



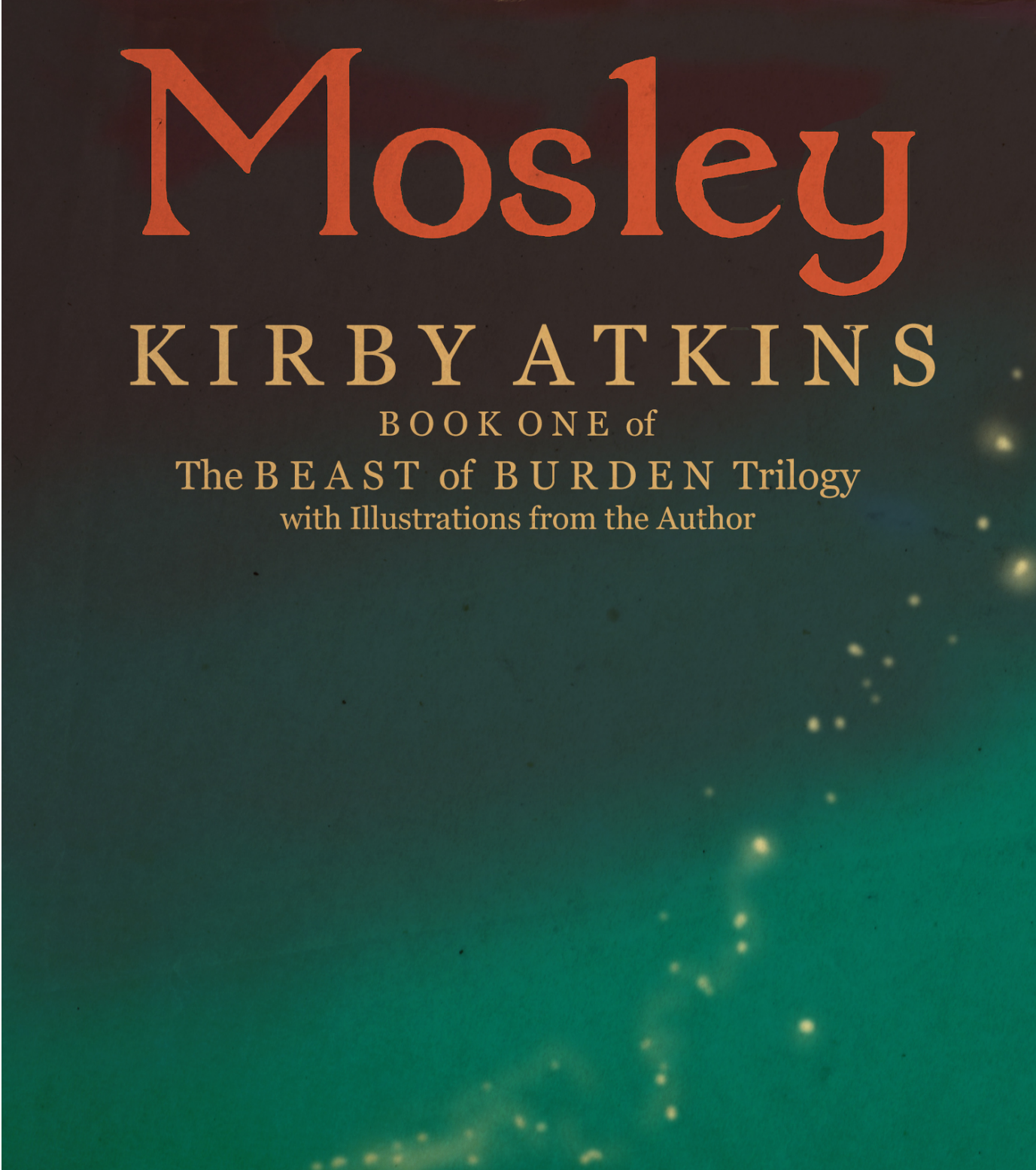
Mosley

KIRBY ATKINS

BOOK ONE of

The BEAST of BURDEN Trilogy

with Illustrations from the Author

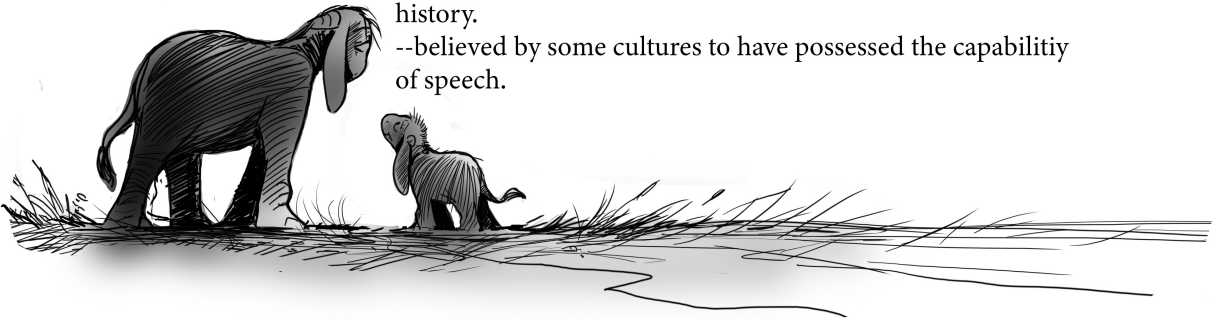




thor-i-phant

thickset, usually large, nearly hairless herbivorous mammal, now extinct, chiefly used in agrarian societies before recorded history.

--believed by some cultures to have possessed the capability of speech.



*Take heed to hauntings and to dreams
For in them is a key.
This constant pain and toil and death
This hopelessness that steals your breath
Was never meant to be.*



chapter one

Simon Makes a Purchase

The last man who dared step onto Simon's farm uninvited never knew what hit him.

He had come with the census to assess property and record boundary markers. The problem was this land was so far outside of town that the markers were old and hard to find. He was, therefore, clueless when he'd stumbled across the line. But Simon wasn't clueless. From his row of turnips he had seen the nervous little man rooting around with his map and quill. Simon gripped his hoe and plodded out to meet him with a sullen expression.

"Howdy!" the man said, shielding his eyes from the sun. "Maybe you can help me here. I was just lookin'—"

But he was cut short by a sharp pain making everything go black. The last thing he felt, besides the throb in his head, was a tight grip around his ankle dragging him only a few feet back over the line and then releasing him. Simon said nothing but turned and stomped back to his turnips.

Such an odd and angry man—and always busy. His face only seemed capable of a pinched expression and there was always dust in his hair and on his clothes. He worked long days, stopping only when the sun was down and it was too dark to see anything. Then he would stumble into his house and shut it up like a tomb until the sun rose again and he could go back to work. To pay him a visit was always a risky proposition and he was known to chase people off his property, swinging a hoe or sickle blade.

At the “Fig and Gristle,” the town pub, Simon’s reclusive lifestyle was the topic of conversation. Bemus, a fat and freckled traveling salesman, bought the wounded census taker a beer and held a steak to his head.

“What did you expect?” Bemus asked laughing. “Did you think he was gonna make you a sandwich or something?”

“No,” the census taker replied, blinking nervously under the slab of meat. “I wasn’t asking for hospitality. I just didn’t think he’d bash my head in.”

“Well, he’d done worse if you’d knocked on his door. Consider yourself lucky!”

Red, another farmer with a crimson face, piped in from across the room. “How is it that he don’t treat you like that, Bemus?”

