

Fentry's Tomorrow

(after Faulkner and Foote)

F. J. Schaack

And so Fentry raised the boy.

In the fields, the cotton fields of rich cultivation that had been stolen from woods and bears, in the fields somewhere between Oxford and Tupelo, Fentry raised him. With the child strapped to his back, the planting and bending and wielding of farm tools curved his spine closer and closer toward his heart. The weight of the child, sometimes squirming, sometimes sleeping heavily, molded into a cavity on Fentry's back until both hearts were the same heart. The boy grew too big and could toddle through the prickly bushes himself. Fentry actually yearned for the burden missing from his back. But piggyback rides through the brambles and hide-and-seek games and thank-and-please prayers whispered into the covers while kneeling over the bed already covered by the omniscient darkness (the darkness that nightly recorded the holy messages of father and son, stilled in its own utter darkness at the uncommon poignancy of the common moment), all these replaced the living knapsack which had grown, physically at least, less symbiotic.

The rides in the wagon full of cotton puffs, both man and child submerging in the terrestrial clouds of cotton which they themselves had picked, picked each individually with dried crimson lines on their hands as proof, these rides going nowhere since they hadn't yet hitched up the mule came at the end of the longer days as just reward. The grown man and manchild sat throwing clumps of cotton at each other, throwing peals of laughter across the Mississippian back woods, throwing into each other's arms each other until their sweat mixed into a sweetness of hard work and hard love, and blessed the day's harvest.

Only when Fentry found him playing in the fenced graveyard did he reprimand him. The graveyard so alone on the highest rise of flattest land, which eternally held the Fentry clan, a compost of collective generations. And, also, the resting place that should have held the boy's mother, although her sudden death made it impossible for Fentry to bring her back here, to bring her to become part of the modest Fentry spread, to bring her back here one way or another. This graveyard made him spank the boy once. Only a strong

one-handed swat before he even knew Fentry was behind him, before Fentry himself knew why he was swatting him, before either of them ever knew. The boy's eyes swelled with tears. Soundless and confused. Fentry instantly swooped him up in his arms and wiped away the salt lines with his own tears smearing with and becoming the boy's. This one time inside the graveyard, the insides of Fentry broke and as quickly mended, as he assuaged the child, this child whose pale eyes were so like Sarah's, like those who should have been living beside him or at least buried in the hallowed plot of land in this rough land of northern Mississippi.

But it was too blessed to last.

When they came, when he saw them coming down the twisted road, Fentry knew. He knew when he saw them coming for Sarah's boy, because the Thorpes claimed the boy as one of their people, more a Thorpe than a Fentry, they'd say (though not in ways that mattered or ever would, ever really would). And from that ubiquitous moment, with the boy still clutching his hand, still his alone for the briefest of moments longer, Jackson Fentry knew what he'd have to endure tomorrow. Their emptiness of tomorrow lived today. The years of tomorrows that would soon stretch longer than the longest furrow in this land's most barren of fields. ♦