

Steve Davenport

Nine Poems and Three Fictions

Curtal Sonnets from American Bottom

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STEVE DAVENPORT

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Field and Stream

1

It was a field my father was a field
my father my fall and summer ball field
this highway north a long winter field
splitting empty corn field bean field corn field
his shoulders and steering wheel a front field
his cousin riding shotgun a side field

Ten years old and half the back seat my field
beagle dog Duke the car trunk his closed field
unlatched at the old barn to rabbit field
my .410 my holiday proving field

It was a long field

2

It was a stream I was a stream running
fast as piss a piss of a boy shell packed
with shot and snot-nosed boy spray my shotgun
pointed at the clump of grass there see it
a rabbit see it balled up fur its eye
dark right there hot twitching I couldn't see

mine was a hot stream of sight running wrong-
eye dominant across the gun barrel
instead of down it to that hot dark eye
I pulled that trigger pow it was a stream

It was a hot stream

3

The rabbit a field my father a field
and I was a field of vision rushing
the banks wrong-eyed streaming my shot a click
bang that switched field to stream was spray was meat
was blood of that rabbit splattering us
you should have said he said we can't eat that

1964 and a .410 mine
my father wiping the blood from his face
from the barrel and stock of his 12 gauge
my field of study his hand on my head

The field is a stream

4

What's holiday is heavy and heavy is hard
and hard is hot and hot is time and hot
in time his barrel up and stopping time
he had a head not a hot head a cool
big boss bald head turning laughing pointing
and the wide car stayed in the lines

What's holiday is father and shotgun
is hard cold ground is .410 and 12 gauge
is air thick with breath with time with walking
is metal smoke is necessary form

The barrel is a long field.

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Outdoor Life

Once again she becomes as clouds veiling
the fucking moon. She's mutability
on display. Life principle #1.
She floats there, twenty-one bruises, waiting
until it's light and she descends, veins
opening and singing anemia,

bird song of her bone marrow biopsy.
Needle she's falling to is long, hollow
for twisting, crunching into, rotating
out an answer 2mm wide,

2cm long.

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Playboy

Coffee Joe got pants that monkey his brain
up and down both sides of the Joe barrel
when he leaves the refinery. Coffee
Joe's Cigarette Joe back and forth behind
a parked car on a dark road. Coffee Joe's
Cabaret Joe, On-Call Joe, Joe Cahoots,

local remedy for married women
who can't afford the full cure. After work,
Coffee Joe's Cardio, Come-and-Go Joe,
Candescent Joe, Community-Minded

Cylinder of Hot Joe.

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Good Housekeeping

Somewhere a shelf of labeled containers
containing formalin and bits of flesh.
Somewhere a book waterlogs in a tub
while three-personed cells batter a body.
Aggressive. Invasive. Metastatic.
Somewhere a container labeled right breast

flanked by four others. Lymph node, sentinel
one. Sentinel two. Axillary tail. Breast skin.
Somewhere Overpass Girl bruises, blows, burns.
Somewhere retreats. Somewhere folds in. Somewhere

enthralled, ravished, betrothed.

True Confessions

1

The ball fields under the old bridge are lit,
the fences are short, and the river stinks
some nights like dead fish and men sweating
after work and cigarettes, beer and piss.
Here the catcher squats, toad in a jersey.
I'm on deck and there's this married woman.

I'm counting the syllables of a line,
thumb to thigh. The guy in the batter's box
jumps away, jerking his bat in short arcs.
He says the catcher's who did it, broke in,

raped his grandmother.

2

Tall chain-link fences criss-cross for backstops.
Long, low fences separate the four fields.
I'm trying to compress things, concentrate,
shorten my swing, elbows in, use my legs,
beat perfect time on my thigh as I wait.
She'll come by later she'll come by later.

I don't know the batter. A dirt-leg friend
of somebody, taking somebody's place.
The catcher's a toad and this guy's a tube
of amphetamines. I'm watching, waiting.

