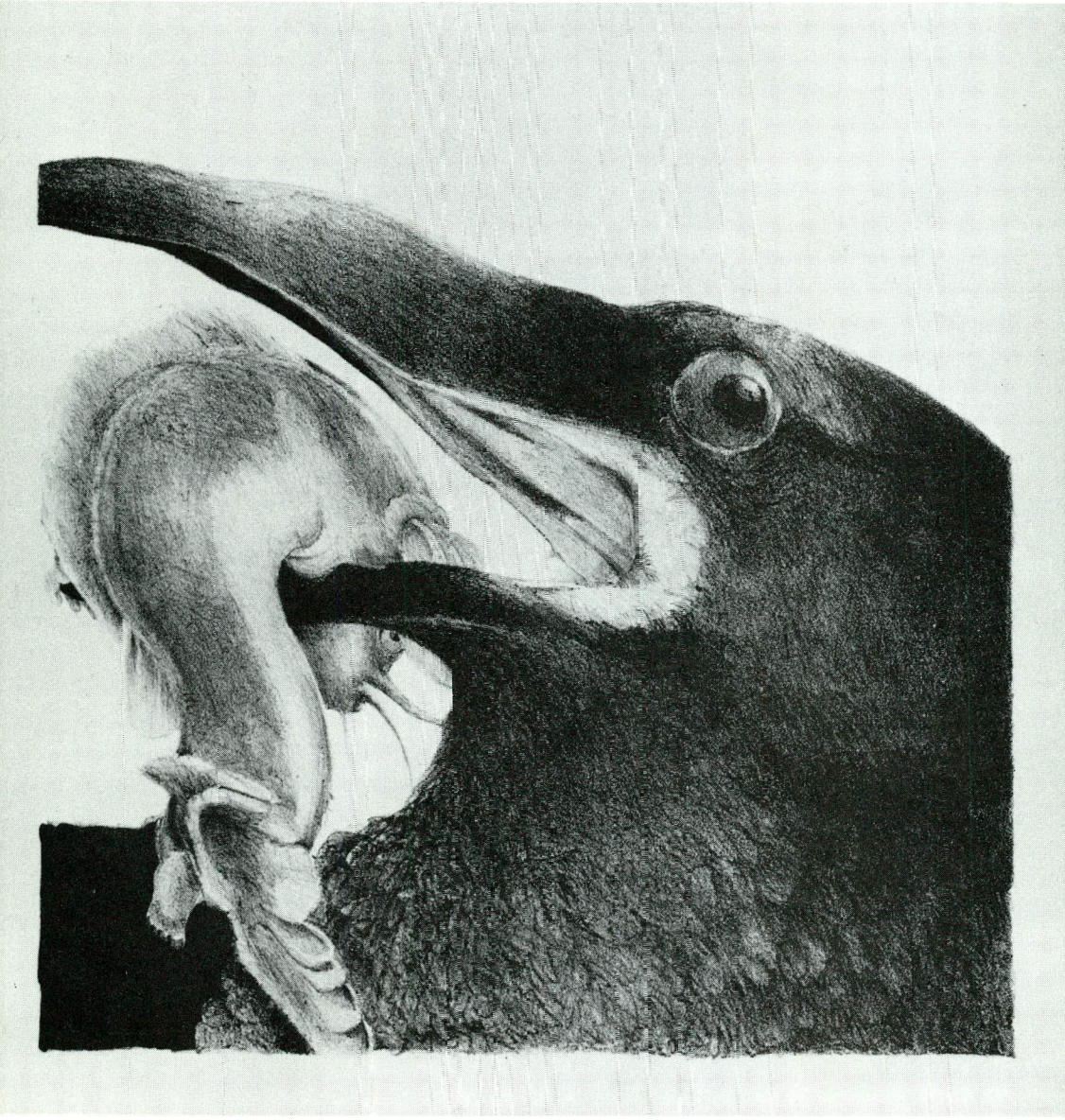
CONTEMPORARY BLACK WRITERS: CELEBRATING 125 YEARS OF KANSAS STATEHOOD



COTTONWOOD 38/39

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SUMMER/FALL 1986

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COTTONWOOD magazine welcomes submissions of fiction, poetry, graphics, photography, translation, reviews of small press literature and literature by midwestern authors. We also welcome articles on the arts from both local and national writers and artists. Poetry submissions should be limited to the five best, fiction to one story. We cannot return submissions which do not include a self-addressed stamped envelope.

Since COTTONWOOD has no regular source of funding, we depend heavily on the interest and support of our subscribers. Issues appear tri-quarterly at $5.00 per issue or $12.00 for a three-issue subscription. Although issues are sometimes irregular, three issues are guaranteed per subscription. Subscriptions and submissions should be directed to:

COTTONWOOD MAGAZINE
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COTTONWOOD 38/39

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SUMMER/FALL 1986

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Editor's Note

A year ago, while the staff was considering how COTTONWOOD might contribute to the celebration of the 125 years of Kansas Statehood, Phil suggested that we should recognize the contribution of Black writers to the growth and progress of the state and region. Some of the materials in this issue remind us that progress has been painfully slow, spotty, and at best more like one step backward for two ahead; yet in the work of those represented in this issue, one sees that dignity and a commitment to truth make it possible to hold the ground that courage and strength have gained.

We planned to bring out an issue of the usual size in November of the anniversary year. The task has taken longer because the quantity of submissions taxed our staff of readers; the quality doubled the size of the projected issue. Even in a double issue, there was not room for a number of excellent items. We believe, and hope you will agree, that the delay has been well worth it. We are very proud of the accomplished work presented here. Even at the last moment, as we go to press, a beautiful piece of news has arrived: Our warmest congratulations to Rita Dove, who has just been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her volume of poetry *Thomas and Beulah*!

Dr. Gerald Early, our guest editor, joined in the project during a discussion over supper among two of the editors, Dr. Early, and Dr. Barksdale, then Langston Hughes Visiting Professor in the English Department at KU. We are deeply grateful to these distinguished scholars. Fred Whitehead of Midwest Distribution called to our attention the remarkable autobiographic work of Frank Marshall Davis, and our Photography Editor, Jon Blumb, helped us to discover the impressive artwork of John Newman. A lot of help from our friends.

We have selected rather sparingly from the many fine photographs stored in the Black History Archives of the Kansas Collection of the University of Kansas Libraries. The Black History Collection contains personal letters, diaries, speeches, scrapbooks, photographs and organizational, business, and educational records. The Archives seeks to add to its collection similar items which may be lying forgotten in storerooms, file drawers, basements and attics. The Kansas Collection, housed in Spencer Research Library, provides a safe environment for the preservation of such historical items, where they may be made available not only for formal research but for the use of every member of the community. Readers who are aware of materials that could be made available for the collection may contact Professor Jacob Gordon, Sheryl Williams or Deborah Dandridge at Kansas Collection, University of Kansas Libraries, Lawrence, KS 66045-2800—phone (913) 864-4274.

Issue 40, a celebration of Professor Emeritus Edgar Wolfe, is close to press time also and will contain announcement of the first Alice Carter Awards for our writers. The money prizes will be small but will represent some effort on our part to recognize those without whom there would be no magazine—the wonderful writers who submit much, see only some come to print (and that often longer than we might wish after the acceptance letter). In our heart of hearts, they are all winners. We salute their generosity and patience.

George F. Wedge

Guest Editor's Note: First Catch

we have come through doors flaming . . .
— Quincy Troupe, "Ash Doors and Juju Guitars"

And so long black song
comes dark, provident, absolute . . .
—Ken McClane, "To Hear The River"

This issue is dedicated to the memory of alto saxophonist Charlie "Yardbird" Parker, the greatest of all the Kansas City jazzmen and one of the most dominant Afro-American presences in 20th century American popular culture, who crashed through the door flaming, poised upon the ardent edges of panic and wonder, and who desired nothing more than to sing and to be sung to in return.

I

Kansas, Bloody Kansas. What is the importance of Kansas in particular and the midwest in general in Afro-American culture? It is the place that produced the heroic fanaticism of John Brown and serves as the litigious source of the landmark Supreme Court decision—Brown v. Topeka Board of Education— that integrated public schools and, in a large political and spiritual drama, public life in America. There are certain prominent blacks who come to mind as being associated with Kansas or Kansas City in one way or another—Langston Hughes, Charlie Parker, Count Basie, Gwendolyn Brooks, Gordon Parks, and Carmell Jones among others; and an even greater number— from Mary Lou Williams to Sonny Liston—connected in some vital way to the midwest. But what, in truth, is Kansas and the midwest to the black imagination?

"I never liked Kansas when I was growing up—too many restrictions," said poet and journalist Frank Marshall Davis. "Kansas City was better." There are four geographies of myth for Afro-America and only one has really been a true midwestern location: 1) the American south as the land of enslavement, oppression, and the locus for the origins of one of the world's greatest folk cultures symbolized particularly by New Orleans, Memphis, and the Mississippi Delta where so much of black expressive culture took its form; 2) New York, the city that became the home of the New Negro Renaissance and the nesting place for every major trend in black political thought in the 20th century; 3) Chicago, where thousands of blacks migrated after the First World War, including King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, Earl Hines, and Richard Wright ("Chicago," said Frank Marshall Davis, "in the late 1920s and the early 1930s was a complete challenge. It was big and the home of the *Chicago Defender*, at that time the nation's largest Negro newspaper; it was then the jazz capital of the nation."); 4) and Kansas City, the only undeniably midwestern sense of place in the black cultural mind. For some blacks like Frank Marshall Davis, the midwest

(symbolized by Kansas and Missouri) was a place from which one simply and passionately wanted to escape but for blacks from Colorado, New Mexico, Nebraska, Arkansas, Ohio, and Iowa, Kansas City was a place to come to. Winding out of the back, dusty roads of Oklahoma came the mythical Blue Devils whom virtually every midwestern black boy went to dance halls to see during the Depression and before—boys from Ralph Ellison in knee pants breaking curfew to chubby Charlie Parker holding in his sweaty palms the C-melody saxophone his mother bought for him—to see the Blue Devils and dream of going to Kansas City. It is the grand Territory, as the midwest and the southwest is called in Afro-American culture, symbolized by Kansas City, that gave America two of the most epic black organizations in its history: the Blue Devils and the Kansas City Monarchs of the old negro baseball leagues. "I spent my first week in New York and my first month's allowance looking for Charlie Parker," Miles Davis once said. But we know that the quest for Parker was, for Davis, a midwesterner himself, nothing more than a kind of re-lighting out for the Territory, the search for the last and the greatest of the Blue Devils. New York was not New York. It was Kansas City, the jam session, the fulfilled dream life of the adolescent midwestern black boy at last. New York has never been the first catch of the questing black artistic spirit. It has always been, hauntedly and fixedly, the Territory.

II

If this special double issue of *Cottonwood*, devoted to contemporary Afro-American writing, has a piece whose magnitude is both obvious and central, it is the long excerpt from Frank Marshall Davis's unpublished autobiography, "Livin' the Blues." Davis, who emerged in the 1930s as an important poet from the social realist school (which means that his writing makes up in sheer force what it lacks in elegance), has never received the critical attention he deserves for either his poetry or his work as a journalist. In this regard, he joins novelist William Attaway and poet Fenton Johnson ("a kindred soul," Davis calls him) as other Afro-American naturalists who have been neglected by both readers and critics. This long chapter from "Livin' the Blues" relates, in terms that echo the powerful, unflinching prose realism of other black male autobiographers such as Douglass, Wright, and Malcolm X, the story of the education of a young black male in Arkansas City, Kansas, in the first quarter of the twentieth century. But its centrality is not simply a function of its being the longest piece in this collection. It serves as the imaginative core around which other pieces are illuminated such as Professor Richard Barksdale's essay on Langston Hughes, Professor Edgar Tidwell's examination of Sterling Brown's "Slim" poems, my essay on the Count Basie autobiography and my interview with Audrey Jones, Eugene Kraft's interview with Gwendolyn Brooks, the "Kansas" poem by Gordon Parks (which originally appeared as prose in an early chapter of his autobiography, *A Choice of Weapons*) and Herbert W. Martin's "Deadwood Dick" poems. Together, these works make up as diverse and exciting an anthology of creative artistry and critical commentary on Afro-American life in the midwest that I have seen. For these pieces alone, this issue of *Cottonwood* would have inestimable value.

But the literary riches here are truly vast: Richard Perry, whose novel, *Montgomery's Children*, I have greatly admired, has contributed a fine story called "Now I Can Tell It." Sheila Roberts, an expatriate South African, has two disturbing and fascinating stories about her native land which both display talent worth watching. The poets here range from Phyllis Becker, who is being published for the first time and whose work I am very proud to be introducing to a literary audience, to Rita Dove, who was called in a review of her latest book of poetry, *Thomas and Beulah*, in *Georgia Review*, a writer who "must be recognized as one of the best young poets in the country today." L. Poole's "o'tel" poem is one of the most innovative dialect poems I have read in years. To be sure, all of the poetry is startlingly good, fresh, and wonderfully inventive. It is heartening, perhaps even a bit daunting, to realize that so many good, extraordinarily good black poets are writing today. It is almost as if one were hearing the hum of some superlative, eternal jam session, voices rising and falling in unison, in solo, witnessing first catches and exactingly creative pursuits, hunts sparked with wayward energy.

III

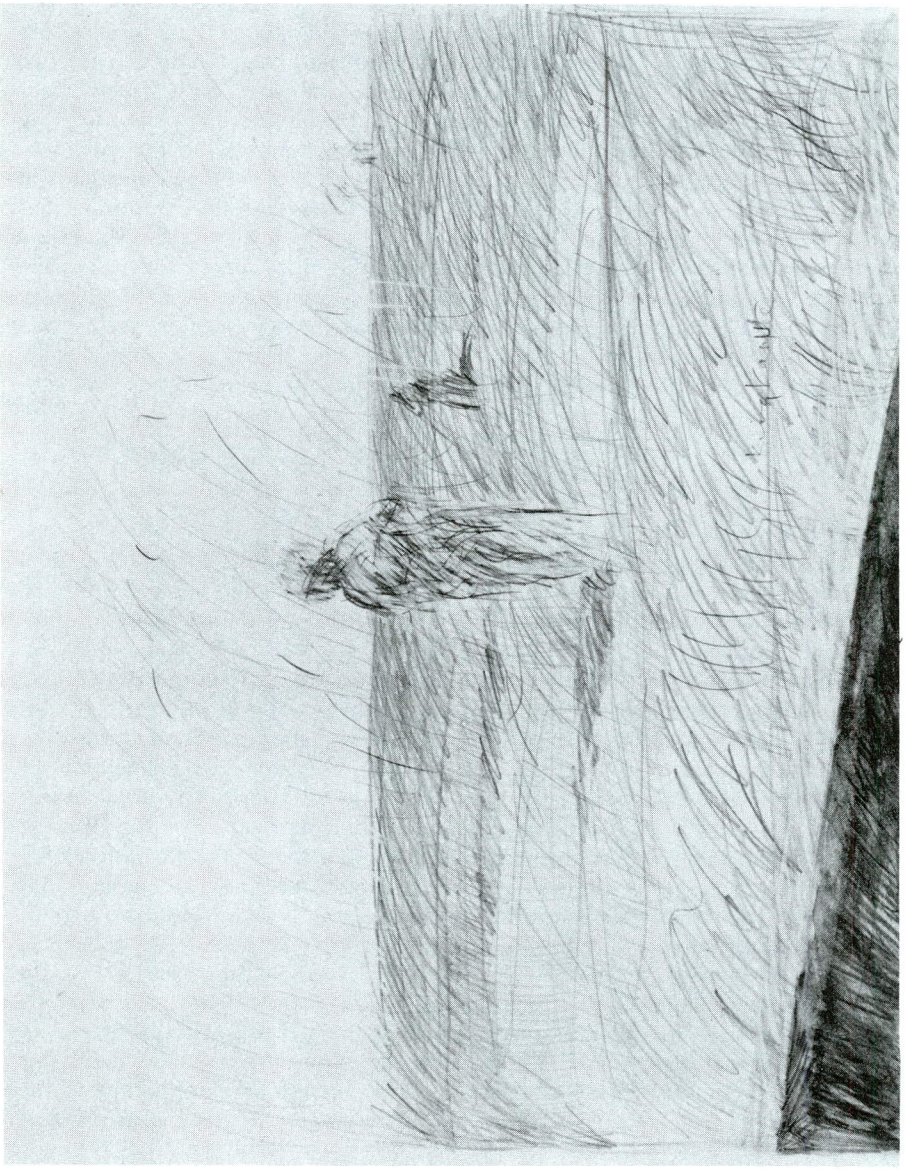
I have come, finally, and with an unexpected sense of real shock at an arrival that I never really anticipated ever manifesting itself, to the moment when I must acknowledge all of those who have worked (much harder than I, alas) to make this issue possible.

