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CORN CANTOS

By

John E. Burgett
B.A., University of Louisville, 2010

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2014

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A Thesis Approved on

April 15, 2014

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Paul Griner

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ABSTRACT

CORN CANTOS

John E. Burgett

April 15, 2010

This creative thesis is a long poem based on experiences working in corn fields. It examines how migrant worker relationships have evolved over the recent decades, and offers a forecast of the future of migrant relationships with seed companies such as Pioneer and Dekalb.

The poem's format draws from Ezra Pound's Cantos. The style shows some similarities to the works Charles Olson and Walt Whitman.

The thesis is divided into nine smaller poems that can be considered chapters in a narrative. The style is non-lyrical, attempting to capture the idiomatic expressions and base language of the characters.

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I. MR. COON

Doug came by with the trap.

Did you guys set it up with some Boudin?

We need to, huh?

We didn't discuss the logistics of if I'm paying for all the fucking gas . . .
which is great, because, I mean, it's well worth it
cause I don't mind paying for all the gas,
you putting up with me,
cause, you know,
I don't think I'm gonna have my license back by next year . . .
so, be somethin' to think about.

I'd fucking talk to Dave,
but I can't count on that son-of-a-bitch to do anything but *be late*.

Hey, don't worry about next year, cause I've already thought about it

Let's not worry about next year,
let's get through this killer year first

But it is, it's killer. It's detasseling.
We already know all they need to do with us is--
give us the seven acres they owe us,
and we go do our rewalks on rogueing fields,
and I just remember when it was like,
walking barefoot and thistles and I didn't have no shoes
--and makin' less

Burn it in half.
Don't just burn it a little, burn it in half,
and then you walk by the fire,
and then when they burn in half,
then it makes sense.

Doug came by with the trap

I already had something going
I put a bunch on there, so he could watch
Doug likes a good fire.
I figured since it was his wood and all.
I told him he was absolutely right--
but I was right too,
cause I was drinkin', and I was gonna drink more when we got the wood,
so I get to talking about shit. That coon in Pensacola did tear up
them two white pit bull's ass.
I told him--I saw 'em like the next day, and the one had to be put down,
cause it had its shit hanging out its belly.

And it's just cause they got backed into that little--
like the size of a sidewalk--
three and a half feet,
and that coon's comin' *out*
and if you back one in, they got crazy teeth, and you know,
if the birds got West Nile, and the mosquitoes around here . . .
I don't know what the coon's got, but I don't want none.

And my dad said, "Well, you should keep yourself covered, and try to avoid mosquito
bites."
He's talkin' about Illinois.
But I'm like, shit dad . . .
He don't know that I sit around Pensacola and drink beer and feed mosquitos--
that's my pastime
in the evening.

So if we get up around six, we can call Janice and if she doesn't have any work, we can
go do some rogueing.

We can be at Casey's at six when they open up, as far as I'm concerned. And then just go
on in.
But like today, sat around enough, so it wasn't soaking wet,
and went in the field at eight-fifteen in the morning.
And it wasn't all wet,
Since we have work to do anyway,
I hate to get all dresses up and call Janice and not have work
--we have work regardless. I like the way that works.
We have like four rogueing fields to do,
get those walked,
and then we're home free.
By all means--

Like today, I saw Wendell in the field,
and I told him in the best possible way,

that I was in my field.
We've already been in there again,
and I don't mind going through shit three times.
Back when they'd make us show up at seven and do a third walk,
and then tell us no work,
that was bullshit.
I don't mind doing three passes, but right now--
the best thing to do if we really want a ten-grand season--
that might be what makes or breaks us--
is Wendell going, "Damn, they don't even have any work today. I thought I told Janice to
tell them no work."
--But we're out there anyway.

--Or, if not,
they think we're a bunch of fucking Jim Belushi fucking middle-aged men we're looking
like,
and that we *like* days off.
Not only do I want to go at six-thirty in the morning,
I want to make sure they all fucking see us!

(A log rolls down almost out of the fire)

Those are the little things.
We already know this.
is that, it's that fickle
"Yeah, Janice, let them do all they can today."
Or
"No, Yolanda was promised this."
They can do that
fucking for whatever reason
whether they had the breakfast pizza or not
It's up to Pritchett right now,
Walburn could intercede and say,
"Hey, give them more."
Wendell could even say,
"Hey, them guys have been with me . . . I remember one night, Chris and his brother
stayed up with me and went behind the Hurley twins and picked tassels till the moon . . ."
We picked tassels in the moonlight.
We worked till ten at night with Wendell
cleaning up other peoples panels.

And so anybody could do it.
It's just that fickle.
Any one of those people
could intervene on our behalf
Five dudes just quit on Yolanda's crew.

