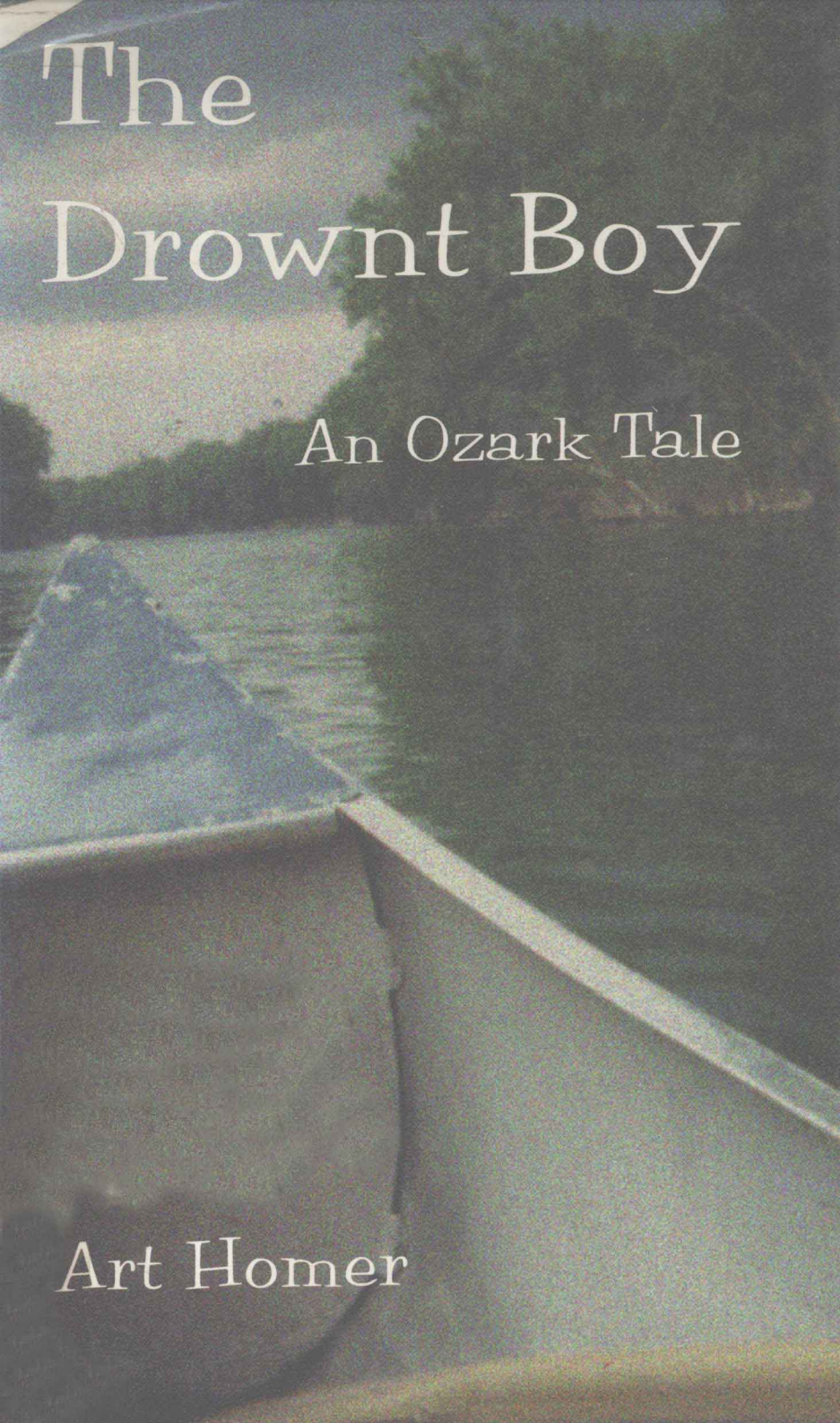
The Drownt Boy

An Ozark Tale



Art Homer

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The Drownt Boy

To my family—

Robert Homer, Colleen Davidson,
Dennis Mahoney, Alison Wilson, David Homer,
Amy Mahoney, Willow Homer, Myfanwy Smolsky,
Remus Smolsky, and Alexis Lindsay.