The team is leaning.

3

I'm counting syllables and I'm on deck.
She's married she's married and she's married.
Batter has to kill Catcher with a bat.
I work the midnight shift at the flour mill,
sleep, and drive to the university,
where I read poems about indolence.

I work on a line about a batter
and a catcher, paroled early, who throws
ball one back and nothing happens. I count
the syllables I count the syllables

in motherfucker.

4

Here's what I remember. Men ran bases,
spit, swung bats, swatted at mosquitoes fat
with their blood or after it. I forget
Batter and Catcher, what happened. Married
Woman moved on. Or someone replaced her.
Life anywhere is messy. Here's what counts.

I left the mill for books full-time. I found
poems about work, about compression
that holds me, increases my density.
Every day I write my true confession.

I count syllables.

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Popular Science

She drops the big white bullet palm to palm
to palm like stepping down on swinging stairs
to the top of Big Rock Candy Mountain,
where the good cells sing in the cigarette
trees and there's always ice and whiskey too.
Her mouth's blistered from chemo and she's full

of holes as she goes where hydrocodone
grows in the acetaminophen shoals.
She laughs when I write our hearts make morphine.
She writes you're three hours away happy in a book,

floating in a tub.

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GQ

We're corked bottles Murfy bleats on the cracked
sheep horn he keeps in his two-room cabin
next to nine shitty bean rows and the outhouse
he calls Lake Isle of Innisfree. Wattle-and-daub
job, snot-green paint, pastoral as all hell.
And hell's his stoppered, brain-broke life. Murfy's

out the door, past his raggedy peacocks,
down to his pond of empties, gluggety-
glugging, tossing another bottle on,
unzipping at glass's edge, muttering,

dribbling on his shoes.

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Real Simple (1)

Prayer, the mind's subcutaneous banquet,
letter P, hobo bundle, long-handled
net, tin cup; the body in paraphrase;
letter P, aspirated, plosive note
in a portacath, post-mastectomy;
letter P buried, a port like a coin,

a plea in a chemo tube, a prayer, Puh,
blown, Puh, into the subclavian vein;
Overpass Girl, mouth pursed, lips popping Puh,
hope's pilgrimage, post-belief, pre-belief,

poor traveler, Please.

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Real Adventure

It's curtailed, truncated, stopped, this body
of two bodies locked in a promise, trapped
behind glass, a laundromat or a gas
station, these bodies one body that pulls
a sawed-off shotgun from the trunk or blocks
the door with a truck and goes around back.

Loads tumbling, hotdogs turning on a spit,
glass rattling. One town over, kids cruise.
Two blocks away a man drops a bottle
grabbing his woman's hair as she throws up.

A bird shits on a car.

You Be Wing

Black Guy and Bald Guy watched from some scraggly-ass bushes while the first names were given out.

You be Dog. You be Cat.

You be Dainty Finger. You be Broken Toe.

You be Truncheon. You be Ticker Tape.

You be Canvas. You be Chisel.

You be Wombat. You be Calla Lily.

Bald Guy and Black Guy squatted and stretched in their cave to chalk the history of that year's hunting season. Different heights, they authored separate parts of the story, one the top half, the other the bottom half.

Black Guy and Bald Guy were there when the first tree was felled by human hand and split to make a dwelling. One mortise, the other tenon.

Together Bald Guy and Black Guy discovered the first fishing hole. One pole, the other eight-pound line.

Black Guy and Bald Guy served as foreign advisors in the court of Kublai Khan, though by Marco Polo's account, you'd never know it. That could be because they spent the majority of their time trading locally with Nicolo, Marco's dad, and Uncle Maffeo, who did a loving, dead-on imitation of the Great Khan listening to Marco's accounts of his travels through provinces Khan would never see. A storyteller, that boy.

