

JESSE STUART

Love

Yesterday when the bright sun blazed down on the *wilted corn my father and I walked around the edge of the new ground to plan a fence. The cows kept coming through the *chestnut oaks on the cliff and running over the young corn. They bit off the tips of the corn and trampled down the *stubble.

My father walked in the *cornbalk. Bob, our *Collie, walked in front of my father. We heard a ground squirrel whistle down over the *bluff among the dead treetops at the clearing's edge. "Whoop, take him, Bob," said my father. He lifted up a young stalk of corn, with wilted dried roots, where the ground squirrel had dug it up for the sweet grain of corn left on its tender roots. This has been a dry spring and the corn has kept well in the earth where the grain has sprouted. The ground squirrels love this corn. They dig up rows of it and eat the sweet grains. The young corn stalks are killed and we have to replant the corn.

I can see my father keep *sicking Bob after the ground squirrel. He jumped over the corn rows. He started to run toward the ground squirrel. I, too, started running toward the clearing's edge where Bob was jumping and barking. The dust flew in tiny swirls behind our feet. There was a cloud of dust behind us.

"It's a big *bull blacksnake," said my father. "Kill him, Bob! Kill him, Bob!"

Bob was jumping and snapping at the snake so as to make it strike and throw itself off guard. Bob had killed twenty-eight *copperheads this spring. He knows how to kill a snake. He doesn't rush to do it. He takes his time and does the job well.

"*Let's don't kill the snake," I said. "A blacksnake is a harmless snake. It kills poison snakes. It kills the copperhead. It catches more mice from the fields than a cat."

I could see the snake didn't want to fight the dog. The snake wanted to get away. Bob wouldn't let it. I wondered why it was crawling toward a heap of black *loamy earth at the *bench of the hill. I wondered why it had come from the chestnut oak sprouts and the matted *greenbriars on the cliff. I looked as the snake lifted its pretty head in response to one of Bob's jumps. "It's not a bull

blacksnake," I said. "It's a she-snake. Look at the white on her throat."

"A snake is an enemy to me," my father snapped. "I hate a snake. Kill it, Bob. Go in there and get that snake and quit playing with it!"

Bob obeyed my father. I hated to see him take this snake by the throat. She was so beautifully poised in the sunlight. Bob grabbed the white patch on her throat. He cracked her long body like an ox whip in the wind. He cracked it against the wind only. The blood spurted from her fine-curved throat. Something hit against my legs like pellets. Bob threw the snake down. I looked to see what had struck my legs. It was snake eggs. Bob had slung them from her body. She was going to the sand heap to lay her eggs, where the sun is the *setting-hen that warms them and hatches them.

Bob grabbed her body there on the earth where the red blood was running down on the gray-piled loam. Her body was still *writhing in pain. She acted like a *greenweed held over a new-ground fire. Bob *slung her viciously many times. He cracked her limp body against the wind. She was now limber, as a shoestring in the wind. Bob threw her *riddled body back on the sand. She quivered like a leaf in the lazy wind, then her riddled body lay perfectly still. The blood colored the loamy earth around the snake.

"Look at the eggs, won't you?" said my father. We counted thirty-seven eggs. I picked an egg up and held it in my hand. Only a minute ago there was life in it. It was an immature seed. It would not hatch. Mother sun could not *incubate it on the warm earth. The egg I held in my hand was almost the size of a *quail's egg. The shell on it was thin and tough and the egg appeared under the surface to be a watery egg.

"Well, Bob, I guess you see now why this snake couldn't fight," I said. "It is life. Stronger *devour the weaker even among human beings. Dog kills snake. Snake kills birds. Birds kill the butterflies. Man conquers all. Man, too, kills for sport."

Bob was panting. He walked ahead of us back to the house. His tongue was out of his mouth. He was tired. He was hot under his shaggy coat of hair. His tongue nearly touched the dry dirt and white flecks of foam dripped from it. We walked toward the house. Neither my father nor I spoke. I still thought about the dead snake. The sun was going down over the chestnut ridge. A *lark was singing. It was late for a lark to sing. The red evening clouds floated

above the pine trees on our pasture hill. My father stood beside the path. His black hair was moved by the wind. His face was red in the blue wind of day. His eyes looked toward the sinking sun.

"And my father hates a snake," I thought.

I thought about the agony women know of giving birth. I thought about how they will fight to save their children. Then, I thought of the snake. I thought it was silly for me to think such thoughts.

This morning my father and I *got up with the chickens. He says one has to get up with the chickens to do a day's work. We got the *posthole digger, *ax, *spud, measuring pole and the *mattock. We started for the clearing's edge. Bob didn't go along.

The *dew was on the corn. My father walked behind with the posthole digger across his shoulder. I walked in front. The wind was blowing. It was a good morning wind to breathe and a wind that makes one feel like he can get under the edge of a hill and *heave the whole hill upside down.

I walked out the corn row where we had come yesterday afternoon. I looked in front of me. I saw something. I saw it move. It was moving like a huge black rope winds around a *windlass. "Steady," I *says to my father. "Here is the bull blacksnake." He took one step up beside me and stood. *His eyes grew wide apart.

"What do you know about this," he said.

"You have seen the bull blacksnake now," I said. "Take a good look at him! He is lying beside his dead mate. He has come to her. He, perhaps, was on her trail yesterday."

The male snake had trailed her to her doom. He had come in the night, under the roof of stars, as the moon *shed rays of light on the *quivering clouds of green. He had found his lover dead. He was coiled beside her, and she was dead.