The Drownt Boy

Contents

Magic 1

The Drownt Boy
The woods are lovely, dark and deep 20

Water 40

The Drownt Boy
But I have promises to keep 54

Falling 70

The Drownt Boy
And miles to go before I sleep 89

Storms 97

The Drownt Boy
And miles to go before I sleep 121

The Meek 136

my father was a young man. Previously, backwoods folks took their mule-drawn wagons on the logging access road across marsh and up steep grades. Traces of it still run through the hills, overgrown now. The "nigh cut" they called any such forest track—even if it was longer than the high road. People still hauled corn and cane to town in wagons when I was a child in the midfifties. The Depression moved into the Ozarks, liked it, and retired there after World War II, letting the rest of the country go on with the boom times.

The place was bypassed for geological ages. The landscape is part of the Appalachian uplift separated from its parent by the fault under the Missouri-Mississippi valleys. Rivers running through the broken peneplain are literally older than the hills. They once ran through plains that sank under seas, then lifted, submerged, and rose again. Now the plateau is broken and eroded into hills and steep hollows, the rocks softened and crumbly from erosion. The rivers retain the meanders of plains rivers, though hills have risen and half collapsed around them. The rocks are old: sandstone dissolving around granite knobs, limestone from sea creatures, flinty chips of chert working up through plowed fields with the frost heave. And the forest is old, a crossroads of geology, of plant and animal life from the eastern woodlands and the western plains. Southern riparian species homestead river bottoms. Northern ferns forced south by the Wisconsin ice sheet survive in the mouths of caves and in cool spring branches hundreds of miles from their current range.

A crossroads of peoples too. Here, the unimposing Bluff Dweller looked down on the Hopewell-Mississippian city states along the river. Centuries later, guerrilla warfare of the Civil War brought first one side then the other ferrying their wounded to Hospital Cave in johnboats. The James Gang rode through, leaving a bullet hole in one of the log uprights of the Centerville Post Office—which, by the time I saw it, was worn smooth and round from generations of boys sticking their fingers into it. I imagine men my grandfather's age getting splinters.

What I have to say about the place is no truer than the claim my friends make of my birth. "You'd argue with a signpost and go the wrong way," my mother says. A combination of childhood memory, history, and wishful thinking, my research has been haphazard. The bullet hole, for instance, could be a clerk's joke at the expense of small boys. The Post Office is absent from current guidebooks of the place. No one remembers it. I may be remembering the wrong town.

Then again, no one remembers the old tram road past my folks' place. Visiting Ellington a few years ago, I asked directions at a supermarket. A country gospel group performed from a flatbed trailer in the parking lot. I remembered clearly where the curving low-water bridge used to sit under two feet of water at flood. My uncle, the bus driver, traversed it in low gear, water climbing bus steps, he finding the curve by memory. The clerk had lived in the town all her life and didn't remember the bridge or the road. She knew the half-surviving town of Corridon at its opposite end, a forty-mile drive by the state highway instead of twenty over the old right-of-way. The stock boy, she said, had "taken that hot rod of his over all the back roads in the county." He could tell me where to find it if anybody could.

He did.

The low-water bridge was gone, the road reached by a turnoff the other side of county bridge sixteen. I didn't recognize the first three miles of the tram road under its curious paving. The calico asphalt of varying age and composition looked like excess from highway projects rolled out when the heavy equipment operators got around to it. Soon, however, it turned red rock and clay, leveled monthly by the county grader—down in the morning, back twenty miles that afternoon. Across these ridges the school bus had carried me, a backwoods kid, into a town of sophisticates with running water and electricity. Seventeen miles to Ellington, three and a half to the village of Corridon, towns most kids in the fifties would have considered irredeemably hicksville. At night I took the road back, way, way back into the woods. Back into the past and into magic.

That the woods mean magic I had always taken as personal mythology—finding the submerged road by memory—until I began reading nature writers. Now I can construct a veneer of scientific backing for my beliefs. Most chroniclers of natural history portray the plains as the place where progress happens. In "How Flowers Changed the World," Loren Eiseley explains that evolving plants and insects of the plains literally prepared the ground for increasingly sophisticated animals. Some of these crept back into the forests. Magic has nothing to do with progress. Ecologist Paul Shepard, in his *Thinking Animals,* gives a riveting account of the evolution of intelligence, important segments of which happened in the plains. As Shepard describes it, "The intelligence of mammals and insects and birds is the mind of the grassland" whereas "trees are comparatively shallow beings and the earth beneath them a cool veneer."

