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The Worm Ranch

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The Worm Ranch

My lunch was on the kitchen counter in a paper sack. I picked it up, made sure there were two sandwiches and walked out the door and down the road. The day was fresh because it had rained last night, making the ground percolate like a pot of coffee. I could hear the small bubbles popping clearly and smell the freshness. I thought if it had to rain, night was the best time.

Nightcrawlers were all over the road, stretched out in small puddles of water or on the wet gravel. Some were cut in two pieces. Cars had done that. I felt bad for the nightcrawlers, cause they were just worms and worms are like something dead, only they move.

The creek ran through the corn and wheat fields and there was a path beside it. Pipes, buried in the ground, spilled their load into the creek, making it stink. In the summer the smell was worse and scum covered the surface --except for a narrow strip in the middle. The only time the stink and scum weren't bad was after it rained or in the winter.

I liked walking beside the creek. It was a good place if you wanted to be alone, especially in the morning before work. I shave off a mile and a half by taking the creek path.

A song sparrow was singing as I walked through the fields. I could hear it clearly. It was very close. Most of the song sparrows put plenty of distance between you when they sing, unless they were trying to protect their nests. I thought how the worms were different.

I picked a weed and stuck it in my mouth. Everyone should have a good piece of weed every day before work.

I always met Bob at the end of the creek path; unless he was sick. He was waiting for me on a big rock and looked up as I came walking.

"Hi Bob. "

"Hi Frank. Did you get your gloves? "

"No. "

"Why? "

"Decided they would be too hot on my hands and start smelling. "

"If you said you were going to get them, you should have got them. "

"Oh, hell. Let's go."

We walked along the gravel road looking straight ahead.

We reached the Worm Ranch about eight o'clock. Mr. Gibson was waiting and took us out to the biggest worm pit he had. Frank and I rolled the straw back to the middle of the long, narrow pit and began picking worms.

The worms were always cold and wet and liked to get right down in all the cow shit and be hosed down every night. Nothing holds water better than cow shit, except maybe a bowl; but cow shit does pretty well for the worms.

Mr. Gibson says his worms are educated, because their favorite food, besides soy beans, is old newspapers. One pit of worms can eat five newspapers every two weeks. But I figured any worm that stuck around in cow shit, waiting to be picked, counted, and then sold to some fisherman, was just dumb.

Bob and I were picking out Tiger worms, cause it was summer. In the winter we picked out White worms, in the fall, Leaf worms. Tiger worms are smaller and faster than the other worms and are the hardest to catch. Mr. Gibson says they "move faster than a cat after butterflies." But he was old and besides we still got the Tiger worms, even though it took longer.

I thought about the gloves. I didn't need any gloves. It was better to get all the crap in your fingers. I could do a better job. I had a good job. Some day I would probably change; but right now my job was good enough.

Bob looked out across the field. To the right was a knee-high wheat field. We always ate our lunch under the oak tree at the edge of the wheat field. Hanging from a limb was a thick rope with a tire on the end. We swung on it after eating our lunch. The rope was rough and did a good job cleaning our hands after we washed them.

We finished picking for the morning and walked up to the Worm Shed to wash and get our lunches.

"How many have you got?" Bob asked.

"Five bowls, eight hundred worms to a bowl."

"So have I." That makes a dollar and a quarter for the morning."

"Not bad."

We walked out to the oak tree and sat down on the grass.

I heard a song sparrow and wondered why the worms never crawled away but just stayed on day after day in all that cow shit. I thought how you can pick worms, but you can't pick song sparrows.

I began to eat. After, I swung on the rope with the tire. I could only reach a certain height and then the rope would jerk and I had to slow down. Going back and forth on the rope was like traveling.

Frank and I always swung on the rope. Even though it jerked when you went too high, it was fun and like flying for a while.

Jim Sadler

Twins

We poisoned our father and mother,
We poisoned our sister and brother,
Then out of professional jealousy,
We cleverly poisoned each other.

Larry Fahrner