

inal young literary stylist, a satirist who does not hesitate to assail hypocrisy and social injustice wherever he uncovers it and regardless of its color, race, creed, religion, social standing or national origin. Classicist at heart that he is, his hilarious barbs are meant to expose human folly, mendacity, absurdity and wickedness with an eye to tempering their evil effects. Reed has taught writing and American literature at the University of Washington at Seattle and at U.C. Berkeley. This summer he will travel east back to his old hometown to conduct classes at S.U.N.Y. at Buffalo. The selection which appears here is from his forthcoming novel, *Flight to Canada*, inspired by his readings of slave narratives.

With settings that range from the Middle West, the present-day South, Los Angeles and Hollywood to the mythic Dixie of antebellum days, it is hoped that the work of these four authors will serve to provide the reader with some idea of the richness, variety and broad scope of contemporary Afro-American writing.

FICTION / JOHN McCLUSKEY

John Henry's Home

In the longest moment of his life, John Henry Moore stared down the barrel of a shotgun and reached slowly for the toothpick in the corner of his mouth. The cigarette in his other hand was burning down to the filter and he let his aching fingers drop it, checking any sudden move. He watched the eyes of the man holding the gun and, finding no mercy, looked to the man's screaming wife.

"Don't kill him, Lou! Don't kill him!"

He cursed his luck, his life that flashed by like a doomed comet, and that first weekend after he had returned to the world. He had lied to himself about what was possible at home, lied about how easy things would be. He had looked too long at the reflection of the present and he had called that good. He held his breath, hoping to ease the strain on his kidneys, and looked again at the open lips of the barrel, down its blueblack length to the man's nervous fingers . . .

He had closed the closet door, straightened the full-length mirror hanging against its back, and studied his front. He had dragged on his cigarette and watched the smoke ooze evilly from his nostrils. The pose had dictated some kind of badassed movie detective or mackman. He had pulled his slacks up, then frowned at the tightness through the crotch and thighs. Most

other dudes home from the war were underweight. Like Mitchell. John Henry was good sized when he came home and going strong now on his mother's cooking. He had already put on five pounds in his first week home. The added weight didn't look too bad except that women seemed to prefer their men looking like skinny sissies these days. It wasn't that way when he left. Tight pants and shirts and high heel shoes. It isn't how much or how little you have that counts, he knew. It's how you use it. He had grinned at himself, patted his belly, and left.

The barbershop was four blocks away and John Henry, as cool as he wanted to be, took them slowly. After all, there was the brightness of the day to consider. It was early March, though it looked more like October and touch football time for the old-timers and fake high school stars in the park. His second night home, Alice and Jody had thrown a welcome-home party for him and, drunk, he had promised to get together with the fellows for a game. Of course, he knew that the game would be forgotten in the morning. The party had been one of the few events in his life when more than two people in a room seemed happy to see him, listen to him, touch him. He had liked the feeling, despite the war, despite everything. He was not hard enough to shut out everything like Tony, his Army buddy now riding shotgun for a Detroit gangster. Tony had sent a photo of himself posing against a silver-grey Rolls-Royce. Nor was John Henry soft enough to retire like Mitchell at the age of twenty-three. He'd look for himself somewhere in between. Here, back in the world.

He pushed into the barbershop and waved at RoughHouse and Irwin, the barbers. Then he nodded at faces vaguely remembered and at others, younger, he didn't remember at all. Little jitterbugs were shooting up like weeds. Like that Bobbie who was a basketball star now. John Henry had seen him on the street once and had teased him about playing marbles and wearing a Davy Crockett hat. Grabbing an old magazine, John Henry took a seat and pretended to read.

RoughHouse finishing a tale and giving a razor-line at the same time. "Some crackers too dumb to be white. They deserve to catch hell . . ."

Then Rough dragged out stories of hants and fools. John Henry did not look up. He hoped they wouldn't start on him, wouldn't ask about the war and whether he had killed a man, whether it was true the Blacks and whites were shooting at one another and calling such murders accidents. Did the Cong really take it easy on the brothers when they sneaked into camps and cut throats? Did they really seek out the white-only bars as targets for grenades? Huh, was it like that for true? John Henry wanted to be left alone with the memories of his war. His burned arm was reminder enough.

Still the room grew smaller. RoughHouse, dipper in the business of all, cleared his throat. "John Henry, I'm sho glad you here 'cause maybe you

can straighten out something I was trying to tell that hardheaded Jew-Don awhile ago. He claim he fought the Japanese in the Second World War. I fought in Korea myself. I was trying to tell him that the Japs were smaller and had bigger heads than the Koreans. He come tellin me that the Japs is the biggest, then the Vietnamese, then the Koreans.”

