

check list

sharp verbs

rhythm

fresh images, metaphors & similes

punctuation

magic

alternate title:

Honky Tonk Angels



I forget to knock on the yellow door at my babysister Lovie's room and I know it the minute the teacher with the bug eyes ^{jerks} looks up from her desk, and I know she knows how come I'm there but can't help giving me one of them looks ^{what} that says, "Hain't you had no learning, heathen?"

Lovie looks up with them swole brown eyes and she just comes on to the door. And the teacher don't say nothing, just stands there ^{waxing} shaking her head whilst the other younguns talk and ^{rattle} shake papers and scrape their desks on the cement floor.

We hear her hit the desk with her ball-bat paddle as we walk off across the ^{square closed in by wine bricks walls} ~~patch of dry green grass~~ and start for home. It's right after Christmas and for their Santy Claus Lovie's teacher give her whole class ball-bat paddles, the kind with a rubber band stapled to a red jackstone ball to bat back and to. Our old dogs chewed up Lovie's and made her cry.

Her cold dirty hand feels out mine and I shake it off to keep her from feeling my bad nerves. She's short and chunky with brown curly hair that ^{worms} wraps around my fingers when I play with it at night and she sucks on her thumb. County nurse says Lovie's eat up with tape worms and that's how come her belly to poke out.

We go on. Through the gap in the wire fence what runs around the schoolyard to the nigger quarters where the pines make up woods to the Georgia/Florida line and then we head down the backway the buses use. A row of mostly white board houses on the left, one big old house with rocking chairs tipped to the wall--Miss Lular's where Mommer belongs to be washing. The clothesline under the chineyberry in the dirt backyard is empty. We're coming up on the upstairs hotel

don't nobody live in nomore, and the tall white courthouse at the crossing looks dingy in the sorry gray light.

"Sister, you ~~are stopping by~~ ^{gone stop at} the library?" Lovie says.

I don't say nothing. I hain't though cause I figger we hain't welcome there neither. In the courthouse where the library is, they got two water fountains, one for niggers and one for whites, and I don't know which one we belong to drink out of now. That makes me thirsty.

"Come on," I say, grabbing holt of Lovie's hand and walking fast at the crossing under the blinking red light ~~that~~ ^{what} don't mean nothing ~~cause~~ ^{since} they hain't much traffic in Statenville. Generally, I stop, look, and listen at the side of one ~~of the handroads~~ and then the other like they learned us to do at school for a train--which I ain't never laid eyes on--but this time I just rush on acrost, keeping my eyes on the row of shacks where ours with the screen porch sets at the crossing facing my Uncle Lieutenant's filling station. I can hear Lovie breathing fast behind me, her not knowing how come we got sent home, but scared like a dog of anything smells curious.

The closer we get to the house, ~~riding~~ ^{stumping} the cold packed gravel and dirt and ~~grumps~~ ^{stumps} of frost-kilt smut grass on the shoulder, the more I can't wait to get inside but ~~I~~ ^{yet} can't stand the thoughts of how the old man's gone pick us about how come we hain't in school. And I know he don't care, but it'll come out something else for him to get up in the air over and make a point with his dead daddy and brother ~~what~~ don't speak to him, them and the town. I don't know what he'll do but I know him finding out is what's had my chest in a bind since the teacher and the principal got around to saying out loud what they

been saying behind our back--"Count Trevor's younguns is got nigger blood." I go on.

At the raggedy screen porch, ^{my ears perk to} ~~I can hear~~ the ying yang of Mommer's juice harp from the living room--I do hate that thing--and we have to kick over the hairy rug where the dogs sleep to get to the front door. Making up in my head what I'm gone say to Mommer bout how come us home early, I push open the door to a swarm of heat and the ^{sharp} ying yang of the juice harp. I don't come up with nothing to say but that's ok cause I don't need to say nothing till the old man gets in--Mommer don't care--and by then I'll come up with some story or other. And it comes to me that he hain't got no way of knowing unlessn he quits the job he just got in the post woods like the one he quit last week, turpentineing.