I wish to thank George Wedge for asking me to participate in this project and for expressing real confidence in my abilities to help bring it off.

The *Cottonwood* staff has been terrific: Phil Wedge and Jack Healy have been friends who have truly enriched my life; Shelle Rosenfeld (the lady in black who, I think, has calmed down at last about Nathaniel Mackey's wonderful novel, *Bedouin Hornbook*) is a fine person with a very sharp critical eye. Gary Brown, Tamara Dubin Brown, and all the readers have been witty, helpful, incredibly competent, and fun to be around. In short, my involvement with *Cottonwood* has been one of the most endearing, and will probably become one of the most enduring, experiences of my life. Never has anyone's timid ineptitude been so completely covered to seem such deft expertise. I have appreciated the warm support and wise counsel.

I must add that although I have thoroughly enjoyed my first venture as an editor, my first catch, if you will, I am not so eager to become accustomed to this business as I feel that something may catch me before too long or perhaps, as the song goes, I am "too young to go steady." Thank you all. The pleasure's been mine.

Gerald Early



POETRY

Gordon Parks

KANSAS LAND

I would miss this Kansas land that I was leaving.
Wide prairie filled of green and cornstalk;
the flowering apple
Tall elms and oaks bordering streams that gurgle,
Rivers rolling quiet in long summers of sleepy days
For fishing, for swimming, for catching crawdad beneath the rock.
Cloud tufts billowing across the round blue sky.
Butterflies to chase through grass high as the chin.
Junebugs, swallowtails, red robin and bobolink,
Nights filled of soft laughter, fireflies and restless stars,
The winding sound of crickets rubbing dampness from their wings.
Silver September rain, orange-red-brown Octobers and white Decembers with hungry
Smells of hams and pork butts curing in the smokehouse.
Yes, all this I would miss—along with the fear, hatred and violence
We blacks had suffered upon this beautiful land.

Phyllis Becker

NOBODY HOME

He came home from the office
To his three bedroom home,
Put up his briefcase, closed the blinds,
Changed his clothes and sat on the bed
In the air conditioned room.
He was uptight and raw,
Feeling like he'd failed again,
In ways he was not quite sure of,
Only knowing for sure
He was not going to be invited
For beers with the boys.
Never thought he'd end up here,
Other places, maybe even back home.
And he thought back to
Sitting on dirty brownstone stoops
To escape the heat,
Drinking in the night,
Music from open windows, tapping feet,
To friends, a face, smile, gesture,
Some hard to remember, most moved on.
He rubbed his forehead, his body stiff,
And sat there in the darkened room.

Phyllis Becker

HER THOUGHTS LAY IN WAIT

Thoughts about what happened
Would come to her
At strange times.
Never when everyone
Thought they would or should,
Say for example when
Someone talked about a
Rape, mugging, assault
They heard about on T.V.
Or a close call someone
They knew experienced.
She really didn't
Think about it then.
Those thoughts waited
To come when she
Least expected them
Like in between dragging on
A cigarette and sipping a drink,
Walking down a hall, talking
Casually to a friend, in a
Restaurant, riding in a car,
After work when she got home,
These thoughts would sneak up on her,
Catching her by surprise
like he did.

Phyllis Becker

DRINK HOT TEA

My shrink told me
In soft, soothing tones
To drink hot tea,
Keep bundled up—
I would feel cold.
I had goose bumps
On my arms
When I took
A hot, steamy shower.
I felt so stereotypical.
Every scene I'd seen
On T.V. when a woman
Was attacked,
She took a shower.
"You know what I'd do
To him and all his kind?"
My shrink said to me,
"I would have them
Castrated in a public square."
I laughed a hard, harsh laugh.
My first laugh in a week.
(I think I was supposed
To get mad).
I laughed in spite of myself,
Trying to imagine
This self-composed,
Gentle woman
In a dark, scratchy,
Woolen, hooded robe,
With a razor-sharp
Instrument in her hand,
Myself in the crowd,
Sipping hot tea.

Phyllis Becker

GRACE

They resumed their conspiracy
At the dinner table.
The gravy was thick on
The mashed potatoes.
They eyed the peas on their
Plates, suspiciously.
They were bright green.

Heads bowed. He kicked her
Under the table. She glanced
Sideways as their father
Murmured grace.
He looked at her again,
Spread his white napkin across
His lap and with one hand rolled
Green peas onto the napkin.
Some smashed, some hit the floor.
He squished it in a ball.
Amen,
They were grateful.

upon her head

carried

the huge
wicker
basket
of
clothing
upon
her head

glided
gracefully
up Brooklyn's
Sterling
Place
without
missing
a
step

smiled
and i
smiled
in
return

wished
i had
a
c
a
m
e
r
a

to capture
the essence
of this
ebony
island
lady

departing from the corner laundromat

the huge
wicker
basket
of
clothing
upon
her head

glided
gracefully
up Sterling
Place
without
missing
a
step

Linda Cousins

THE LION, TIGER, AND MASAI WARRIOR IN MY BROOKLYN LIVINGROOM

They give me
their liquid strong eyes
  piercing lucidly
yet lovingly
my moves and musings
in this brooklyn room

they do not pounce upon
  and maul me
as this "civilized" american
  society
so often does

from their tree-lined grassy
habitats
they render to me
the ancient strength
of my Africa home never seen

my Masai warrior
looks at me
from the corner
of his eye
he sees my Ashanti lover
kiss me
and touch my breast
his locks in ochre'd/red
  dreaded strands
have inspired mine
into these thick flowing
  black ropes
evidence of our kinship
and bonds of cross-tribal love

my regal lion
and tiger
on canvas
hanging above
the aluminum-foiled
African dancing ladies
formed by the hands
of an unknown Nile descendant/
a prison artist
encaged somewhere
in the brutal jungle
of upstate new york

my Masai warrior
across the fireplaced room
his ever-present eye
corners me in tender strength
from glossy poster paper
furnishing these clues
of a lost culture
that I constantly excavate
from my soul depths

these rare ones—
untainted African man
  and beast
upon a cruelly polluted planet—
taunt and tantalize
me onward in my quest
toward the renewed revival
of our triumphant
  and ancient
African Selves.

Elinor Meiskey

DARKLING

Shhh—
She is hanging out clothes
In her black skin.
Kinky hair bound by a red bandanna,
Large flowers in bright colors
Cover a cotton dress,
Bare feet make toe, heel prints
In dirt.
Inside, a room set off—
An altar
Where water and wind move
Through air with sighs.
She laughs her way backwards,
"Arms kotches you
If you falls."
Scars heal, wounds close.
Afterall,
A fine line is felt
When hands move softly over
Places torn.
There's always silk.

Herbert Woodward Martin

THE DEADWOOD DICK POEMS

for: Judith Brown Yales

I

Between the spaces,
Deadwood Dick
I vision you, man
Image within the pupils
Struggling somewhere in mid-life against the stampede
Odds of Texas, Arizona, Nebraska,
Horses and other men.
You, with your love of the free and wind,
The best eye on the plain
I have found it necessary to walk through your blood,
Question tender and desert nerves that,
You might have preferred to deal with privately.

II

Early your father died.
He made you man at twelve
Through death, through the discipline
Of breaking colts for 10 cents apiece.
It was another horse
With which you earned your reputation and fee.
Too bad you lost your 25 cents by
Collecting it beforehand.
That animal-will which
First introduced you to stampede,
The rough paths and pasture;
that throttled you almost to the ground,
Taught your arteries tenacity.

III

You, Deadwood, master of rope and gun,
When the wind interrupts your sleep
The ground, I know in that instance is harder.
I sense, what your nights must have been,
Where even the sagebrush approaching by wind
Is ultimately feminine company,
Although, that wind continues to move
Between you and your dreams
In the heart of its burning.

Deadwood what loneliness must have been like in those days!
One learns, in time, to sleep quite well alone.
I have experiences, dust-storms of the heart
Where you dig in and cover your face
Until the disaster is over / or
You ride like hell through a hail-storm
Hoping the ice will not strike against your temples.
A man can shoot everything but nature.

When you were thirty,
Were you swift, learned and happy,
As young men are supposed to be?
How many men did you know, who
Were afforded death by the natural stampede of your life?
Was the open as free as history records?

A man could shoot everything but nature
And death which itself is a bullet,
And loneliness, that knife of grass
Which cuts the flesh silently,
Although, the pain is apparent hours afterwards.
A man will resist everything if you tell him his heart is no good.

IV

Nat Love, in your black leather from foot to white Stetson,
You, man, were rough.
No woman's hand could have held you.
No circumstantial embrace could have kept you for more than a night.
What I want to ask is how . . . no, why?
After so many years of riding
You never recorded a single soft encounter?
Were there no quiet, accidental moments in barns?
Or everlasting evenings in the plains of the flesh
Where, one lying next to another on the ground
Can hear the sound of everything approaching;
Feel the heat from gathered brush expire
See the moon disappear,
Hear the wind stop,
Or fall deeper into sleep like night into silence?

There are certain concerns a man must be discreet about.

V

Where are the dark wolves of your knowledge?
I question you, Deadwood.
You may answer with subtle implications.
I know we have moved sufficiently from understanding,
So that to touch is less likely to mean love,
And to speak means certain death.
How do you feel in the open
With the moon's coyote gaze upon you?
Or when you wake and find a rattlesnake curled between your heart and stomach sleeping?
Where did you bury the knowledge of your
dark enemies?

VI

You Deadwood who,
Woke one morning with Indians in your eyes,
Who suddenly turning from nightmare to tears
Bled real blood.
Exiting from that dream, do you realize the cause may have been,
That there was no woman to share the dawn with?
There is some excitement to be derived from riding a horse
But a horse is never companion enough,
Not, at least for a man named Nat Love.

Sunday night.
Deadwood,
The roads are deserted.
We discuss ourselves.

VII

Indians come in silence; buffaloes come with noise
Their sound comes first,
Like maddened cowhands paid-off and drunk;
Then they appear and nothing can turn them around.
A man and his horse lay dead from the stampede.
Indians come in silence, the buffalo comes with noise.
It is with such swiftness the most destruction occurs.

Squinting in the day break

More often than not
Chicago is
fresh turned
black top,
still wet,
if you will notice.

Especially in a pre-dawn
morning after a flash
summer rain
when somewhere you
can hear the first
one to leave his house
every morning slam
the door and start the
engine letting it idle
for a while to smoke a
cigarette until
he has organized his day
and the first bird song I
have always heard
since I was a newspaper
boy pushing my cart
through the streets and alleys of my
newspaper route in the
pre-urban renewal
mornings in Hyde Park,
you can still hear,
if you will notice.

Close your eyes
to hear the toot of
a train whistle passing
through this urban country
town and the soft southern
drawl as twang of folks on
the southside of Chicago
wish you a 'hi'
or gentle 'howdy do,'
when they will.

Wars and urban ghettoes,
street gangs
and Chicago politics
do not seem to be as near
or matter much
when standing on the corner
your lungs take a strong dose
of the smell of Chicago,
still wet,
like fresh turned
black top,
if you will
notice.

Stanley E. Banks

A HARD-CORE WOMAN

She was a hard-core woman
  who after being broken-in
  by her first step-father,
  lost faith in gentleness.
She was a hard-core woman,
  filled with venom,
  ready to set your insides on fire,
  would turn her back on you,
  let you have it.
She was a hard-core woman
  who at age fourteen
  gave birth to a beautiful daughter—
  adding a second generation
  to the ranks of hard-core.
She was a hard-core woman
  with a black doll-like face,
  brown crystal eyes
  that saw more than
  fancy should allow.

Wanda C. Outlaw

A VISITOR

The goddess, Discordia, kissed me last night.
I fell into myself and groped for the end
  of my void.
She said, "Into your life a little sadness
  must come."
There is no Knight armoured enough for this rescue.
I submitted to the unwanted seductress
  and stroked her ever so gently.
She screamed her pleasure; her conquest was sweet.

As I unfold from within
  I hear her vow to return
  with a kiss no less pungent than the night before.

Wanda C. Outlaw

in passing

perched on a stoop
giving admiration to
miss Lay's chips
i counted all the black cars
that went
by . . .
wondering why only Blacks didn't
drive them . . . my family did.
  my dime philosophy was overwhelming
passing—passing time—passing

I found time to throw down
in the back seat of a black car
couldn't say no to those black cars
and found a fierce Black man in it.
  i gladly welcomed my heritage
passing—passing time—passing

uncle sam gave me
plenty grief—plenty work
and little pay
but i saved, and Lord my rainy day
brought me my own black car
to wash, to wax, to pay for.
  had to keep up the tradition
But in passing . . .
Grandma passed—passed by
in a black car that took her to rest.

while eating my Lays,
i gave my thoughts to Grandma
and my true heritage.

Lea Hopkins

ESSENCE OF MEAT SOUP

Essence of meat soup
is when da meat
been plopped in da pot
for a few minutes
den snatched out real fast.

Oh you know it's in there—someplace
cause ya can taste it
as ya lick yo fingas
where da juice dun run all
down yo hands.

Was like dat at our house:
Essence.
Po folks live on essence ya know.
Essence of food.
Essence of clothes.
And most times essence of life.

But there was one essence
we did'n llow
and dat was essence of Love.
L-O-V-E
Huney, we had love.
Full bodied, meatty, fat love.
The kind that just fills ya up
and makes ya chest stick out
and puts a big grin on yo face.

All eight of us squeezed togetha in three rooms
in the basement,
steppin over
and crawlin under,
We had love.

When yo stomach is groanin
and the cardboard in yo shoes
smells like rottin potatoes,
you gotta have somethin to hold onto.

We all cherished our love
and prayed our love
and sang our love—LOUD,
shook the rafters
and laughed
  cause it felt soo good.
Oh I wish you'd ah been there.
Sweet baby Jesus, ya shouda been there.

If you coulda just seen Mamma's face
the day Effie got the clerkin job
at the Five n' Dime.
She was soo proud.
One, just one of her dauta's
had a job, or rather a po-si-tion.

Mamma neva considard washing floors
a po-si-tion.
She scrubbed floors at the factory
for twenty-five years
on her hands and knees
everyday
afterday
afterday
and one day,
she passed out, just gave up.

Daddy walked five miles
picked Mamma up in his big black strong arms
and carried her home, to us.