We could do *their* acres.
We might do their acres.

I'd like to make sure I've covered all my bases
and the reason I didn't make ten grand this year
isn't because *I* wasn't ready for it.

I've been telling Wendell as much--
"Well, it's hard to walk by that shit, isn't it?"
"I find myself getting the Mexican's stuff."
"It's hard to leave that stuff."
But no, I don't touch that shit. I want that shit to be there.
I want him to see that he needs us.
Hell, we might end up *checking acres*.
But they don't--they just send the Mexicans back through.

And, um,
my bad,
that whole,
"I'll do it myself and I don't care if it takes me twice as long."
--that was gonna fuck us *all* up.
And I saw that.
And thanks for being an gentleman and letting me ride with you
after I said,
"Fuck off, I never want to ride with you again."
Because I saw it was gonna take us all down.
We're independent contractors,
but they see us as a group
of independents,
so when somebody doesn't do their shit or check their shit . . .
I saw how they acted in them *two* hours.
I wasn't mad. I was just like,
ready to go drink beer
you know that feeling.
And you were in between me and my beer, I guess.
I don't know.
I apologize.

You see, those logs aren't too long, Al.
The fire pit is just too small.
You gotta look at it.

It's funny, cause you came to me a few times,
and was like, "Hey, they're freaking out, and this shit ain't gonna work."
I realized that shit,
right away

coming out of my rogueing field
Linda the inspector was over there waiting for me
You see, they think we're over-heating.
I went over to Dave's truck.
I wasn't trying to get away from your car. I just didn't want to be next to Janice.
I wanted to take a few tokes.
What did she say?
"Hot, hot, heat, heat, hot, hot, heat, heat, hot!"
It's like, *God damn! We gotta work in this shit, enough already!*
You see how the whole thing got blown out of proportion
at eight-fifteen in the morning?
We know to stop and take breaks, right?
We're not gonna die.
As far as I could hear, that's all she talked about for twenty minutes
the *heat*.
It's like,
I know, Your words are adding to the heat, Janice. Stop!
So they were just *freaked out* about the whole thing.
And Linda goes, "So Al was trying to teach you a lesson you weren't ready to learn?"
And you know, I didn't say shit about it.
I was like, "No, me and Al are grown men, though. I don't know, what, am I late?"
I said, "No, fuck, I ride my bike all the time, Linda. I haven't had a license for two and a
half years. It's not that big of a deal to me."
Cause I do--
I'll ride ten miles in the morning.
It was a little different
with that one-speed Schwinn
and with hemorrhoids,
Ouch!
But
they just *freaked*.
It's too hot, and if y'all are gonna be workin', you can't be ridin' the bike.
But look at 'em.
They're fat, old, middle-aged Illinois women
and they're just so unhealthy,
like,
you should be in a scooter.
you should be in an electric chair.
It's too hot to be walking
Get in!
Ride in my electric grocery cart with me!
I mean,
what the fuck?
It'll be
alright.

So where's the trap?

It's right there beside the bike, and it's set . . .

Is it baited?

No, it's *set* to go off.
Dave took a picture of him in a tree,
so he's close by.
The coon is a lot bigger,
but he can squeeze his fat ass in there.
So that's set.
And you put the food
back here.

And it's a catch up here
So you can lift it and
do it
and that releases it--
when they walk over that.

Is he even gonna fit in there?

I don't know.
They get pretty skinny, though, man.
The coon I saw was twice that big,
but they can suck up like that
let's find out.

Let's see (whispering)

Well, let's put something in it.
I want the shit *in* there.
A piece of boudin.

OK, that's what Dave said, boudin.

We should figure out how to open it.
Let me see the flashlight.

We can just put it through the front.

Is that the boudin? Let's put it on a stick and cook it for him--make it good.

It's already cooked.

I know, but I wanted it to be all warm . . .
So the raccoon could smell it.

Here you go, Mister Coon--a *nice* chunk of boudin.
Mmm, you're gonna like that, buddy.

Mmmm.

What is this? Is this the shrimp? You're giving him the good stuff!

Oh, shit. It's gonna fall off the stick.
How easy it comes apart.
It falls into the fire.
Maybe we don't need to cook it.
Just throw it in there.
Maybe he'll smell that cooking in the fire.
He'll probably come in here--
leave it in aluminum foil,
we gotta get it to the back.
Don't put your fingers in the trap.
Yeah, he'll smell that.
He's coming down.
This'll give old fuck-boy somethin' to play with.

