

No Guts Under Shirts

out of the millions of prophets and scientists and
philosophers
and celebrities and teachers and parents and high
school
valedictorians
who insist you ride life like a bull
and take sensational risks
no one seems to have the guts to
cook bacon
without wearing a shirt

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An excerpt from ***Jungle of Neckties***

. . .I wanted to forget everything, so I leaned back against the wooden post with my book, centering on my scalp a ratty sailor's cap I'd gotten from a hobo in Georgia. I lowered the

bill to shade my eyes, resembling a weary man, slumbering beneath a cactus under his sombrero.

I held my book on my chest, licked my fingers, and flipped pages. I got lost in the book and forgot the time of day, didn't hear the clamor of cars for over an hour. I think I almost fell asleep halfway through the novel. But the thought of repulsion lingered like a recluse somewhere in my brain.

After the sun dipped behind the mountains, a pair of boots shuffled by, kicking dust past my feet and covering the leftover spit with sand.

I looked up from under my hat. A worn man with holes in his shirt, a cigarette in his knuckles, and a pack on his back stood above me. He came from the opposite direction as the man in the car.

“What are you reading?” he said.

I carelessly showed him the cover.

“That's good literature,” he said, nodding. He looked at me, perhaps witnessing a younger him. His voice was gruff but polished, and he spoke without taking breaths.

“You know,” he said, “I've met so many of you, your type, my type, us – society's dropouts and bums, the scum. The yeggs, outlaws, homeless, and tramps. All these people who resent Uncle Sam, who won't follow the rules, who ache for accidental adventure, who hide in the caves of bridges, who live comfortably on the waste of western minds, and just drop it all and *get going - gone!*”

“What these *Normans*, those sorts of people, what they think of us, of you, is that we are uneducated, barbaric animals addicted to booze or methamphetamine without the capacity to keep jobs. We are almost inhuman to them – brainless monsters in back alley shadows who deserve to be shunned. We ain’t whole in their eyes.

“I know what it’s like to live a savage existence,” he said. “To satiate the lust for freedom and just go. Gettin’ on with your short, valued life instead of waiting for the bus or for retirement...which never comes, man, until you’re too old or too sick to stick out your own wrinkly thumb and get a ride to nowhere, anywhere, to even sleep on the ground!

“What I’m getting at, man, is that what I’ve noticed throughout my life as a vagrant is that each of us – like you with your wooly face in your book – they are intelligent, literate people. We’re smart. We may not look it in the eyes of briefcase-bearers because they’re confined to a jungle of comfort and neckties. But if they’d take the time to sit, to *sit down*, and inquire of us, they’d learn. Our intelligence and reasons for living the way we do would be revealed and justified to them if they listened to our stories. They’re just too scared to take that seat.

“Anyway, good book,” he said, giving no chance for me to speak before he left.

“Keep kickin’ back, kid – you’re doing the right thing. You’re alive with debt to no one.” He turned and walked away.