Bemus settled in his chair. “We have a mutual understanding, me and Simon. See, I bring him stuff and save him the trouble of having to come into town. Seed, tobacco. Plus I keep him stocked with all my finest Bemus brand products.” Bemus pointed out the window to a donkey led wagon just outside. The wagon sported a large canvas sign that read “*Bemus’ Traveling Medicine Show.*”

“Now my *Swarthy Enchantment Collection* has a beautiful bouquet of pink peony--”

“He had a woman out there, didn’t he?” Red asked interrupting.

“No. There ain’t no woman.”

“I heard there was a woman.”

“There ain’t no woman!” Bemus said crossly and then flashed his smile again. “Hey! Looks like you got the rash! Hang on, I got just the thing!”

Actually Simon did have a woman with him once. Those who remember said that she was expecting a child around the time Simon bought the land north of town. But then suddenly she was gone and no one could recall if she had died or just left him. Maybe he murdered her out there in those lonesome fields. In any event, Simon became more reclusive over the years and rarely came into town anymore to trade. No one ever bothered to see him and he never felt the lack of their company. But Bemus was an exception.

Maybe it was Bemus’ outrageous personality that made him get along so well with Simon, if getting along was what they did. The fact was, Bemus never

seemed to shut his mouth and maybe that relieved Simon of the pressure of ever having to open his. Bemus would show up every few weeks, sell Simon what he needed (and plenty of what he didn't need) and then usually stay the night. They would drink and Simon would let the drone of Bemus' chatter lull him to sleep. It was hard to tell if Simon enjoyed Bemus' visits or if he merely tolerated them but over the years it had become routine and mutually beneficial.

One spring morning, at Simon's farm, Bemus was unloading bags of seed from his wagon. Simon was getting ready to plant and Bemus looked at his horse with a doubtful expression.

"That creature ain't got no gumption, Simon," he said. "His back's got sway enough to make his stomach dangle."

Simon knit his brow and glanced at the miserable creature tethered to his plow. The years hadn't been kind to the beast and neither had Simon.

"You orta get you a thoriphant," Bemus said.

"What's a thoriphant?"

"You never seen a thoriphant?"

"Nope."

A grin like a peeled banana crawled over Bemus' face. "Never seen a thoriphant?" he said and smacked his own forehead. "Well of course you haven't! You don't get out enough to know what a dog looks like, much less a thoriphant. They're rare. Expensive too."

"Then I ain't interested."

"You should be."

"I ain't."

"You will be."

Simon sighed heavily. Bemus would have his say and make his pitch, either until Simon gave in or lost his temper. But Simon often faked disinterest. "Alright," he finally said, pulling the strap tighter on his horse.

"Alright what?"

"Alright what is a thoriphant?"

"Oh! You're ready to hear me now, are you?"

Bemus settled in and loaded his pipe for a smoke. He mentioned seeing thoriphants at an auction in Enoch. They were remarkable beasts, very elephant

like in appearance, with baggy, rough, gray skin but their heads were free from trunks or tusks. They had long ears and the males tended to have horns that grew and twisted into different shapes depending on the breed or family. These extraordinary creatures possessed the strength to pull a plow, carry a load, or power a grist mill. But the advantage of owning a thoriphant was not found in their strength but in their phenomenal ability to think rationally and even to speak.

“Speak...?” Simon said twisting his face.

“Yep,” Bemus replied grinning. “They can talk. Talk as good as you and me are talking now.” He puffed his pipe and nodded his head. “Very articulate.”

In truth, thoriphants were often more articulate than their masters. They were gentle and humble by nature, not given to conflict, but very reflective and thoughtful. Owners could expect their thoriphants not only to do the back breaking labor of the farm, but also to accomplish intelligent chores and even handle business in the master’s absence. Simon rarely left the farm, but the prospect of having a capable servant to help him in the fields had always appealed to him, though he balked at the idea of constant company. But with a thoriphant he could have the best of both worlds, a slave and a beast, a creature he could treat like an animal but depend on like a man.

“You gotta git you one,” Bemus finally said. He slowed his pitch because he could see wheels turning in Simon’s head.