The ^{little low} ~~square~~ living room is dark coming in out of the light, with beet-red curtains drawn across the ~~wood~~ ^{part-board-} patched winders, pictures and stuff on ever wall. What you smell going in is sulphur and lard, ~~fish~~ ^{arse} and ~~eggs~~ ^{pease}, but you get use to it and don't ^{it} ~~pay~~ ^{ruised} no mind. Hung over one of the junk couches is a wood cross ~~put~~ ^{put} together with popsickle sticks and a Jesus covered in webby black-eyed peas I made in Bible school last summer. Yellow cats streak like sunshine from the two dirt-slick couches and ~~the~~ red fire winks through cracks in the dog-foot stove. Mommer just sets there, playing on her juice harp what looks like a regular mouthharp but's got tiny strings like a guitar. Her wild green eyes look like she's wearing magnifying glasses. Ying yang. She holds the harp to her mouth with one hand and plucks the row of strings with the other. Ying yang, no tune.

She cuts her eyes at me going on to the kitchen door--I don't say nothing, just ~~gave~~ ^{eye her back and} back at her and Lovie goes over and leans up against her chair. She keeps rocking.

Ever dish in the closet-of-a-kitchen is dirty, the old white kerosene cookstove is cankered in grease from the red pike fish the old man brung in last night for me to fry. I slide back the red curtain on the string rod over the cabinet where the dishpans set and let in the smidgen of light that makes up from the scrub oak shade and gray dirt on the sideyard. The woodpile is scattered out to meet junk bicycles and tires and rusty bedsprings the old man either pilfered from the dump or stole one.

I always say to myself, I'm gone quit reading and straighten up around here from now on, not leave ~~all~~ ^{dirty} the dishes at night, but I won't now, I don't care, cause I figger we been branded for good around Statenville and niggers ain't ~~knowed~~ ^{parous} for cleaning up nothing.

Ying yang.

In a minute I make out the tune Mommer's picking on the juice harp--"Honky Tonk Angels"--and it makes me mad at myself for listening and trying to make something out of her sorriness. Miss Lular and two or three other church ladies is always ~~coming~~ ^{dreaming} up with something for Mommer to do and she let's them down. But, to her credit, she's done just enough washing and ironing to keep me and Lovie in hand-me-down shoes and frocks. The old man drinks his money up, but he's a sight more industrious in my eyes, and if he had somebody to back him up, he might amount to something. What man's gone get up and go to work with a slob wife telling him it don't make no nevermind where he do or don't? Me not but thirteen, I know that!

"How come y'all home from school before the buses run?" Mommer says to Lovie.

"I don't know'um," Lovie says and the juke harp picks up where it left off on "Honky Tonk Angels," right in the middle where it don't make a lick of sense--I didn't know God made honky-tonk angels, I might of known that you'd never make a wife...--and me wondering how come the sudden interest, Mommer-mine. Cause she couldn't of heard Miss Annar and the principle ~~and them~~ *in the school hall,* ~~at school~~ And it comes to me right then, ~~scratching~~ *scouring* the cookstove, that what I'm really out with Mommer over is ~~that~~ *she's* the side the nigger blood comes in on, she's the one's ruint me and Lovie's lifes. How come her not to never tell us, I don't know, but I do know it wouldn't of made a dab of difference. My face burns, I'm so mad and scared, and I can't picture what'll come next, how we can get back in school and back to being white trash which was bad enough but bettern being niggers. Lord in heaven, help!

Long about sundown ~~the~~ the old man comes in, rank with tar and sweat, his green baggy ~~twill~~ britches ripped in the rearend and knees like he got tangled up in bamboos--they was ripped up before he set out that morning but they serve to make him look like he's suffered. Not that he's the suffering type, and most of the time his ~~skin~~ *skin* rusty-complected face is all grins, specially when he's got a drink in him. Unlessn he's mad. He ain't today and looks like he's gone go back to work tomorrow.