Mamma slept alot afta that;
most of the days, all day sometimes
and we clung togetha wrapped tight
in our love, watchin over Mamma
and carried on.
Daddy stopped smilin.
Laughed sometimes but that smile was gone.

My Daddy used to walk in a door
and the whole room lit up
cause of that wonderful, lovin smile.
He smiled because his soul was glad.
With Momma down, his soul just sorta left.

Well, now I'm gettin all sad faced
and teary eyed and bringin folks all down.
That's not what I tended to do.
I wont you up, up here where I am,
where I always been
deep
deep
down in the pit of my stomach.

Like the time Big Bud punched out
ol shit-faced Jerome for pinchin
my sista Molly's ass.
Chil, we laughed bout that for weeks
cause if Miss Molly had'na been switchin
so hard past the Dew Drop,
her ass would'na got pinched no way.
But Big Bud, my favatist brother, was mad.
Hell mad,
nose all flared out
eyes bugged out
cause he felt he was duin
his duty
to protect Miss Molly's vir-gi-ni-ty
which she didn't have no way.
She lost that in the back seat of
Jimmy Ray's car months ago.

Memba that eight in this family
I was tellin yall bout?
Well we really was six
till I got knocked up by Billy
and had the nerve to have twins:
That Billy sho was some good stuff,
and I reealy loved that man
but he left town shortly afta.
Just run off.
God knew where, I sho didn't
and it hurt.
I felt so lonely and low probly
woulda pined my heart away
ceptin for my Daddy
and he was all the Man I needed
with Billy up and gone.
Way he figued, they was his chillin
and he loved them like he loved
all us chillin.

To us, the babies was just
two mo mouths to feed
and a lotta more love to spread around.
And that's the question and answer
of the matta.
Why we loved so hard and yes we loved
each other for always,
no matta what.

Well, I sho hope yall enjoyed my little story
cause I sho enjoyed tellin it.
And yall know what,
we still togetha.
If not in body, always in spirit
and most defnately in love.
And THAT we will hold onto,
fight fo
and die fo.

Michael S. Weaver

THE NEGRO FORT

for Prospect Bluff in Florida

People without names
bathed in upturned air
like guineas full
of buckshot, their feathers
multiplying to millions.
The finale of last minutes
crackled in the fire
of exploding powder.
Wherever they decided
life would assume a foundation
and roll on, wherever
they made a stance,
the Devil conspired.
Past the horizon
of ocean and sky,
old men pointed to birds
sweeping down at angles,
carving the African
landscape. Hopes and prayers
were shot up to bring
a divine army around them,
seal off the fort
from Hell. A clapping
in a lone hut between
the hands of a grandmother
and her woman child, a fierce
grasp for a fading song,
heavy cascading water
in the lungs, the laughter
going down as she claps,
chants with the child and the metal
rips through in streams,
jagged, yellow, wondrous.

May Miller

Balancing

1.
Did man come from the sea
dragging awareness of change
through centuries down which
eater and eaten moved warily?
Is it that whipped by misgiving
he probes an aeon hoard of rock and bone
marveling at the chiseled tool,
at the carved vessel brimming
with token of early barter?
He is invaded by awe
as he invades the fossil.
No yesterday justifies his present;
no tomorrow holds respite
since what he finds is still unfound
with the past rekindled only
in the thinking of his time.

2.
Often he wakes in troubled night
to awareness of sinister vanities:
a novel flat upon his chest
the open page turned down;
on the table a box babbling
crime and welfare condescension;
there, too, a bookworm with figuring
deposit—withdrawal—balance.
Rain may well drip glittering
on his windowpane,
the close-in shades flapping
in measured beat,
but thunder merely rattles hills
where the past lies petrified.

Martha M. Vertreace

EARTHBOUND

That was my country. Terrible winds and wonderful emptiness.

—Georgia O'Keefe

Easter: the Chicago River oozes green
since St. Patrick's Day. A sax player
stands by the cogs of the drawbridge
which sways like a reed to home-grown
jazz as it roots into sidewalk cracks
on Wrigley Plaza. On hot Sundays
like this, my father and I walked home
from church along railroad tracks. My
dress hid playsuit stripes criss-
crossed under my slip. I counted
wooden ties, while he told stories
I believed of where trains we never
saw had gone. He bought strawberry
popsicles which I learned to eat,
to color my lips, he always said,
"brassy red like a harlot." Years
later in Joao Pessoa, running
with a nut-brown boy whose kite
disappeared in the Brazilian sun,
I remembered how my box kite lifted
like a coal car open at both ends
laughing at gravity, until it faltered,
trembled on a hot air stream like aspen
catkins in a coming storm, then drifted
groundward. My father held its
tightrope string; his wrists jerked
in delicate tension, dance of control,
the kite rising like sleep in morning
air, like Cahir Castle from sea mist.

Martha M. Vertreace

RIVERBOAT

My father at eighteen or so
a waiter on the Mississippi
learned Cajun French
he unlearned at the university;
brought a steak back a second time
to a suited sir who then demanded
  I want this steak black
  as black as you are
Quizzical—too poor to dar allow
the seductive hurt to hear
that nothing in this voice meant
  black is proud—
    there would be time
    and time enough
    for that—
the steak went back a third time
and returned a cinder
escorted by a scared kid
unsure of what to feel
and a Cajun chef
who, knowing all the rules,
forced the man to eat
every mouthful.

Thomas Glave Jr.

THE EMPLOYEE

He went looking for work
in the oddest of places:

Ditchdigger,
gravedigger,
digger for apples.
Even Lewis Carroll
wouldn't give him a job.

Now
his fingerprints
are as black
as the backs of his hands
from newsprint
in the help-wanted ads.

The employment agency's
no help.

"If you had a big prick,"
they say,
"we could use it."

"If you had fat lips,"
they say,
"they would be useful."

"If only
you were stupider,"
the sweet gray-eyed secretary
says with a smile.
"We need at least one stereotype."

Fortune finally belched on him.

A lynching factory
in Mississippi
hired him.

"Population control," they say,
as he knots another noose,

"Control,"
they say,
"that's the best way
to deal with

you folks."

storyteller joe
en iz fren o'tel

o'tel
ee use live ere

know what ol o'tel use say
everone round ere's dyin
dat's o'tel use say

ee use gets blin
gets real blin
tils summon tells im
go
gets
yooz bad fo bisnez

dey use tell o'tel
gets
outta ere
boy

en o'tel use gimme thins

why
see dis coat
o'tel done gived it
en deese shoe
o'tel

why
iz rainin one day
n o'tel seez i aint gots no shoe
n ee sez
ere
jes tooks em offa iz feet
n sez
ere

o'tel
ee was a good man
en if
en if
en if i needs a
coupla greens till monday
o'tel sez ere
you cans pay me back on payday

bu man
ee always knowd i ain't gots no job

sum nites
i'z waitin for im ta gets in
cause you knows
sometimes ee'd ave a swig
to lay me out

i slees bes dat way

an i'z waitin
an waitin
an waitin
an all suddn i eres o'tel
coughin up
ou in de stalls

an i'd go sneakin ou my room
cause dey'll take yor key
if dere's two in yor room
an dey catchya
an sides
ya go sneakin roun nites
dey lible think ya gots an ol lady
an dey'll done put a boot on yor door
an say get
git yor stuff
an don come back
you knows da rules
ain't no ladies loud in yor room

an you say
man
i did'n eeven know she's dere
man i'z jes sleepin
an
an
an she mussa pict dat lock

don kick me ou
man
i ain't got nowheres else

an dey peers in dis lil black box
an say
dis ez de tird time dis mon
you come backs en coupla weeks

en know what o'tel do
eed ide me in iz room
en brings me food

even done slept on de flor

en i'd say
no o'tel
en eed say
bugs don bodder me
s'all up ere
en eed poins t'is ed
en say
dey ca'n git ya up ere
s'only things i gots
en iz mine

en i'd wakes in monin
looks down
en dere'd ee wuz
ol o'tel
blood an all
settins nexta im
en dose bugs acrawlin alls oer

en eed be snorin
wit dis smile on iz face

an i members
one time
way back
o'tel en me
when we's still diggers
an man
seemed
seemed like me en o'tel
be two feets down
an it'd rain
an rain
an rain
an rains all summer

we dug en dug
en we dug
two by eight
two by ten
en den o'tels oncle wen en die

an o'tel
eez real close t'iz oncle see
bein cause everyone else ee coun fine
an ee don members
ows ee gots ere

en we takes iz oncle
in dis wheelbrow
en done wheels im for mile en mile
down dis road

en iz rainin en rainin
en o'tel
seein dis ill
sez
up dere
en poins

en man
you coun tell iz feets
from mud
pushin dat wheelbrow
up dat ill

an alls i member
iz o'tel n me
bent
diggin
rain streamin down iz face
iz muscles all bent up awitchaway
an man
oo woulda blieved it
we it rock
two feets down
rock
two feets by seven
rock

two feets by eight
rock

n'otel
sorta bent dere
shofel in iz ands

an first
ee looks reptile
jus come outta iz ole

en den like dis ape
whooz zoo was gone

en ee sets
in dat pile we jes dug
plops iz feets in
en stars scratchin iz chin

lookin iz oncle like sum jeelyfish

n'ee stars talkin
en talkin
en talkin iz oncle
in dat wheelbrow
sez ow ee wants iz address
so az ee kin looks im up in dat next world

en o'tel askin me
if i thinks
rain'll wakes em up

o'tel en me
jus settin
en it growin darks all over
jus a settin
an settin
an settin

n'all sudden like
o'tel gits up
an says
nuttin matters
an takes iz oncle
an done dumps im face down in dat ole
an stars shubblin an shubblin an shubblin
an shubblin
an ee done cubbers up iz oncle
all sprawled awitchaway in dat mud

en wen eez finish
ee jes turns en goes

en i not wantin ta say nuttin
tills a couple a mile down
en i turns an says
dey gonna miss dat wheelbrow
a work
en maybe we shoud

en o'tel jes walkin an walkin
an rains
comin down
arder an arder
an o'tel jes walkin fasser an fasser

an i stars a say sumthin
an ee jes stops

en man
iz like
evrythins slo motion

like even de trees lisnen

an ee stops
an ee jes looks
looks righ threw my eye
en says
don matter
i ain workin no mo
two or six down
or leavem bove groun

dey gone
dey gone
en f'anyone wans proove dey'd ever been ere

an o'tel jes stops

da win goin roun
en da rain comin down
en me jes lookin
jes lookin

an ee jes turns
an stars walkin

roun abou an our affa sunset
course dere weren't no sun
seein az rained all day

an when we finally gots to grams
i tol im
dis ere's o'tel
en grams makes us afire
en tells us
ow rains iz good
for transplantin

an ow ee put in
a hunred pine
en sumday
dey'd be tall az cities
en eed ave a party
an invites alls iz frens

o'tel coud come too
if he waren't doin nuthin

an sumday
dis farm of iz
gonna ave
hunred foot
two hunred foot pines

tall az anythin in win
an evryone ould know
ee planted em

an o'tel
jes starin in dat fire

not really lookin or nuthin

win rattlin winnowpanes

an grams askin o'tel
if ee wans a cubber

an o'tel not sayin nuttin
jes turns
an walks inta dat empty win

an grams sayin
ows i better gits my fren
cause dere's a storm abrewin
an ow
one day
deys gonna run tricity out ere
an dat coud be bluffin
bus my backs been aykin all day

ow bou sum whisky
ee says
en donya thinks yor frens gonna git cole

an me jes lookin

iz rainin too har
to go blin nigh lookin
grams

en grams in bafroom
yellin
whiskies by de winnow

i sawz im
a couple years back
ya know
jes o'tel
walkin down street

sora ben lookin

an i asses
man o'tel
where ya beens all dees year

en ee stars coffin
en shaken a lil
en says ere
en gis me a swill

an we sis down
on dat sidewok
sorta sprawled ou like

en ee looks up at dose scrapers
en says
looks like rain
en pulls iz at
oer iz ed

Terri L. Jewell

COVENANT

We are the daughters
of the strongest daughters—
  tropical birds staged in leaves.
Our hair ulotrichous
and thighs stretched taut
    mirror reverence
    for bànyam and bell,
force us inward
toward Ghanaian fire
where the true magic lies.
    We watch a pale people
    who wish themselves
    gourmets of the exotic
while storing away their gold
for the death of their children.
    We know a sad people
    who lashed our mothers
    to stop the flow of milk,
howled in holy scripture
for the ban of our blood.
We are dark women
    trilling at the wind
    pounding up the dust
with shoulders and teeth bared.

Philip Royster

ORPHEUS ASCENDING, LAMENTS

Clever until my bones crawl
these childish lips wheedle and beg
to steal your touch
bruise your arm
suck your luscious thigh,
and these carnal hands
hurry to catch
the silent passion
that plays still
in the body you bear
without intent.

This old need of heart
is stone to your devotion
to another; surely
he stole you while
I was weak or young
or busy working the sunrise.
And just as surely
you couldn't have known,
could you, that I was coming,
and that this coming was
really my return.

Why do you hold back?
He would waste the flesh
that wraps your bones,
and set you coloring
your days to suit his will.
And I envy him your flesh
and your colors, and I charm
you to rise, as I charm the sun.

Let us leave this nether tyrant
who, like a wicked father, chains you
to duty, whose castle has become
your dungeon, whose touch has proved
impotent, whose eye avoids your despair.
Give back his guilt; he has other
wives who will find it no burden.

Philip Royster

BLACK ORPHEUS

Your strut is somber
as the yawning sky rises
early this morning
over the spent streets of Rio
after Carnival,
and you carry to the countryside
your last caress so full
of mourning. You have forgotten
last night's fateful turning
in desperation to capture Eurydice gone.
You would not listen when her spirit spoke
but heard only your wretched longing
louder than all the *cuicas*
crying Carnival.
You would not believe the voice
of the spirit riding the old, fat,
tired woman: "Do not turn
or you will lose me forever."
Stubborn samba man, carnival king,
a gladiator, now carrying a cold corpse
of your brown country woman afraid
of death. But not you, Orfeu, who
caresses the body your longing has hushed.
At sunrise you sing to her spirit gone
to the long strong black arms of your rival,
the skeleton masquerader who
haunts her every step.

