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Chris Offutt

A Dog and His Boy

On the hill above a narrow hollow, a dog sat in the woods with its head propped over a log. A bluejay called from a shagbark. The dog twitched an ear, causing fleas to rise and circle its head before settling back to the black fur. The jay moved on. From an arched weedstem, a tick slipped onto the dog's hind shank.

Below the dog at the foot of the hill, a yellow bus stopped beside the grade school. The driver spat a brown arc of tobacco against a limestone shelf that jutted from the hillside. Lines of heat shimmered above the blacktop, the edge of which was soft enough to hold a footprint. The driver squinted into the murky shadows, seeking the dog. It came every day to meet a boy. The dog was part coonhound and part something the driver had never been able to name—husky or lab, maybe wolf. He wanted to ask the kid, but he walked to school, and the driver never left the bus.

The black dog stood and stretched like a cat. It scratched itself and the tick fell from a strand of hair and landed on a fern. The dog followed a game path to a rain gully, scattering rocks down the hill from beneath its footpads. The dog left the cool shade of the woods. The sudden sunlight was swift and harsh as an ax cut, but the dog continued without breaking stride, accepting heat with the same ease that the boy had accepted the dog's presence outside the schoolhouse every afternoon for seven years.

At the bottom of the hill, the dog stopped, its

nostrils opening wide. The fur along its neck rose. The dog became very still. Twined with the smell of bus exhaust was that of an enemy.

“What a ye got, old son?” the driver said.
“Snake in the ditch line?”

A child left the school. The driver spat. The dog’s quarry slank along the cool stone toward the children spewing from the building. All were bald, shaved by the State to stave a plague of lice. From the combined scents of sweat, urine, and food that marked the human presence in the hollow, the dog smelled the boy. A grey and yellow shepherd was near him. The dog charged across the road in a galloping fury.

The driver lost sight of the black dog when it passed by the bus, and looked for it on the other side. It leaped with jaws wide and struck the shepherd in the throat. The shepherd reared on its hindlegs and batted the attacker into the stone wall. It clamped its teeth to the black dog, tearing away part of its ear spindled on an incisor. The dogs rolled across the clay dirt and into the throng of children. Older kids dragged siblings away. Within seconds of combat, the animals were slinging blood, saliva and clods of dirt into the air.

The principal ran from the school with a coal shovel and hit the black dog on the head. It turned briefly to consider the fresh attack and ruled the man out. The black dog wheeled to face the shepherd, which clamped its jaws over the black dog’s head, pulling the left eye partly out, and tearing the skin from lid to nose. The principal kicked the black dog. He drew his leg back to kick again. Something struck him in the side and he pivoted quickly, expecting another dog but found a scrawny boy hitting him with a tree limb. The boy’s face was grim. Even his eyebrows were shaved. The principal grabbed the branch and

wrenched it, and the other end hit the boy in the face. The boy yelled and the black dog was suddenly upon the man, clawing at his legs while biting into the flesh below the ribs. The shepherd leaped for the black dog's throat. The boy began kicking the shepherd, and from the crowd of children came another bald kid who rammed his shoulder into the thin one. Both boys fell to the yellow clay dirt.

From the bus door, the driver bellowed a primal roar that drew the dogs' wary attention to a new and potential threat. They broke from each other and circled, their fur glossy with blood. Strings of spit slid over their torn jaws to the ground. The thin boy crawled to the black dog and wrapped his arms around him as the dust slowly dissipated. Dislodged fleas hovered above the children, hunting the safety of hair.

The driver stepped from the bus, both arms clasped across his belly, his face white, eyes glazed. A sudden sweat leaked from his hairline. He bent from the waist and began to retch. Children made a circle around him. They dodged the splash of vomit and delivered into the air a laughter that drifted the hillside like a fragrance. A blue fly left a spot of blood to land beside the driver's vomit.

When the driver finished, he wiped his face. "Swallowed a chew big as a baby's fist," he said. "You'uns go on and get on the bus now."

There was a cut in the boy's head. He had the makings of a shiner, and bite marks in his arm. Both he and the dog were bleeding freely, but the dog's eye was worse. The boy looked up the gully to the woods, decided against the shortcut and began walking the road. He favored one leg.

Through a tear in his shirt, the principal prodded his ripped flesh. He'd never been struck by a child

before. When the bus was gone, the principal hurled the coal shovel against the rock bluff across the road. A sharp peal echoed off the rock and faded into the air.

Around the bend and hidden from school, the boy crouched beside the shaded creek that trickled off the slope. Tatters of garbage hung in the trees from spring rains. He and the black dog drank from the ferrous water, and the boy washed the dog's wounds. There were deep gashes about its neck. Most of an ear was gone. The dog bore up to its cleaning without a sound, even when the creekwater ran into the open flesh surrounding its eye.

The boy cupped water in his hands and poured it over the cut on his own head. Pink water streamed down his face. His eye throbbed. The boy leaned against the dog. For a long time they panted together in the cool quiet of the woods. A squirrel watched them from an oak. A hawk veered in the sky, watching the squirrel.