“Yeah,” Simon finally mumbled, staring at his horse. “Maybe I will.”

So that day Simon gave Bemus a bag of coins and told him to bring back a thoriphant. There was an auction that week in Enoch and Bemus was more than happy to go, especially since he would take five percent of the price as a finder’s fee. Bemus left for Enoch that day, taking the old sway backed horse with him to sell. The horse didn’t appear to be particularly upset at this development.

Bemus didn’t immediately return. Simon began to get nervous as the time for planting approached and he was without a beast of any sort. But early one morning Bemus finally came back with a strange animal in tow. He was large, dusty, not smelling all that good, and with a quality to his face that was a little alarming at first. It was expressive, full of thought and not necessarily at ease with his new situation.

“Simon, this is Mosley,” Bemus said gesturing to the somewhat stunned creature.

Simon didn’t say a word but glared at Mosley. Finally he cut Bemus a sharp look. “He ever pull a plow?”

“*Don’t ask me!*” Bemus laughed. “Ask *him!* He can talk, remember?” Simon’s eyes cut back to Mosley. It was an awkward moment for an already awkward man. But Mosley saved him the trouble of asking again.

“Yes sir,” he said meekly. “A while back. I’ve been at the gristmill in Parsons for the last two years.”

Bemus grinned at Simon and raised his brows. “How ‘bout that, huh? Just like I told you-- *very articulate.*”

Simon just stared. It never crossed his mind that he might have to carry on conversations with this new thing, whatever it was. Bemus climbed aboard his wagon, grabbed the straps, and frowned at his harnessed donkey.

“Old Bemus needs to upgrade his animal too,” he said. “I got my eye on one in town. He’s older than yours but I only need him to pull the Medicine Show. The company might be nice too.”

Simon and Mosley’s eyes met for a moment. Company was the last thing Simon wanted but it looked like he had just bought some. He gave Bemus as much of a pleading look as his hard face would allow.

“You’re... going now? Don’t you-- want to *stay the night?*”

Bemus laughed and smacked the strap. “Not tonight. Got me some salve to sell! Besides-- you got someone else to drink with now don’t you? Course, you may have to hold the bottle for him!” And with that Bemus laughed and set out across the empty field.

For a long while, Simon just glared after the Medicine Show as it trundled along. The sound of its grinding wheels grew fainter and fainter. Soon the wagon was just a speck on the horizon and finally disappeared.

Silence. The sun was rising higher.

Finally, Simon reached up and rubbed his head with both hands. His greasy hair stood up on end. His arms dropped to his side and he took a deep breath.

Mosley swallowed and finally made a determined glance over at his new master. “Do you-- do you have any stables, sir? Where would you like me to--”

This was a new experience for Simon, hearing voices after Bemus had left. He already didn't like it.

“There,” he barked and pointed to the barn.

“Yes. Thank you, sir,” Mosley replied.

Simon nodded over at the old yoke leaning against the barn. “You fit in that yoke?” he asked.

“I'm-- I'm sure, sir.”

“Then fit in it.”

Despite their first meeting, the days that followed were a confirmation to Simon that he had made a good investment. Mosley indeed was a hard worker and thoriphants pull plows differently than horses. Guidance or steering was unnecessary. All Simon had to do was hold on to his end and let Mosley do the rest. If the sun beat down too hard, Mosley might slow a bit, but one sharp word from the rear and he would pick up his pace again. Even so, Simon eventually resumed using the strap. It said all he wanted to say. He wasn't going to start being sociable now.

But he also couldn't hide his pleasure with the state of his fields. He knew he could never have busted as much sod with any other animal. Having a brain at the front of the plow made a big difference.