SUMMIT BEACH

(Akron, Ohio, 1921)

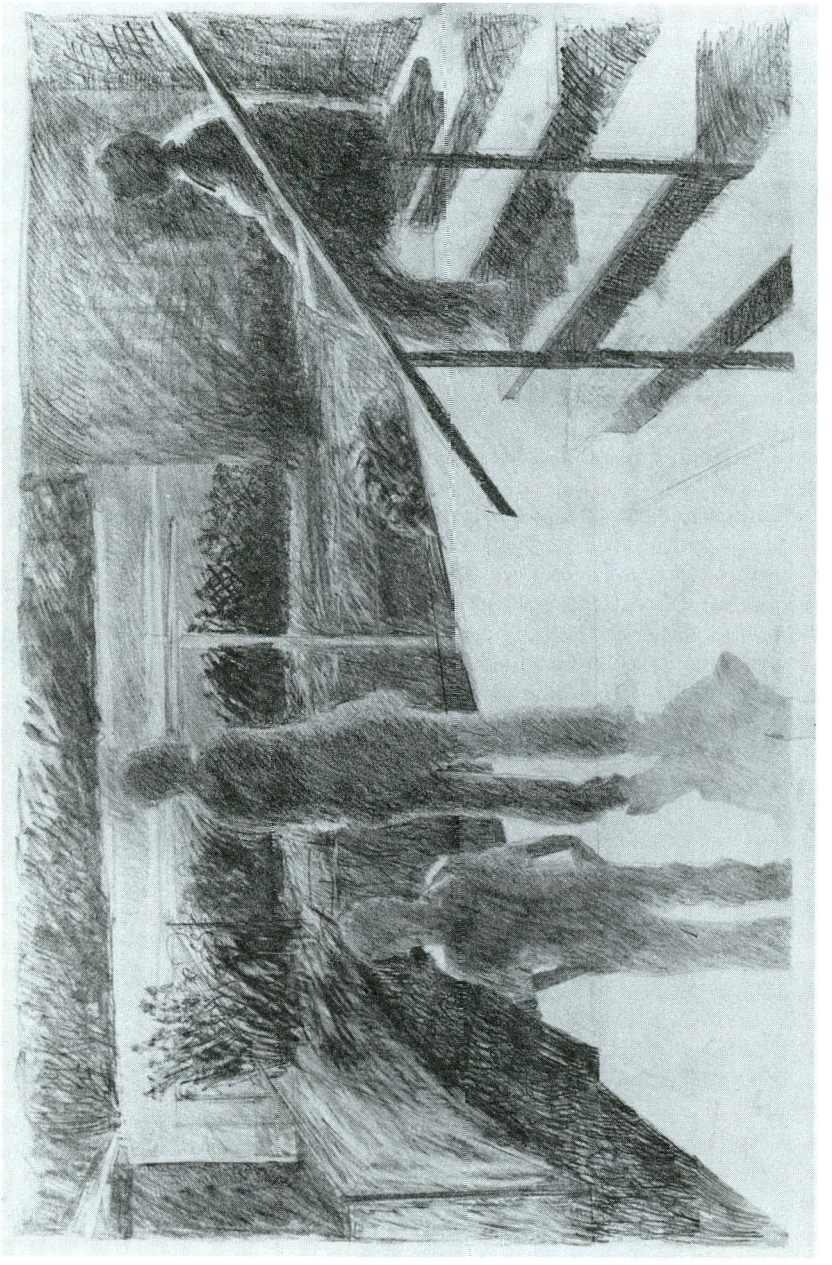
The Negro beach jumped to the twitch
of an oil drum tattoo and a mandolin,
sweaters flying off the finest brown shoulders
this side of the world.

She sat by the fire, shawl moored
by a single fake cameo. She was cold,
thank you, she did not care to dance—
the scar on her knee winking
with the evening chill.

Papa had said don't be so fast,
you're all you've got. So she refused
to cut the wing, though she let the boys
bring her sassafras tea and drank it down
neat as a dropped hankie.

Her knee had itched in the cast
till she grew mean from bravery.
She could wait, she was gold.
When the right man smiled it would be
music skittering up her calf

like a chuckle. She could feel
the breeze in her ears like water,
like the air as a child when
she climbed Papa's shed and stepped off
the tin roof into blue,
with her parasol and invisible wings.



INTERVIEW

AN INTERVIEW WITH GWENDOLYN BROOKS

Eugene Kraft interviewed Gwendolyn Brooks, poet and consultant to the Library of Congress, in April 1986.

EK: Do you still work and currently live in Chicago? Or do you come here two days a week?

GB: I am here Monday, Tuesday and half of Wednesday. This week is unusual. I will be here the whole week except that I'm going these places.

EK: You probably get tired of being looked at as a black poet.

GB: No, I don't! I'm not one of those who says I just *happen* to be black.

EK: Yet throughout your work there have been changes in the way you present black people—probably because there have been changes in black society. For one thing you say there is a lot of fury in your work, or you write about anger and fury. But you don't really see much of that in *A Street in Bronzeville.*

GB: You don't?

EK: Well, I see some.

GB: I believe there is a poem in there, called "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith," quite long.

EK: Yes. "Hysterical ties gathering for war."

GB: There I do what I don't often do, don't always do. I come right out and say that there is "this result of this or that oppression." But there are many poems that I raise my brows when you say I write about fear and anger. I would say that I write about people and about circumstances that have been influenced by horrible happenings in our society.

EK: I think the exact quote is "My works express rage and focus on rage." But the sense one gets from reading your poetry as a whole, just reading the interviews and everything, is the sense that you are a very well-adjusted person. That there is anger there but it isn't the kind of anger that would block writing.

GB: Well, I'm wondering just what you have read. You seem to be familiar with "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith." Many poems I've written are informed by an awareness of what is happening and that awareness came chiefly, or began to come sharply, in the late 60s when I met a lot of young people, some of them

poets who knew more about what was happening in our society than I did. We used to have very interesting little confabs, and I think I came out of that richer. I am a person who is fundamentally optimistic. I've written a lot of poems that people (so many whites) have said are "bitter"; so many whites have said, "Why do you write these bitter poems?" I've been hearing that for decades—and decades and decades. So you find chiefly sweetness and light?

EK: No, I find . . . As James Baldwin says, "To be intelligent and black is to be in constant state of rage." At least he said that in the 1960s.

GB: There is a constant state of *understanding*, I would say. As for rage, of course I'm very angry at this or that. When I turn on TV and hear various opinions, I am horrified. For instance I am now very upset by all these statements about the black family that have been appearing here on the TV and the newspapers. And, I am not saying that there aren't some very sad occurrences and results of the considerable oppression that has been visited upon us. But there is no balance; there is just the horror, the sadness, the lack. And I would like there to be a mention of what I know to be true: That there are many fine black families, excellent black men who are trying very, very hard to raise their families and are often succeeding.

EK: Yes.

GB: There's a story in *Ebony* this month that tells about a woman—and I haven't been able to finish reading it—but she has raised 16 children, all of whom have graduated from college. She saw to that. There are many such beautiful stories and I myself was raised in one of those wonderful families. I had a mother who was warm and spirited and intelligent. And I had a father who was the same, and saw to it that we had books in the house, we had the *Harvard Classics*, and my mother saw to it that my brother and I had library cards as soon as we were old enough. And my father came home and had dinner with us at six o'clock with the family. The family table—I remember that dining room was one of more than natural sunshine; there was just happiness. The family was glad to be together, glad to talk about what had happened during the day. My mother would play the piano and we would group around her and sing. My father sang to us and recited poems to us. Paul Laurence Dunbar. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

EK: I was going to ask you about what is being considered the breakup of the black family. You yourself say in an interview that there seems to be a lot of splitting going on—you used the word "splitting." You seem to be talking about women's liberation there.

GB: Black women deciding that they don't need black men. Yes, there is a good deal of that, but again, that is not the chief of the story. I don't know percentages. There are people—how I envy them—who go around with percentages flopping out of their mouths, but I still see so many stable black families. There they are, black families together, walking down the street together, enjoying each other's company.

EK: Maybe we live in different neighborhoods. Maybe that's one thing I realize just from reading your poems, that . . . Well, it's something too my students taught me last year or a couple of years ago, when Jessie Jackson was running for president. I wasn't particularly interested in the man; I don't like him particularly the way I like Thomas Bradley, or other black leaders, Barbara Jordan. But I was amazed at how much really intelligent students were passionately dedicated to the idea that at least he was running. And whites had no idea about that.

GB: Why not?

EK: I don't know.

GB: When whites say how intelligent they are—I'm always hearing that from them—why couldn't they understand why blacks would look up on Jesse Jackson? At first there were many blacks who did not want Jesse Jackson to be president, but they understood where he was "coming from." They understood that he knew what's happening and he's brave, and he's strong, he's a survivor and they knew essentially he had their interest at heart. He was not one to run away from the idea of being black. And *you* know—I can tell that you know—there are many, many blacks today in this atmosphere who don't want to be black. There they are. They can't get away from it. But they don't want to be black.

EK: Are you talking about politicians, say, or prominent black people or just the middle class?

GB: I'm talking about just people. Poor people also, middle class people and the very rich backs, many of them, not all. Now, you know that I began by saying I want balance in the estimates but . . .

EK: How do you "stay black"? What exactly does that mean? Now that say, oh something as minor as clothing or hairstyles . . . You know, looking around the northeast section of Washington people dress more poorly than white people but they seem to dress much more like white people than when I was a kid, say.

GB: And that's on purpose and you remember, because you're old enough, what happened in the late 60s when black people—even earlier than that when a few daring souls—had stopped straightening their hair. And now you'll rarely see a hairdo like mine. Almost all the women now, though I think it quite surprising, though delightfully so too, insist on straightening their hair and using Clairol and whatever white women are using. So that's very sad.

EK: When you said that there are a lot of black people that want to be white, were you talking about politics, conservative persons, maybe?

GB: No. I was talking about black people who want to be white and who try very hard to imitate what whites are doing, how they're looking. Do you remember

when a movie called *Ten* came out and Bo Derek the star had her hair in cornrows? And what was so sad was that little girls would have their mothers put their hair up in cornrows and then I'd ask them, or might compliment them, and they would say that they got that "style" from Bo Derek. That is horrifying since cornrowing is certainly *ours*.

EK: But it seems to me that if young black people are not confused about what it is to be black, it doesn't occur to them anymore.

GB: That's our fault for not carrying on the inspirations.

EK: Are you talking then about, say, black culture, black music? What exactly?

GB: Having a sense of yourself in being a black. And it's good if you'll study some history, because if you study some history you will find inevitably that your people have done wonderful things in this world—have created art that is much prized, perhaps not by you but whites who go over to Africa and bring it back here.

EK: That's another question I meant to ask. I've got three quotes from you where you say things like "Man isn't cozy with art," "Art isn't comfortable," "You can be around art a little time, but you don't feel good about it." But if you look at the classic . . .

GB: Wait! You have reduced my poems to utterly prosaic pedestrianism! That's a prose version of my poem "The Chicago Picasso."

EK: I guess I'm just not understanding your lines. Or "It is not the instinct of man to love art." "Most of us do not feel cozy with art." I noticed that (this isn't criticism; this is just something I noticed) you don't write poems about painting; you did that about the Picasso, but I got the impression that Mayor Daley sort of instigated that.

GB: He did. He sort of instigated that. I *have* written poems about art. Not that I expect you to have read every single piece that I have ever written!

EK: I think I almost have. But back to Jesse Jackson, one thing he has said over and over again is that the church is the salvation of the black people or that the church is the center of the black movement and so on, and you said in an interview once that nobody is really working on the church, that interesting things are going on in the church.

GB: Oh, I remember making a comment about the black church. I was just naming a list of things that need to be written about blacks. Now, blacks *have* written about the church, but I was saying that there is a need, or at least I would like to *read* a book about the black church that uses everything. There are funny things going on in the black church. What kind of book do I want? This is not a *Native Son* type of book nor an *Invisible Man* type of book; it would be a *chatty* book.

It would be something like my novel *Maud Martha*, which is *serious* and *funny*. I mean it's like life, I feel, and it doesn't emphasize darkness or light.

EK: I went to a Catholic church about a month ago, here in northwest Washington. The congregation was entirely black; I was the one white person there. The priest was black and the service was in English, but at the end of the sermon the priest sang a Protestant hymn, a traditional Protestant hymn—"What A Friend I Have in Jesus"—the congregation started singing along. It was an incredible sort of mixture of Protestant, Catholic, English, Black, White

GB: Yes, and that just kind of indicates what a mixed-up race we are. When I went to Africa—I've been to three African countries, Kenya, Tanzania and Ghana. The first country I went to was Kenya, and I don't know if you've read this book *Report from Part One*. [EK indicates that he has.] Well, then, you remember what I said about "Striking out in the street and feeling so African" and seeing a church I just turned into and went to attend the service—and it was so white. You know there were whites there who were involved in the leadership of the church, the whole audience was African. But that turned—I mean you talk about anger and fury . . . I went way back in our history to when this would not have been the thing. I mean I don't even know about the different original African religions, but I hate to see them right there in Africa subscribing to white practices. I wrote a little something, I wrote about that experience, a little short poem and I ended it with a solemn-faced black who was an associate minister or whatever saying at the end impulsively, "God don't send yo son, come yosef!" I thought that was spirited at least.

EK: Even though it's a poem in which there is anger there is more than that.

GB: *Good.*

EK: I think, for example, "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith," there's anger, but he's really pathetic too.

GB: Yes, and he is also *humorous* and *brave*. Didn't you sense that he had the courage to make something out of his life? It could be nourishing to himself, *tasty*.

EK: But he doesn't acknowledge culture or anything. "Everything is just what it is" is a line from the poem. "I can't look at something and go back and forth."

GB: He really was subscribing to an aspect of culture, though, and I would think that you would see little bits of that throughout. He *did* subscribe to art. He picked out colorful suits for himself. I was thinking, as a model, of those zoot suiters who used to be so prevalent in the forties, and I had, as my A-Number-One Inspiration, Cab Calloway in that wide white hat and the suit with the chain.

EK: I meant to ask you this before we get off religion—you don't seem to like it much in a lot of your poems. I think I listed about eight poems or eight passages where you seem to be a bit negative. This may have been my imagination but I wondered if there might have been a little disagreement between your mother and you in that respect. Is that a correct reaction on my part—you don't much appreciate religion?

GB: I'd like to say much about that. First of all I'll say my mother saw to it, in fact we bought our house because there was a church at the corner, and she meant my brother *and myself* never to have a reason not to go to church—rain, snow or whatever, she wanted us raised in the church and we dutifully did that for many, many years. I think I was 19 or almost that before I stopped going to church or Sunday School. I can't say that I stopped. I did keep on going but just not regularly. About religion though, I can tell you that my religion was what my father's was, what my mother's was essentially—*kindness*. That is my religion. I believe you can't go too far wrong if you are determined to be or trying to be kind to people. There are a lot of questions that I would ask about religion. The people who have read the Bible and believe that every word is true surely have not read it carefully, because it's full of contradictions. And I know when you tell people that I'll have enemies coming down on me, but it's the truth. There they are, the people who say that God is always right, knows exactly what to do. I can't but question why little innocent babies have to die, have to be bombed or split in half or burned to ashes or whatever.

EK: In one of your poems, a couple of lines say, "The Lord was their Shepherd, yet they *did* want." You're talking about Belsen and Dachau.

GB: You *have* been reading.

EK: Is St. Jude in *The Mecca* funny, *just* funny, or is she a bit contemptible? There are three religious figures in there and they are not very nice.

GB: Well, she's a lot of things. As is usually true or I would hope is usually true in my work because, getting to the age I have, I certainly have found out that almost nobody is just *one* thing. If you know a person long enough, you find all kinds of things there to enjoy or deplore or be frightened of or to consent to.

EK: That's why I can't understand the reaction of some of the early critics to some of your poems. Like the "Bean Eaters." To me it's a social poem too, but taken one way they are sad people. At the same time they are rather like that poem you dedicated to your parents. They can be looked upon as fortunate; they have all these mementos from the past, they raised children . . .

GB: Yes. I can't see how they can be looked upon as sad people. They are poor people to be sympathized with, to feel a little bit regretful for. But those people—as who would know better than I, since I based that on an aunt and uncle of mine who were not bean-colored. They were *not* the color of navy beans! They were

dark brown, but I wanted to call that poem "The Bean Eaters." Well, I'll tell you that part later. . . . But my aunt and uncle, way back in the Depression times, loved each other heartily. They came to the end of their life together, as they finally had to split up, and they lost their little home that I was describing, and my aunt came to stay with mother for awhile. And they still—my uncle stayed with a brother—but he would still come over to talk to my Aunt Ella and Uncle Ernest, and they laughed together, they had so much fun together. I never knew them when they weren't really poor. They finally went back to my mother's home—Topeka, that's where she died. Anyway, yes, they *did* enjoy those mementos. *That's* why they were there.