Bald Guy and Black Guy were drinking in Lagos, Portugal, when the first auction of African slaves on European soil took place a few blocks away. They remember the day perfectly—March 14, 1445—because it was their birthday. They were drunk, and before the day was up they had joined the crew of a pirate ship because, well, it sounded like a good way to make money.

You be Treasure Chest. You be Slave Trade.

Black Guy and Bald Guy stood on the deck of the H.M.S. Bounty

when Captain Bligh stepped down into that open boat.

You be Yardarm. You be Plank.

Bald Guy and Black Guy were sleeping in a gulley a hundred miles away when the AME churches burned in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1822. God bless the souls, they said, of Denmark Vesey, Gullah Jack, and the men hung with them.

You be Freedom of Assembly. You be Armed Slave Revolt.

They drank coffee with the first generation of Buffalo Soldiers around a fire that popped and whistled.

You be Horse. You be Rifle.

One night in a candle-lit bar Black Guy and Bald Guy, avid readers, cursed the difficulty of reading in such a place at such an hour. Influenced by the pitcher of beer they'd just consumed after a day of digging a long, deep trench for public sewage, they said a little too loudly that the state of affairs in the illumination area ought to be at least as important as the state of affairs in the shit production-and-removal area. They proceeded to describe the sort of invention that might liberate them from darkness. It would be like a firefly, Black Guy said, the size of a big-ass potato. It would never flicker, Bald Guy added. One booth away, Thomas Alva Edison, hunched over a notebook and an empty plate, made a note to himself that the big-ass potato part absolved him of any responsibility in sharing credit with his fellow man. Or men. One booth away.

You be Science. You be Commerce.

Bald Guy and Black Guy knew Sam Hose back when he was Samuel Wilkes, back when he lived in Macon County, Georgia, before he moved to Coweta County and got lynched. And mutilated.

You be Knot. You be Knife.

Black Guy and Bald Guy must have seen the first Frankenstein movie, an Edison Studio project, about twenty times. They loved it.

You be Old. You be New.

They held a low opinion of the art at the Armory Show without seeing anything themselves. The newspaper accounts persuaded Bald Guy and Black Guy not to waste their time. Except that one of them did get

away from the other to go see what the fuss was all about and kind of, just maybe, in fact did enjoy himself, thought much of the work interesting but kept it to himself for some time.

You be Nude Descending a Staircase. You be Words of the Devil.

Harold Lloyd running the Ivy-League football in *The Freshman* made them laugh and laugh.

You be Escapist. You be Confrontist.

For six months in 1932, every week like clockwork, Black Guy and Bald Guy stood in a bread line for hours. Life was hard. They were always hungry.

Over a period of five years, as secret operatives in the employ of unknown parties, Bald Guy and Black Guy killed six members of the Romanian Iron Guard (one at a time), two spies for the Arrow Cross Party before they could report their suspicions about Bald Guy and Black Guy to their Hungarian superiors, and a dozen Spanish Falangists in the explosion of a train car outside Madrid. Their efforts paid no direct benefits in the fight against Fascism, but they felt good about themselves. Brave and helpful. At times, sexy.

Friday nights Black Guy and Bald Guy blew weed with Che and Alberto just off the University of Buenos Aires grounds in a little apartment atop a restaurant. Though Alberto remembers differently, Bald Guy says he was the one who named the motorcycle La Poderosa. Life was good.

You be Doctor. You be Revolutionary.

Bald Guy and Black Guy did the Watusi. They did the Swim. They did the Boogaloo and the Mashed Potato, the Frug and the Hully Gully, the Freddie and the Loco-motion. To the house song, "Peppermint Twist," by the house band, Joey Dee & the Starlites, they shook it with a couple of working girls on the Peppermint Lounge dance floor not ten feet from the Duke of Windsor. Those were the days. Without bodyguards between them, they and the Duke recognized the work of Chubby Checker and Bill Haley, but the cat for them that night was Hank Ballard, front man for the Midnighters. They raised their glasses to his genius and wished he were there, lifting Joey Dee & the Starlites higher and higher.

