

## *Save the Bones for Henry Jones*

(‘cause Henry don’t eat no meat. –Danny Barker)

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DAN MASTERSON

Only a rig driver would stop in the middle  
Of such a night, and he does, and kicks his cold-pak  
18-wheeler to an idle, half off the road,  
Hazard lights flick-flacking the runner, calling him

To catch up and climb aboard, and he does, clutching  
A blanket-roll sopped against his chest: a drowning  
Man and his log lost in the raids, a broken  
Gaunt man poked to the bone by the horizontal

Sleet-rain that cut him down and soaked him through where it  
Found him out deep inside the tunnel, flat against  
The rock wall he’d tried to become part of for hours  
There beneath the northbound lanes of route #55.

“I keep it hotter’n hell in here; feel good to ya?”  
“Mister, if this is hotter’n hell, I gotta  
Find more ways to sin.” “Well, you just hunker on down  
Up against that floor vent’ that’ll scorch you over

Like dark toast. I gotta burn me some miles here.  
Be in Chicago by daybreak; that good for you?”  
“Sweeter than good; that’s just where I’m needin’ to be.”  
“I’m Bunk; you got a name?” “Jones, Henry Jones; it was

A good and decent thing you did back there, picking  
Me up, and I thank you most kindly, Mister Bunk.  
I sure wish I could pay you back someday somehow.”  
And then sleep, sleep so thick you’d think Bunk had hit him

One upside the head with that hammock fist he has  
Loose-wrapped around the steering wheel as Henry Jones  
Squats on the floormat, head soft against the seat edge,  
Taking all the heat he can get, snipped threads of steam

Rising off him as the windshield wipers lay down  
A backbeat as steady as Kansas City Red’s  
When Henry blew harp that Sunday at The Purple  
Flame. But most the time he’d just scrub tabletops,

Stack chairs, and push-broom the clutter into a pile  
At the back wall, and shovel it down the basement  
Stairs, closing the door behind him, to start the hours  
It took to sort the garbage and wash down the floor.

They gave him three army blankets and a straw-pad  
Cot he set up under the cellar stairs where a fuse  
Box hummed him to sleep when the dancing stopped up top.  
He got a black iron kettle and a cracked lid,

A hotplate and a split bar chair; the hanging bulb  
Worked fine. Every afternoon he'd walk the alley  
And wait at the kitchen door for the cook to serve  
Him up a full growler of day-old wine and all

The makin's for potlicker soup: fresh carrot tops,  
Celery stubs, potato skins and onion wraps,  
And Sundays: hog jowls and a jar of blackeyed peas,  
But always the bones: good gristly beef bones to change

Scalding water into holy broth, and Henry  
Didn't need teeth at all; lucky thing since a guard's  
Joliet blackjack left his mouth room only  
For his tongue and a few bad teeth because Henry

Had take a homemade shiv from a neighborhood  
Hood and shown him exactly where it belonged.  
When snow came, he made it fly off the entryway  
And did likewise for a dollar bill or a foot of smokes

Up and down State Street, before stopping off at Brandt's  
For a brand new set of harps, and head for The Flame,  
His shovel stashed beneath his arm, breaking-in each  
In turn, his hands choking a Hohner tin sandwich

Through his own array of hot licks and funky riffs,  
His six-pocket vest harp-full and at the ready  
As he struts the curbside, bending the Delta notes  
Of Robert Johnson's I Believe I'll Dust My Broom.

Then came Joliet again, and the guards beat him  
And took his harps away—for good, they said—but he  
Knew better, but no matter: his lips too swollen  
From their fists and his lungs still shallow on the draw,

Rattly on the blow, his eyelids hot in fever,  
Both legs long gone cold from deep inside the kneecap  
Clear up the thigh into the groin where nothing seemed  
To work the way it used to work, his blanket roll

In plain sight in one of the storage bins built up  
Against the cellblock glass: belongings on display  
To drive the inmates wild: civvies and mail and packs  
Of cigarettes and Zippo lighters, and Henry's

Five harmonicas in a heap atop his roll.  
The second man Henry killed really was in need  
Of killing: a torcher sent to burn The Purple  
Flame down, patrons and all, but Henry's coal shovel

Laid him out with the first swing and he ran blood  
Upside down on the stairs as Henry did his best  
And got him flat into the alley, but unaware  
That his G-harp had slipped from its hold no more than

Half a foot from where the dead man lay, fingerprints  
Shining from the new tin and Henry's scratched-in H.J.  
A dead give-away that gave him up to the cold  
Brick and chains of Joliet, never far away.

But now is now, and Henry's almost dry but dead  
To the world flying past him at 85 miles  
Per hour: Bunk's cruising speed for bad road surfaces.  
Snoring Henry's lips are far apart and what teeth

He has left are gum-flesh and hollow as used up  
Cole slaw cups thumb-crushed in mashed potatoes way back  
At Mitzie's Diner where to state troopers arrived  
Just in time to miss Bunk, but everybody knows

He's on the run and no one's going to give him up  
To greyshirt fuzz who play a hunch and hit it right.  
The siren and its flicker coloring the storm  
Make no nevermind to Henry Jones locked inside

The heater's dream: the solo spotlight catching him  
At center stage, as he blows his way through I Don't  
Want No Woman If She Has Hair Like Drops Of Rain.  
And Bunk almost loses his chance, what with the police

Crowding him over, and him having to gear down,  
But he gets the revolver from beneath his seat  
And somehow rams it home inside Henry's blanket  
Roll. "They wouldn't hold Henry for something he knows

Nothing about," he says, almost aloud. "And he  
Can catch another ride and give the gun the old  
Heave-ho; or he might use it in good health a while."  
But here they come: Bunk and Henry sharing the back

Seat, while the tall trooper calls headquarters to say  
The hijacked cars are safe but cold inside Buck's rig.  
And next comes the untying of the blanket roll,  
The two strings snapping once above the jackknife blade

And here's the 38, pearl handgrips both rubbed clean.  
There's no way Bunk's 'fessing up to possession,  
And now Henry's parole papers from Joliet,  
With ink barely dry from yesterday's signing, rest

Easy in the trooper's hand as he shakes his head  
And picks his way through precious few belongings: one  
Shaggy old toothbrush bound to its tube of Colgate,  
A comb with a few more teeth than Henry, a bent

Crucifix, its Christ missing an arm and its crown  
Of thorns, three extra socks, and a cardboard coaster  
With its purple flame rising from a saxophone.  
A good shaking of the blanket drops Henry's five

Harmonicas onto the trooper's lap; he smiles  
And turns to Henry and hands him one, asking if  
He's any good and if so play Prison Bars All  
Around Me. And Henry can. And Henry does.