He sidles up to the cookstove shining his wet red gums and goes to picking over the brown strips of fatback I just fried. (He ain't got no teeth cause of ~~too many doses of~~ ^{the} Black Draught ^{his mommer dosed him with} when he was a ~~little~~ ^{for meanness?}) "Babe, you gone make some man a fine wife." He hooks a long tarry arm around my waist and yanks me to him and nuzzles my neck with his greasy mouth. His cheek feels like ~~a~~ ^{one} big sandspur. He lets go and snatches another strip of fatback, then jigs off to the living room ahead of the drove of dogs.

"My old lady's got a tune a-going, huh?" he says and ~~flaps~~ ^{pinks into} on the junk couch closest to the kitchen, swinging his foot, ~~and~~ Lovie settles in beside him and loves on him, sucking her thumb. Her eyes look heavy, like she's going to sleep. Her dark face looks ~~like~~ ^{is} warm and thick.

Mommer plucks out the tune with knuckled fingers, which she sets and pops what time she hain't playing ~~that~~ juice harp. Her swole-tight ankles are crossed, and her black socked toes twitch. Her drooping cheeks keep time with her toes. She's yeller-complected and her long brown hair fuzzes around her face what looks like it's been cut out of warm clay with a heart cookie cutter. Her eyes are bright and feverish from the heat of the woodstove, and you can't tell where she's pertened up to the old man watching with his skinny legs folded at the knees or where she's happy cause she's finally got one tune down pat.

But for once I thank the Lord above for that juice harp--keeps everbody from bringing up us getting run off from school. I figger it's just a matter of time before the old man gets wind of it, cause in a little place like Statenville, nothing don't stay secret long.

✓ But I need time to work out in my head what to do ~~and~~ I've about made up my mind to pick up Mommer's washing jobs, make a little cash, then me and Lovie catch the Trailways bus at Hoot Walter's store and head out for Valdosta, Georgia, 25 miles away, the onliest real place I know of, though I read of Alabama and Florida and Tennessee, even England, which I can't picture. Another country like England would be better, but Valdosta seems near enough but far enough away and big enough to lose your shame in. Close enough so I don't get us bodily lost.

I put supper on the eating table and set Mommer's pink figgerdy plate and spoon where she can just turn around and go to eating. Her can of Peachtree snuff sets by her plate. The cats and dogs, catching a whiff of bacon, start prowling and meowing around and under the table, their shaders throwing paisley patterns acrost the dusty board floor. I go to kick the old yellow fice with mange but don't and he lays down on one of my feet and gnaws at his skint possum tail. I slide my foot out and finish putting the forks we saved out of flour by the other plates, trying to put off cutting in on Mommer's playing till she gets to the end, and I can't remember the end, the way the song winds up on the Saturday night Grand Ole Opry. Nobody don't eat nothing much in our house nohow--likker don't have much punch on a full stomach. So I let the grits and sawmill gravy set to harden like lard under the naked bulb over the table.

"Let's eat," I ^{finally} say and the old man unfolds his long ^{can't be} ~~skinny~~ body from the couch and comes on to the table.

Lovie lays over, sucking on her thumb with her fingers fanned over her pug nose.

"Lovie," I call out, "wake up and eat, sugar." I go over and shake her by the shoulder and her body rolls slack, then gets stiff.

The juice harp goes ying yang, back to no tune, and Mommer's wild green eyes set to wandering.

"Let her sleep, babe," the old man says, "good for her."

"She hain't et today," I say before I think.

"She eat at the schoolhouse, didn't she?" He drags out a chair from the table and sets down.

"Wake up, Lovie sugar, let's eat." I ^{wobble} shake her again and her ~~eyelids~~ ^{scorch-brown} peep above ~~braise-blue~~ circles.

The ying yang stops. "They come in nigh at dinnertime," Mommer says, her voice hoarse from not talking. She coughs and spits a wet brown glob of snuff in the Luzianne can on the woodstove, rocks her chair round to the table and puts her juice harp by her plate.

I feel mad at Lovie and pinch her shoulder and she says ank and draws her knees up with her sack drawers shining. I pull her dress down and turn to go to the table.

"How come y'all youngun's coming in before dinner?" the old man says. "County still feeds younguns up there, don't they?"

"Yessir," I say and my face is a red I can see around my bushy brown wreath of hair. Free lunches for white trash, I think, nothing for niggers.