You be Five-Star Hotel. You be Flophouse.

Black Guy and Bald Guy know where they were when Kennedy was shot. They were bucking hay bales in Kansas.

You be Lunch Counter. You be Water Fountain.

Once upon a time, Bald Guy and Black Guy were hoboes, riding the rails in train cars that kept them dry and mobile. If they wanted to follow work or needed a fresh start, they knew how and where to make it happen. And if they didn't get caught or clubbed, the system worked. These days they spend too much time in cardboard boxes on urban streets.

You be Rain. You be Wind.

You be Fire. You be Ashes.

Black Guy and Bald Guy are buddies. They depend on each other. They never die. They die over and over again.

You be Morgue. You be Autopsy Report.

They die a thousand thousand deaths.

In one, Bald Guy and Black Guy shoot each other with the same bullet as war rages around them.

In another, Black Guy and Bald Guy rise like a phoenix out of the ashes of a neighborhood fire. One wing, the other lift.

Oh My Darling

Black Guy and Bald Guy are standing in a cavern in a canyon, and they are paralyzed by what they see.

Black Guy and Bald Guy are Forty-Niners, or miners, though given the year of their arrival, they might as well be Sixty-Oners. Within a year the town will be called Magalia, a better name for the famous 54-pound gold nugget than Dogtown, which is what Vinson and Chamberlain called it when they founded the place the year after gold fever struck at the Mariposa Mine.

The drift mine they're working on this day is the Black Diamond. Or they were. At the moment they're unable to move. Paralyzed or simply too heavy with grief and guilt, they stand there looking down into the shaft and the frothing pool of gray water that took Little Clementine. 54 pounds. That's about what she weighed, sweet girl-nugget, when her makeshift herring-box sandals (dirt poor, that girl!) betrayed her, she caught a splinter in the side of her foot, a big mother, the splinter and the foot both, and she fell into that pool.

Here's the thing about Clementine's dad. He couldn't be everywhere at once. He had to make a living or they, he and his only nugget, would starve. He depended on folks like Black Guy and Bald Guy to pitch in, watch over her. And where were they when Darlin' Clementine (dreadful sorry, pretty nugget!) fell in? Goofing around probably.

Knock knock.

Who's there?

Beats.

Beats who?

Beats me.

I'd like to beat you.

Bring it on, black miner.

Or arguing about something. This or that. A gambling debt or a detail in a story. Maybe race relations in the West or back home in Illinois, where they worked the Yankee Diggins and, for a while, the Madison County Coal Company before they packed up and headed west for work in California. They could have been arguing about child labor laws. Something important to one or both of them, maybe to the world, but now? Little sister ain't nothing but a thing gone. Taken from them by chance, what Black Guy likes to call "the idiot name for inaction."

Knock knock.

Who's there?

Ken.

Ken who?

Ken you please, bald miner, shut up for five seconds?

That might be when she falls. Like a potato in a pot, like a stone off a cliff, like a baby down a well.

In goes Clementine; a year later out comes the Magalia nugget. Somebody loses; somebody wins. Law of the mines, something they all agree on, are willing to risk for the profit, even if victory's temporary and loss is permanent.

Bald Guy didn't jump, he'll say, because he couldn't swim. He'll imply Black Guy is a superb swimmer (half dolphin!) and might have jumped in after her. In fact, he'll almost say that he would have if he hadn't expected Black Guy to.

Black Guy, to his credit, will admit the truth. He knows how to swim, but he froze. He can't explain the sudden fear of heights, but the thought of looking straight down to see how far he'd have to drop was enough to lock him up right there, not two feet from the edge of the shaft. What he won't say is that Bald Guy can in fact swim and is a liar. Black Guy and Bald Guy are partners, so Black Guy won't press the issue in public.