The bull blacksnake lifted his head and followed us as we walked around the dead snake. He would have fought us to his death. He would have fought Bob to his death. "Take a stick," said my father, "and throw him over the hill so Bob won't find him. Did you ever see anything to *beat that? I've heard they'd do that. But this is my first time to see it." I took a stick and threw him over the bank into the dewy sprouts on the cliff.

Glossary

- ax** a tool with a heavy, sharp blade, used for cutting wood
(to) beat that more astonishing than that (colloquial)
bench a level, narrow stretch of land (just below the hill)
bluff a cliff
bull male
chestnut oak a tree of eastern and central North America with leaves similar to those of a chestnut tree
Collie a breed of dog, related to the sheepdog; "Lassie" is a Collie.
copperhead a kind of poisonous snake
cornbalk the rows of planted corn
devour eat hungrily or greedily
dew the moisture on the ground in the morning
got up with the chickens got up very early
greenbriar a kind of bush covered with thorns
greenweed a small shrub with yellow flowers; the weed shrivels and twists when thrown on a fire
heave move with great effort
His eyes grew wide apart A more common phrase is "His eyes grew as big as saucers." Stuart makes effective use of rural metaphors such as this one.
incubate to warm (an egg) as by bodily heat, so that the embryo will develop
lark a bird with a melodious song; larks often live in fields
Let's don't a rural variant of "Let's not"
loamy adjective form of **loam** "rich soil"
mattock a tool used to break up hard ground
posthole digger a tool for digging holes into which posts are put; a fence will be attached to these posts
quail a brownish-gray game bird; the eggs are about 1/3 the size of a chicken's eggs
quivering vibrating
riddled filled with holes
says used instead of "said" to give immediacy to a conversational narrative

- setting-hen** a hen that sits on eggs to keep them warm until they hatch
- shed** past tense of shed "cast, throw"; commonly used in the sense of ~ light on something "illuminate"
- sicking** urging (the dog) to attack
- slung** past tense of sling "throw with force"
- spud** a sharp tool used for digging out weeds
- stubble** here, the short stalks of corn left after the cows had eaten the tender tops
- wilted** drooping from heat and lack of water
- windlass** a machine for pulling or lifting things by means of a rope or chain which is wound around a cylinder or drum and turned by a crank
- writhing** twisting

Comprehension and Discussion Questions

- *1. Why were the boy and his father walking in the field?
2. Why did they need to fence the land?
3. Who was with the boy and his father?
4. What time of year was it?
5. Why did the father want Bob to kill the ground squirrel?
6. What did Bob find before he caught the squirrel?
7. How did Bob kill a snake? Did he do it skillfully?
- *8. Why did the boy suggest letting the snake live?
9. Was the snake willing to fight the dog? Why?
10. How did the boy know it was a she-snake rather than a male?
- *11. Why did the father insist that the snake be killed?
- *12. What words suggest that the snake was a beautiful female rather than an "enemy"?
- *13. What happened as the dog was killing the snake?
14. How many eggs were there? How big were they?
- *15. What pattern does the boy see that he summarizes in his statement "It is life"?

16. What time of day was it when they went home?
- *17. Why did the snake's death lead the boy to think of child-birth?
- *18. Why do you suppose he says "It was silly of me to think such thoughts"?
19. What time did the boy and his father get up the next day? What kind of a day was it?
20. What work did the boy and his father have to do? What did they find when they got to the field?
- *21. What can you say about the imagery in the paragraph that begins "The male snake..."?
- *22. Why do you think the father told his son to throw the snake over the hill where the dog wouldn't find him?

* These questions are the most important for class discussion.

Exercises

A. *IRREGULAR VERBS*. Complete the chart.

	<i>infinitive</i>	<i>simple past</i>	<i>past participle</i>
Ex.	KEEP	kept	KEPT
1.	_____	bit	_____
2.	_____	heard	_____
3.	take	_____	_____
4.	_____	_____	dug
5.	_____	flew	_____
6.	_____	hit	_____
7.	_____	_____	slung
8.	hatch	_____	_____
9.	_____	spoke	_____
10.	_____	grew	_____
11.	_____	_____	seen
12.	_____	shed	_____
13.	_____	_____	fought
14.	_____	threw	_____

B. **PREPOSITIONS.** Put each of these prepositions in the appropriate blank: *above, against, from, in, of, on, over, through, toward, up.*

Ex. The cows kept coming *THROUGH* the young corn.

1. Bob, our Collie, walked _____ front _____ my father.
2. The squirrels had dug _____ the young corn.
3. The dog jumped _____ the corn rows.
4. I started running _____ the clearing's edge.
5. Something hit _____ my legs like pellets.
6. Bob threw her riddled body back _____ the sand.
7. White flecks of foam dripped _____ his tongue.
8. The red evening clouds floated _____ the pine trees.

C. **FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE.** Find as many images as you can of birth and death in the story.

Ex. IT WAS SNAKE *birth* EGGS. *death* DEAD TREETOPS AT THE CLEARING'S EDGE

Topics for Discussion or Writing

1. What is the effect of setting the story "yesterday" and "this morning" rather than further back in time—or simply using an unspecified past tense?
2. Consider the use of pronouns. What pronoun is used to refer to the dog? When does the pronoun reference to the she-snake shift from "it" to "she"? What pronoun is used to refer to the male snake? What is the effect of these choices?
3. What happens to each of the characters in the story as a result of the events that take place? (*N.b.*, you must first decide who "the characters" are—does that category include the animals, as well as the humans?)
4. What statement about love and hate is the author making? How does hate affect people? How does Stuart's view of love differ from that of Collier in "The Chaser"?
5. What experience have you had—or do you know of—that represents your idea of true love?