Mommer mumbles something, placing her juice harp and snuff can around the pink figgerdy plate she's frowning at like she begrudges having to eat.

ASKS
 "You pay up my death insurance today?" he asks Mommer and
 the band arms long forehead
 like 80's "Policy mandator
 Friday
 that's Friday"

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"What's that, old lady?" the old man says.

And I think how they really are old, right at fifty, and can't get that picture of them drinking rot-gut whiskey out of my head. Maybe it's sorriness makes you age fast.

"I say...." Mommer clears her throat, spitting again in the can at her right elbow what's blistered from the heat like the bone's been stuck in scalding water. "I say, Lovie says her and Sister got sent home for something."

"By who?" The old man's gnawing on a ~~piece~~^{strip} of fatback with his long arm ~~hooked~~^{cocked} on the back of the chair.

I start for the kitchen, swimmy-headed ~~from their~~^{with dread} mumbling.

"Get back in here, girl!" the old man hollers and one of the dogs ~~wanders~~^{ambles} out to the front porch--the door's been left open cause the old man's always hot and the old lady's always cold.

I go back and set down beside him with my feet up on the side of the shaking mangy dog.

"Let me get the straight of this," the old man says, gumming the limp bacon rind and swallowing. "Y'all got sent home from school cause the county don't aim to feed no more poor younguns. That right?"

"Nosir." The soles of my feet feel warm and damp on the dog's ribby side.

"Then you want to tell me how come?" He sets up straight, something he don't never do lessen he's fixing to get fired up.

"Nosir." I hang over my plate then notice Mommer's hanging over hers too and I set up straight like the old man.

"Spit it out, gal!" he says.

"I can't."

"You can't?"

"Nosir."

→ *He snorts* "Can't never could"--his onliest lesson in my 13 years. ~~He~~
~~snorts~~ "You want me to wake up Lovie and whip her backend till you
talk?"

"Nosir."

Mommer peeps up half-heartedly, "Don't you come in here, Count
Trevor, messing with me and mine."

"Shut up, old lady, hear me!"

Mommer, sulling, pulls ~~the pot of~~ *pot* grits to her plate and spoons
out a mouthful.

The old man gets up, stripping off his belt, going for Lovie
with her legs drawn up.

"No, don't. Don't!" I ~~go~~ *holler*, jumping up and rolling the dog who
springs high and bumps his head under the table. "Lovie don't know
nothing. They didn't tell her nothing to my beknowest."

He shines me a toothless grin like he's just joking, but his
filmy brown eyes burn with boy meanness. Maybe looking for a reason
to quit his job or move us to another borrowed house, the places
people pick out for us to live so we won't end up next door to them.

I know this is the maddest the old man'll ever get, and last
time he moved all our stuff in a wheelbar, clear acrost Statenville
to Tarver, to make his point that the county and the church was
falling down on their job in doing what was right by poor people.
And I wonder for the zillionth time what happened between him and his

popper to cause the grandpa that never claimed none of us to leave all his timberland to his son Lieutenant. I think I know.

He comes back to the table with his belt doubled like he's gone let me have it instead. I back up. "We'll be took back in school before you know it, Popper." I call myself gentling him, since I'm his pet baby, but I know I'll end up blabbing the whole thing and of a sudden, I don't care. I don't care where he beats me and Mommer and Lovie black and blue, or where he quits his posting job and moves us right by the schoolhouse in broad daylight, or where he gets drunk and murders Miss Annar and the principal both.

"I tell you what," I go, gritting my teeth, walking toward him till I hear ~~the~~ Mommer's spoon clank on her gold tooth. "I tell you what old man," and I'm crying, "we got run off, me and Lovie, cause they fount out we got nigger blood."

Mommer's wild eyes go up, spoon stuck in her mouth like she's taking her fever, the old man drops his belt, a dog slinks out from under the table, and I go on. I go on.

"That's what they said. I heard 'em talking about it the day of the Christmas party and I knowed what was coming shore as Santy Claus. Now, you go on, old man, do what you have to, and nothing you do won't surprise nor bother me none cause I ain't got nothing now, me and Lovie don't."