In private, though, and after giving considerable thought to the long-term buddy benefits of allowing Bald Guy to save face, Black Guy punches him in the nose.

"You suggest I can maybe swim and you looked to me for leadership

at that moment? When have you ever looked to me for leadership?”

“Afraid of heights?” Bald Guy says bending over and squeezing his nose, which he’s pretty sure is broken. Again. “You were cliff-diving on the Missouri this time last year, you fucker. You broke my goddamn nose. You could have hit me in the eye. Shit.”

Knock knock.

Who’s there?

Norma Lee.

Norma Lee who?

Normally, Bald Guy would have thrown back at Black Guy, but four things kept him from it.

One, though he has a spiky temper, getting punched doesn’t necessarily activate it.

Knock knock.

Two, Clementine would have disapproved and the memory of that darling little nugget with the big-ass feet disappearing down into that gray water was enough to keep his momentum more inward than outward.

Who’s there?

Three, he knew immediately that Black Guy was probably right. Bald Guy had sold him out when he implied that Black Guy might have saved her.

But that wasn’t why he was crying.

Knock knock.

He was crying because Black Guy was crying.

Who’s there?

They were crying together.

Knock knock.

Ten, twelve feet apart.

Knock. Knock.

Ain’t nobody.

Where the Water Runs Uphill

Black Guy and Bald Guy are buddies.

As far as Black Guy's concerned, he's as Small-Town Middle-America as anyone he knows. He played quarterback and point guard in high school. His favorite sport is baseball. He likes sit-com reruns, beef medium-rare, and ketchup on most things. He's addicted to soft drinks, and he includes himself on the long, long list of Elvis fans.

The thing is he's also French. And that, more than anything, makes him an outsider.

Bald Guy's German, English, and Welsh by descent, but nobody holds that against him because he speaks only English and does not make annual trips to France to visit relatives. Bald Guy's dad, Big Clovis, was born and raised in southeast Missouri, not all that far from Cooter, and that, he says, makes him Hillbilly-American.

Most folks laugh and say Ain't we all, Ain't we all.

Black Guy's not. His dad's a successful French screenwriter who lives in Strasbourg with his third wife and four young daughters, all of whom love Black Guy and happily include him in the family. Black Guy's mom's a school teacher who, in her early twenties, took a group of students from the French Club on a six-week tour of France and returned to St. Louis with a plot twist that revealed itself slowly over the next few months and caused her to leave the all-girl prep school mid year and cross the river late that next summer to accept a new teaching job in a small Illinois town.

Because his father admitted paternity even before the birth, Black Guy enjoys dual citizenship.

Damn if that ain't cool, his friends would say and then put him back in the box labeled "Not From Here." For a week a couple of girls called him French Guy.

Bald Guy's bald because he chooses to be. By the time he was in the

fourth grade, he was already shaving his head, twice a week at least, to stake out his own identity. Tired of being called Little Clovis, he saw his dad's hair, thick and wiry as a beaver pelt, as the first easy target. When Black Guy's mother, a black woman, finally bought a house in town and transferred her son from the Catholic school he attended five miles away in Alton to the small-town public grade school up the street, Black Guy went directly to the town's swimming pool and got into a scrape with a boy who called him a name. It was there he met Bald Guy, who had just returned from his annual week in the Ozarks with his family. Every summer, early August, Bald Guy's parents piled him and his three sisters in the station wagon and followed another carload down for a week of ping pong, swimming, and water skiing in a little cove not far from Bagnell Dam. Every year, the same small cabin at the same five-cabin place with the same four other families. Bald Guy loved it.

That next spring Bald Guy asked Black Guy if he wanted to come along. You can buy firecrackers and a big fat foot-long cigar if you want. And they got this house where the water runs uphill I shit you not.

Black Guy said I spend my summers in France with my father.

Every spring Bald Guy asked him. Every spring Black Guy declined.

