

CLAYTON BROTHERS

By Jeff Kling

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What in Sam Hill is going on here? The most special day of my life? Who's me? Whose life?

Maybe let's start with that name, Clayton.

Funny name, Clayton. One cannot help but marvel that the German word for clay...you do know the German word for clay, don't you? You have studied, haven't you, as I have urged you repeatedly to do? Yes, you have. You have done your reading, and I am proud of your curious mind. You know the German word for clay is "ton." Pronounced "tone."

Clay-tone.

That's interesting. Know why that's interesting? Because I'm your father and I said so.

What is a Clay-tone? That's easy: it is the rush that fills the vastness of the void. Here's what you do: get your hands dirty making a clay pot, then fire that pot and burn your fingers a little--a little burn builds character--then hold the finished pot up to your ear and you'll hear that Clay-tone. Big and deep, like the ocean in the conch. You remember the ocean. If you behave, I'll take you there again. We'll get ice cream.

You think ice cream's interesting, don't you?

Well, I'm telling you: there's something in that name, Clayton. Believe me. I'm your father. Listen to your old Dad. I know things you can only dream about. You know what it means when you have that dream where all your teeth break and fall out? Simple. It means you stayed up too late eating candy! Serves you right.

Now, run off to bed. I want to have a conversation with the adults.

What? A stomachache? Okay, have a flat Coke. Just this once. It's good for what ails you. Now run along.

What? A bedtime song?

All right. I'll sing you about these here Claytons, the work they've done. It's good for what ails you, too.

(Father sings)

Hop in this Boxcar,
Jumping Bean.
This Train is Bound
For Good Hygiene.

A stumbling block
Along the rails!
A boy was bad,
Now his health fails.

That's it...you're faaast asleep. Your old Dad's going to have a word with the grown-ups, now.

Where was I?

Clay-tone, the rumble of the void. I remember.

In Clayton paintings you experience the result of cooperative siblings, who together and unencumbered have figured out life itself. They know what should and shouldn't fill God's former void.

Let me see if I can explain.

Let's say you're at a cocktail party. On the occasion of a gallery opening, let's say. You want to sound sharp, smart, and possessive of intimidatingly vast critical powers. You can rely upon some version of the following statement, perhaps even whispered conspiratorially, to see you through: "This work fills a necessary void." You and the champagne bubbles will have everyone within earshot all atwitter. Such wit.

But:

Is the void necessary? And if so, why did someone fill it? Why are we here?

Maybe the void is necessary. Maybe life has no meaning. Still, we can make it meaningful. Fill the canvases. Pour your heart into the blank white spaces. Evacuate your soul all over the page. Crush the emptiness with your voice. Don't be afraid. Someone will be glad you did. Not everyone wants to sound clever at your (and ultimately his own) expense.

These pages leave me with the overwhelming conviction that there's more to life than A-Team reruns 24 hours, and Everwood. Maybe TV's a bunch of cruddy crud designed to make advertisers fat in exchange for nothing of value. Except Jackass. Maybe an advertiser's gut is a void that doesn't need quite so much filling. In fact, we can't with accuracy call it a void. They are as fed as a La-Z-Boy is stuffed. That is to say, well.

TV doesn't fill our void. It is the void. So avoid it. That's one of my rules.

The void frightens. The blank canvas imposes a tyranny all its own. (How will you fill it? How do you know it'll be right? What if people say they prefer the void?) Well, if God backed down from the void, we wouldn't be here to watch A-Team reruns. The A-Team itself would not exist! Yet on a daily basis, The Brothers Clayton stare at the void and, with enviable fearlessness, fill it, rendering that void, in hindsight, as attractive as a plastic surgery mishap.

We could say the Claytons' work represents the fruit of fearlessness. It shamelessly creates. It is born of innocence. It indulges innocence, draws strength from it, and encourages it. This work comes from a place we might all still be enjoying had Adam not chosen to fill his bellyvoid with forbidden apple. Adam, Adam. There are rules, Adam.

Aristotle, who got paid substantially better than Greek minimum wage to sit around and think up clever stuff all day, once opined of Beauty that it merits repetition. That's how you know Beauty: you want it copied. You want to see more of it. You want to make babies with Beauty. It makes you want to clutter the void.

The repetition the Clayton work inspires, often in the form of student work, underground art, tattoos, and flat plagiarism (by lesser lights like me), testifies to its beauty. It is wrongly assumed to be of a whole with the work it engenders.

That's right. I too have voided ethical rules to try and see the world through Clayton pens and brushes.

Daddy, What's that you're drawing?

It's a guitar-playing Easter bunny, Kitten.

Why does he have a wooden hand?

He lost his paw to the Luck Industry.

Why does he have an amplifier that's a lard bucket?

Because it makes the rabbit sad that he got fat by eating other animals. That's his bunny blues.

We all benefit from these visual poems. They make perfect, illogical, narrative sense. They fill an unnecessary void. They have the validity of God's own mess to back them up. To stand before their work is to stand in awe before the gaping cosmos; to want to contribute to the Clay-tone roar in one's own way.

The most special day, it turns out, is any day you appreciate that you have life, regardless of its circumstances, and resolve to live by a code that can make life better, more special, for others. I have found neither art nor religion that makes this notion more attractive.

There's salvation in these pages. Salvation in these rules, salvation in these stories, in this magic Dad Logic.

Be good.

Drink your milk.

Be nice to animals.

Manners only help.

You know who has no use for rules, don't you? That's right. Only one man. The Devil.

Old Nick, Get thee hence!

Oh, dear. In my zeal, I have awoken the offspring.

Sorry, kittens. Run go brush your teeth and tuck in tight and you'll fly right under Satan's radar. I'll sing a little more for you; help you meet the Sandman.

(Father sings)

Can polio stop you?

Read the banners:

Life is kind

To those with manners

See this poor gal?

She has no arm.

Yet she behaves!
She'll know no harm, no no....

NO-NO!

Mind those No-No's.

Singing is praying twice. Clay said twice is rich soil and solid bedrock. We could all stand to put down some mental roots in their work and set awhile. See what takes shape.