He just stands there, wall-eyed, ^{read)} whilst ~~at~~ the old lady sets and stares at her juice harp.

"Go on," I wave my hand, snot running down to my mouth. "I don't care no more." I suck cold up in my head and go to the kitchen looking out the paint-black winders over the dishpans. I can't hear

nothing around my squalling but in a minute the whole house shakes from the front door slamming. The black winders shudder.

Somewhere out in the night I wake up to a bunch of hollering outside, a study stream of traffic coming together in one big ^{roar} roar at the crossroads, then heading shesh shesh shesh west. Sireens going off like they done when I was little and the courthouse burnt to the ground. My wisdom teeth go to paining me and I grit down on my swole gums. The old man's done something, something bad. And truth be told I can't picture nothing bad enough to pay them back. I lay there, mixed-up glad and mad, sucking in a bloom of smoke that's too thick to of come from the woodstove what half the time don't draw and nearbout smothers us to death.

I ease up to keep the bedsprings from squeaking and waking up Lovie, but they do anyhow. She smacks her lips and rolls to the wallowed out spot on my side of the mattress then goes on sleeping. I draw back the rotten curtain and see truck lights feeding back from great banks of smoke. Tiptoeing through the smoky cold, in all that racket, I go out on the front porch and follow with my eyes the way the traffic's going, a smoky red arch hanging in the east over the spot where the school house sets. ^{Red} Sparks spouting like a chimney blaze.

"My Lord God in heaven!" I hold to the screen frame, shivering from the cold what feels thicker with smoke, and watch the fire brighter through a round hole punched out in the screen. I can smell the smoke like a good fire in winter and I keep watching the red drawing to sky like blood in muddy water; I watch first through the

hole and then through the screen like I'm doing a science experiment on different strengths of fire. The white courthouse shows through gaps of dusty smoke, its time of burning his'try now, just one more lesson Miss Annar's learned us about how ~~mischief~~ ^{mean} can turn into ~~trouble~~ ^{heartache}: all the county records and land deeds were lost and the landowners ~~couldn't prove~~ ^{went to warring over} who owned what. And I know in my soul that the old man burnt the courthouse too, maybe to get back at his popper, and it's something I know that makes me old and light ~~feeling~~ and I give up. He ain't never gone change and so neither are we.

The back door eases open and shut and I figger it's the old man and he ain't burnt the school in mine and Lovie's best interest, but to suit hisself, to satisfy that something that rears up in him from time to time. And I can go inside and find him ~~just as satisfied~~ ^{plum pacified} cause he's done got it out of his system and had something to get excited over, making something happen in Statenville, and he won't never change, and all the excitement going on out there, the cars and trucks and all, does seem a find sight, the wildest thing ever happened in this dry place.

I go on. I go in to the dark living room, searching the shaders for the old man, and I hear him go still in the kitchen door, a queer silence coming out of his tipping over creaking boards. I speak right up to the shader on the door jamb. "Old man, you gone and done it this time." I smile, I can feel him grinning.

He's breathing like he's been running. He laughs low in the throat.

"What you gone do when the law comes?" I say.

"Babe, I burnt it down." His voice catches like a cuckleburr's stuck in his throat. "From the litard posts of the fence to the school house, I set fire to hit. Ain't nobody gone run off my girl younguns." The last part he says like it's come to him I'm somebody he's got to make it right with.

"And it ain't right," I go, "two wrongs don't make a right."

"That's what they say, babe." He steps out of the doorway and a truck light from the hardroad picks up the ghost of his long ~~skinny~~ ^{swagger} ~~body~~ as he turns and goes in to the old lady.

The next morning, while the smoke packs down over Statenville, the law comes. The sheriff, a ~~big tall~~ ^{heavy} man with a red butt face what wears his britches hiested up, ~~stands on~~ ^{faces the house from the} shoulder of the road. The old man sets on the doorsteps with his elbows on his ~~knobby~~ knees. His long ~~hands~~ ^{finger dangle} hang out. Both of em's got smut in their nose holes.

