

5-1-2008

Basket

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Recommended Citation

Houston, Justin (2008) "Basket," *Forces*: Vol. 2008 , Article 11.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.collin.edu/forces/vol2008/iss1/11>

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Autumn 2001

J.P. Reese

We always believed that spring would come;
Believed that summer would flower again,
Ill-prepared for this season of drought.

The Angel-Wing mounds in finished growth.
Petals drop over the berm.
Red cherries ripen under an Indian sun.

Apples firm for picking, their juice runs tart, cool
Over our tongues. Seed rests in fallen fruit to spread
The possible beneath this always uncertain earth.

We crate the remains of this final harvest;
Wrap roots pulled from furrows in yesterday's news;
Avert our eyes from its pictures of death.

We shoulder the leavings of all that is past.
The end of the season begins.



BASKET Justin Houston

(from page 5)

"Whatcha doin', Leora?"

Leora let go the rake. "That's Mrs. Harper to you," she said and pushed herself stiffly to her hands and knees. "You shouldn't be up there." She steadied herself by leaning against the shed wall as she got on her feet. "You get on down, you hear."

"Why?"

Leora wiped her palms against her pant legs. "Because it ain't safe."

"Why?"

That just iced Leora's cake, this child questioning her like that. She picked up the rake and shook it at the girl. "Because I say so." Leora turned her back and marched toward the shed door. It was no secret that my dear, old friend had rued the day the Fletcher clan moved in next door, "all a hundred and ninety-three of them," as she liked to put it. Truth is, the Fletchers only had five kids, but they were home-schooled and fast-moving little creatures, so Leora got her fill of them after about a month of neighborliness.

And Winnie? That Winnie . . . Why, she was the worst of all.

"Precocious" is what the girl's mother called her. She bragged that Winnie had accepted Jesus when she was just three, said the child marched right down to the altar and told that preacher, "I'm saved!"

Leora leaned the rake against Roy's old smoker, just where they always kept it, and then backed out, closing up the shed door. She had her own word for what Winnie Fletcher was, but she was trying real hard not to say it anymore.

Winnie said, "I know you got a baby cat under there."

"That so?" Leora turned, looked up at the child. She told me the sun shone right in her eyes, but she didn't want the child to see her blink.

"Uh-hum. I know something else, too."

Leora folded her arms. "Surprise, surprise."

"I know Jesus wouldn't like the way you're treating that kitten." And with that, Winnie leaped off the fence, leaving the slats to quiver like plucked guitar strings.

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I can't say Leora is much of a talker, but she called me next morning, said how all night long, she tossed and turned. Couldn't sleep what with worrying about how Winnie was right. "No matter how ornery a creature is," Leora said, "if God made it, I suppose it has a right to be treated respectable." She confessed she'd been awful to that little cat, even after Winnie skee-daddled. Not only had she tried to skewer it with a rake and flush it out with the hose, she'd shot at it with a can of Raid Roach Control.

"And it's too young to even skitter up the fence," she said.

Now I could hardly believe my ears. It just didn't seem like Leora to fret so about a stray, but darn if she didn't get up out of bed and drive to the all-night Wal-Mart there in Mesquite, bought a big ol' bag of soft-chew Cats D'Light. Said she wore her robe and slippers right into the store. Then — she said it was after midnight — she poured cat food in the grass by the shed and went back to bed.

In the morning, the food was gone.

Leora's bosom swelled with pride over her generosity. We could all see it, the way she walked into Bible study, walked around the block, walked through the grocery store with her chest all puffed out like she was a teenage girl who'd just discovered underwire braziers. Of course, it was Liddie Sykes who made the first wisecrack out loud. Something about how those Hollywood starlets wouldn't need boob jobs if they'd only find themselves a stray cat to cuddle. If it hadn't been so funny a thing to say, I might've shot back and defended Leora, but as it was, I just laughed. And I kept on laughing — we all did — and she kept on feeding that darn cat.

It was no surprise to any of us, except Leora, how fast that cat grew. Doubled its size in a week. Problem was, though, it never got any friendlier, at least not so's I could tell. Leora and me, we have this arrangement. I get fresh vegetables from her and she gets fresh, homemade bread from me. Not that bread machine junk with a crust as stiff as bark, but good, hand-kneaded honey wheat that let rise in my kitchen and cook on a stone. So I'm at her place fairly regular. I saw her try, really try, to make

nice to that cat. She fed it everyday, like I said, but she also stopped chasing it, swinging at it and hollering at it.

Still, every time I was over there, no matter how Leora tried to share her space with that cat, it'd arch its back. Shoot every hair straight up like a porcupine. And hiss? Why, that little fur-ball hissed something fierce at poor Leora. It was bad enough when the thing was tiny, but what with it growing so fast, I figured it just might someday sink its claws into Leora's throat. Draw fatal blood like its relatives the she-lion over there in Africa. But I didn't say nothing. Just watched, day by day, as the kitten grew.

Not 'til mid-August anyway, when we had that cold snap. Temperatures fell to, oh, I'd say about ninety degrees, so Leora and me, we fixed up some iced sweet tea and enjoyed the afternoon on Leora's front porch, fanning ourselves with folded newspaper and eating from a platter of sliced and salted tomatoes. All she wanted to talk about was that kitten. The way its eyes turned to dark slits and how its tongue turned white if it hissed a good long time. It was clear Leora's pleasure in doing right was curdling, even if she didn't let on to anybody else.

She poured me a second glass, and I commended her for taking on responsibility for one of God's creatures. She huffed, said nothing good had come of it, then added, "Isn't love supposed to win all?"

The words popped out without me thinking. "Do you love the cat?"

She gazed at me a while. The horse across the road whinnied. The Johnson boy drove by in his new Chevy truck. "Well, I might love it," she said, "with a little barbeque sauce."

I darn near fell over laughing, but the point was made. Leora decided to name the cat. Hissy. I said it fit.

But even named, that cat was a devil, spitting and hissing and gulping its Cats D'Light. Leora might have been able to endure if it weren't for Winnie's blue eyes constantly watching over that fence. A home-schooled child can have too much time on its hands, and Winnie was obsessing on Hissy. Leora complained that each morning, that child climbed her fence and stayed there nearly all day, singing and talking and cooing, trying to coax Hissy out from under that shed.