II. HIGHS AND LOWS

Janice didn't answer her phone.
Well our fields are by the tree grove
All our fields are.
Our rogueing field is here,
our detasseling too . . . Ninety-seven tomorrow.
What's it say for today?
Ninety-five. Mostly sunny, light southwest winds--in your face.
Overnight, mostly clear, light southwest winds.
The record high on this date was ninety-eight in eighty-eight.
Your first year.
It got down to fifty degrees on this date in eighteen eighty-nine.
In eighteen ninety-six, it got to be forty-nine degrees tomorrow.
But I remember it being forty-eight degrees up here one day,
it was about this time,
beginning of July.
Beginning of the season it got down to forty-eight.
It was good.
I got down in my sleeping bag
numerous nights in a row.
got off the top of it and climbed in it,
zipped that bitch up.

Which is just awesome,
cause usually it's always been a couple of months of heat by the time I get up here.
May, June.
And to come up here and be cold, ahhh.

And in New Orleans, it is . . . eighty-nine/seventy-six,
but--three point six-four inches of fuckin' precipitation.
It's been raining every day.
Here's the map--all that rain and clouds down there.
Yep.
Here--nothin'.
We're just in the middle of a high.

III. CHRIS GETS DRUNK

I used to race to the end also.
Every night I was on blow.
That was the last night
I was going to do it.
That's why I get rid of all of it.
I was sittin' out there
with the sun coming up.
Had to get rid of that shit.
I never slept with it overnight.
And the one night I did
had some overnight--
it was really like one of the only nights.
That's the night I got arrested at the Flora-Bama.

I got caught with all of it
cause we were out there at the mullet toss.
I had saved a big half ounce of bud from the night before.
I had had a couple pounds of weed
got rid of all of it
and just saved that bud
for me and Dennis.

And I had a couple ounces of coke--
got rid of all of it
but had one big rock
fuckin' like an eight-ball
for the next day, cause it's mullet toss--
I don't want to be waitin'
until I saw my guy
in the afternoon.

So me and Dennis got up.
and I had just bought this old Jeep International
off this old dude.
I had cash like that, man.
I had bought this Jeep, like, earlier in the week--
like cash in my pocket.

He was like, "I'm thinkin' I'm just gonna sell this. We got that new one. If anyone wants it."

"I might want it--that old Jeep you're drivin'?"

It's an International, the classic, Safari.

I was so happy, man.

I bought that mother fucker

like a thousand dollars

Had about four hundred dollars worth of work to it.

And me and Dennis were already driving it around.

Our new fuckin' beach-mobile.

And this guy kept fuckin' with me for some weed
and I was like,

Nah, nah, not now, not now. Too many fuckin' cops here.

I ain't doin' nothin'

I was thinkin'

tellin' old boy

Nah, I don't want to get a bag of weed right now.

It's too hot.

I'm just gonna chill.

I'm trying to figure out what's going on right now.

My senses were tingling.

Ah, not right now.

This girl comes up. She's my waitress.

We had these little

wooden nickels

we'd give our waitress

plus the tip.

Free drink

wooden nickels.

I'm loading this girl up with them.

We're down on the boardwalk

She comes up

she goes,

"Hey, Randy's trying to get that bag for me. Will you get it please?"

"Oh, it's for you? OK, I'll go out there."

I went out to the parking lot with Randy

and I sit down in my Jeep.

I set my full Miller High Life

on the roof of the car.

It's hot, and

I sit down.

And I break out the bud--in half.

I'm puttin' it in a bag
give it to him.
He's over there lookin' at it.
And I see that coke.
I got it in the center console.
So I break a piece off--
crush it on the center console
snort that.
And I'm sittin' there.
Ahhhhhuhhhh.
I said, "I gotta get the fuck outta here."
And I look,
and there's a cop right at my window.
Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap.

And my shit was put up, but old boy,
had that bag of weed right there.
He gets out of his door
he dumps the bag of weed out
and he's rubbing it into the oyster shells
right away.

And that cop
called the other cops
radioed 'em

I look across the street
and here come
five cops

I'm like, *Fuck.*
And my shit was in my center console.
I get out
He goes, "Sir, come with me. Stand here."
And I was like, "I'm good, I'm good."
And I looked up
I seen my beer
and it's all sweaty
it's full
in the sunlight
all that moisture coming off of it
I grabbed hold of it.
"Put the beer down."
He was a junior cop or whatever.
Take my beer and I started drinking it.
"Sir, the beer."

And he came to grab the beer.
I just held him back like a quarterback--
straight-armed him
Had my arm out like--
Glug, glug, glug.
And I knew it was gonna be my last one.
That was my last beer for five years.
And that's all I was thinkin', *Fuck, I'm going to jail.*
And--sure enough.