The old man mumbles, snorts.

The sheriff goes, "I hear you! Uh huh!" He looks behind him where the sun coming up paints the town built around the crossing a ~~smoky rose~~ ^{Sodom & Gomorrah (hell red)} smoky rose.

"I ain't your man, Sheriff." The old man grunts and struggles up, stretching and yawning, then says it again like he's finally come up with something smart. ^{"I ain't your man, Sheriff,"} "But if you could pin it on me, I ~~can~~ ^{lay you out to see} you would."

"We got a kerosene can, for starters; state fire marshal's coming in."

"Mine ain't the onliest kerosene cookstove in the county." The old man's on the porch now, leaning down and talking through the screen. His beard's the same ~~color~~ ^{fly-wing gray} as the wire mesh.

The sheriff wanders off toward the crossing. "Ain't no truth in you, Count Trevor."

"That's the truth," the old man says and ambles inside like a family man on his way to Sunday breakfast.

He shuts the door. "Say somebody set fire to the schoolhouse last night, burnt it clean to the ground."

"Don't say," says the old lady setting by the woodstove in her blue housedress over ~~long~~ britches. She spits into the can.

"Say some rascal burnt even the litard fence posts around the school."

"Well, I be dogged!"

"Gone build it back," he says, taking on a dreamy look, ^{his chin going up.}

"That what they say?"

"What I say."

So me and Lovie ain't the onliest ones out of school the rest of the year, and I reckon to some of the school younguns Count Trevor-- ^{it takes} ~~Count No-account~~ to most folks-- is something of a hero, the kind of hero that bumps into what makes him one.

Me and Lovie don't go out to play all that smutty winter, not like we'd generally do at the cemetery ^{by} the Alapaha ^Rriver. We keep to ourself and cut out paper dolls by the fire from a Sears & Roebuck



catalogue while Mommer plays the juice harp, learning two more hillbilly tunes, and the old man works wherever he's working. Loafing for all I know. Cause he don't rare and take on--don't drink neither--and ever night he comes in grinning and shining his gums, wore out to the bone.

Summer comes, and I'm finding a little peace, though me and Lovie still don't go out of doors. We listen and watch from the front porch while ~~the~~ ^X other younguns slam in and out the screen door of Miss Ruth's store, eating grape popsicles on their way by our shanty row to the river. We're quiet for a spell and all during the hot still, smutty days, we can hear the ~~woodpecking~~ ^{and ring} of hammers on nails off ~~behind the smoky courthouse and the old upstairs hotel~~ ^{where the new school's going up} where they putting up a new school. And the sound of the saws grinding with the locusts feels like some order and newness in our lives. Much as I want something to read, I don't go to the library, and I try not to think about later, what we'll all do. I feed everybody and cut out a stack of paperdolls and keep them inside the covers of the catalogue--even the ones Lovie tears the heads off of at the string-like necks--a smooth mound that smells clean and dry. I don't know what I'll do when the people in the catalogue runs out, the men and women and children, smiling and posing blank-faced.

A tent revival sets up on the oak shady lot acrost the road, and I set out at night and listen to the preaching and singing and watch everybody coming and going. I stop rocking when they walk past the house, satisfied they can't see in through the smutty screen, but I can see out. Skeeters whine to the ~~rhythm~~ ^{beat} of their shoes tapping on the hardroad.

The old man comes out of the dark house and pulls up a chair and props his crossed feet on the wood ledge of the screen.

He takes out the tobaccer can from his shirt pocket and shakes a dab in a cupped paper, spits, licks and rolls it. He strikes a match on the rocker rung, holding it to his slick pointy face like he's *setting fire to his long nose.* *taps out* checking the tiny flame. He sucks in and rears back, shaking out the fire. "That's a sight of people, ain't it, babe?"

"Yessir." I start rocking, sliding my feet, and run my hand over the mound of the packed catalogue on my lap.

"You ain't going over there?" He cocks his long head toward the lit tent.

"Nosir, not this time."

"How come?"

"I don't want to."

"You ain't overed hit, have you?"

"Yessir, I just...."