If progress is necessary to evolution, however, so is escape—if memory, also forgetting. Shepard does credit the forest with a role in the evolution of intelligence. When our mammal ancestors were driven back under the trees, their vision-centered intelligence had to use the hearing centers of the brain to adapt to a limited horizon and nocturnal habits. Out of such marginal forebears and forced connections intelligence arose.

Similarly, marginal peoples retreat to the forest. Theirs is a journey backward in time, be their forest the oak groves of Europe, the rain forest of the Tasaday, or Appalachian hollows. Abandoned in this journey are not only the rewards of technological progress but some of the assumptions of postindustrial, postmodern society. These assumptions—for better ***and*** for worse—are forced into connection with older postulates about the world.

If our rational vision of the world has given us principles with which to control our surroundings—to predict the future and avoid some of the consequences of time's one-way arrow—perhaps some of the older, magical visions better prepare us to accept the present in all of its contradictions. This divination is not a foretelling, but a telling,

a way of casting and recasting experience to give it meaning in terms apprehensible to the heart, however painful that may be. We can then accept consequence, can truly be con-sequent—following together. For a moment, time's arrow points toward us, the present, from all directions.

The Ozarks remained, if not retrograde, at least untouched by progress until the census crews, and the lumber and lead-mining companies, took notice at the turn of the century. They discovered people still living the frontier life on old homesteads, hunting, subsistence farming, curing with herbs, and open ranging. Old Scottish tunes retained their original forms. So did the language, as well as various social structures from Scotland, Ireland, England, and later Germany and Russia. The church clung to the splintery cross of its early Protestant dourness, but it wasn't standing still. Even Calvinism devolved enough to coexist with root doctors, snake handlers, and who knows what kinds of African and southern po'-white, holy rolling, shout-your-hair-down practices. Secluded as the Vietnam vets who hid in the Olympic rain forest, as the forgotten Japanese soldier on his jungle island, the Ozarkians were retreating in time, the forest working its charm on them.

My first memories are not of the Ozarks, but of St. Louis. When my parents went there for work, they alternately left me in my Grandmother Homer's care or took me along. Such memories blend with my mother's stories, and both deny the black-and-white photos. The towheads in them could not possibly be my brother and me. We stare moonfaced over a birthday cake, lean against the cabin. Here we are behind the chair in which we got our haircuts, now in front of the Model T with the crank dangling from the radiator. I remember curbs, a two year old's tiredness at the hard sidewalks and new hard-soled shoes. Mother and Aunt Helen, or Mother and Father, lift me by my arms up and down the city's curbs—*Wheeee!*—trying to make a game of it, but I wasn't buying it. This is corroborated by photos of me in an honest-to-god Buster Brown suit, standing between my parents—the

archetypal little man fighting to separate mother earth and father sky. They're still happy. I frown like trouble waiting to happen.

We soon returned to the cabin of two rooms, living room and kitchen. Our eighty acres of forest had less than five acres cleared. Sumac reclaimed a grazing field on the access road, and a couple of acres surrounded the cabin. The yard sat on a knoll, native grass on the north side, plowed garden on the south. From the gate at the turnaround, ending a mile of access road, a well-defined dusty path ran to the door. Later, the addition on the north of the cabin added a bedroom and a living room with picture windows. Father scythed the grass and raked it by hand, and we fed it to whatever stock happened to be about, either ours or unclaimed. Later, we moved to Ellington twice for my father to find work, but returned, me happily, to the cabin each time.

Fortunately for my personal mythology, reforestation programs and national park expansion have reestablished pine stands and aided the natural succession. The forest has outgrown my memory of it. Not easy. Living in a log cabin is like living inside a tree. Ours was local second-growth pine, crosscut, the knotholes axed down more or less smooth, the corner joints hand chiseled and lock notched with extended corners. The logs warped, and the gaps between them needed constant chinking. The sills and floor joists rested on rock pilings, so settling and leveling was synchronous with the land. The house rotated slightly on its foundations in one strong storm—not uncommon in what is still tornado country, despite its relatively high relief. And nature lives with you. For chinking will not keep out animals. I had to convince my mother the banded snake crawling on the rafters was a coral snake, not its innocuous mimic, the king snake. The encyclopedia was on my side—black and red bands separated by yellow borders. I had sighted a semitropical snake in a temperate climate. No wonder it wanted to move inside; the nights were cold.

