you carved out heartwood. You paced Off your tract of ground and planted
pinnacled rows

Of corn. You staked tomato vines, then added squash, Cucumbers, and peach trees to your garden.
Every Hunting season, a cleft-hoofed twelve-tined buck Stepped nimbly into your Winchester's
cross-hairs.

One squeeze set your table-board with venison for months. Clad in leather boots, denim overalls,
and deerskin jacket, You died March 12th, a solitary man gone down into legend. I ask in return,
Rick, only some gentle remembrance of me.

The Beaten Track

I deemed myself clever, Rick, when I remarked That a Delta girl's thoughts were nuts without meat
But I loved to "crack 'em." This said by your hearth During Christmas while we listened to
chestnuts Seethe and sputter in an iron skillet. We were feckless Lads in those days and prone to
such utterance.

Still, we embraced summer evenings when the moon Put its ice in our glasses of Coke and Jim
Beam. Frosted napkins lent our calloused palms a purchase On those trickling shots. The stream
lulled itself To sleep, pouring its tribute into the lake. We heard The catfish jumping at stars. Some
angler's skiff came

About, his oar swirl like a vespers bell in the chill Depths. Often the water bailiff fined poachers
Before they could broil their catch over live coals. Each May I conjured a million puffs of smoke, The
cottonwood hauling its long freight toward Those idyllic memories of fall. Both of us, Rick,
Hankered after the creatural existence of hobos Despite our privileged upbringing. We imagined
Dipping dented tin cups into a crackling cauldron Of mulligan stew, a small tent of patched canvas
Our only shelter in all weathers. What could we Ever know about hunger and loss, who never once

Slept beside dying sticks and embers, a ten-cent loaf Cradled under one arm like an infant? The
hobo's bindle, His bed clothes and blue denim jacket, rode one shoulder, And we fancied ourselves
famished knights of the road, Who never shirked hewing wood or stoking a furnace To earn
whatever thin provender we needed to reach

The next town. We hearkened to the mellifluous strains Of Linda Ronstadt's soulful lyric "The
Hobo," and seldom Grasped that it was not good to be poor, and there were No coins of minted
silver to free us from the bondage Of enduring want. Soon we learned a vagabond's burden And his
lot of abject poverty was too hard for us to bear.

Much harsher than any game warden, one old hobo told us, Were the railyard "bulls" with clubs to
beat the sweet Jesus Hell out of anyone hopping a freight on their line. Thus, Rick, We relinquished
all reveries, and savored our highballs. Coke And Jim Beam ultimately proved enough for us.
Highballing Diesels held no more allure. The steel tracks ahead read all clear.

The Reunion

We filled a mason jar, Rick, with blended whisky. Moonlight buoyed each clinking cube. Mosquitoes
Imbided. We did likewise. You said the kisses Of ardent women were strong liquor that never

Loses its savor. We replenished our drinks, Waxing more lyrical with every passing hour. Your own mother kept a well-thumbed psalter In the parlor, but I preferred my black-bound Pelican Shakespeare all clinquant with gold. Leopard frogs simmered among the cattails In the marsh, and both of us swore we heard The grass growing once the moon went down.

We relished those August nights on the Delta. I conjured the fish hooks we baited with wasp Larvae, the papery nests like old punchboards Still seen in country stores. Rick, you'd tease

With a toothpick each grub from its sticky cell. Such operations required a lethal niceness. We Snagged channel cat and trout in a creek so local And cold we breathed frost until almost noon.

Say a cottonmouth would yawn a coffin's satin. I'd lop off its head with a machete. You'd peel The hide and shellack it to the icehouse door. Pit vipers made your flesh prickle and freeze.

In October 1972, we hitched from Memphis South to Red Banks, the strains of America's "Ventura Highway," their vocal harmonies, Tortoise shell picks, and pearl-inlaid guitars

Bridging the gap and spanning the decades Between then and now. You were a big-boned Shack of a man, Rick. Your corporeal being Reduced to crematory snow, you're sifting

Through various layers of subsoil near the house You built on Briscoe Road. Winter is behind us. I've poured a mason jar full of 90-proof charcoal- Filtered Jack Daniels. I expect you most any time.

