

William Faulkner Is Asked a Question

Brian Abel Ragen

Why, you ask, for reasons of your own of which I can have no true knowledge, and which I suspect are as occult to you as the reasons for my own answer will be to me, at least until that day on which it has been promised that I will know as I am known and see clearly, rather than, as now, through a glass darkly, though I trust that promise no more than the assurance that I will see my native place rise again and strut upon the tawdry stage of this continent in all its pride and glory and cruelty, "Why did the chicken cross the road?" Well, I can tell you this, though I hold no brief for the chicken or for the road or for myself: there was a chicken and there was a road and there was a crossing. That road took its crooked muddy way through one of the poorer sections of Yoknapatawpha County, though to put "poor" in the comparative and apply it to a place where poverty was not so much the air all men breathed as the mud that clung to every man's boots might suggest that wealth existed somewhere in the vicinity of Jefferson, which it did not, except, again, in the comparative, for the man whose boots were ankle deep in mud and manure and chicken shit at least had some advantage over the unshod man who made his body a vessel for still more hookworms with every weary step he took. There are in this world happy roads and even poets who claim that choosing one line of mud in preference to another will make some difference in the fate that the Lord or the blind forces who rule the world in his absence have planned for us, but this was not a happy road and people chose to take it for one reason alone, and that was not one they found it necessary to contemplate in rhyming stanzas while they neglected their farming, which they could not, since growing corn and okra and pigs kept their bellies, if not full, at least not empty, and the reason for their choice of the road not being especially suited to poetry in any case, since it was simple: no other road cut through those

particular pine woods and allowed the inhabitants of the hardscrabble farms that had been hacked out of them to visit, on occasion, with those of their neighbors with whom they were not currently involved in blood feuds, to reach a store from which they bought little more than salt and nails, and to gather on Sundays in a shack little different from their own dreary dwellings to hear a man wearing a black coat with no more learning than themselves explain both that their own wickedness had brought them shame and poverty and that their poverty and humility showed that they were more virtuous than the booted men and beribboned ladies of Jefferson who sinfully entered a church with a steeple and read from what they dared to call a prayer book. This road had been cut through the woods long ago, and its first purpose had been to facilitate the travels of the white man as he cleared the county of such vermin as wolves and bears and Choctaws, all of whom became revered emblems of the area once they had been exterminated or driven west, and later it became a lane down which Negroes were marched from the upper circles of Hell that existed in Kentucky and the border states to its deepest recesses, which were to be found, not in some subterranean grotto, but in the cotton plantations of Mississippi, and then it became the artery through which blood to be spilled was pumped, when the gentlemen of Jefferson, dressed in grey and wearing plumes in their hats, rode North in a glittering cavalcade to defend their homes and honor and "social institutions," by which they meant the right to treat other human beings as chattel, and some of them came back down that road, having lost everything but their honor, which was a dubious possession to begin with, and they were followed by equally glittering horsemen in blue, who having saved the Union, were now busy freeing the slaves and raping the wives and daughters of the rebels. It was not a happy road. But just as there was a road, there was a chicken. There are some chickens that bear memorable names, such as that distinguished bird the Rhode Island Red, named for a state whose

citizens had the good sense and sound morality to profit from the sale of human beings not by keeping them as slaves, but by buying them from Africa and selling them in the West Indies, so that their ships and consciences were always clean and sweet-smelling by the time they returned to Providence laden with money and rum, but the chicken of Yoknapatawpha County were known only as chickens, and they existed for but three reasons: they laid eggs, a food that for many was the only animal addition to a diet of beans and cornmeal mush from one Sunday to the next, they furnished, sometimes roasted but mostly fried, Sunday dinner, and they begat other chickens, and since a capon could only fulfill one of those functions and, poultry not being burdened by any deep belief in monogamy, a tiny band of roosters could fulfill the third function, a great many hens and very few fine fellows sporting combs like the horse soldiers' plumes filled the coops and dooryards along the road I have described. In Jefferson, the chicken took its place in the unending saga of race and miscegenation that kept retelling itself long after its hearers and its tellers should have been tired of it, for in town the person who fried a chicken would, like the chicken itself, usually be a creature whose life was not his own. While the ladies in pastel dresses and the men in white suits sipped their cloyingly sweet tea and juleps on porch swings, the help-- who were, quite often, their own cousins or even half-brothers or half-sisters--fried the chicken, cooked the gravy, and made the biscuits, having been marked for such tasks by the color of their skin and the coils of their hair. But on the road to which I have referred, there was no help, not in any sense, nor any Negroes, though the boys and men of the hardscrabble farms had still trudged off to join the butternut infantry, to which they were well suited, being used to mud and disappointment. So the chicken I describe had, perhaps, alone of any creature born or hatched in the limits of the old Confederacy, escaped the trammels of race. Yet he did cross the road. And "why?" you ask again, as if knowing his motives would explain the mysteries of existence.

Perhaps the chicken was like the deserters who slunk down the road as the war went on, deaf to the demands of honor and law, for is it not the duty of a chicken to die to provide his master a Sunday dinner, just as it is the duty of every man to die for his country, even when it struggles in a wicked cause? Or perhaps it was honor itself that drove that chicken across the road: he himself may have been a rebel, one who chose to secede from his farm rather than submit to constitutional changes, such as his own upcoming elimination from its body politic, that he found incompatible with the rights he had come to regard as sacred. Before we close this colloquy, however, I feel it my duty to pose a question to complicate your own. You have asked, as so many have asked and will continue to ask even after the more refined issues of philosophy have paled upon us, "Why did the chicken cross the road?" Your question assumes that this crossing was made by a single chicken--whether a heroic or nefarious fowl is beside the point: you imagine the journey of a lone Byronic bird, defying fate, and acting as master of his soul, should chickens be cursed, as we humans are told we are, with that unwieldy encumbrance. Yet my own suspicion is that the chicken did not set off for the far side of the road alone. What leads a man or a bird to do something dangerous and inexplicable is usually not the motion of his own mind or heart or ego, but some collective frenzy that proposes a course of action that perhaps no one prefers, but none are brave enough to resist. I am asking you, in other words, to think of chickens, not the chicken, for if you do and you have attended to what I have told you about the road, you will have the answer, I believe, to your question. The chicken crossed the road for the same reason the young gentlemen of Jefferson rode off in their fine clothes to find themselves lying gut-shot on a battlefield or dismembered in a field hospital or raving mad as they limped home in spurless, worn out boots: because the rest of the flock was on that road, and they could not conceive of any way not to be part of it.

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