EK: Speaking of young black people who don't know their history (which seems to be quite true), it has something to do maybe again with white society. There's a Duke Ellington Bridge in Washington. There's a Joe Louis Center in Detroit. There isn't the birthplace of Ralph Ellison in Mississippi.

GB: There is you say?

EK: No. I once read an article about this black lady who went to see Flannery O'Connor's birthplace in Georgia and got very furious because Ralph Ellison's birthplace wasn't marked.

GB: Yeah. That happens to blacks, many of them. Of course Paul Laurence Dunbar's home is still there and enterable. But many of us lose our homes. The home I was brought up in will never be marked, it was burned to the ground about a year ago—and who knows how or why? But it's gone. The home that my mother knew chiefly—well, the first home was flooded, flooded out, 1311 North Kansas Avenue,—and about a year or so ago, the one that they moved to after that was burned. And my aunt died in that, my last aunt on my mother's side. I hope I'm not wandering here.

EK: That's all right. The culture symbols of blacks—young people especially—seem to be musicians, movie stars and athletes, still. I think if you asked (and this is a guess!) a thousand young black people who Mary McCloud Bethune is, they wouldn't know.

GB: I'm sure you are right.

EK: Well, I did personal surveys on your poetry, and around Howard University everybody knew who you were. And I'd say I was going to interview you and everybody wanted to know if they could come along.

GB: Good.

EK: On the bus going home, I never found a single black person who knew who you were. I asked about 25 people if they knew who you were.

GB: Where is your home?

EK: It's in a black section of Northeast, 15th and Northeast.

GB: You mean right here in Washington?

EK: Yes.

GB: You know I'm really surprised to hear that. I wouldn't have been a few years ago, but I have received the most *amazing* reception here. Wherever I hang out in the street, somebody is going to say "Miss Brooks?" and express how glad they are to have me here. So, I have really been amazed at that. I didn't know Washington knew anything about me. Well, a few people at Howard perhaps. I would like to tell you, however, that there will be a lot of kids who know me back in Illinois, because there has been for about three or four years the Gwendolyn Brooks Junior High School in Harvey.

EK: D. H. Melhem said the other night that Gwendolyn Brooks is one of the major poets of the 20th century and it's time the academics recognized this fact.

GB: I'd like to get to her and I warn her not to say things like that!

EK: Are black writers really very unappreciated by black critics? What should white critics know about black writers that they don't know, other than the fact, I would say personally, that there are so *many* of them? I mean once you start reading, there's just so *many* of them.

GB: Yes, the numbers are growing. Well, I would say that those who don't and admit that they don't know anything about black poetry should *just start reading* it because there are many brands of it. There's the—you don't see this kind much anymore—but there is the little list of obscenities and the "Kill the Honky" poems. You rarely see poems like that anymore. But there are poems that are very much like that white product that feels itself successful only when it's deeply obscure. And then, there's the kind of poem which isn't exactly obscure but then after you've read it you say either "Huh?" or "So what?" There are so many "So what?" poems.

EK: A lot of your best poems it seems to me aren't especially black poems, like "Beverly Hills, Chicago." Was that, by the way, influenced at all by Robert Lowell?

GB: *In what way?*

EK: Well, you see, *The Anniad* I think you can say is dense and somewhat complicated and at times a bit difficult to understand. Lowell's early work is like that and then he went out to California and got among the California poets and greatly simplified his language.

GB: Now if I was going to be influenced by anything that Lowell did it would

have been by this very early work that you are talking about. *Lord Weary's Castle* I certainly did admire but I don't feel that I admire him to the extent that I would want to write something like him. However, "Beverly Hills, Chicago" is nothing like anything Robert Lowell has written. I think he would have been, to tell you the truth, ashamed to have written that poem.

EK: Really?

GB: It is based, however, on the fact that my husband and I used to travel around the suburbs, look at the beautiful homes and we would envy the people who lived there. Of course, later on we found out that those people were very much like ourselves, and they went to the bathroom and they ate chocolate cake and went to church or didn't go to church, got divorced. I think that poem was simple to the point of . . . But then that's something like what you are claiming, isn't it?

EK: Yeah. Well, he did write an ode about these black soldiers marching off to war.

GB: The book *For the Union Dead*—there might have been a poem in there. I've tried *very* hard to be myself and not try to be like my many, many admirations.

EK: Of the white poets, I think I know. With black poets, were there any strong influences?

GB: Oh, innummerable.

EK: The poem about the bird in the window, I was thinking possibly Emily Dickinson.

GB: I'm surprised! You mean "A light and diplomatic bird"?

EK: Yes.

GB: Emily Dickinson wasn't as mannered as that poem was. Emily Dickinson tried very hard, as I've always felt, *sincerely* to get the *exact right word.* Now this poem you are talking about is in *Annie Allen* and a lot of that book was very mannered. I was doing what I felt you should do because I was very much under the influence of rich white poets. When I say "rich" I don't mean financially. Poets who loved to work richly with language. And a lot of that experimentation certainly did not come off. And that poem, I remember struggling over that poem; I wanted it to be very richly expressed.

EK: I think it's the sort of poem you read and you just like the sound of and you just keep reading it, and after you've read a stanza and you've repeated it seven or eight times, then you've got it figured it out, you know.

GB: However, no matter how mannered that was, I was not saying things that had no meaning. And anything I've written I've always had *something* to write

about. I'm not just playing with language.

EK: Are there plans for collected poems?

GB: A collection of brand new poems on which I plan to spend the summer writing? That's the way I'm going to spend my summer.

EK: Oh?

GB: There will be weeks when I won't even step out of the house, no matter even if it's a day like today. But I am going to bring out another collection that will be even plumper. It's to be called by the publisher *The World of Gwendolyn Brooks*. It has four books of poetry and a novel in it. The novel won't be a new collection but the book will have most of those poems in there—I'm sure I'll take out some of them—and *To Disembark* and a couple of other little books. And I'll call that whole big collection *Blacks*. One word: *Blacks*.

EK: In the selection of poems what principle did you use in leaving things out? There are poems in an earlier book whick I wished you had put in, for example, "Love Story." The love story poem about Sundays with your husband and the Sunday dinner, chicken and . . .

GB: Didn't I have that in *Selected Poems*? I wonder why in the world did I left that out?

EK: That's what I wondered.

GB: Because, I mean, there certainly were poems that were much worse than that that I put in!

EK: A lot of the early poems which you might consider mannered seem to be really good though. Those sonnets from *A Street In Bronzeville*, for example.

GB: I hope a lot of them were successful. I think that most of them said what I set out to say.

EK: How much do you write these days?

GB: You will be interested to know that I've written more since I came to the Library than I had in quite sometime. And I don't know whether it's just being around the very subject of poetry and talking with a lot of wildly enthusiastic poets—they make you want to run get a pen and do something yourself. All that might have been part of the reason.

EK: Those poets from the Lotus Press at the King Library—that was *interesting*.

GB: Did you go to that?

EK: Yes, I was there. It was interesting—so many different kinds of Cajun poems . . . and just *so many* different kinds of poems.

GB: It gave you an idea, didn't it, of what I was trying to say?

EK: Yeah.

GB: It gave you an idea of what I said earlier of the great variety of black poems.

EK: And there weren't that many bitter poems or bitterly ironic poems. Only one of the earlier poems . . .

GB: *A sign of the times*!

EK: Do you ever regret that some of the poems in *Riot* were as extreme as they were?

GB: When you say "extreme," do you mean "strong"?

EK: "Therefore we are thankful for steel."

GB: That was a very poorly written poem, *very poorly*, and I assure you it will not be in a collection of mine. But what it said—no, I have no regret. Why would I?

EK: "Steel" might be read as an encouragement to violence.

GB: Oh, I was talking about . . . have you got the rest of that poem there? You know I left my *To Disembark* . . . Yeah, it's here: "This is the time of the crips, the creeples, and the marketeer." I use that in another poem. "Our warfare is through the trite traitors, through the ice committees through the mirages, through the suburban petals, through toss-up and tinfoil. Therefore we are thankful for steel." We are thankful for steel. That's a lousily written poem except for that first stanza. But I'm calling these men "men of steel"—which is almost a cliche. But that's what I'm saying. I am not saying that they ought to pick up arms or that they will go forth into the streets with Molotov cocktails.

EK: In "Boys Black" you say, "Sharpen your hatchets."

GB: Where is this?

EK: In "Boys Black" and there is a continual repetition of the word "force."

GB: "Invade now where you can or can't prevail." I'm telling them to be strong and to think of something they want to do in terms of livelihood or what else—anything adventurous—or I was thinking of something positively adventurous. So I was thinking "adventurous"—that they not allow anyone to say, "You can't do this," "You are unable, because you are black, to succeed" here and there.

And of course blacks are told this all the time, you know. I know you know, because you know a lot about us, that sometimes in school black children are told not to study this or that because they can't possibly make it in that field out there in the great world. "Take this, sharpen your hatchets, force into the dream" and before that "There is ground beneath the pseudo-ice." When I say, "Sharpen your hatchets, force into the dream," I'm merely saying, "Do not be dismayed by what you see as prevention, deterrents. Keep agoing. Keep your . . ." Gee, is this the way that everyone of your ilk would read that poem—as an injunction?

EK: I think somebody who wanted to find things wrong with black poetry would. The language is, of course, a metaphor—but you *do* say "force" a lot.

GB: "Force into the dream." They have to. . . . A young fellow I just talked to—a young fellow that was in here a couple of hours ago—is studying law and, as a matter of fact, he is very strong and he needs to go on with it. But if I were talking to him and felt that he was not surviving and determined to succeed, I would tell him to be forceful. "Don't give up. Don't allow anybody to turn you away from your aim." And that is really what that means. Now I do have a poem and . . . well, I think you've read it, it's in *Riot*. . . . No it's in *Family Pictures*.

EK: In *Young Africa*, you say, "They await our hot blood."

GB: Yes. Though I was thinking of another one there, that is a song. Not a song, a poem addressed to Keorapetse Kgositsile. What did I call that poem? Would that be in the *Black Poets*? It really is rather military and I would like to find it to see how or how I was not justified. Yes, it's in here—just a minute now. "He is very busy with his looking, to look he knows is to involve subject and suppliant, he looks at life, he sees pell melling loneliness in the center of grouphood, he sees lenient dignity, he sees pretty flowers under blood. He teaches dolls and dynamite." Now as a matter of fact I never heard him say that we ought to go forth and murder. But he was very resentful of what had been done to his people in South Africa, I know that. Because he knows there is a scientific thinning of our ranks. That's a line that could be the subject for a lecture in class. "Not merely Medger, Malcolm, Martin and the Black Panthers but Susie, Cecil Williams and CJ. He teaches strategy and the straight aim." I know how that's going to be taken.

EK: Yeah, the "straight aim."

GB: "Black volume, might of mine, black flair, volcanoing merit, black herohood, black total." Well, he did want volcanoing merit and black herohood and he wanted blacks to be totally black instead of half white when they thought they were achieving that.

EK: You're not a feminist poet are you? You mentioned in an inteview that a lot of your poems are about women. But unlike so many women poets today, a lot of really popular ones, popular with college students, some of them dead, like Anne Sexton, oh, Sylvia Plath, Denise Levertov—Adrienne Rich to an extent—you

are not a feminist poet. Women's libbers can't claim you, would you say?

GB: Well, they've made attempts to and properly so. Why not? But I wouldn't write after my name "Gwendolyn Brooks, Feminist" with a capital F. But I certainly do believe in a lot that they believe in; I certainly would like a lot done they espouse. But even in those years when they were more passionate than a lot of them are now, I would warn black women to be very careful about doing just what a lot of them are doing today, shoving their black men aside and feeling that they have nothing to give them. And I would say that was just another way of dividing us, and then when we go away from our men, the whole race would be diminished, depleted.

EK: You seem, in a very healthful way, to be appreciative of male sexuality. In *Report From Part One* you speak of your husband flexing his muscles and how you liked it and you said, "Why isn't there an exhibition of manhood today?"

GB: Yes, that was so cute!

EK: That surprises me because there seems to be a lot of [exhibition of manhood] in the cities. I haven't lived here for over a decade and I came back six months ago.

GB: From where?

EK: Europe. Germany for the most part.

GB: Oh, how exciting! There must be quite a story in that.

EK: Yeah, there's quite a story but it's . . . I know I seem to see a lot of "exhibitions of manhood" and flexing of muscles around. Anything from commercials on television to kids walking down the street.

GB: Well, when my husband did that—he doesn't do it anymore, but when he did that as a young man, there was so much being said there. You know? It wasn't just "Look, Gwendolyn!" I mean it was saying, "I am important, I am here, I am valid, I do have my strength." And that was just one aspect of it that I was to understand. Of course, he knew I understood it, but still he enjoyed doing that. Certainly, yes I do have, I think I have, *a very healthy attitude about everything.*

EK: Yeah. You're lucky, I think.

GB: I really do.

EK: That early upbringing strikes me as being intensely fortunate.

GB: Yes. That helped. Yes. And then other people I've met along the way have helped—just living helps.

EK: You promised an hour, and it's an hour, but I could go on for three hours.

GB: Well, please do go on unless somebody comes in here!

EK: One thing one notices in Europe, especially in Germany—and it seems to be contradictory to what you have been saying here—is that black women don't seem to be appreciated for their sexuality in Europe; it's the black men who are. I think three times in Germany I saw a white man with a black woman and . . .

GB: I'm surprised you saw that in Germany.

EK: Yeah, but you see the converse continually; you see white women—German women, American women—with black soldiers, black men, all the time. You see it *all day long*.

GB: I am surprised to hear that it's so extensive.

EK: Oh yeah.

GB: In *Germany*?

EK: Absolutely, yeah. And I was wondering if you found any resentment on the part of black women toward that.

GB: Certainly! Indeed I do! I've written poems on the subject. That's why people—I usually lose a few people from the audiences when I read this one, "The Ballad of Pearl Mae Lee." Did you happen to see that? It's in my first book.

EK: Yes.

GB: And I enjoy reading that on college campuses where I see this kind of pairing. Because I do not, I frankly *do not like it*. I mean, friends yes. Talk to anybody. But I don't like seeing our race being diluted right on out of existence. So this is not a very popular attitude with whites *or* blacks. Some of those who really secretly feel the same way are the ones who jump me when I say that sometimes on campuses.

EK: But Pearl Mae was a very sick woman.

GB: No.

EK: To trap a guy into . . .

GB: Sammy was the one who . . .

EK: Oh, yeah.

GB: He was sick because [he felt]—and he had been consciously sickened by this society to feel—that what is white is right. You know that old rhyme. Before he "advanced" to whites he was favoring black girls at school—you know about the school days—who were "un-fair" as we used to say. So that is certainly *not* a healthy attitude. Well, let me give you an example of it—and you saw it here but you may have forgotten it. When I was in elementary school, I was about ten or eleven years old, maybe a little younger, and a friend of mine, Rose Herd, never forget her name, she had a light complexion, she and I were walking down the street from school and so a little boy, will never forget his name either, Emmanuel, came along in his wagon. And he said, "Hey Rose, come on! I'll ride you home!" and so she went to get in the wagon, I went along too and he's at least my color, probably darker—"Not you, black gal!" So we grew up with that kind of thing and it of course has been very painful and continues to be painful.

EK: You seem to feel in your poetry a strong sense of identification with women who don't consider themselves physically attractive. Would you say that is true?

GB: What a cute way that is of saying that I don't look like Lena Horne!

EK: No.

GB: Which I don't. Yes, I do identify with them, empathize with them. They and I have had an interesting time of it.