Soon Mosley was doing other chores. He was very skilled at using his teeth to pick things up, or his horns and feet as leverage against a heavy load. He fed the chickens. He assembled the plow and even created a system for harnessing himself and tightening the straps. Simon sat on his porch at the end of the day and drew diagrams. He constructed wheels for the plow that could break away. In the morning all Simon had to do was wander out of his house and Mosley was there, yoke on his neck and the plow ready to go. It was becoming a productive operation.

But rarely a word passed between them. At the end of the day Simon would stumble into his house and Mosley would enter the large barn that loomed upward and cut an odd triangular shape in the dusky sky. Once inside, he disassembled the plow, ate whatever slop Simon had left for him, and lay down in

his bed of straw. His face was hard and tired. Whatever dream he had of a better life had died years ago. With his teeth he pulled a canvas tarp over himself as a blanket.

After a few weeks Bemus showed up again. He grinned at Simon and pulled a cork from a bottle. “I didn’t steer you wrong, did I, old pal?”

Simon was skilled at hiding his enthusiasm but managed to shake his head anyway.

Bemus shot him a narrow look. “Stop it. You’re embarrassing me.” They were sitting on the porch watching as Mosley loaded a cart with debris in the distance.

“Is he content out there in the barn?” Bemus finally asked.

Simon shrugged. “Guess so.”

“You ought to get him a female,” Bemus said with a sly look.

“Female?”

“Yeah. They’d make some babies. I could sell ‘em in Enoch. Remember how much you paid for him? How’d you like to make that much off some calves?”

Simon knit his brow. It wasn’t a bad idea.

Bemus continued, “I can find you a female. Work out a good price. Heck, he might even pick up the pace out there if he had something to come home to.”

Simon was still thinking. He was happy enough with Mosley to not begrudge the investment. There might have even been a slight desire to be kind to the haggard looking beast out there.

“What if he doesn’t like her?” Simon asked.

Bemus spat out a mouth full of wine and sat up suddenly. “Oh! Excuse me, tender heart, I didn’t know he *had* to!”

It was nearly a week later that Bemus’ Traveling Medicine Show returned to Simon’s farm, only this time it wasn’t being led by a donkey. An older thoriphant was pulling it along. His back was swayed from uncounted years and his head bobbed low to the ground as he plodded along. Walking beside the cart was another thoriphant, much smaller in frame, almost graceful. It was a female.

Mosley and Simon saw them coming from a distance. They had just plowed the east end of the farm and both looked hot and tired. Simon wiped his

face with his shirt and watched as the Medicine Show pulled up to his house. Mosley was a little stunned. It had been weeks since he had seen another thoriphant.

Bemus leapt from the cart and did a little dance. “Ladies and gentlemen!” he sang, “Children of all ages! It’s--” and he made a big flourish toward the old thoriphant.

“It’s Bemus’ Traveling Medicine Show,” the old thoriphant said with a croaking voice. “Bringing you the finest potions, elixirs, and other health related products.”

Bemus nearly fell over laughing. He blinked teary eyes at Simon. “How you liking that, slick? I got me a new pitch man! Donkey never honked like that for me!” And he brayed like a donkey. Simon just stared, unamused, but Mosley recognized the old thoriphant pulling the cart. His name was Turpin and he had worked up and down the region for as long as Mosley could remember. In fact, years ago, when Mosley was just a calf, it was Turpin who had first taught him how to draw using a piece of chalk in his teeth. The skill never proved to be useful once he was of working age.

“He can’t pull a plow no more but he’s all the Medicine Show needs,” Bemus continued. “But that’s not all I brought!” Bemus grabbed the female by the ear and yanked her in front of the wagon. She said nothing and kept her eyes down.

“Purty for a thoriphant if you ask me! Nuptials are pending, of course. All depends on if Mosley will pitch woo as ordered.”

Mosley was stunned stupid. She was a beautiful thoriphant but the awkwardness of her situation was more than he could bear, and before he knew it, words were coming out of his mouth.

“I don’t need--” he stammered. “I mean, I don’t want—”

Simon’s eyes cut to Mosley and his face twisted. “Are you crossing me?” he said in a low growl.

