



government by gus *

Dave Head

Gus went nude all summer. Whether or not this was a subject for debate, I was not concerned—the logic of it was all very plain. This I reasoned, after first seeing the local hermit on a hot summer day, when my brother, Jim, and I first invaded his private wooded domain. I reasoned (a) it was indeed very humid weather, (b) this was his private property, and (c) since it was a secluded spot in the middle of a wood, who would be there to protest?

Gus lived in the woods not more than a mile from my family's Kentucky home. People in town, when asked about him, would just say that he was "a little bit off." I first heard my father speak of him:

"Be careful about going too near Gus Williams' property," he said. "He'll have a fit if you go tramping through his woods, cracking twigs, and scaring away all his squirrels." Then he would add, more solemnly, "he might just shoot you by accident."

This last statement, when let fall upon the ears of my spirited older brother, acted as a biological catalyst. Jim immediately determined that he and I should visit this unusual character, and determine to our own satisfaction his exact nature.

It was to our credit, and even today I am amazed and gratified as I look back on the situation, that my brother and I accepted the entire project in an unbiased spirit, having no preconceived likes or dislikes for this man, and having no fear of giving him a chance to reveal his personality to our approval or condemnation. Indeed, I think it is one of the greatest qualities of childhood, a quality which too often becomes vestigial and anachronistic in adulthood, that the child can first seek an individual character, can seek interaction with that character, and, finally, can judge it only on its relative merits.

We knew Gus existed. We had seen his empty shotgun shells on the floor of the woods. Beside the bridge crossing a creek we once found several squirrel tails and remains of their fur. Here Gus had stopped after a day's stalking in the woods, and had skin-

* Freshman Writing.

ned his squirrels. We knew he existed, but we wanted to *see* Gus. We wanted to know who he was and what he looked like.

On a summer day Jim and I followed the path we knew would take us to his house. As we came out of the woods we were greeted by the sight of a large field, covered with clover, and of a mass of blackberry bushes lining the woods all around. We proceeded forward with an unwavering surety. Then we saw him.

Gus was standing by one of the many bee hives which stood in the clover field near his barn and home. He was a medium-sized man, rather heavy, about fifty years old. He wore a farmer's billed denim hat, to protect his bald head from the sun, a large work shirt, work shoes and socks, and nothing else. Of course he was surprised to see us.

"Hi," my brother said. He spoke so nonchalantly one would have thought he met such people every day.

"Howdy."

Jim immediately went into introductions:

"We just came over to see this part of the woods," he added. "We've never been here before."

"So you're J.R.'s boys, are you? Well, don't mind my appearance. I always go around like this in the summertime." Gus realized from the start that we were there as children, and thus to be trusted.

After minutes of talking—mostly on the fine points of caring for honey bees—we three went to his back patio, sat down on chairs, and Jim and I listened to our first formal lecture.

We discovered that Gus was a political scientist. He began a speech which would be the envy of any politician, and enlivened it with all the controversies of the day. Foreign policy was his main topic—he undoubtedly considered local issues too mundane to discuss.

"Now, President Eisenhower ain't doing this right," he would begin; then he would start discussing the merits and demerits of the administration in power, of the one preceding it, and of all the candidates aspiring to the next administration. Gus would use "pro" here and "con" there, he would use logic in one place and sympathy in another, syllogism for "A" and profanity concerning "B." Gus could combine all the forms and precepts of politics, from the most liberal views on morality and nudism, to the most conservative ideas on economics and military policy, and fuse them

into a unified and tremendously impassioned monologue. This was his own hedonistic calculus, the result of hours spent meditating in the woods along quiet stream banks. This was Gus Williams—a thinking American.

Gus stopped speaking. He had finished his speech, he had defeated his opponents, he had saved the United States government from anarchy and destruction. He then looked at Jim and me. With the perspiration rolling down the sides of his face, Gus smiled.

"You know," he said slowly, "people in town think I'm crazy, living out here all by myself. Well, I've got everything I need. I got a nice warm house and plenty of food. My brother-in-law brings my groceries up every week. And I got a radio and a T.V. What more do I need? I got money. There's bee honey, and all my land's in the 'Soil Bank.'"

He looked anxiously at us, awaiting our approval. His political speech we could not understand, his fine points of logic were above us, and there we merely sat in polite ignorance. But here was something we could understand. Yes, we agreed that he was right, and secretly we both envied him.

My brother and I left. We had seen Gus—had seen his bees, his house and barn, his rifles and shotgun. We knew Gus Williams well, even though we had known him only for an hour. As soon as we were back onto the path leading home we began to talk excitedly about what we had seen and heard. We stopped for a while at the bridge over the creek. For a moment neither of us spoke, then Jim said,

"He's not so bad. He's not crazy, I don't think."

"He's not any worse than Babe McCarthy, who makes moonshine," I added.

"Yeah. At least Gus doesn't hurt anybody. He just does things his own way, runs his own farm like he wants to."

Perhaps we did not really understand Gus. Perhaps neither of us do today. I still ask myself the questions, "Why did he hate people—yet like Jim and me so well? And why did he live by himself—yet listen to every newscast, concern himself with every fragment of occurrence coming to him from the outside world? At the time we just went away, our minds aroused and our questions still unanswered. We agreed on all our assumptions about Gus, and as a note of finality my brother added,

"But he charges too much for his honey."