And I went through withdrawal.
I had been high for so long.
I was in jail,
fuckin' exorcist.
fuckin' possessed.

I got out a few days later--
went right into treatment.
Brunie Manual
director of the Friary
He's a great guy--real spiritual.
He came with my mom.
I say, "Who's this? Is this my lawyer?"
"No, this is Brunie. He runs the Friary."
"Ah, I heard of that place. Fuck that. I don't need a fuckin' brain washin."
Cause treatment back then,
I've heard of that shit--
I don't want nothin' to do with it.

I got out of there and went right into treatment from jail.
And then I went right to a halfway house from treatment.
And then, started feelin' like a human again somewhere in Louisiana.
That was Louisiana.

I went to treatment in Minnesota
after we got married, me and Beth.
That was like, ninety-five, ninety-six.
I caught her cheatin' on me.
I took half the money out of the bank.
We had like thirty grand
All of the sudden,
I had fifteen.
I had just gotten back from detasseling, too.
So I had all that money.
I had like, twenty-one grand.
Leavin' Las Vegas, baby.

"You're a cheating, lying whore."
I just grabbed a couple of girlfriends,
started buying blow again.
I wasn't selling it this time.
I was just *doing* it.

I been there a few times now. I went back there one time just for a couple of weeks.
I went back this last time for six weeks.
Too much money, man.
I go up there--
They know all their shit, but they don't have anybody
with any charisma.
They're sober
but not like *AA sober, been there*.
They're all just square.
"Well, eat these vitamins, and it'll be alright."
These people are fucked up.
They want someone to talk to them--
tell 'em how fucked-up *I've been*.

But I split up with Beth that first time,
and I was with Tee
and we went out
we went somewhere
She says, "Well, you need to do this, if you're not gonna be drinkin'."
"Oh, I'm gonna be drinkin'."
I had just got back from six weeks of treatment.
"Oh, no. I'm gonna be drinkin'."
"This ain't like the last time. I ain't gonna be sober but a minute."

IV. IT'S HOT

"Well," Al says. "Janice said Naomi's crew shut down around noon."

"Oh really?" Dave is sitting in a folding chair next to his white pickup.

"So I guess we're all hurting a little bit."

"Week asses," says Dave.

Chris says, "It's about noon now. We should probably start shutting down too, huh?"

Dave laughs, "It's four-thirty."

"You done with yours, Dave?"

"Got one more pass."

"We're saving a panel for tomorrow."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yep, not countin' the one I gave you."

"OK, so you . . ."

"Yeah, I'm saving two for tomorrow if you look at it like that. Fourteen's yours."

"Yeah, I'll get it."

"Right on. . . . Yeah, we're gonna do somethin' like go take showers and go to Tuscola and get a snow cone. Be a good idea."

"I'm kinda thinkin' . . .," Al says.

"Champaign?"

"Nah, Champaign might be good tomorrow because we might have most of the day off, but I was kinda thinkin' of Ryan's in Mattoon for that big salad you were talking about."

"Is there one in Mattoon?"

"Used to be."

"No, that was like a Western Sizzlin shithole."

"Nah, there was a Ryan's."

"OK, well the buffet in Mattoon was always the Western Sizzlin."

"We could call Doug and ask him."

"Yeah, yeah."

Al bends over and pours a water on to the back of his neck. "Ah fuck."

"Yep," says Dave. "So ya'll are done, huh? Or just leavin' that one more."

"Yeah, we're gonna leave that one for the morning. What are you gonna do?"

"I'm gonna finish. I got that one pass . . . and I got that other one of Chris's. You just got one left?"

"One panel, yep. What do you got? One of yours and one of Chris's?"

"Well, I got half a panel and then his one."

"You want to save his for the morning?"

"I mean, I might as well if we ain't . . ."

"I don't know what's going on tomorrow. It's a gamble--Well, it's not a gamble for me, cause I don't think I can go back in there."

"Yeah, it's getting rough."

Panky walks out of the field. Chris asks him, "How you feeling, Steve?"

"I feel bad."

"You feel bad? Get some shade."

Al tells him, "Yeah, me and Chris are leavin'. We're gonna finish in the morning."

"It's not that bad, it's gonna be cooler. Did you get some more blocks?"

"Nope," says Dave. "It's all going to the Mexicans."

Panky says, "But you're not going to feel jealous?"

Dave laughs.

"This is low, it's full pull, it's fucked up. I got as much as I want. Give me more of something else," Panky says.

"Uh huh," Dave says.

"I got corn that's too short to pull, and it's all hard to pull cause it's so fuckin' dry. You know what I mean? And it's closing itself down. I've never seen it like this. It's bad. It's really bad, man. Other than that, I'm having a fuckin' great day."