“Well, Rough, I’ve never seen a Korean,” John Henry said. “I saw a few Japanese in California but that wasn’t close up.” Yellow men among the snows, wave on wave through the jungles. One was a wave, as precise as a scorpion.

They leaned back in their seats when John Henry couldn’t deliver the decisive word. RoughHouse started again. “I know one thing, though. They can fight their asses off, can’t they? I mean, hell, I was in the Philippines and saw them coming and coming.”

“What did you do then, RoughHouse?” some joker asked.

“I kept shooting and praying. Yeah, buddy, that was me all right. Look here, y’all, I cut Mitchell’s hair last week and he come talking about they would cool it on brothers over there. You believe that mess? War is war and niggas always get caught in the middle of it and after it’s over we get booted out of the army with some funky papers.”

Then the war stories were strung together on the knotted thread of memory. Certain that he had to give them something, Roscoe shared a story told him by a buddy. He’d tell it early so they wouldn’t keep bothering him. His own story he would tell some other time.

“Yeah, that war things is never always cool. I had to drive a jeep miles down a road that had been closed off for a while because of heavy shelling. So I drove out of camp for about a mile when I met this white boy with a rifle. I told him where I had to go and asked him whether the road up ahead had been opened yet. He said yes that everything was OK, so I took off, and had that old jeep hummin. All I had was a big pistol on my hip, you understand. It was kind of nice that day, about like today but a lot warmer, so I settled back to enjoy the drive. I was weaving around them big holes in the road where the shells had hit, all between the trees and stuff on the road. That drive was the only peaceful time I had all the time I was over there. Anyway, I’m doing it all the way in and when I get near the village there’s another sentry, a brother. He looked at me like his eyes were going to pop. ‘Where you come from?’ he asked me. When I told him he sat down on the ground and started laughing like crazy. ‘Man, that road been closed,’ he said. ‘You coulda had your head blown off. Them Viet Cong must have thought you was one crazy blood driving through there like that and they was probably laughin so hard they let you through.’ I almost peed on myself behind that. I started thinkin of that soldier at the other end who let me through so I finished my business in that town and

went back down that road. When I got to the other end, I found that cat and whipped him 'til he roped like okra.”

The barbers stopped their clippers to rest against their chairs, laughing. When that died down they saw John Henry's stolid expression and started again. A belly-holding, thigh-slapping laughter, a welcome-home laughter that rumbled up from collective pasts. John Henry, never the athlete, never the smartest, slow with the girls, slow with the dozens, was ever swift with the jokes. Could beat One-Eyed Tommie when it came to stories. John Henry, that crazy John Henry, was home.

“What you plan on doing now that you're home, John Henry?” You couldn't beat RoughHouse for directness.

“I don't know yet. Right now I'm just gonna let Uncle Sam's pay support me.” Then he pulled up his sleeve and showed the ugly scars of napalm. An accidental drop near his platoon. Fire-jelly from the sky, from one of their own nervous pilots. “Uncle Sam owe me something, don't he?” Waiting customers leaned closer for a better look and frowned at the ugly scars.

“I hear the mill is hiring,” Irwin said.

“I ain't in no hurry for the mill, man,” he said. He had to watch it: most of the men in the barbershop owed their thin bank accounts, their mortgages, their past bail bonds, doctor bills, and their children's first years in college to the steel mill. “Like I say, I'm still thinking. I'm behind by four years and I ain't gone catch up working for no hillbilly in a mill. You can bet on that.”

RoughHouse noticed John Henry's eyes rolling up and the vacant stare. Another world was where he was now. Though the customers agreed with themselves about the mill, they didn't like his saying it. After all, they were beyond choices now. Loans had to be repaid. RoughHouse stopped his razor again, humming in the quiet. It was always a long way home and John Henry wasn't there yet. Might never make it back. Rough knew so many who could never make it back.

“Y'all read the other day about Ali talkin about he could have whipped Joe Louis and Joe Frazier in a telephone booth, blindfolded and with one arm tied around his back . . .?”

Smoke. A smoke no more harmful to the lungs than the dust-filled smoke at the mill where men like his father and two brothers breathed it and brought it back up with phlegm. Mill men were tough enough to work in the smoke for forty years and accept cheap watches for their struggle, men who would later die coughing on front porches or in bed, smoke never ever gone. John Henry dealt in a smoke that would keep the slicker men happy, could have them wrestling the bulls of the universe, could have them riding and leaning on falling stars as easily as they could in big cars. Just a gentle thing, this smoke.