In high school Bald Guy joined the French Club. Black Guy's mom was the teacher. Between his junior and senior years, Bald Guy went with her and a half-dozen classmates to Paris for a month. While there he spent some time with Black Guy, who took the train in from Strasbourg for a week's visit. They ate a lunch of cheese, bread, bing cherries, and bottled water outside the Centre Pompidou. The next day, as they exited the Place Vendôme, one punched the other in the arm and they must have chased each other back and forth around the huge Napoleonic column a dozen times before they fell laughing and panting against the fence at its base. Later that day they smoked weed and shared a bottle of wine with a couple of Dutch girls at Jim Morrison's grave. Black Guy and Bald Guy agreed that Père-Lachaise was the only place to be buried, though Bald Guy thought somewhere in the Ozarks would rank a close second even if he had no particular place in mind yet.

Except maybe a spot hidden way back of his uncle's, a mile maybe, maybe less. Hard to tell in the uneven terrain. A spot no bigger than half a football field folks call Negro Hollow, with a spring trickling into a swimming hole that runs off, when high, into Woodrell Creek, which disappears into a string of hills and comes out the other side a county away.

Locals call it Holler. Pronunciation aside, Bald Guy gets the joke. Grab a black guy by the toe.

What Bald Guy thinks when he's there isn't Holler but Hand. God's Good Hand. It's like the Lord is holding it out, his cupped palm, right there near the southeast edge of the Missouri Ozark Plateau. If you got to lie down and die, Bald Guy tells himself, you couldn't do much better than the Lord's palm. He'd tell Black Guy that, but how to explain the name of the place? Negro Hollow. Or the truth: that its real name is Nigger Holler, a fact he doesn't look too full in the face because he guards his feelings. Family feelings about place, roots. His childhood. Who he is. And what it all means, about which he's not sure.

Bald Guy repaid Black Guy's visit to Paris with a weekend in Strasbourg, where they looked at university girls in the afternoon. After dinner, they listened to old Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis 45s with Black Guy's dad, who called the two singers a couple of back-alley hillbilly cats whose mixed-race music forced America to rethink race possibilities. Black Guy's dad took it as his parental duty to explain American culture to them since they were too young and close to the source to have the context necessary to enjoy its finer points. "Johnny B. Goode" rang like a bell, no denying that, but for his money, "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On" was still the perfect expression of rock-n-roll in America. They shook nerves, Black Guy's dad said, these songs. They rattled brains. Like Elvis. He tried to explain to these American teenagers the similar genius of the other Jerry Lewis, film director and classic comedian born Joseph Levitch. These men have great balls of fire, no?

Bald Guy looked at Black Guy. Telethon, Black Guy explained.

Oh, Bald Guy said.

The two young men understood even less the odd angles and claus-

trophobia of the classic American film noir playing right then on French television. Black Guy looked at Bald Guy as if to apologize.

Look, guys. The black and the white, Black Guy's dad said as the anti-hero pointed a pistol at the fat man and gestured screen left to the corner of a small table. The way they play off each other. Pointing the gun at the fat man, he points it at himself, no? Very American, no, the gun, the bad/good antihero split, the black and the white?

What Black Guy understood at that moment is what he still understands. He never feels more thoroughly like an outsider than when his dad, who is not black, starts in on American culture. The color of Black Guy's skin, his features, the kink in his hair, all of it is nearly inconsequential on the streets of Strasbourg or Paris. There he seldom thinks about it.

At his dad's, he becomes American and Black and curiously African the minute his step-mom and half-sisters leave the room. It's one thing to have your best friend's grandmother, visiting from southeast Missouri, wait until her son and grandson start arguing about a ball game on television to look you up and down and say, you got a lot of nigger in you, don't you? It's another when your father waits until you're almost a man to start laying out the differences between the two of you.