"Janice was tellin' Yolanda," Chris says. "She rolled her window down. I walked up beside her. She's lookin' at her book. She goes, 'You got nineteen through One-o-three.' I thought she was talking to me. I was like, *I don't want any more of this shit.*

Panky says, "These Mexicans are made for this. They're short."

"I want them to do this," Al says. "I'm glad they're going in here."

"I'm so glad," Chris says. "I want to see them run through this like they run through that . . . I want to see them two-row this shit at a fast pace. It's gonna slow 'em down. It's gonna have to. Cause they've been doing that easy shit, and that shit up in Crittenden was all nice, and they were just, *Ah! This is so easy! We used to have to pull every one.* They're gonna come in here and go, *Ahhaahaha!, Ay Caramba! Drug violence isn't so bad after all. I think I'll take my chances in Laredo. . . . Ay Caramba! There's a fuckload! This shit's not funny, man!*

Chris and Al get in the car. Chris says, "Holler at us, Dave! Be careful out there, Steve! Keep up that sense of humor! That's what gets me through the day!" As they drive away, Chris says to Al, "That's the most I've ever heard Panky say."

"I know. He must be on his meds, or whatever."

"I told you, he's high. You got that drip going. He's out there giving birth. He got's his little natural drip going. Then you come out of the field, and you sit down in the shade, it's like, Weeche!"

"He was a little giddy, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, a little giddy. . . . I could see him getting into being alone by himself too long in a panel. That laughter gets a little--kind of like a maddened laughter, *Ahhahahahh!* *Ahhahahahah!* Yeah, you could loose it out there for sure. That'd be the perfect place to have a heart attack, get struck by lightning, have a mental breakdown, anything, to test

your . . . stress test--We're gonna run y'all up to about a hundred and fifty percent for a few days and see how y'all do. Crank the heat up . . ."

V. POWER BROKERS

I didn't do any media for like four months.
No TV, no fuckin' newspaper
No radio.
Then I hear something about Japan had a nuclear meltdown.
What?
But that's when I kinda quit watching.
Japan had a meltdown
and we were starting a new war
every day
Tunisia,
fucking Libya,
Egypt,
Bahrain,
United Arab Emirates.
What? Really?
It's like the CIA playin' . . .
What's his name?
Dick Cheney and Carl Rove's last gasp.
They know they're gonna be dying soon.
Coming around to it.
I was thinking Jeb Bush,
He's gonna come through and make the rest of their thing happen.
All them Americans for a New Century--
While Bill Clinton was in office
for eight years
them guys sat up there
and steamed and fumed and planned
the future of the world
and oil interests, of course
cause the Bushes are there
It's all about wars and oil
He's up there with Carlisle Group
These people make billions of dollars in revenue a year
just by buying and selling currency
and starting fuckin' wars
or whatever the fuck
they do.

They're the power brokers.
And fuckin' George Bush.
Every ex-president has the opportunity
to have CIA briefings
every morning.
He was head of the CIA for a while.
He gets 'em.
Jimmy Carter doesn't.
Gerald Ford didn't.
Ronald Reagan didn't.
Fuckin' nobody did.
But George Bush does.

Michael Moore makes a movie
spells it out for America
they get on there
when George Bush Junior won again
somebody said something about Michael Moore
at the Republican Convention.
There's a lot of fan-fair.
It was Neil Bush and Jeb Bush.
"What about Michael Moore and what he said about your father?"
Neil Bush
He's DynCorp.
He's the one who gets a few billion a year in contracts.
He's takin' Blackwater's place in Iraq.
He's been fighting the war in Columbia
since Ronald Reagan times
He called Michael Moore a *Mental Midget*.
draw the party line
The Bushes are Republican royalty.
"Ah, he's a mental midget. We can't talk about *that*."
And everyone laughed.
There's like eight of 'em sitting' around.
And there's partyin' in the background.
discount him as an enemy
"Ah, he's on the other side. He'll say anything."

It's pretty easy to see
when there are two opposing sides
what I always do
who's profiting from their side
and who's just doing it
because they're just
someone who got fucked
and calling attention to

a fuckin' situation.
And who's making billions of dollars.
Who might have a conflict of interest.
Who might lie to protect their side?
That dude don't give a shit.
He was livin' up here.
He don't give a fuck.
It's not gonna help his life one way
or the other.
You gotta look
where everyone's comin' from.
But I figure
I'm getting too wide in my definition of the enemy.
I been kinda thinkin'
It's anybody who belongs to a fuckin' country club,
All fuckin' lawyers,
any politician.
Throwin' 'em all in there.
Matter of fact,
it's the whole ship of fools.
Fuck 'em all. This bitch is gonna sink.