Share it, John Henry. Ease a little pain, man. It started the very next day with a couple of nickel bags as a gift from an ex-soldier in the next town, a gift to John Henry, to the town. Two of his sidekicks, Tucker & Art, would go for it. They've been to the big city, they know what's happening.

"Man, this some righteous shit, John Henry . . ."

Noon was midnight and burning moon caught them in Tucker's car parked in front of the pool hall. They were on the Strip—a pool hall, grocery store, laundromat, bar and an abandoned printer's office—a block that had struggled to life while John Henry was away. Yokel cops cruising by, trying to scowl. Art blew smoke at them. Hip Art with no front teeth and the runny eyes.

"Simple dudes never heard of marijuana, let alone know what it smell like."

Dance strange and funky—butt bumping dances under this moon, town. Come on out, saditty couples living behind venetian blinds and hating the town and what your mirrors throw back. Did you hear what foxy Jeanette said about smoke opening her up and bringing her love down as if strange fingers tripped along the insides of her thighs? She would even buy John Henry a suit behind that pleasure. Come, dance. Not his fault the war-gods have died with the thunder and now the angels of pleasure had slipped on in.

John Henry moved from his home to a small apartment and later went to the mill. A front, though. He saw death there, slow, his. But young workers came to him and begged. At lunch-time he cooled them out with dollar joints, rolled tight as toothpicks. A few of the older, steadier workers drifted toward his corner of the plant. They were used to gin or scotch all night and slightly bored with it. He'd help them make it through the hard nights of their days.

Good news had traveled fast there. He was called into the office of one of the top men. The executive's face was pocked and puffed by alcohol. Grinning, he had pumped John Henry's hand and reached the point quickly. He had heard of John Henry around the plant (tomming spies, everywhere!) and wanted to know whether John Henry could help him. Of course, a small raise and protection would be given in exchange. They had shaken hands, John Henry laughing the rest of the day in the plant. He had figured the man as he had figured most of the executives at that plant: aging Christians aching to wear dungarees & sandals, to grow a beard, to stroke the behinds of their secretaries. He would be middleman to their heavens, too.

But if smoke could get you moving, the White Horse could get you there extra swift. That was how his soldier friend had described it. John Henry

saw himself catching up with high school classmates who owned homes now. He saw the streets of his town paved with twenty dollar bills. Saw money in the faces of the young kids standing on the corners. It would be so easy, so quick. But he hesitated.

“Look, man. This heavy stuff is new for me. You been doing it up here ever since you came back from the war so you know what’s what. I mean, for one thing you dealing in a big town. My town so tiny you can hear a fly fart.”

“Don’t worry, man. I’m just turning you on to something slick, that’s all. It’s not like a life-time thing. You think I want to spend my life pushing to jive chumps? I’m into bigger stuff. I got a brain, John Henry, and I’m gonna use it for the bigger things, know what I mean? Uncle Sam will be sorry he ever cut this pretty nigga loose with some messed up discharge papers. And I know you, John Henry. I know you didn’t suck mud in a stupid-assed war for three years just to come home and knock your brains out in a steel mill. Tell me anything, man, but don’t tell me that!”

How much heart, John Henry, how much heart you got? Be so bad you roll grass in ten dollar bills. He drove back to town to stay on top of things. To think.

He had run into Mitchell many times, God-fearing Mitchell who had a bad leg from the war. He had tried to share smoke with Mitchell but got nowhere. Mitchell worked in the post office and had married within four weeks after returning home. During John Henry’s first month back, they stood one another a round of drinks in Roscoe’s Place, early evening before the crowd.

“How’s married life, Mitch?” John Henry usually began.

“It’s cool with me, John Henry. You know me, man, I never was into a whole lot of running and stuff.”

“Yeah, you and Jackie been tight, too, going way way back. Look like the post office ain’t hurting you none either.”

Mitchell laughed, stroked his goatee. He was shorter than John Henry, neat, always and forever a neat man. John Henry had concluded that Mitchell went to battle pressed clean. “You the one to talk. If I had your hand to play, I wouldn’t have a worry in this world.”

“Mitch, you seen bighead George Pendergrast? Somebody said he’s teaching college in Cincinnati. They say he’s got him a nice pad down there.”