“Crossing you? No! No, sir.”

“You see I bought you this female?”

“Yes sir.”

“You know what to do with her, don’t you?”

“Yes sir.”

Bemus laughed. “Oh he knows what to do! But love is a delicate business, Simon, you old fart, and needs privacy to bloom, as they say. We should leave them to their own devices.” He put an arm around Simon and produced a bottle. “Here’s to our *selling* instead of buying-- and to mutual success!”

Soon they were in Simon’s house and the thorphants were left alone. Mosley found himself a little out of breath and blinked away the dust on his face.

“Turpin,” he finally said.

Turpin smiled sadly at Mosley and nodded back. “Mosley,” he said and turned quickly to the female, “this is Bera.”

Bera just stood there, wide eyed, not sure what to say. Turpin continued, “Bera, this is Mosley. He’s a good thorphant. You don’t have to be afraid.”

“I’m sorry,” Mosley blurted out, “but-- would you excuse me for a second please?” And he started toward Simon’s house.

Turpin nearly followed but was coupled to the wagon, “Mosley, wait!” he yelled.

Mosley was nearly to Simon’s house. He could hear Bemus laughing and yammering inside as he approached, but suddenly there was a voice behind him.

“*Wait!*”

Mosley turned to see Bera at his heels. She approached and stared at him hard with pensive, green eyes.

“Don’t ruin this for both of us,” she said.

“*Ruin it...?* It’s not-- I don’t *need* a mate. I don’t even *know* you.”

“I don’t know you either, but--” she looked around at the empty fields surrounding them. “This is better than where I came from. It’s quieter. I— I like it quieter.”

Mosley shook his head. “This is all happening too fast. I don’t know anything about you.”

“Turpin said you were kind,” she said. “That’s all I know about you. But you’ll *like* me I think. Anyway—” Her eyes seemed to sting for a moment, blinking back tears. “I don’t think either of us has a choice.”

Mosley didn't know what to do. The sound of Bemus' voice continued from inside the house. They were making plans, speculating how big a herd they could have, what the price would be per head.

"It's not about liking you," Mosley whispered and came closer. "It's not like that. I-- I don't *want* a family. I don't want children. I just want to work and--" His voice trailed off and his eyes wandered.

"Why?" she asked.

"They'll *sell* them. You think they care about-- No. It's not worth it."

"It might be. You never know."

"No. It's not."

Bera was out of things to say and turned to look out over the fields stretching endlessly before them. The sun seemed to bleach everything to the same colorless hue and the wind moved only a little. Finally, her eyes shut and she started back toward the wagon.

Mosley watched her for a moment. She was like a shadow retreating back to its source. She was beautiful. Pity and danger moved in his heart and he found himself calling out to her.

"Bera--"

She stopped and looked back.

Mosley blinked unsteadily.

"I--" he began and shook his head, "I don't want a family, but-- you can stay with me." He almost laughed. "I guess they've already decided anyway. But if that's the way it has to be then-- then don't worry. I can take care of you."

Turpin had finally managed to uncouple himself from the wagon and approached. "You'll take care of each other, Mosley. All of us need a friend to do our dying with. I could do a litany now if you'd like," he said with a smile. "Those men don't care about such things. I know it's hasty but I thought of some words on the way over today. *May I?*"

Mosley found himself nodding. Was he actually going to do this? *Now?* Still dusty from a long day's work and his head spinning? But Bera came close. Turpin looked at them and began to chant lowly...

Oh, wanderers and broken selves,

*Where nothing whole on earth can dwell,
Be peaceful now as souls you meet,
Despite the sun and earth and heat.
Though backs are bent and youth is spent,
The gray and rough-hide thoriphant,
Shall spend his days in bless-ed lands,
With unbent backs and clasping--*

“No,” Mosley said, interrupting. “None of that. I don’t believe any of that. Just— just say it’s so and it will be.”

