***Pariah***

He had a pale and pallid look,

and it wasn’t just

his fair complexion, corn-silk hair,

or the faded jeans

and thread-bare shirts

in which he faced

the world each day.

No, there was a washed-out quality

about his very soul.

Raised on a hard-scrabble farm,

a stone’s throw from the Tallahatchie

(a turgid stream that meandered

along the edge of Two Mile Bottom

like a great coiling snake

until the government

came along and

made it straight

as an arrow)

he spent an entire summer

entranced by the great, churning drag-lines

as they clawed their way

down the length of the bottom,

metallic jaws scooping up

endless buckets of silt and mud,

dumping them to either side,

so that, in the end, the stream

was nothing more than a sterile ditch.

And in all the years

that followed,

however a conversation started,

whatever its substance,

he always managed to

bring it around

to those idyllic days he spent

watching in wonder

as they dredged the Tallahatchie.

Waiting patiently
for someone to befriend him,

he was a pariah,

a perpetual loner,

a modern day Huck Finn

but without Huck’s wit and guile;

like a dog kicked one too many times,

his first impulse

always to tuck tail and run.

I remember, with no small measure

of guilt and pain,

the day he dropped his head

and wept when our sixth-grade class

laughed as he struggled to describe

the tiny attic room in which he slept,

proof positive of the unwitting and

infinite capacity of children

for abject cruelty:

*Though boys throw stones*

*at frogs in jest,*

*the frogs*

*they die in earnest.*