“No, man, I never see him. He comes home for a minute to see his people then—zoom!—he’s back in Cincinnati. That dude ain’t got no time for this place. I guess he’s doing OK, though. Remember Billie Barnes? He tried out for the Detroit Lions, you know. He didn’t make it so they say he kind of drifted out West. He didn’t have anything to be ashamed of, if you ask me. Ain’t too many from this town ever done much of anything except raise a

lot of hell. Well, anyway, he's changed his name to Billy Africa and he's out in Colorado trying to start the revolution. Yeah, they say he's cutting hands off of dope pushers, too."

Mitchell coughed. He did not want that to slip. It had started as a joke, probably.

"Billy always was half-crazy," John Henry said, squirming. "Whatever happened to Daniel White? That cat was always quiet, but he could beat all of us drinking gin."

Mitchell laughed, slapping his chest. "John Henry, Daniel is way out in Los Angeles. I hear he's got a good job, too. They say the last time he was home he was pushing a deuce-and-a-quarter. Which must be a lie because we both know that wasn't his style. I can just see his stiffnecked self trying to be cool."

"You never know, Mitch. You never know how anybody's going to change." He had asked himself how Mitchell could be so blind. All their friends gone, living well, and the two of them sitting in a funky bar. And Mitchell has the nerve to laugh at their new ways. He's probably so confused he doesn't know whether to hate me or love me for what I'm doing.

"Why don't you drop over some time, John Henry?" Mitchell asked. "Bring one of your ladies and we'll play some whist or something."

John Henry nodded, wondering how many things Mitch could have been. College, maybe, a hellified basketball player. Might have made a dynamite lawyer; Mitchell always was smart. But he said he didn't want that now. Maybe he wasn't up to the strain of getting it. Maybe the war left him with only one ambition: to rest in peace. But John Henry would never go out that way. After making up lost ground, he'd start a business in another town and push on to the top. They'd remember him in this town. He'd visit home once a year and prowl the streets in a new car. Yes, they'd remember.

"What about you, John Henry? You thinking of staying here for awhile?"

"Not if I can help it. I'll be out of here before it turns warm again. Watch. You know I never was too crazy about this place, even though it is home."

Mitchell smiled and they finished their beers. They'd get together again, soon. They were as serious with that promise as buddies growing apart could ever be. John Henry had decided to do what he knew he would do all along. At the end of the summer he paraded the White Horse through town. At home they found this creature beautiful. They quietly lost their minds at the sight of it, taking turns to mount. They wanted its flesh, wanted to suck its veins, wanted its power. Instant friends offered their services now, wanted to walk in the shadow of John Henry. He paused on street corners to show off weird greens or way-out red outfits. But all the folk he touched,

even the one or two who might have loved him, turned to stone.

That summer Bobbie played basketball in the shadow of the Horse. In the fall he would be a junior in high school and would start for the varsity. Knew he would start, though he had quit the junior varsity last winter because he couldn't get along with that team's coach. The coach had pronounced the sentence and benched him many times: Bobbie Powers is not a team player, Bobbie Powers has a bad attitude. A new year and a few new moves like the spinning jump shot and he'd be back out front again. No one worried. The coach needed a winning team to keep his job. He was no fool.

So Bobbie sharpened his moves that summer and when not playing he hung out with Chico, Cool Chico, his only real buddy. But one buddy is enough to turn you around. He shot up with Chico on a simple dare. Bobbie would try anything once, or twice.

On a hot afternoon in August, Bobbie fell out of a car at a highway rest stop twenty miles north of Cincinnati. Turning grey and dying. The needle was an ugly exclamation point to the vein. Chico vomited, cried and beat his fists on the hood of the car, while the sleepy-eyed truck drivers at the stop kept their distance. Miles away a few boys were playing ball on the hot court. The weaker players, minds steamed by dreams of superstardom, stood in the shade and waited their turn, making the myth of Bad Bobbie.

As Bobbie lay dying, John Henry and Tucker were making connections in New York. It was Tucker who had given Chico the phone number of the Cincinnati pusher. Nose running, Chico had been impatient and did not want to wait until they would get back from New York.

When John Henry and Tucker returned to town, they went directly to John Henry's apartment. A few minutes later Jeanette burst in to bring breathless news of Bobbie's death.

"A couple cops were around yesterday, asking questions," she said. "But I don't think they found out anything. Still they must know something on you, John Henry. Somebody must have told them something!"

Tucker was standing, shaking his head. "I told that stupid-assed Chico to hold off, but he kept pushing and pushing for the address. Did the boy O.D. or what, Jeanette?"

"I don't know, I don't know," she said. "O.D., poison, whatever. All I know is that he's dead."