My mother warned me there could be snakes and who knows what under the house. I thought it would be safe, however, since my dog

made her home down there, and crawled after her. I kept a sharp lookout. My mother walked above me in the kitchen. I crawled along on my back, the dirt like lowering sky above my head. The bottom of the floor was all the more alien for being upside down. My mother dropped something and yelled. A pale body washed across the bark of the rough-hewn joist, crossed down into the dirt, and coiled in a scrape the dog dug to escape the heat. I didn't want to call out. I was thankful when the dog quietly came and ate the white-bellied coil—actually, lapped it up. Like a slide projection suddenly brought into focus, the snake resolved itself into a pool of milk, spilled between the floorboards, along the joist, and into the dirt. The dog capitalized on my mother's accident.

Other guests were more a danger to themselves. In the half-finished addition, the picture window gaped unglazed for weeks. Two smaller windows on the side walls had frames and panes. Hummingbirds barreled in the opening and tried to leave through the glass. They buzzed the panes like flies. We had to catch them and rush them outside quickly before they exhausted themselves. If we held them long, fright killed them. Each nearly weightless body was a soft palpitation punctuated with the light scratch of claws as it discharged itself into the air.

Our house was one danger, our pets another. One of the cats killed a bobwhite, the quail whose self-naming call is ubiquitous along fields and riverbanks. My parents looked for the orphan chicks in the tall grass of our yard, homing in on their peeps—not yet the whistle of the adult. It was late and we needed to find them before dark, when either wild animals or our pets would quickly finish them. My brother and I sat amused by our parents' exaggerated care, walking through the tall grass. Despite their best efforts, one voice after another stilled and they found the remains on their shoes. The perfectly camouflaged chicks will freeze even if they're crushed. As juveniles, they grow feathers enough to explode from under your foot into the roar of flight that makes quail hunting so exciting.

Not primeval, the Ozarks, but primal—a first step out of reason's merciless light and back into the liquid motion of shadows under branches. What the nineteenth-century scientists referred to as Nature's profligacy was my affluence. A more directed teacher might have presented the ant as ample demonstration that the six-legged exoskeleton was a viable anatomical design. Then I could have learned the happy word *cooperation* as I watched the social structure of the hive. Instead, I continued to watch bugs willy-nilly: termite; walking stick; the clickbug whose hard, jointed body squirts from your fingers like a watermelon seed when he "clicks" his joint; dung beetle; ladybug; the leafy katydid; praying mantis (the wonderful pun of her pious stance, the body of her prey broken before her); milkweed butterfly emerging from the cocoon; potato beetle and its soft grub. Then, in no particular sequence: reptiles, amphibians, birds, mammals, and, always, the column trees, those first and most universal caryatids. These were my daily companions. Because we subsisted on a nearly equal level with these, our prey, our predators, and our competitors for hard-won food, a part of my experience would be forever strange to my generally urbanized generation—even to kids from the increasingly domesticated, industrialized farms of more prosperous areas.

We were backward—not anachronistic, but anti-chronistic, half feral by some standards. Like the novelist's character living a flashback to develop the plot, like the equations of the astrophysicist studying ever more distant and ancient sources of light from the big bang, like the computer models linking modern genetic patterns to fossil DNA, we existed with the arrow of time inverted. We were like T. H. White's wonderful conception of Merlin living reversed in time, whom the young Arthur meets (not coincidentally in the forest) weeping in farewell to his longtime friend from the perspective of his anti-chronological progress (egress?) toward birth. Who were his contemporaries? Who are mine?

Come here,
Motherless Sparrows
And play
with me.

Thus wrote Issa, the sixteenth-century Japanese Haiku master, at age six. Like him, I sometimes preferred my forest playmates: birds, bugs, and snakes. Lizards were my pets for a day. The blue bellies' tails detach, flipping like baby snakes to distract the bird or young boy who grasps the tip of one. They rode my shoulder leashed with a string around my top shirt button. They would not be fed. Not herbivores, as a few experiments with lettuce showed, they had no interest in dead or stunned flies. They suffered no ill effects from my handling. Once captured they adjusted by sleeping, keeping one double-lidded eye open for escape, and conserving energy. My frenetic metabolism put out enough heat for both of us. At school or church functions, boys dashed them against rocks or logs to kill them. I killed one. It lay on its back, its hands slowly curling up, its gesture less a plea than a question. "Why?"