Turpin looked at Mosley for a moment and then nodded. “Alright then,” he said and straightened himself. “You are bound together. Bound to live uncounted days and to help one another to the grave. May you find joy under the sun.”

And it suddenly was so. Mosley looked at his mate whom he didn’t know only minutes before. She managed a smile. The sun had found a veil in the evening clouds and the gray fields around them slowly turned scarlet.

That first night Mosley and Bera slept uneasily at opposite ends of the stable. Up until the moment Bera came, Mosley had been able to spend his days in a quiet trance of work and sleep, work and sleep. He let the meaninglessness of his life lull him into a dull but manageable dream so that rage or disappointment or despair could not overwhelm him. But now there was somebody else in his life, sleeping only a few feet away. And he cared for her.

She cared for him as well. There were long days when Mosley and Simon would work until the sky was flaming and dim and shadows were long. And they did as they had done before, Simon stumbling into his house alone and Mosley into the barn. But Mosley was no longer alone. There was a face waiting for him at the end of the day, welcoming him in, and it made all things suddenly tolerable.

Bera kept house, as thoriphants do, making the barn into as warm an environment as could be imagined. She helped around the farm with chores while Simon and Mosley labored away in the fields. She was warmth to wake up

to and a reward at the end of the day. But when the sun was low and Mosley entered into the barn, Simon would often sit on his porch with a bottle.

One summer evening Bera gave Mosley the news that they could expect a child in the winter. It was impossible not to be overjoyed by this news, the mysterious product of their love, yet Mosley lie awake at night and wondered what this child's life would be. There was the world he wanted to give and the world that was.

Summer slipped into fall and Simon and Mosley reaped a large harvest of tobacco, wall-bean, and turnips. It was the most profitable year Simon had ever had. But at the end of the day Mosley was more in a hurry to get back to Bera. The weather turned cold. The leaves fell, leaving naked trees like spider limbs reaching to the sky. Then one dim winter day, when the bare fields were dusted with light snow, Bera came to term.

Mosley and Simon were outside, putting up fence posts, when suddenly they heard the faint cry of Bera from the barn. Without so much as a word to Simon, Mosley unhitched himself from a pallet of timber and hurried to the barn. Simon didn't protest. He was nervous as well and didn't quite know what to do with himself over the next few hours. Night crept over the world and a steady rain began to fall. Simon sat in his house and listened to the rain on the roof. But he could also hear Bera's low moans coming from the barn. He ate supper and worked his fire. He finally decided to boil some water and leave it by the barn door in case they needed it. Just as he lay the buckets down he heard the cries of a little one from inside. He heard the exalted weeping of parents. He plodded back to his house.

Later that night, Mosley found Simon sitting quietly on his porch, bundled from the cold and with a flask in his hand. The rain had dissipated to a soft mist.

"Sir...?"

Simon blinked slowly.

Mosley continued, "Sir, it's a boy. We had a boy." He smiled but Simon gave no response.

"He's beautiful. Squawking like he's already mad at the world." Mosley smiled. "We're calling him Rue. We heard the name before and we liked it so—" Still nothing from Simon.

“Anyway, I-- I thought you would want to know.”

Mosley stood there for a moment and then turned back toward the barn. But Simon cut narrow eyes at him.

“Mosley.”

“Yes sir?”

Simon tightened his grip around the flask. “Everything’s wet now.”

“What?”

“Wet! Everything’s *wet!* If you ever leave the pallet out there again I’ll rip your hide with the strap, you understand me?”

Mosley stood there for a long time, bewildered. Finally, he nodded.

“Yes sir,” he said and made his way back to the barn.

That night, the moon rose through a mesh of shredded clouds and cast pale light on the farm and surrounding fields. The rain was gone now but had left what looked like a wide river that cut between the barn and Simon’s house. The two buildings stood in the dripping world, like remote and opposite islands.