EK: You say in your grade school days, in *Report From Part One*, that white boys often would fall in love with a black girl. You said, "They ignored me." There wasn't any kind of persecution, you said. "They just let me alone." But every now and then a little white boy would fall in love with a black girl.

GB: Oh, I remember when that was. That was in high school, freshman, Hyde Park High School, and I shouldn't have said every now and then, but I did; it was just to make a point, I suppose, because I remember that happening only once. And a black boy was teasing me. I remember his name was Elmer. Isn't it interesting how these names stay with you? And he was a very handsome little fellow with black curly hair and he sat there behind me, and this boy knew, the black boy knew, that he liked me—I mean it wasn't *love*, but he liked me, liked to talk with me—and he didn't like it. He didn't like it—he wasn't interested in me, but he didn't like it—and now I understand why. But Elmer—I forget his words of course—but they were to the effect that this harrassment of me was to stop.

EK: You're not tired of writing yet?

GB: Writing? *Oh no*! I just told you I'm going to spend the summer writing. I'm all excited about making my poetry subscribe to my standards. But more accessible.

EK: You say in an interview, "I want to be read by people who generally don't have a long attention span."

GB: Yes—in addition to other people.

EK: Yeah. So you want simpler language.

GB: I don't want to use that word.

EK: "Clarify your language," you said.

GB: "Clarify!"

EK: Yeah.

GB: Yeah, that is better than saying I want to write namby-pamby little poems that kindergartners can "understand." I'd rather be away from that word; I can't stand it. I prefer the word "apprehend."

EK: Generally you would say you are leaving structure further behind?

GB: If by structure you mean imitations of Wallace Stevens or—who else? Charles Simic?—no, I do not want to be in their camp. Of course I certainly do admire Wallace Stevens' language. Yes, I do admire him.

EK: Well even in some of the fairly tightly structured
poems like the*Anniad.*

GB: Oh, that's what you meant when you said—I thought you were referring to the general!

EK: You put in an extra syllable or an off-rhyme but even then . . .

GB: And I like off-rhyme; that is something I will be working with further.

EK: One problem with black poets—one problem with Dudley Randall's press—is you can't get the books from it. I looked yesterday in four bookstores for collections of black books from his press.

GB: Did you go to Trover's? Because that's where I got this one from.

EK: Trover's?

GB: Oh, that's right, you haven't been here in a while. It's down on Pennsylvania Avenue, right around the corner from the Capitol Hilton Hotel—oh, wait a minute—it's 267 something. I hear they also have my *Selected Poems.* But Dudley Randall—his press is not in his hands anymore; he's sold it to another group of people and I don't know when they're going to publish again and everybody is complaining. You call; nothing happens.

EK: You say that in teaching young people it's necessary to read a great deal. What do you read, just poetry?

GB: Oh my gosh, *no*. I love prose. One of my favorite writers is Lytton Strachey. Oh yes, he writes a reliable prose. You can just lean into it and know that you are not going to be . . . you are not going to fall. I love his work.

EK: *Eminent Victorians*?

GB: No, that's not my favorite among his work. I like best *Portraits in Miniature*, those shorter essays, and then there are essays on Carlisle and Voltaire, which are longer. But I really—you just . . . it's like eating. So I like him, I like biography. One of my favorite books right now is *Freedom Rising* by James North. Have you read that? It's about a man who wandered in Africa and South Africa and other parts of Africa too and really saw what was happening there, told the truth about it.

EK: When will the next volume of your autobiography be finished?

GB: It's finished! I finished it last summer but haven't brought it out, and I'm glad I didn't because I'd like to go over it, put a nip and tuck here and there and of course add a chapter on my experience here and . . .

EK: I was going to ask you, what exactly do you do here, have you done?

GB: Yes, I'll get to that. And my response to *The Color Purple* which I know you were going to ask me about sooner or later and I'm not answering that until it *does* come out in print and it is there for everybody to refer to in whole. What was it I just interrupted?

EK: Sorry, *I* interrupted. What do you do at the Library of Congress?

GB: Yes. Everybody wants to know that who is interested at all. And that's going to be part of my—and I'm going to tell you—part of my "Goodbye Statement," because I think people ought to know just what is involved with this kind of job when you take it really to heart. Which is what I have done. So. I'm supposed to recommend poets to come here to read down there at Coolidge Auditorium and have recommended a lot of them and I have my own little lunchtime reading series. I have poets come in, up there in that poetry room and they talk about their poetry, read and talk about themselves, and then after that the audience (sprawling on the floor half of them) question them and make comments. It's really an exciting time. And then about twenty of us will go out to lunch. It's fun! And I'm having ten in the last lunchtime reading, which will be April 16. If you are around I *wish* you would come to that. I'll have Margaret Walker, Ethelbert Miller—Josephine Jacobson is coming in and she hasn't been going *anywhere*. But she said she wouldn't miss this—and James Lunene Perrell, and a poet I found at Rhode Island College, Angela Peckinpah—you ever met her?—May Miller, Kenneth McClaine—Kenneth teaches out there and has a beautiful book of poetry—Julia Fields, Toi Derricotte—Oh, you know her?—and Richard Harteiss. So we are going to have a great time here from twelve until three. Then we will go out to lunch and you are invited if you show up.

EK: I'll show up.

GB: *Great!*

EK: You know, that poem "We Real Cool"—which I guess of all your poems seems to be anthologized most—I suppose I've read it about ten times, and I was so surprised to hear you say—I *believe* you said it several times—that the "we" at the end of the line is sort of wispy and wistful and soft.

GB: Well at least you don't . . . well you can, *I* don't—some people do and some people say "*we* real *cool*, *we* left school," but I put it out there so you would have just a split second to recognize these people, to look at them. They saw themselves as hardly here and they were expressing this being in what they did.

EK: I saw defiance.

GB: Yes, defiance.

EK: And "we die soon." Life doesn't matter anyway and we know we are going to die because we're living dangerously.

GB: Well, that is to be taken into several different ways. It doesn't have to be a physical death, it could be a moral, a spiritual death, which often happens.

EK: Yeah. The girl in the Blackstone Ranger poem isn't satisfied with Blackstone Rangers?

GB: Right. And she has kind of an understanding about what makes them tick.

EK: Yeah. You said to Paul Engle, the Last Question, that writing gets harder all the time. Does this mean because you're getting better?

GB: Writing gets harder? Yes, because you *do* want desperately to get better. You don't want to sit back and say, "I have some books published so that means I'm a poet." I wonder if there are many people who take that attitude? I rather doubt that there are. Most of us I think want to keep working and to be more effective.

FICTION

Sheila Roberts

THE CHANGE

African folktales tell of Tokkalossie,
a mischievous spirit known to seduce
and impregnate girls and older women.

At sunrise the backyard was like an ordinary box. The red brick walls on three sides squared off the red trampled earth on which no grass ever grew, and the roof of the north-east-facing house sent a rectangle of shadow over the back steps as if a lid were trying to come down or raise itself over the backyard. All shadows in the early morning were a uniform deep russet, and the sky was eggshell grey. An early riser might look upon the scene and wish that the mystery of uneven night might maintain itself indefinitely.

Before dawn the tokkalossie would leave, clicking like a rat across the concrete floor, then shrinking to nothing and sliding like a sheet of grey paper under the door. Soon after a knife of sunlight would edge under the same door and Nomhla would know it was time to get up.

The kitchen in the main house would be gloomy and the surfaces cold to the touch in the thin winter light, but the air in the bedrooms would smell of open mouths and soft full intestines, and the sweetness of warm necks under sheets and blankets. Nomhla would boil water on the kitchen stove and set trays of tea to carry in to the sleepers.

That night the tokkalossie had tried galloping her home to the hills beyond Kwamandla, but she had clung to the mattress under her and flung her head heavily backward. There were nights when he rode and rode, twisting her this way and that, and then the hills would loom like bellies and buttocks crouched over her and she would give in, reaching down to hold his head.

Now Nomhla held her cardigan tight across her chest as she ran, head down, across the red earth of the backyard to the kitchen. Her pelvis and legs felt like sodden wood from the riding of the tokkalossie. When he was on top he pounded her as if she were new grain on the threshing floor; when she was on top she would bounce like a child on a loose bough until she would collapse forward, the tokkalossie taking, softly, her ear into his mouth.

All her things had always smelled of candle-wax: clothes, sheets, blankets, curtains. But she no longer smelled it. Now they reeked of the tokkalossie, and this she could smell: it was like the saliva of a dog or the feathers of fowl as the rain starts. The feet of her bed stood up on bricks, but still the tokkalossie found ways of leaping up on her, presenting himself like a large rat, a bullfrog, or a late

summer's hare. Sometimes rarely he was a horned iguana and then she would have to cry out. Those were the nights she hoped Mrs. Meintjies did not have curlers in her hair.

Nomhla was convinced that Mrs. Meintjies never slept at all on the nights when she went to bed with curlers in her hair. The curlers must press into her head, giving her open-eyed hours to dwell angrily on all the corners that had tiny nests of tangled dust, on all the ceilings that had the pencil strokes of old cobwebs, all the stubborn blackness under pots, and the smudging inside her husband's collars. But surely, even awake, Mrs. Meintjies could not hear the arrival of the tokkalossie right across the backyard in Nomhla's bedroom!

In the main house Mr. Meintjies was sitting on the edge of his bed, his feet like beached fish planted wide apart on the floor, the toes moving. His stomach rounded onto his thick thighs, his chest with its small upright grey hairs drooped toward his stomach, and his head hung forward. His hands rubbed and rubbed his stubbly face. He ran fingers over his bare skull and picked at the edges of his nose. He yawned with a deep moan. He wondered whether it had been the barking of dogs or the arias of cats that had kept him restless during night. Or the scuttling of rats. Or his wife's persistent sighs over an unattainable cleanliness. "Where's the tea, Nomhla!" he called, his voice like cart wheels over gravel.

Nomhla poured boiling water on the tealeaves. Her palms felt as if she had been pressing them onto the stiff prickling tufts of burnt winter grass. The tokkalossie's head was like the hot blackened veld after a July fire. Beneath the stubble was a skull as hard as a kierie, out of which darted a tongue as fast as a lizard's, as bright as a flame.

In the second bedroom the five children opened their eyes and waited. The boys did not look at the girls and the girls ignored the boys. Nomhla would come in and give them each a mug of tepid tea which they would suck thirstily into their nighttime throats, setting the five cups one after the other in age order back on the tray. Then the three girls would get up and go whispering to the bathroom. While they were out of the bedroom the two boys would dress. When the girls, still in their flannel nightgowns, came back to the bedroom, the boys would go to the bathroom. Down the center of the bedroom floor was a thick chalk line drawn by Mrs. Meintjies. No boy ever stepped over the line to the girls' side, and no girl ever trespassed across the chalk to the boys'.

Until the bathroom was free of children, Mr. Meintjies sat on the edge of his bed and drank three, four, five cups of tea, knowing that this was the best way to rinse the previous day's brandy out of his blood. Mrs. Meintjies remained lying motionless in her own unruffled bed, staring at watermarks on the ceiling and seeing a straw hat with a ribbon and one glove and a powder puff. She would lie imperviously, staring at her mild creations, until her husband, hippopotamus-like from the back but Priapic at the front, got up to wash.

Nomhla filled the kettle again to make more tea for breakfast. Then she began mixing the porridge. She had to stand patiently stirring and stirring it because if it had lumps the children pushed and pinched at her, hissing, lifting their small hard hands but not daring to slap or shout, so pushing, Nomhla, Nomhla, Nomhla. When the porridge pot was ready to set aside to keep warm, Nomhla cut twenty slices of bread for school lunches, cutting slowly and carefully so that the slices were neither thick nor uneven. On twenty slices she spread margarine,

on two peanut-butter and syrup, on two sandwich-spread, on two cheese and jam, on two Marmite. Two were left plain. She placed ten margarine slices onto their mates and cut the sandwiches in half. Each child would find his or her two specific sandwiches and place them in a brown paper bag.

First the girls came in and then the boys, to take their places at opposite sides of the table to eat their porridge. The butter was passed, the sugar, and the jug of cream skimmed from the top of the milk. The girls spoke only to one another in lowered voices and throaty noises, and the boys shared the secrets of their minds and their pockets only with each other in undertone. Across the table malicious gleams and snide mouthings were exchanged in ordained silence. No one wanted the father's roar to bellow from the bathroom and beat upon the eardrums of offenders and non-offenders alike.

In the bathroom Mr. Meintjies sounded like an elephant in a shallow pool. He noisily sniffed water up his nose, swallowed it gurgling toward his throat and then spat it out with force. He did this again and again, believing that in this way he could keep his passages open and his lungs healthy. The children left for school.

In a pink plush bathrobe Mrs Meintjies came to sit at the kitchen table, the curlers still punishing her head. Nomhla poured her a fresh cup of tea and put one egg in a pan to fry. "Nomhla, I heard noises last night," said Mrs. Meintjies. "I thought I heard noises again from your room." Nomhla shook her head. *Haikona*, her head said, *Haikona*. No noises, Missis. Nomhla set the egg on a plate in front of Mrs. Meintjies. "I don't want you letting boys come to your room, Nomhla," said Mrs. Meintjies regarding the egg. "No Missis." Mrs. Meintjies would slice the white off in portions and eat it daintily until only the yolk remained. Then she would balance the whole soft yolk on her fork and drop it on her tongue like a communion wafer. Closing her mouth, her eyes glazing with pleasure, she would mulch the yellow slowly with saliva and swallow it.

Mrs. Meintjies went to take her bath. Round the edges of the bath she would leave a lacing of lilac-colored violet-smelling bath oil for Nomhla to clean off, and the waxiness of soap-scum. Mr. Meintjies would leave the wash-basin criss-crossed with the trimmings of sideburns and nose-hairs.

When Mr. Meintjies stamped into the kitchen, Nomhla set a slab of steak into the heated pan. Five minutes this side, five minutes that, one-two-three, Nomhla, don't overcook. Seal in the juices. Mr. Meintjies would chew his steak like an old buffalo chewing a cud, his eyes half closed, his shoulders hunched. Nomhla would stand at the stove, not watching. Steak upon steak over many years had decorated Mr. Meintjies's arteries with deposits of pale fatty stalagmites and stalactites.

The kitchen no longer in use, Nomhla could cut her two doorsteps of bread, spread them with peach jam, pour a mug of cold tea and take her breakfast to eat on the back stairs. The sun would be up and the earth of the backyard a hard pink, the brick walls fibrous, and her own room fragile and tilting to one side. A brief gust could blow it over and expose her bed and her boxes and her picture of Lord Jesus and the candles stuck with wax onto saucers. Any light brighter than the dull oblong from her window would show the drying corpses of dead mice under her bed and the old thin black carapaces of cockroaches pressed beneath her trunk. And now the footprints of the tokkalossie scratched on her floor.

Nomhla knew her body was preparing itself not to bear children any longer and the preparations were like signs, on the air the hint of a dust-storm, or a fire, or far-off drumbeats. The tokkalossie received the messages and came maliciously titupping under the door, keeping to the shadows, and then leaping onto her. In his mischief he would want to challenge the signs, forcing her to conceive again or, thwarted, jockeying her into her ancestors' cairns beyond Kwamandla.

Disturbed, Nomhla ate and drank and then returned to the house. As she washed her mug and plate she once again felt the pain in her pelvis as though the tokkalossie had stoked warm coals into her that now had cooled and grown heavy.

Mrs. Meintjies put on a pink dress, powdered her face, and unwound the curlers. She brushed and brushed at her hair, hurting her scalp, dissatisfied, as she had been for the past five years, with this mass of greying fibers that would not conform to any picture of a woman's hairstyle that she had ever studied. She felt an obscure anger, suspecting that her husband was to blame for her hair's disobedience. And, indeed, the following year, when Mr. Meintjies collapsed and died, her hair began to relax and thin out and she was comforted. Mrs. Meintjies would make a good widow.

