All the Outs in Free

Tom Harkin*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©1962 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
All the Outs in Free

by Tom Harkin

THE BULGING, red sun sat hesitatingly on the horizon.

It looked like a red ball which had been dropped, and was in the last stages of compression before rebounding into the air. If it gave off any light, it was indiscernible — that is, it as the source of the light could not be determined by ordinary, casual observation. For the soft, warm, aphonie air surrounded every object, giving the entire landscape a rather polychromatic glow, as if one had trouble focusing his eyes. And one would have been amazed, if he'd noticed at all, that his body cast no shadow in any direction. It was the beginning of one of those summer evenings in the middle west, in Iowa, which are so nostalgic for the older ones, and so filled with expectations for those whose memories are just being made.

In North River, population 118, four hired hands were returning to their homes after a long day in the fields. Two men, lunch buckets in hand, were trudging the quarter mile up the railroad tracks from the section house to the town. Two other men, covered with fine, black dust, had just gotten out of an old Model A and were crossing the dirt street to their houses. The black-faced driver ground the gear shift into second and released the clutch. The old blue car lurched
the remaining block to the brown-shingle house with a tar-paper roof. At least four other men, all heads of families, all occupants of North River, had been home since five—from the foundry in Purgess, twenty miles away.

Mothers were preparing hot meals over hot stoves, while daughters helped by setting the table. Numerous kids, and North River was replete with children, were doing various things. Two young boys, barefoot, one with a B-B gun, the other with a slingshot, were stalking blackbirds in Frank McHugh’s trees. Down the street, two boys were flanking a third—in order to catch a possible “fudge”—take careful aim at a group of marbles, while two girls observed from a safe distance. At Pat Keanan’s place, two of his boys and two of Ted Keanan’s boys were dividing up corncobs and stuffing them into their pockets in preparation for a cob fight.

Suddenly, and seemingly unexpectedly, though it happened every evening, Mrs. Martin stuck her head out the back door and in a high, shrill—but not falsetto—voice, called her children to eat: “Jim-mee,” “Joo-ee,” “Sup-er’s ready.”

She was always first. Always. Then, in rapid succession, other heads stuck out other doors and called in other children.

“Jack-kee, Suuz-zeee, time to eat.”
“Mar-ree, Mike-ull, get in here this instant!”
“Marg-grut! Rich-hurd! Come wash up!”
“Boy-eees, sup-er-er!—until the once mellow air reverberated with yelling mothers, running children, and slamming screen doors.

Bobby Cooper tightened his grip on the railroad track with his left hand and ground his knees more firmly into the loose gravel embankment. It was about a three foot drop from the tracks to the ditch. His right arm was extended, poised; his right hand was cupped over the still, rather stagnant water. A small black object wriggled from between some cattails and into the small open space. A small cupped hand slipped into the water and scooped water plus tadpole onto the gravel. After several delicate attempts, the slippery tadpole was secured and dropped into the transformed
Skippy peanut butter jar, which was half filled with water and a half dozen other tadpoles. Bobby was about to stretch his arm over the water again when the first call reached his ears. He pulled himself up, grabbed the jar off the creosoted tie, and started the five hundred yard trek home, stopping only briefly to wave at two men coming down the tracks from the section house.

Crossing the street about two blocks from home, Bobby inadvertently kicked a pile of loose gravel, scattering it on the sidewalk before him. One rock, fairly large, smooth, and almost round, caught his eye as it came to rest a few feet in front of him. Without breaking his stride, he kicked the rock with his right foot, with his black, tongue-less tennis shoe. The rock skipped and bounced and finally stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, right on the corner. Bobby stopped, looked at the rock, then looked ahead and to the left — as if he were trying to decide whether or not to kick it again and, if so, in which direction. Instead, he turned left at the corner and walked backward, keeping his eyes on the curious stone. He turned around just in time to see his father pull into the driveway in his old, blue Model A.

“Hard day at the mine, dear?” Marie Cooper inquired as her husband took his seat at the table.

“No. Only got out four ton today. Work’s really gettin’ slow. Looks like that shutdown might come after all.”

“That’s too bad. I — Bobby! Quit playing with your food. Now sit up straight and eat right.” Mrs. Cooper reached over and pulled her youngest son’s chair closer to the table.

The rest of the meal was eaten with the usual variety of family conversation. This family, the Joe Coopers, contained four children: Jack, Carl, Sara and Bobby — in order of their ages, eldest to youngest. Jack and Carl were both in high school, and Sara would start next year. Bobby was the “baby” of the family, having just finished the second grade. The meal was almost finished when Mrs. Cooper turned to Jack.

“What are you kids going to do this evening?” She addressed the question to Jack, intending it for all three of the older ones, for whatever Jack did, the other two, Carl and Sara, did also.

“The usual,” Jack answered.
"And what is the usual?"

