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Baptism of Fire

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"A moonpie and a yaller dope," Gondan
ordered every noon when Daddy took
the pickup down to the diner on the highway
for our lunch. We ate in the weeds
crowding to the shade of a wild cherry:
hotdogs, Pepsis, a tube of peanuts each.
But Gondan, who professed to preach when
one of the ridge churches lent him
its pulpit, sat alone in the sun
and argued to all and the August heat his doctrine.
"The Book says a man's not sanctified until
he has the Baptism, until he has the fire,"
he grinned and pulled on the tall orangedrink.
"It says a man can fall again without
he's washed by the Ghost of fire," louder,
daring any Washfoot Baptist in the group
to dispute him. The girls adjusted cutoff jeans
and looked away toward the trees
by the creek where they'd go with one
of the older boys before the afternoon
was done. Once Old Man Bayne, who picked our
beans to supplement his pension from the
Spanish American War and lived in semi-deafness,
ventured that the only cleansing that would
count was water symbolic of the Blood,
to get to heaven. Gondan, still chewing the
moonpie and shaking with excitement, yelled,
"The Word says it takes the Baptism of Fire
to see the Kingdom, and anyone tells it different's
a cockeyed liar." None challenged him; if

prodded further he would start to fight and shout and laugh at once. When teased outside the cottonmill one night he rolled himself through a big puddle until they stopped him. We sat crusted with saltsweat in the stingy shade. The boys flicked peanuts at a cricket, and Junior, with perfect aim, sent one into Linda's shorts. The beanrows wobbled and shivered in the clear flames and luffed like sails when a breeze passed on the vines already yellow with maturity. It would be schooltime soon and we were saving to buy new clothes. Gondan wore his suitcoat in the field no matter what the weather, its collar ripening with damp and smut spores. The clods glared harsh as ice and brimstone. "But with that final bath of fire you're insured against hell and feel a great big tin tub of honey dumped all over your soul." He volunteered once for the mission field, but the office in Raleigh rejected him for lack of education. No church in the valley would give him the call to be its pastor, and the mill had fired him for provoking quarrels. "Anyone that ain't rubbed clean by purifying flame better get his asbestos suit," he finished and threw the bottle into the brush, heading for the scorched rows to pick silently the rest of the day. Daddy called Gondan the slowest hand he'd ever hired, and wouldn't keep him on except a man of the Lord could not be left to starve. Replacing the bottles neatly in their crate on the tailgate we followed reluctantly back into the furnace of vines, comforted by meager shadows and the wind that pushed the tangled field and all its load of weeds and riggings into autumn.