While Mrs. Meintjies was at the shops, Nomhla washed and dried dishes, scrubbed the kitchen floor, vacuumed the living room, swept the bedrooms and made the seven beds, scoured the bathroom, dusted, and began ironing the previous day's washing. At three o'clock she again took two slices of bread and jam and a mug of tea and went to her room. But she could not eat. She drank the tea, straightened her bed, and without removing her head scarf and shoes lay down on the cover. Soon she dozed, dreaming of a buzzing peacefulness, as if she were a child resting in the motionless sunlight of Kwamandla while wasps worked busily at a new nest under the thatch.

The little boys came home from school. They changed into khaki pants and shirts and old jerseys, and grew absorbed in scraping a network of roads in the dry dirt of the backyard over which they ran small cars and trucks, mumbling through pursed lips brimm, brimm, brimm. . . .

Both good, contained little boys, with their lowered voices and small movements, were nurturing in their hearts the seeds of an enormous cruelty that at a future time would devastate two families. But now they forced themselves to be good and went calling, "Nomhla, Nomhla, Nomhla, come help!" Their mother was trying to get through the front gate while carrying heavy shopping bags. Nomhla sat up groggily.

Straightening her head scarf and hugging her cardigan to her, Nomhla went running, head down, up the side of the house, the little boys after her. She and they took the packages from Mrs. Meintjies who watched frowning, her tired voice warning them to take care not to crack the eggs, not to squash the bread out of shape or cause the tomatoes to burst, not to clang the bottles together dangerously, and not to let the string bag of potatoes break. The little boys thought their mother was reading their minds: they had hoped to see dusty brown imperfect potatoes go rolling across the paving stones, to be kicked and dived at and tossed to each other.

In the kitchen Mrs. Meintjies unpacked the groceries, pushing toward Nomhla the things she was to cook for dinner. "Tea, Nomhla, tea," said Mrs. Meintjies yawning. Her yawn stretched, showing the wagging pink of her opened throat.

"I don't get enough sleep," she said.

Kettle in hand Nomhla nearly spilled water as she asked herself for the first time whether there was a tokkalossie that visited white girls and women, whether he might sidle into the children's room and slip into bed with the oldest girl, causing an unexpected and probably bewitched grandchild to be bestowed upon Mr. and Mrs. Meintjies in nine months' time, or whether on moonless nights he slunk into Mrs. Meintjies's smooth unstirred bed, slyly keeping it unstirred as he covered her carefully with himself, now flattened like a soft woollen blanket, his plump mushrooming penis nodding gently against her sleeping pubis. The white tokkalossie would not assume the shape of a rat or cat, a hare or a leopard. No, he would be like a book of ghost stories read last thing at night, or vibrant, evaporating brandy in a glass for sleeplessness, or a hotwater bottle losing its water in a widening pool.

Nomhla made beefstew, mashed potatoes, pumpkin, and green beans for dinner. She sliced beets and sprinkled them with sugar and vinegar. She made an egg custard, stirring, stirring to keep it smooth. And she put on a pot of puto for herself. As he took his place gruntingly at the head of the table, Mr. Meintjies said, not looking at Nomhla, "You mustn't let boys come to your room at night." But he said the words as if he had been told to but did not believe there were such boys who still came visiting. "I want peace and quiet at night," said Mrs. Meintjies sharply, looking into Nomhla's face, vaguely confused at the wild look in Nomhla's eyes, then quickly looking down at her plate. She hoped suddenly but obscurely that Nomhla had poisoned the food. Nomhla looked into the eyes of the oldest girl. They were blank and heavy-lidded as if she were enthralled by the deep dream she had entered. But the little boys' eyes were bright as they wondered whether they could kick the little girls without being detected and accused. The little girls, eyes alert, looked hard into the little boys' faces, daring.

Later in her room, Nomhla set her candles on a crate so that they might compose large hilly shadows in her room, and placed a little pot of water on her Primus Stove to make her own tea freshly. She looked forward to feeling the stiff crumbling cornmeal on her fingers as she scooped it from pot to mouth, and the saltiness of the meat gravy on her tongue. She would eat and then get a kettle of hot water from the kitchen to wash her arms and neck with. Then at last she could get under the blankets and stretch out her tired body. If the tokkalossie came swirling in under her door like a spring wind, she would lie quietly and let him knead her like yeast bread and bake her, rising, in the heat of his breath.

Mr. Meintjies was pouring his last brandy of the evening with a thick unsteady hand while Mrs. Meintjies sat at her dressing-table looking at her hair. "That Nomhla is getting strange," she said, "and she smells. Maybe we should get another girl and let her go." Mr. Meintjies did not answer. His wife had said the same thing at least once a month for the past fifteen years. He made the brandy a stiff one and watched it shake like liquid garnets in the glass. Neither knew that at that moment Nomhla was speeding comet-like over the house, skewered by the tokkalossie, flaming to the hills beyond Kwamandla.

Richard Perry

NOW I CAN TELL IT

I.

David said the next time I was in Spain, I must visit Alicante; there I would find the perfect whore. David likes to be cryptic. Sitting on the balcony of the San Marcos Hotel that first evening, I guessed the fabled woman could have been the rose and wine streaked sky. Say what you will about Granada, Alicante has the sunsets.

But I hadn't come for sunsets. I called to Annibal for more gin. I drank from dusk to dark; I ate chicken with rice, then went down to the lobby and watched the women. One tugged a red ribbon that held thick hair. Another smiled and smoothed hands over ripened hips.

I chose neither. Their bodies reminded me of Malaika's. The one I picked was young, maybe seventeen, slender, with a tiny scar at a sun-baked corner of her mouth. When I stroked her shoulder, the hair of her arm erected like fine bristles. She undressed holding a sleek back toward me, keeping her breasts hidden.

In the morning I slept late. I washed with tepid water from an earthen pitcher. On the balcony I ate scrambled eggs with salad and shielded my eyes from the sun. Then I went out into the streets.

Alicante is no place to visit in summer. By noon, on cloudless days, the sun is a brutal shimmer, the heat unbearable. I headed away from the barrio, toward the center of the city. At a slanting stall I stopped and bought a black beret. The young man grinned crookedly, prattled of passing women and gave me water. Further on, past the Plaza de Oro, the streets were wide, palm-lined avenues, the shops and hotels modern, the open air cafes beginning to fill with pre-siesta drinkers.

In Alicante all streets lead finally to the sea. The beach seems endless; it is well kept, sparkling. I would like to remove my shoes and sift the fine white grains between my toes, but the sand would scald them. A sailboat bobs gently, anchored beyond the listless breakers. Few people risk the sun; two Americans huddle beneath a blue- and white-striped umbrella. The man, fanning his sun-reddened mate with a folded newspaper, looks at me as I pass, then turns sharply away. A dead gull rots at the edge of the sea. Heat and stillness contain the odor—two steps past and the smell of death is memory.

Later, from the parapet of the Castle of Santa Barbara, I lean elbows on the stone wall and watch the city below, both halves, old and new, linked by the small, stagnant pool in the center of Plaza de Oro. Between this and the castle is a larger plaza, another pool—this crystal. Perhaps the few tourists throw pennies there.

That evening I eat dinner in one of the modern hotels. Two aged Germans sit at a table near the door, talking furiously over broiled fish dinners. One, picking his teeth, looks up when I enter and makes a sucking noise.

My waiter is German, fat, elderly, with large gray eyes that seem never to blink.

I am seated at a table near a young Spanish woman and her escort. They don't talk to one another. He probes a finger beneath the stiff collar of his shirt and adjusts the knot of his tie. She wears a red flower in hair pulled to a bun at the nape of her neck. Several hairs come loose, float wraithlike at her ear. Throughout the meal she glances at me. Once I time it perfectly and smile; she pretends to be looking past me.

The waiter tells me the young woman is the daughter of a high police official. The escort is her brother.

Does he know them?

They eat here often.

Would he introduce me?

He stands tautly for a moment. Something, a smile perhaps, tightropes between pursed lips. Now the eyes blink, slowly.

If I wished. After dinner.

I order more wine and consider the possibilities. To seduce the daughter of a high police official in the presence of her chaperone, and he her brother. . . .

At their table I am disappointed. The flower is paper, the flawless type gifted, maimed men fashion and sell on the corners of American cities. The brother smiles handsomely, pulls his chair closer, rests his knee against mine. A muscle throbs hypnotically in the hollow of his cheek. We talk about the weather and life in New York, where he has spent a year, an exchange student at Columbia University. He says he sees few American Blacks. What brings me to Alicante?

I say I'm searching.

For what thing?

I hesitate. I won't burden strangers.

The perfect mistress, I say. I'm searching for the perfect mistress.

This makes the young woman lower her eyes.

And have you found her, *senor*?

I haven't. But life is long, and all the world is not Alicante.

Yes, this is so.

The knee is hard, insistent. I move slightly; a pause and it follows.

Why, I ask, are there Germans in Alicante? Here and in the streets also I saw several. All elderly and going to fat. What do they do here?

Only some does he know of. This waiter once manufactured perfumed soaps and lampshades. The two by the door are former salesmen of women's lingerie. There are several such. Others, no one knows, no one asks. Most have money and spend it freely. Only few, like this waiter, are employed. And what do I do?

Do? When?

Pardon. He means what is my occupation.

I say that I read all night and go south in the winter—something David was fond of saying.

Again we talk about the weather.

Outside I still wear the pressure of his knee. A breeze has sprung from the Mediterranean; I imagine the stench of dead gull in its salt flavor. I swallow this and the taste of wine and say that I've been joking. I'm really a jet fighter pilot. I've flown many missions in Vietnam. Yes, the earth is different seen from the sky; one gets the full sense of its spherical shape, of its finiteness. Yes, this is sobering. No, you can't see people from that height, only the cross hairs of the scope. No, I don't think about it.

He's impressed. The young woman walks between us, wearing rose-colored satin pumps. She smells of sun and lilacs. I pull my black beret from my pocket and put it on. The brother seems annoyed.

What's wrong?

Pardon. My cap.

My cap? It's a fine cap—I remove and offer it—see for yourself. I bought it only this afternoon. A young man gave me water.

I must please not to wear this cap.

But why?

In Spain, in Alicante, only peasants wear berets; it is unseemly for the daughter of a high police official to be observed with a man who wears such a thing.

But this can't be so, I say. Just last week, in Granada, it was evening, and in the square I saw young men who wore them, who walked holding the hands of their lovers. Close behind chaperones followed and said nothing.

He knows little of Granada. In Alicante. . . .

And in America, I say, the black beret is a sign that you're a friend of the people, a revolutionary.

His profile sharpens. He says that he's of a family of revolutionaries. Hadn't his father left his bulls in the care of servants and gone to fight in the Civil War? And after the great victory, hadn't the General honored him with this post?

We are standing in front of the house. A wrought iron gate guards a white table and chairs in the center of a flagstone patio. Above the door of the house a heavy wooden cross is bolted. A light burns in an upstairs window. I've said nothing to the woman. I turn to her brother.

Listen, I say. I've things to tell you. Once, in Vietnam, in a village near Dalot, in the place of the Montegnard people, a man who had witnessed the destruction of the French showed me where he'd hidden his granddaughters from American soldiers. Seven they were, all skilled in certain secrets. I could tell you of this and other things, inside, over a nightcap.

This is not possible. But, he says casually, he and I might share a bottle of wine at a cafe a few moments from here. There we might continue our conversation.

I say goodnight and head back to the barrio. A dog laps water from the pool at Plaza de Oro, turns and disappears, loping into the shadows. The pool ripples and stills. The thin sound of a lightly strummed guitar seeps from a window above my head. Malaika is dead.

The hotel lobby is darkened, quiet. Ponce, the clerk, sleeps on a straight-backed chair, his unshaven cheek resting on his chest. At a corner of his open

mouth, a bubble of saliva swells and contracts with his breathing. His son, Annibal, sleeps also, on the floor against a wall. I bang my fist on the counter, twice. A woman, I say. I want a woman.

Ponce wipes his mouth with his shirt sleeve. Certainly. He turns, speaks rapid Spanish to the boy, then comes around the counter, beckoning that I follow. We go through a door beneath the stairway out into an alley. There is a half moon tonight; light the consistency of skim milk paints our way. The alley is formed by two rows of single-story adobe buildings. We walk past three doors without knocking. Again he motions—I'm to wait here in the alley. I peer into the darkened room. Through the open door, beneath the stronger smell of disinfectant, leaks the odor of human waste.

Ponce shakes the bed.

Rosemarie, he whispers. Rosemarie.

Yes, what is it?

A voice grumbles in the darkness. Infidels. What is this intrusion? Can a man have no rest?

Rosemarie speaks reassuringly. The bed groans as she leaves it. When she appears, she wears a half smile. Loveliness flows sleepily across her face, pooling, sharing moon and shadow with her eyes. She is wrapped in a long white cloth; hair cut the length of a young boy's brushes darkly at her ears. One shoulder is bare. Without speaking she goes ahead, moving soundlessly on naked feet.

Ponce closed the door.

Who was that man? I ask. I don't want a well-used whore. There are plenty who are idle. Give me another.

Ponce says no, I'm mistaken. Only two months ago did she come here. There was no money to keep their house or feed them. She has not worked these past few days, and the man . . . the man is her husband who cannot work. He has had an accident with a burro and now is ill.

What kind of accident?

Ponce smiles sadly, cups his groin.

An accident. It is a terrible thing, no?

Yes. It is a terrible thing.

In the morning Rosemarie is gone. I again wash from the earthen pitcher. From the windows I see tiny figures on the hills behind the barrio. When Annibal serves my breakfast I ask what they are.

They are children.

Children? What do they do there?

They live in the caves.

Alone?

No, there are parents.

Would he take me?

Why?

To see if there's a story. To sell to American magazines, I say. That's how I make my living.

Now? In the heat of the day?

Why not?

If I wished.

Annibal turns to go, then glances at the hills.

You, *senor*, you have children?

No, we had none. Why do you ask?

He only wondered. He will wait for me in the lobby.

* * * * *

The hills are barren; nothing grows but stone and dry earth. Annibal and I sweat beneath the sun. The ground levels. There is a huge boulder; we lean against it. The earth is pale pink from lack of rain.

Should we go on?

They will come.

Moments pass. Small ragged figures appear, approaching us cautiously. Their dark faces are gaunt, their stomachs swollen. Alms, they say, alms.

Where are their parents?

Annibal motions. Further up the hill, larger gray figures shrink like lepers before the black mouth of a cave.

You are moved, *senor*.

I say nothing. Why should I be moved? I have seen hunger. In Mississippi children wore it in their eyes. In Vietnam it foraged in cans outside the mess halls.

Why are they here?

They are poor.

Couldn't they be poor down there?

In the city they beg. This drives away the tourists.

Alicante has few tourists, almost none in summer.

There would be less.

How do they live?

Sometimes priests come to pray and leave food and clothing. Besides that, no one knows, *senor*.

I've brought no food, what coins I have I scatter. The children crouch and rush them. They make no sound.

Back at the hotel I pack my bag. I should head home, to New York, but there also it is summer; there, too, the heat holds the odor, and the apartment would still smell of Malaika. Time, I think. But time is no healer.

Annibal carries my bag to the station. I send a telegram to Paris and catch the afternoon train heading north for Barcelona. Like all travelers on trains I read old magazines and stare out the window. At Valencia, a young Black boards my car, a burly American with a knapsack on his back. He grins broadly and greets me with a clenched fist.