I knew the motion was reflex—like a headless chicken's flapping. I had seen birds drop dead lizards in the dirt at my approach. Even minus a head, their feet curled up in this ineffectual gesture. I was not squeamish about dead things and would analyze—literally, "take apart"—whatever I found inside strange skin. These older boys had no interest in this, had probably seen as I had the silvery flesh, the amazingly small amount of blood, the translucent bones. Shrikes, or "butcher birds," impale lizards on thorns and barbwire fences. Even this, the victim alive, impaled and left to age in hot sun, serves a purpose. My parents killed for food—chickens, a pig—but they made my brother hold the houseplants he had broken until he could hear them cry. It didn't take long. Subsistence hunters, human or animal, are opportunistic feeders, neither amused nor revolted by the dirty but necessary work of killing.

The lizard was a hunter too. I must have spent hours watching lizards and frogs hunt, though I whined about being bored. My mother's response was "Glad to meet you, Mr. Board. I'm Hammer N. Nails," sticking a finger in my arm and pounding it in with her other hand. The louder my whining, the harder the "nail" got pounded. I must have had a modicum of patience, however. I remember watching frogs catch dragonflies—the impossible speed, the moment of the hit frozen in my mind, a wing or tail protruding oddly from the mouth—and wondering whether the frog's tongue or its bite killed. With patience, I could also watch stalkings the world usually allows to remain hidden.

Watching on a slant through the unfinished window in the addition, my chin braced on the sill, I could see high cirrus stalk the horizon. Fighting drowse at afternoon nap, one could pretend to sleep, watch the minute hand stalk the hour hand, and contemplate the tortoise and the hare. This would have been the key-wound captain's clock. We had no electricity. The hands moved slower even than the praying mantis, a pendulum hypnotizing its prey with its swaying. The clock hands were like the mantis in another way. When the minute hand got close enough, the last increment of distance disappeared in a quantum lunge. First the two hands were apart by ever so little, then they were not. Then the dragonfly was only parts prying the frog mouth into a gloating mow. The mantis dismantled its struggling catch in small bits, a dainty spinster with corn on the cob, the misdirecting wings folded like a napkin. Then the frog again, a grasshopper leg kicking until it came off, dropped on the ground, still jerking, lizard tail, my mother shaking me, chiding me for falling asleep so quickly, my nap over and the sun slanting orange through the south window.

This is how time passed. Ample to realize the mysteries of eating and dying. First for young boys is eating. Some troubled children ate dirt, according to my mother. Perhaps one could cut out the middlemen—the animals, the plants—keep hand-over-handing it down the food

chain. Plants grew from dirt. Forest dirt was mostly leaf matter mixed with sticks and sand that feels like boulders in the mouth. Dig below the duff and leaf mold, and mineral dirt will give you an actual taste of the land. The nauseating aftertaste I recognized years later when someone talked me into chewing a zinc tablet as a cold remedy. I found clay bland and palatable. Though aluminum-foil generations would doubt it, good clayey mud is perfect for baking potatoes, keeps the heat in as well, and the moisture better. It crumbles off, and you don't have to pack it out. If you're hungry enough, you can eat it to keep hunger pangs away.

That's what those children were doing, what many poor children in the rural South did and probably still do. Eat clay. There's plenty of it. Certain kinds of clay help fight food poisoning and decrease the bitterness of acorns and other food. Other clays, kaolinites, provide anti-diarrhetics and fillers in diet food. Geophagy and other vices of the poor are acquired tastes, but unlike more sophisticated appetites, they are rarely conceived out of boredom.

Despite my protests, a child's ill temper, it was hard to be bored. Afternoons I conducted original research into the nature of time and its relationship to food. I had facilities that would be the envy of many a scientist. Poor we may have been, if not reduced to eating clay for lunch, but we had books. Books and kerosene lights for reading at night, an upright piano, a windup Victrola with records from Caruso to Tin Pan Alley songs. A wooden, string-jointed Mr. Tambo attached to the spindle and did a minstrel dance. Our radio lit up with mirror-topped vacuum tubes and had a tone that would drive a blues guitarist crazy. It ran on a wet cell the size of a motorcycle battery. On monthly trips to Ellington, we left it at the service station to be recharged. With rationing, the charge would last all month. Bible readings gave way one night a week to Grand Ole Opry direct from Nashville, now clear as a movie sound track, moments later wavery with distance, as storms, chance disturbances of the ionosphere, or a variation in the battery's output disturbed the signal.