

# 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 bundle,  
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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