Bald Guy was with his dad's mom, Grandma Clotilde, the first time he said the word nigger. He was going into the sixth grade, spending a few weeks as he did every summer in the Ozark hills and laughing it up, he remembers perfectly, with a cousin his age in the back of Grandma's camper. They were parked outside a liquor store, where Grandma'd stopped for smokes or a bottle of whiskey or both, and an old black man was getting into his car. For no reason that Bald Guy understands because he'd never said it before then or after in the same way, he yelled nigger"through the window blind at the man, who looked around and got into his car as Bald Guy and his cousin ducked down giggling.

Bald Guy felt horrible the second they stopped giggling. He was glad Black Guy wasn't there when he said it, and he was pretty sure he was never going to tell him about it since for one thing Bald Guy didn't mean it and for another he had no idea why he'd done it except that he knew it would

make his cousin laugh. Years later Bald Guy decided that was the moment of his awakening to race issues. Yet if that were so, Bald Guy now asks himself, why did it take him another few years to realize that Negro Hollow or Negro Holler—or, worse, Nigger Holler—was a bad name for Paradise? When Père-Lachaise came along, he was all too happy to call it Paradise.

Once when Black Guy suggested to his dad that he might shorten his next year's summer visit by a couple of weeks to spend some time with his best buddy in the beautiful Missouri Ozarks, a sort of graduation present to himself and Bald Guy, his father pointed out the state's race history. A week later they opened a book about lynching that his father brought home from the university library. There in the chapter opened before him, Black Guy stared at the body of a black man hanging limp from a tree, one arm cut clean off at the elbow, the shoulder of the other arm hacked at but not completely severed. Black Guy saw what looked like the man's chest cut open and nothing dangling between his legs. The only thing he could read in the text below the picture was the location. Woodrell Creek. All Black Guy could do was stare. Inside he shook. His nerves, his brain. There will be no escaping your Negro blood in the beautiful Missouri Ozarks, son.

Black Guy told Bald Guy he'd like to drive down the next summer to see the Ozarks for a couple of days and that place where the water runs uphill.

You shit me not, Bald Guy said.

Bald Guy didn't know how Black Guy knew about Woodrell Creek or why he wanted to go there, but it was okay with Bald Guy. Maybe he'd seen a picture in some tourism brochure. Woodrell was no Current River. Still, it was pretty enough and the Mark Twain National Forest was nearby.

And maybe, Black Guy said, we can drive over to see Big Clovis country.

Grandma Clotilde country, too.

Anything but that.

What they'd do, Bald Guy suggested, is they'd drive over after a day or two at his family's cabin, probably on their way back to Illinois. They'd skip Grandma's and Uncle Thayne's, go right to the creek, smoke some

weed, drink a couple of beers, have an Ozark moment, and head home. Bald Guy didn't know any Ozark girls and there weren't any shrines to dead rock stars there, but it would still be cool, the creek and all.

That next August, Black Guy and Bald Guy sat beside the stream, a rock's throw from Black Guy's car. Bald Guy swatted at a horsefly, pinched some pot into a one-hitter. Black Guy popped the top on his can of beer.

This isn't very cold.

Quit your bitching. It's a beautiful day. Here. Give me one of those.

Black Guy took the one-hitter, handed Bald Guy a beer. Beautiful. He looked at the trees and wondered which one. He wanted to ask if they were far from the place but couldn't find the words, the mood, the moment.

Bald Guy thought almost any spot along Woodrell Creek was a good one, but he knew there were better spots than this one. This one just happened to be easy to get to. Little chance they'd run into someone he knew and far enough away from Holler that he wouldn't bite on an impulse to talk about it, to take Black Guy down to see it. He'd need balls of steel, or fire, to walk that walk.

So they sat there, lost in their thoughts about Woodrell Creek, about beauty and hills and isolation and trees and distance. They sat there, taking it all in, until they finished the ceremonial six-pack. Bald Guy put away the bag of weed, and Black Guy drove them home to Illinois.