"You ain't." He stares through the dark at me. "You ain't never gone over hit, but you gone do like me and find *a way* ~~somehow~~ to go on."

You don't care, I think, and I *get* mad and open the catalogue, brushing paper dolls to the floor, real slow, my order falling apart as the stack goes down. You ain't never had no care about you, Count Trevor, I think. Then I say it. "You ain't never had no care about you, Count Trevor."

He looks at the lit khaki tent, drawing on the nub between his finger thumb.
"Who you reckon's been a-~~rounding~~ *drawing* a keg of nails a day on that new school roof, huh?" He shuffles up and slumps to the door and goes inside.



Come September and a cool spell that colors Statenville more blue-yellow than black, the principle and Miss Annar both's standing on the shoulder of the hardroad facing the ~~the~~ house. The old man setting with his knees cocked to his chest on the doorsteps.

"We come to say your younguns can come on back to school." The principle, a toady frog looking man, shifts feet in black Sunday shoes.

"I ain't shore and certain I'm gone let 'em, Berk Sirmons," says Count.

"Law says you ain't got no choice."

"Well, you might a-noticed, I don't go by the law."

Miss Annar, short and chunky and funny looking outside the schoolroom, starts. "We held a meeting and decided to take them back."

"Intergration's coming anyhow." Berk Sirmons shines his top teeth and looks north up the hardroad like he expects a bus load of "intergration" to show on the sparkling white cement river bridge.

"I don't know nothing bout no intergration, but my girl younguns don't mess where they ain't wanted."

"They ^{ne}wanted," Miss Annar says, swaying with her hands behind her red-brown dress what goes with her see-through hair. Her top teeth poke out over a soft white ^{witcher} chin. In school light she looks important, out in the sun she ^{looks like a ground mole!}

✓ I hold my breath where I'm peeping through the bedroom window, Mommer playing on the juke harp cutting out about half of what ~~she~~ say.

"Y'all gone have to beg my biggest girl in yonder, I'd wager." The old man looks back ^{stuck back} proud like he knows I'm there.

I drop the curtain, listening and watching Mommer, who looks more yeller than brown, even her hair turning gray looks yeller.

"Get on out here, Shirley," the old man hollers.

I step to the side and lean against the cool wall and I know if I open up that door the old dogs and cats ^{in wood} milling around the living room will pour out with me, with my shame. I don't want to go back

it decide she would have made a good spy in the army with the shell suits show

to school. I don't want to face nobody. *How come them to ask us back is to keep the old man from burn of the new school down too.*

"Get on out here, girl!"

Miss Annar's talking regular, like she'll do in the school room while she fiddles with the winders shade cord. "It's me taught your girl not to say wash for wash. And I'm not asking no thanks, mind you, but she's got a sight more learning to do before she ^{can} amount to something..."

"Shut up, you old heifer!" the count says, ^{low} hollering ^{back} "Shirley, get yo'self out here!"

I can smell the dog must around the everlasting smoke, the lard and piss, and them smells ground me to the place, to Mommer, my own mommer, and the old man, and I know I'll take his side and hers too if it all comes down on us tomorrow. I'll help the old man move us with a wheelbar and I might hate Mommer's juke harp but I won't hate her [#] for playing it. Or for giving us nigger blood.



I go on. I go on cause I know it's a matter of pride with the
 old man, that the old woman setting there can't help what she is--
 I've come to hanker ^{1. (another word for envy)} after that peace to just set there--and for Lovie
 who just might still be in school when intergration comes. I go
 because sure as the old man burnt the ^{old} schoolhouse down, he ^{drove} pounded a
 keg of nails a day in the ^{new} schoolhouse roof, just for me.

without
 reason
 they're
 asking
 back is
 to keep the
 old man
 from being
 down the
 new school
 too.

I get up and go to the teacher's desk and hand her my paper
 while everybody else is scratching their heads, trying to come up with
 something to put down. She smiles and nods for me to go quiet back
 to my seat. I go on. And I ^{don't have any} ~~hain't got no~~ notion where ^{the} or not what I
 wrote is what she wants, but I know it's close as I can come to the
 truth about lessons.