"African lion hunting, what else?" Carl and Sara snickered at their brother's remark.

"Well, I—" Mrs. Cooper was cut off by her husband who had hurriedly swallowed a mouthful of food and was brandishing a gravy-laden fork at Jack.

"Now you listen here, young man. How many times have I told you about shootin' off at the mouth. It ain't nice and respectful, and I ain't gonna have no more of it, you hear?"

"You ain't? Yeh, I hear."

"Well, I don't care what you kids do tonight," Mrs. Cooper continued, "but I want you to take Bobby with you and keep an eye on him. And let him play in the games, too."

"Oh God!" said Carl out of the corner of his mouth, to show his disapproval.

"Oh, God! Oh, God! Is that all you know how to say?" Mr. Cooper leaned across the table. "Some day you're gonna get a lickin' for saying that."

"Do we have to?" Jack asked his mother. "He's a pest. He's a parasite. And besides that he's too small. He's liable to get hurt playing some of our games. Besides, he doesn't want to go with us anyhow. Ask him."

Bobby sat through the conversation with no apparent interest. This, however, was not unusual; for this was the one characteristic with which everyone associated him: his facial expression. Or better, his lack of any facial expression. He seldom smiled and seldom frowned. His face looked as if it had been frozen one night while he was sleeping and kept that way ever since. The large head, the dark eyes set deep beneath dark, thick eyebrows; the low forehead and dark, curly hair, and the expression-less face — together they gave Bobby the appearance of a thirty-year old midget who didn't have to shave.

"Yes, you have to take him," Mrs. Cooper said with finality. "And don't play any games that he might get hurt in. You're going to take him and that's all there is to it."

"Did you have to bring him along?" Mike Essick nodded at Bobby as he handed the cigarettes to Jack.

"Yeh, the little runt. If he tells on us smoking it'll be too bad for him."
"If he does," Sara joined in, "we'll put big black and yellow spiders down his back."

Other kids began arriving on the schoolyard and soon the excited sounds of carefree, summer children resounded through the night air. Wood tag was played, and Bobby was never "it" because no one bothered to tag him. "Red light-Green light" was played, and Bobby was the first to reach the goal line because no one stopped him; if, indeed, the person who was "it" even noticed him. And when "Red Rover" was played, Bobby was the last dared over:

"Red Rover, Red Rover, we dare Bobby Cooper over," they all shouted. Bobby ran. He ran hard at the line of boys and girls. And when he hit the locked arms, he was stopped and hurled backward onto the ground.

As it grew later, many of the kids went home, or some other place to do other things. Then there was just a small group left: four boys and four girls and Bobby.

"Hey, I got a good idea," said Jack Cooper as he put his arm around Mary Keanan's waist, "let's play 'Hide 'n Seek'. Not it!"

"Not it!" "Not it!" "Not it!" the others quickly shouted. And if Bobby had said it, no one heard him.

"Well, I guess you're it, Robert old boy. This tree will be home. You count to fifty, then come looking. You know how to play it." Jack led his youngest brother to a tree, turned his face against it, then ran off into the night with the others.

A few minutes later the small boy turned from the tree and began looking behind bushes, in patches of high grass, and around the old schoolhouse. He searched thoroughly. Finding no one, he returned to the tree from where he started and shouted as loud as he could:

"All-ee, all-ee ox-in free-ee!" Nothing.

"All-ee, all-ee ox-in free-ee!" Still nothing. The small boy turned, and with his hands in his pockets, started walking home.

The night was warm, and the air was still. The leaves didn't rustle, and the sparrow saw and heard the gray cat climbing the tree. Crickets chirped intermittently with croaking frogs. A fat toad hopped lazily across the street and disappeared into some weeds. Millers and other bugs circled
beneath the street lights, while every few minutes a bat swooped through their midst. Somewhere an owl hooted — once, twice; and somewhere in the distance a car churned down a gravel road at high speed. In North River a small boy with an odd — no, with *no* expression on his face paused on a corner beneath a dull street light. He was looking at something on the sidewalk in front of him. It was a rock — a fairly large, smooth, almost round rock. The small boy took his hands from his pockets, held his arms out straight from his shoulders, and balanced on his left foot. Then, in much the same manner as a football punter, he kicked the rock with his right foot, with his black, tongue-less tennis-shoe.

“All-ee, all-ee ox-in *free-ee*!” he shouted as his toe connected with the rock. It flew a few feet through the air, then skipped and bounced out of the circle of light into the darkness ahead — where it skipped, bounced, and fell off into the thick grass along the sidewalk.

**Down in The Yard**

*by Theodore Kooser*

Down in the yard the arbor gate
is open and the whitewashed swing
and trellis greet with mute surprise
the whiteness of an early frost.

The ripened grapes have split their skins;
dark lips with fragrant yellow tongues
are huddled, whispering laments
between the browning leaves and vine.