And then you can go two ways with it
You can get pissed off
and be that guy
fuckin' drunk
You know
--like drunk
Drunk on the road,
or on the street
cussing at traffic
Or you can be
pretty much
generally
these are a bunch of sheeple
fuckin' idiots
they're not really in charge of what they're doin'
and I can do whatever I want right now
And I should,
I'm all about,
I've been sayin'

VI. COLD MOUNTAIN

There's a lot of shit we're not supposed to be fuckin' eatin'.
Shit we are
I was part of that anti-meat shit.
but the group I was with
they didn't really discuss alternatives
So much of it was--
it's cruel to animals
They just didn't want to kill a fuckin' animal.
I disagree
I like to let 'em have a good life,
and kill 'em and eat 'em
Like *Cold Mountain*
he's in the Civil War, and he's injured
He's in the hospital,
and he decides he wants to go home,
but he's deserting.
it's during the Civil War,
so it's all back-country.
There's little towns
but if you know how to live in the woods,
you can just hike home,
kill shit along the way
he has these adventures
All these experiences
shit happened to him on the way home
It's based on The Odyssey.
You remember the Odyssey.
It's a Greek thing,
Odysseus trying to get home.
So he meets this lady who lives in the mountain with a bunch of goats.
She lives by herself
and lives with the goats
She's like a hermit with a bunch of goats.
She has goat cheese
and goat meat.
She's talking to him,
and she calls one of 'em over.

It goes up to her,
and she's scratching its neck.
And she takes out her knife
and cuts its throat
and bleeds it into a bowl.
saves every bit of it
and it's the love thing,
and she's gonna eat it too.

Indians, Native Americans said that we take on more than just the fuckin' calories
and what's in the fat of the animal they'd eat.
They say you take on, not just the soul,
but if that animal lived in fear, or lived a life of confinement,
like a veal cow,
that can't turn around.
They take it away from its mom at birth,
and it's tragic from beginning to end.
Cuttin' its nuts,
all kinds of shit--
nasty shit involved.
And being within eye-shot of the mom, but separated.
It's just so fucked up,
but that's what makes it veal, right?
What makes it so tender.
And they kill it as a baby.
But they say,
animal that live in fear,
you'll take that shit on.
If you eat it.
I don't know if it translates like that--
fear to fear,
but if it lives a miserable life . . .
and there's more there than just the flesh and the bone,
the residue of the life--there.

VII. WATER HEMP

That dude has come out like three times already.
No one else has.
He's walking like he's strolling.
He's not pulling,
he's talking on the phone.
Now he's walking
maybe he's inspecting.
He went down with them,
then he came back. He went to the van.
He came down here and took a shit in the portalet.
The Mexican dumpster.
he actually spoke some pretty good English, so . . .
probably Florida natives.

That one--I said, *Hola!* He goes, *What's up man?*
That happened this year--*Hola!* He goes, *What's up man?*
Say what, mother fucker?

I can't wait to talk to my black friend.
Really, though. When do you see black guys out here?
Must be witness protection program.
Might as well hide y'all in a Pennsylvania Amish community. You wouldn't stick out there either.
C'mon mother-fucker, what's up?
Who knows?
They could be workin' on that Mexican connection.
I want to go work with 'em.
I want to get to know 'em.
Might be bringin' dope from Chicago.

Last year there was that dude from Florida.
I'll never forget it.
How old are you man?
I said, *Forty-four.*
He goes, *Whoa, Man! You had a hard life!*
Mother fucker!
Whoa! Dog! You live hard!

The first thing Tim Bretz says to me was
God dang! You're forty-four? You look like you're seventy-four.
It's the white hair and the white beard.
I was looking at myself in the mirror when I got out of the shower yesterday,
you know. I think I'm pretty fucking handsome.

I don't look for anything from Tim or those guys.
It really doesn't bother me.
I know I look different from everyone up here.
I know that.
There's one dude who comes in
and he's got long hair
and the grey beard
looks like an old hipster
he's that age
not quite as old as some of 'em.
you can tell, he got out a little bit.
he might have gone to see what was going on in the sixties,
where some didn't.
Some stayed at the farm.
And all stay together.
At the Log Cabin, pretty much everyone
they all smoke pot.
They won't sit around up there and smoke it,
but they all got some in their pocket.
That dude that looks like he's pretty cool--laid back--
He goes, *Y'all seeing a lot of that water-hemp out there?*
I said, *Not lately. We've seen it.*
And whoever's behind the bar says, *That stuff'll give you a headache.*
But he was trying to talk about hemp, weed. Right off the bat.
I didn't get into the conversation.
I was just getting coffee or something.

