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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.kent.edu/platypus/vol1/iss1/13
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Michael Ball

A gentle afternoon breeze carrying the scent of new growth and the promise of spring blew across a wide rolling field behind a small farmhouse. The trim little cottage sat nestled by a large much repaired barn. A small boy, his brown hair tousled by the same breeze, sat on the ground by the barn, playing with a black ragged-eared pup. The boy smiled to himself as the pup tugged on the stick he was holding. Today was just too nice to be doing chores.

"Colson!" The boy’s smile disappeared when he heard his mother yell his name. "Colson! Where’re you at, boy? Did you feed them chickens yet?"

Colson frowned at his mother’s question. He hated having to feed the family’s flock. They always pecked his feet and ankles. Colson grabbed the pup and stood up. There wasn’t any way he could get out of feeding the chickens, but maybe he could put it off for a while.

"Not yet, Ma. I gotta find Nipper first. He’s run off again." Not waiting for his mother’s response, Colson tucked Nipper under his arm and ran for the field behind the barn. Once in the field, Colson had to slow down. Walking through the knee-high brush grass took more effort. Even though they had only seen the last of the winter weather just two weeks ago, the brush grass was already greening up and growing nicely. His father would probably want to start the first cutting in a week or two. Colson was actually looking forward to that. His father had told him that he was big enough to swing one of the cutter blades this year. That would leave his two sisters stuck with the task of gathering and stacking the grass on the wagon.

Colson turned and looked back at his house. His mother wasn’t in sight. With a smile, he set Nipper down in the grass and sat down next to his pup. Nipper’s small black nose immediately went to work as he investigated the new smells in the grass with a rapid fire series of snorts. But when Colson tapped the stick on the ground, his attention was immediately diverted and the pup jumped back into their interrupted game of tug-o-war. As the duo played and lost track of time, the breeze rippled the grass in random flowing patterns around them.

The sun was just brushing the tops of the still winter bare trees to the west, when Colson heard a faint sound. It was a low, barely audible moan like the wind rushing over the open top of a large jug. Never tiring of his favorite game, Nipper continued to pull on the stick while Colson looked around trying to identify the source of the sound. The sound came again, this time trailing off like a living thing. The hair on the back of Colson’s neck stood up, just as a sharp gust of air smacked him in the face. The air carried a dank smell with it. The smell of old dirt, corruption and dying things. The stick forgotten now, Nipper cowered against Colson’s leg whimpering, his nose quivering at the vile odor carried by the wind.

Colson scooped up the frightened pup, holding him close as he sat up on his knees for a better view of the field around him. Just as the haunting sound reached his ears for the third time, Colson spotted something at the north edge of the field. A dark

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smudge, like smoke or dust, seemed to be hovering over the grass. As he watched, the smudge appeared to grow and then accompanied by the moaning sound, it swirled into a funnel shape. To Colson it looked like the dust devils that chased the wagons down the dirt road during the heat of high summer. As he watched, it continued to grow. The thing was easily the size of his father’s best wagon now, its shape morphing back and forth. And it was starting to move across the field now.

As it moved, the grass below was brushed by the lower fringe of the thing, turning brown and withering away as though dead. A chance gust of wind brought the smell to the pair again, stronger this time. Colson was unable to stop the sound of disgust that came from his lips and to his horror; the thing turned toward him and began moving faster. Fear filled the young boy and he jumped to his feet, turned and tried to run. The thick brush grass pulled at his legs and after a short distance, Colson tripped and went down hard. His wind knocked out of him, Colson struggled to his feet. He made it back up, but at a price. The frightened pup squirmed out of the boy’s weakened grasp and ran through the grass to Colson’s left, yipping in fear.

“Nipper, NO!” the boy’s anguished scream followed the pup. Colson turned to chase his dog and a fresh wave of the terrible stench washed over him. Looking to the north, the terrified boy saw the monstrous thing bearing down on him, a pair of malevolent glowing red eyes staring at him from the center of the thing. Panic overloaded the horribly frightened boy’s brain and he turned again toward the farm house and ran screaming with a fleetness born of overwhelming fear. The monster followed the boy almost to the edge of the grass and then veered to the east, moving erratically through the field.

Colson ran full tilt into the farm house, scaring his mother into dropping the rolls she was removing from the oven. After his parents succeeded in calming the completely terrified Colson; Mahlon, the boy’s father, went out to the field to investigate. There was no sign of the monster, but the field was crisscrossed trails of dead, desiccated grass. And in the middle of one of those trails, Mahlon found the body of Nipper. The energetic pup was gone, leaving behind nothing but a pitifully small corpse that resembled a mummy left to the mercy of the driest desert.