In the silence they watched John Henry. He felt their eyes, knew their questions, and looked off. They had nothing to do with Bobbie's death. Directly, at least. It's too bad the boy died like that, a helluva shame, but they were clean. Then he lit a cigarette and announced, "Let's go to the park. Jeanette, we'll drop you off at your place, OK?"

By the time he and Tucker reached the park, John Henry had decided that the sale of the new batch would be his last at home. He'd leave, maybe go in with his friend in Dayton. Yes, he'd leave.

"I come back from the war to make money, not to go to jail," he said as they parked.

Tucker nodded. "But big money and risking jail go together."

They headed for the basketball court and John Henry watched the players for awhile. They were clowning around, all of them. None of them could ever be as smooth as Bobbie with the ball. John Henry told the players that they were sloppy, but they ignored him.

When a few more fellows showed up, Tucker got a nickel tonk game going. They were gathered on a picnic table in the shade. John Henry was grinning over his hand when he saw a car swerve to a stop across the street. A short squat man in work clothes rushed from the car. The basketball players saw the shotgun first and scattered. The card players froze. They were older and knew the danger of sudden movement. It was in the man's eyes, that danger. The man walked slowly to John Henry and aimed the gun at his chest. They had watched one another for long seconds before John Henry heard his breath slowly coming out . . .

"You chickenshit bastard! You're the one who killed my son."

And from behind the man the wife screamed and screamed again, reaching out to him, and John Henry's life in the town was no longer something bright and definite as a path leading upward, but as futile as aimless steps across a desert. He saw sand quaking, saw only his hand above it to show the world that someone had gone down slow. He controlled so little anymore.

"I was out of town when it happened. I just heard about it a few minutes ago. I've never sold your son anything."

"Don't lie to me or I'll blow your ass to Kingdom Come! You didn't have to sell it and I'll get that Chico and that punk in Cincinnati. But you the one brought the dope in this town. Because of you my son will be buried tomorrow. Before you came there wasn't no shit like this. They never should have let you out. You should have died in the war!"

The man was shaking his head wildly, one of his fingers tapping beneath the barrel now. The rush of fear was ebbing now, leaving John Henry weak. The toothpick was splintering in his mouth.

Junior Cooper, sitting across from John Henry, eased away and tried to speak. "It was really a dude in Cincinnati, Mr. Powers. Not John Henry, sir . . ." He looked into the man's eyes and stopped.

"Don't, Lou . . ." The woman's voice was pleading. Another man, an uncle of Bobbie's whom John Henry recognized, walked slowly up to his brother.

"Don't go to jail behind this no-good boy, Lou." He stood next to Lou

Powers, then reached slowly for the gun. John Henry knew that if he were to die today it would have to come in that instant as the man's hand came closer and closer to the barrel. The hand of Bobbie's uncle, gripped the barrel and firmly pulled it from Powers. Then he threw an arm around his brother's shoulder and pulled him away.

The man turned to John Henry. "You lucky to be sittin there. You better get the hell away while you can."

The card players had stood up and a few started moving off, not too quickly because now they could afford swagger in the face of the boys with the basketball.

"Damn man's crazy," John Henry said, lighting a cigarette. "Always was crazy as long as I known him." He wanted to pee, his bladder was still strained. He wanted to go someplace and think. If he had died that afternoon, they'd forget him in less than a year and only remember that before he went off to war he was something of a clown and not even a good one. And someone new and slicker would come along to claim the Horse. They'd forget.

A week later as summer chilled toward another fall, John Henry packed two bags. He lied to his mother, telling her he was on his way to a Detroit assembly line. He knew she had heard about Bobbie. He timed his visit to miss his father who was at work and who had cursed him the last time they talked. John Henry had only tried to make a little money to catch up with his tired friends, most of whom were working two jobs. The Horse would have come to his hometown anyway. Someone would have brought it, yes. He turned on the radio as he picked up the expressway outside of town. A bigger town with better contacts might do wonders for his luck.

FICTION / JAMES ALAN McPHERSON

Problems of Art

Seated rigidly on the red, plastic-covered sofa, waiting for Mrs. Farragot to return from her errand, Corliss Milford decided he did not feel comfortable inside the woman's apartment. Why this was he could not tell. The living room itself, as far as he could see around, reflected the imprint of a mind as meticulous as his own. Every item seemed in place; every detail meshed into an overriding suggestion of order. This neatness did no damage to the image of Mrs. Farragot he had assembled, even before visiting her at home. Her first name was Mary, and she was thin and severe of