But I've seen him a few times.
He has a white beard and shaggy hair
not too many other people look like me.
I was looking down the bar yesterday
when I went in the bar around four o'clock.
The afternoon crowd,
some of Kevin's friends,
which are all thirties now,
and some farmers
but looking down the back . . .
they were all facing the bar
I kinda looked up.

I could see all their fat necks.
I could see the rolls on their fat necks.
That's how short all their hair was,
sittin' there
the whole line
I was like, *dang*
It was like seven dudes
from thirty to seventy
and every one of 'em,
I could see the rolls on the back of their necks,
cause they were all a little overweight.
They all had about fucking near-shaved heads.
So, uh, out of that group, I was sticking out a little.

VIII. RACIAL SLUR IN VILLA GROVE

A train whistles in the distance.

"Well hell," Janice says to Chris. "If you guys all leave this week, I bet I'm done next week."

"And you're ready, aren't you?"

"It's been a hell of a year. Her up at the plant, then I been havin' trouble with the damn inspector. Mexicans has to go back about two or three times."

"Yolanda's group, or . . . ?"

"All of 'em."

"You ever find Naomi yesterday?"

"Finally. You know, they fiddle around too . . . they--I call it the siesta, but they take a lunch break, like an hour, hour and a half. You can't do that out here."

"That *is* the siesta. It's a cultural tradition."

"Yeah, but they're the only groups that does that. Naomi's. Juan and Carlos don't do that. And then she bitches cause she don't get her acres. Well, huh! I wonder why. The only how much we get is thirty minutes. Sometimes I don't even take that. I add it on to the end of the day if I don't take it. So I don't know how they think they can get an hour, hour and a half. Get yer ass busy if you want your acres, right?"

"We're gonna put an American crew together."

"I thought you was gonna do that last year."

"Well, Al's the only one who's been really serious about it, but I've always entertained that thought. And you know, all the different people we've brought up here, most of 'em, it didn't work out. They can't hang. But one thing that I've changed in my thinking is, a lot of the people are right here. And the people I talk to in the Log Cabin who did it when they were kids . . ."

"Tell 'em to get their ass out here."

"Well, that's what I'm getting at. They did it for minimum wage. This is different. You get paid for what you do, and the more acres you do, the more money you make. Cause they all worked hourly, and this is not an hourly job."

"No."

"Maybe for a kid."

"Right."

"A thirteen year old black kid from Champaign--Me and Al were talkin' about this since it happened yesterday."

"Have you guys heard about it around here? Has anybody been talkin' about it?"

"Al looked it up on his phone, and it was in the news, the Champaign news."

"About the Team Corn thing. He was thirteen years old?"

"And he was trying to help his mom who has a damn tumor."

"Oh, God."

"So he's workin' his first job and some fuckin' . . ."

"Hey, I've been watchin' the paper. I haven't seen it in the paper."

"No, this was on the online paper. It was on his phone."

"Well what are they gonna do about that?"

"I think they own Team Corn now."

"I mean, what are they gonna do with the guys that says it? Did they fire him?"

"They said it was two twenty-year-old kids runnin' the crew."

"I don't give a damn if he's eighteen."

"Well they're probably gonna fire him. Who do you do the contracts with?"

"Well, all I know is his first name's Mitch."

"Do you do his contracts?"

"I do with Mitch."

"With Mitch? Is he twenty?"

"No."

"He's the old guy that used to have Team Corn?"

"Nah, Mitch is young."

"Who used to run Team Corn? Like when I first met them, they were with Jerry. And Jerry was like, *Oh! I got Team Corn comin' in!* And it was more like Team Kid."

"This is different. Mitch is probably, maybe early forties--that I deal with. But Mitch has other people under him. Cause one day he wasn't here, and there was a burgundy car or somethin'."

"How big is Team Corn now? Work wise? I don't mean how many people, but just guessing how much work they do?"

"We've had, two or three busses down here."

"Two or three busses. So, I mean, work-wise, are they doing as much as Naomi? Yolanda?"

"Oh, probably. Well, see--this is the first time we've had 'em for a long time. They've done two fields, but usually they stay in Muncie. Yeah, they did a pretty good chunk."

"Cause Jerry did bring 'em down here. Or Tolono, up there, Jerry's area, right?"

"Jerry who?"

"Bird."

"Jerry Bird's in Newman."

"He's in Newman, OK. Well, I was sayin' Tolono cause we did those fields up there with Jerry in Tolono. Jerry has those fields that are on the second page of our map."

"Tolono?"

"Yeah, Tolono."

"No, we do."

"Oh, we do?"

