

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.

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