"Villa Grove. That's where I came from this morning."

"Not *we*. Mexicans do. *We* would include me and Al."

"I thought we was gonna get . . ."

"Well, y'all did let us go last year."

"I thought we was gonna get 'em cause they're small fields."

"That's OK. We're happy with what we've done. But I sure wanna do some more. They ought to pay us to go check all that Mexican crap."

"But Team Corn came down here this year, and here we are--in trouble. I don't even know what field they were in."

"If I was there, I wouldn't let that go down. You know what I'm sayin'? I think that's horrible."

"Oh, it is."

"Yeah, it makes me sad. The whole thing. And I shouldn't joke like I do. But I make sure I'm in close company, private. Not where anyone's gonna overhear me and get the wrong thing."

"Especially if the mother's sick. That's even worse."

"And she thought it was gonna be a good thing for her son. And you know what? I could just feel that--Al was reading me the article, and she thought it would be a good experience for her son, and that's sad."

"And what was wrong with the mother?"

"She has a tumor. Yeah--we should do something! Detasslers For Unity! We should go stand on the corner of Villa Grove right now. Detasslers for Unity! . . . Here it is--"

A mother says her son was called the worst racial slur possible by his boss. Now she's warning parents to keep their kids away.

The 13-year-old was detasseling corn in Villa Grove last week when he says his team leaders verbally attacked him. This was the child's first job and he didn't know what to expect on his first day.

"I saw my mom struggle with the bills," said Jayuan Carter.

A few months ago Jayuan Carter's mom found out she had a tumor. She had to stop working, and the family was having trouble staying afloat.

"I wanted to help out a little bit." Carter found out about Team Corn, a company that places kids in detasseling groups across the state.

"I put my trust in adults to train my son on how to work and detassel corn and I felt like it shouldn't have been a good experience," Jayuan's mom, Latasha Britt, said.

"They started calling us names, saying we weren't worth anything." Carter says while he was working, his team leaders, who are 20-year-olds called him the n-word and threw corn at him telling him that he was worthless and needed to hurry up.

"I was trying to block them out, and not listen to them, ignore them."

Carter told his mom and she immediately called management.

"He apologized and told me it wasn't the first time that he's heard that adults have talked this way to these children and that they would be terminated."

But when we called Team Corn, a manager told us the leaders were not fired, and wouldn't say why. But Carter says he only wants one thing.

"I would ask for them to apologize to me."

"I don't understand how people could be so mean and heartless towards children. We're all the same," Jayuan's mom said.

We did reach out to Team Corn for a statement. They had no comment.

"That's the whole story."

"That's terrible."

"Yeah."

"Is that on the computer?"

"Yeah."

"What's the web site?"

"It's Champaign local news. I don't know where they get it from."

"What's the web site?"

"There it is. News Gazette.com, double-u, double-u, double-u--dot--news gazette--dot-com. News-dash-gazette, You gotta have the dash in there."

"www.news-gazette.com"

"Yep."

"What's the boy's name?"

"Yeah, if you search his name--Jayuan Carter. J-a-y-u-a-n, Carter, C-a-r-t-e-r."

"How do you pronounce that first name?"

"Al says it's *Jaywan*. I don't know.

"Never heard of it. So how do you pronounce it again?"

"*Jaywan*."

IX. LAST FIELD

That shit's coming this way, isn't it?

You hope. It's your last chance of the season of dying in a field--let's hope so!

God Damn.

Last field! I saw some lightning.

You hear that thunder behind us?

The radar's got that, and then there's rain about five miles north of Villa Grove.

Awesome. Bring it!

(Thunder cracking)

Sweet! Look at Tim out there on the machine--that one little line of sunshine. You see that?

As straight as a fuckin' row is. Look at that! The sun/shade barrier is straight as a row, and Tim is right there in the sun. Look at that. Is that awesome or what?

Look across the street over here. It's a straight fucking line. And it's only, a hundred, two hundred feet wide.

That's crazy lookin'.

I wonder if he realizes what he's riding in right now. If he's like, *It's hot and sunny right here. It looks weird on both sides of me.*

It's just clouding on him.

Yep . . . Is that rain coming?

That shit's coming this way, dude.

You want to wait and do this tomorrow?

You know me.
I'll do it, fuck, either way . . . I don't know.

What's the radar look like, Dave?
That's what I'm lookin' . . . It's showing a small storm there, but north of Villa Grove there's a little . . .

Yeah, all that thunder up there.

There is some heavy rain over there. But in between, there's no rain.

That shit looks like it's blowing right towards us.

Yeah, it does. Or we might just get that right there to the . . .

we might just get that. It's weird. I don't know. It's pretty much coming right over us.

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