A home boy, he says. Hey, baby. What's your story?

He slides into the seat next to mine. He seems nice enough, but I've got my own troubles and I don't want to be bothered. I turn my face to the window.

I got no story, brother.

II.

But of course, I have a story. Everybody has one. This is mine: I am sitting in a train heading north to Barcelona, the day is hot, there is a young man next to me whose feelings I have probably hurt. I went to Mississippi. I witnessed Vietnam. I loved Malaika and she died.

"I'm going out," she said. "I'm going riding. Come with me."

It was five-thirty in the morning. A shadow tightened her face. She was sitting up in bed, swaying, legs folded beneath her, the sheet puddled in the basin of her lap.

Did I say that we met that summer of 1964 in Mississippi, the place we chose to stand to change the world from? Or at least they did. Malaika and Jesse and David, I mean. I entertained no such notions. Changing the world wasn't important to me, it is not important now. Oh, there were times when I was caught up, I'll admit that; there were moments when the vision they shared appeared before me as a flame, beckoning, seducing. But in time that flame flickered and died, prey to wind, or lack of air, or the simple incandescence of self-discovery. Even the terms of that vision grew strange: civil rights, freedom riders, sit-ins, boycotts—words that, like chivalry or patriotism, stole from the mouth in quick, self-conscious rhythms.

No, I was no hero, no Goodman or Schwerner, no Chaney venturing unarmed into the wilderness of white men's lives. But I was there in Mississippi nonetheless, in a second-story room in a place called Greenwood, adding names to the slowly growing list of newly registered voters. I was almost always frightened and confused. Perhaps this is why, of all that profusion of growing things, I remember the foul weed and not the flower. This why, in spite of the laughter, I recall the lament; in spite of the blues that celebrated life, my memory rocks to the dirge for life's passing. This the reason that despite a thousand details more compelling, I recall the spit flecking the faces of white women, the weariness of the picket line, the bulge of the weapon, malformed and malignant, on the sheriff's hip.

* * * * *

"Come with me," Malaika said.

She'd been that way for days now, agitated, drawn.

"It's hot," she said. "There's famine in Biafra. I dreamed of the stacked bodies of black infants, tongues bloated and covered with flies."

I had a deadline. I had only slept an hour. The alarm was set for eight.

"It's always hot," I said. "There's always famine."

"Michael, listen to me. Listen to what I'm feeling."

"What, Malaika?"

"Like doing something. Let's split New York. We'll go back to Mississippi. I'll start a day care center. I don't feel needed here. New York's too big. We'll buy a house out in the country. We'll have a child."

"It wouldn't be good for you to go back to Mississippi."

"Michael, will I ever be forgiven?"

"It's over, Malaika, there's nothing to forgive. You did what you had to do."

"I didn't have to do it. That's why I'm shaking like this. I didn't have to do it."

She wasn't always like that. For months she would be fine, involved with the children she worked with, then the transformation, despair, the frenzied interludes. Human beings have always staked their hopes in shifting places, dreams have always shattered, and the spirit has found a way to rise again, invent new hopes or resurrect the old. Malaika had her reasons for the changes she went through; even though I will insist until my death that she was justified in doing what she did, still, she had her reasons. But what about the others, what about me? What was it about that summer in Mississippi that left the spirit crippled? Or was it Mississippi? I have seen this vexation everywhere, in those who tried to change the world, and in those who didn't. Maybe it's the times we live through, the poisoned air, the additives in food, war and the threat of war, poverty, the appalling discovery that violence, not love, rules the human heart. Maybe the world was not prepared for my generation, we who slipped screaming into the silence left by Dachau and Hiroshima. Or was it a series of individual failures, an inability of a generation to come to terms with the world and the self?

I think of Jesse, thin, skin black as the skin of seals, the rapid fire bursts of his speech like the clatter of these train wheels speeding north. He was joining the Black Muslims, he said. Nothing else made sense anymore. The Civil Rights Movement was dead. White people were not about freedom for Blacks. It was time that this was understood.

I mentioned the whites who'd broken bread and shared the fear and put their lives on the line with us. I mentioned Schwerner and Goodman.

"Fuck em," Jesse said.

It was the Sunday after Martin Luther King's murder, that almost Spring of 1968. We were in Riverside Park, walking south from Grant's Tomb. We slid down the hill to stroll along the river, and the river moved with a swollen heaviness, and the sun was bright against it. We left the sidewalk and went along the grass, and Jesse stopped and turned. "Talk to me," he said. "Tell me what you're feeling."

We stood, regarding one another, not the best of friends, yet bound in a way that was ultimately inextricable. We'd been through the summer of 1964 together; we'd survived that war. Though neither had been victorious, we were both alive, and inside each of us was the truth that the other was responsible for this.

The river smelled like rotten fruit. Along the pavement, a jogger with a red scarf at his throat skirted the snarling chow walked by a Jamaican. The sun was hard, without warmth. The wind slapped the surface of the river, buffeted the gulls huddled on the rocks. I was being waited on to speak, to give some sign that I knew what Jesse was going through, to deal with his doubt by question or argument, or to bless him and send him on his way. I said nothing. People have to do what's right for them, they have to make up their own minds. Jesse's way would not work for me. But there was nothing written that said it wouldn't work for him. So I was silent.

We ended up at my apartment. Malaika was out.

"It makes me crazy," he said. He was speaking to the window, the night beyond it; he was speaking to an undeciphered past. "All that time and energy, stumbling around getting my ass kicked, talking about being free. I *am* free. Ain't I?" He shook his head. "But how come everything's so dull, so empty? I keep going back to what it felt like getting ready to go to Mississippi, knowing I wasn't alone, all these people with me, and we were going to do it, tear the motherfucker down and put it up again, the right way. . . ."

He turned to me. "Do you think that anybody but us remembers what we tried to do?"

I watched him and I thought about it and then I shrugged.

"I tell, you, Michael, sometimes *I'm* not sure what it was all about. Something happened. But I guess it didn't mean very much.

"I'm scared," he said. "I know what's out there." He pointed to the blackness pressing against the windows. "I live in those streets, I know the pain, people living like animals, man, I mean folks without a chance, kids doomed from jump street and never knowing it. Oh, I know there's *some* joy, there has to be. No one can be miserable all the time. But it ain't no place to be alone, you need something to *buffer* you against that shit, and the only thing I've ever found is people.

"But people change." He looked at me. His voice had gotten very slow and measured. "You change, I change, everything changes, and seldom for the better. That, my man, is the human condition.

"But we didn't believe that, did we, me and you in Mississippi?"

I watched his face, the eyes set close together, the ironic, fading smile.

"I don't think," he said, "that ever again will so many folks have so much hope or believe so much in possibility. Not in our lifetime, not in our children's. And that's sad." He grunted and turned back to the window, hands buried in the back pockets of his jeans, body slumped, rocking. "So I'll try something different. I'm gonna *be* black, live black, *think* black. . . . Maybe exorcize this devil. What can happen? What have I got to lose?"

I didn't know what to say. "Jesse?"

"Yeah?"

"In Mississippi . . . thanks for watching my back."

He looked like he didn't know who I was. "No problem," he said.

A small village streams past the train. The houses are an amber sun-baked color. At the end of a hazel street a pallid church stands sentinel. Children in gray watch the flight of a bright, pink ball. Beyond the buildings the land exhales small, curving hills, russet, garnished with green. I imagine they are the humped backs of sleeping prehistoric beasts. I doze. When I open my eyes I see the mountains, gray and green and purple above the tawny countryside. A watery sky hallucinates, creating the illusion that the sun is a scarlet wafer balanced on a slope.

Where you headed? the young American asks.

Paris.

I'm going to Barcelona. How long you been in Europe?

A week.

Your first trip?

No.

It's mine. I love it. This place is a gas. Where you from?

He has high cheekbones and bright brown eyes, hands as fine and tapered as a woman's. His hands don't go with his body. I tell him I'm from New York.

I'm from Kansas City. How long you be here?

Few more days.

Then back to the old grind, huh?

I'm not on vacation.

Business.

I'm mourning, I say. My wife just died.

There is a moment of speechlessness, into which the train wheels rush, and then he says he's sorry. Was she sick long?

She wasn't sick at all. She fell off a horse.

A horse?

Don't think I'm rude, I say, but I don't want to talk about it.

The bottom of the sun is being sliced away by mountain. Like trains into tunnels, we enter silence. The door between the cars opens, a funnel of hot, dry air, and a girl child steps through, followed by a woman dressed in black. The child is beautiful, the shade and gawkiness of a fawn, hair borrowed from the mane of a roan-colored filly, cropped. They sit in the first available seat. The woman's face is corrugated with age. On the child's forehead the sun carves a motionless flame. My countryman is rummaging in his knapsack. He brings out an harmonica, all silver and bronze, and begins to play a soft and aching blues. The light filters through the window, blesses the child, burnishes the ends of her hair. The old woman's face is sagging. It is an expression that is familiar. I have seen it in Da Nang and Hue. I have seen it on the faces of men and women in Mississippi as they sat on their porches at sundown in the scarred rocking chairs of their lives. I have seen it in Philadelphia and Bayonne, Detroit and Raleigh, on the stoops of tenements, or framed by windows in New York and Washington. And I did not know precisely why what I saw moved me. I do not know now.

I listen to the music. The sun is changing colors, slipping further below the horizon, leaving the car a pale mixture of golden light and shadow.

III.

David can't meet me for dinner. Later we can have a drink together. He is shocked to hear about Malaika. How could she fall off a horse? How am I bearing up?

I don't think I'll be long in this city. It is impossible to run from the memory of Malaika. I am always turning smack into the stone wall recollection of her. What I thought would be a matter of time is a matter of acceptance, of standing still. I will go back to New York. I will discover it, wander its streets. I will come home to drink the tea she collected, jasmine, orange, lime, I will begin again or not begin, I will end or not end. It is all the same, circles. I will stand still in the centers of them.

I unpack my bag. My hotel window looks onto the backs of buildings painted with grime. The room is clean, sparsely furnished, a faint smell of disinfectant. The bed is hard.

I go out into the streets. Paris does not move me. This is my second visit. I was sent here in 1968 to assist in covering the student rebellion for *Ebony Magazine*. The students were ugly, the police ugly, and the city had no charm. I came to Paris with great expectations, victim of myths, of songs sung by expatriates. I came prepared to fall in love—it was spring and I was young and impressionable. I believed that I was in the human heart of a country that would not have been able to murder Martin King. I met some Algerians. One with a mole above his right brow, small eyes like anthracite coal, a smile so broad it revealed the pink flesh of his gums. I asked him if he agreed that students were the vanguard of a new revolutionary movement. Like black caterpillars his eyebrows slithered to meet above his nose. The smile fell into his lap and he looked up at the sky where the French sun broiled the nation. When he turned to me again I saw that the smile had been a mask, a way of hiding fury, a permanent contempt. And I wondered when the last time was he'd smiled for joy, and if he could remember it.

"Students?" He spat. "It is interesting, no? All of a sudden everyone wishes to be the niggers. Then we, the real niggers, can be ignored. Look at them."

As if on cue, a group of students appeared, sauntered past the faded Cinzano sign, the young trees straining against their braces. They seemed impossibly young, impossibly healthy.

"Revolutionaries, my ass. It is spring, their sap has risen, what they are feeling is the urge to fuck one another, but they don't know how." His meaty hands moved in explicit, obscene gestures and he paused and stared at me. "Where is their revolution in winter, when the poor are less visible, hovering in cellars for warmth, without food or hope? Eh? Unwashed vermin of bourgeoise pigs. They are tomorrow's ambassadors, executives, they are tomorrow's DeGaulles. All of their ideals will be sacrificed to the maintenance of power. It is like that in American, no, *monsieur*? Making revolutions because their fathers' money has given them time to do so? An uprising of the leisure class? *Less leisure*, they scream, *more work*. I want to laugh until I shit, until my feces covers their bastard faces. I will take their leisure. Look at me. See these hands? With these hands I take clay, or bronze, or wood. I am a sculptor, *monsieur*. There is a gift in these hands. When will I work, eh? With what will I buy space, materials? I sweep streets for half my living, for the other half I steal. Eh? I am not ashamed. I have three children, a wife who needs an operation on her teeth."

He moved his chair closer to mine, lowered his head and his voice conspiratorily, and I caught, there in the mid-afternoon heat, the unwashed odor of his body.

"Listen, *monsieur*. I will tell you something. Do not trust a priest who offers you nothing but prayer. Do not trust a revolutionary who is well fed. Do not trust one incapable of love. Eh?" He sat up again and the sun struck in his face and made him squint. "I don't lie, *monsieur*. I like you and I don't lie."

I remember with what intensity he coupled the revolutionary with love. I did not ask if he meant that it was one's enemy that one should love, or whether the love of which he spoke was for one's comrades-in-arms. But I did remember that love was the rallying cry of the volunteers, love was the banner they held above them as they streamed into Mississippi that summer of 1964. I doubt whether all

of them believed this without reservation; I have seen the eyes of men and women that cried out for revenge, and I have seen eyes so filled with fear there was no room left for love to enter. But it is true that early on most volunteers believed in the power of love, even when events might have caused them to consider a contradictory feeling. And love backfired; it blew up in their faces.

I cannot say this thing about love exactly as I wish to. But I ask you this: Did black children in Mississippi forgive, with love, the white men who murdered their fathers? Did black parents who followed the blasted bodies of their sons to waiting graves, did they love? Did the six friends who so gracefully carried the coffins, who strode strong and sure on the dusty roads, in the violent heat, did they? And when the bodies of Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman were found, when the shallow graves were forced to tell their bloody secrets, when we learned how, even in dying, Chaney's black body had been singled out for special mutilation, did we love, we who were sickened, and horrified and fired with fear and hatred? Should we have loved? Should we?

But this is not what the Algerian in that cafe meant, someone will say. It is certainly not what Martin King meant, and I doubt that any of the volunteers meant it the way you say it here.

I speak to you of what I have seen and of what I know. I speak to you of love and how it failed. Love between lovers and love between friends. Love between brothers and love between black and white. But I speak most of the love we were told to bear for our enemies. That love poisoned all love, drove my generation into the hills, into the arms of fraudulent religions, mystical cults, the chemical visions that left them wise, and holy, serene and ineffective, seeking love.

When I think about Mississippi, I think that what happened is that the volunteers confused tactic with creed. I think also that they could not juggle the awesome contradiction of a philosophy that insisted that you love the person who was, at that moment, intent upon shattering your skull. You cannot love a person with the object of provoking in him embarrassment or guilt, for then, if that person is your enemy, he will grow yet more dangerous. If he is not your enemy he will soon become the most implacable of foes. You must love someone because he *is*, and you choose to do so. And if you choose to love your enemy, you must be prepared, if the question is between his survival or yours, to unflinchingly blow him away. Not because killing is good. Because love is. And if your enemy, who does *not* love you, achieves your destruction, there will be that much less love in the world.

My hotel is on *Rue Madame*, two blocks from the Luxemburg Gardens. I walk the other way. I stop at a cafe, drink gin and tonic. The afternoon sun is high and hot, leaves silver spots on the glass of windows. I drink another gin. Another. Shadows creep across the street. They have fallen spear-like from the tops of buildings, or they pool like spilled ink, they have a thickness at the tips, and then they merge, the spear and the liquid, now just large dark spaces, cooler than the sunshine. I watch one space steal the shadow of a passerby and return it, slightly longer. I leave the cafe, walk on, trusting my sense of direction. A gnarled man wearing a black beret labors behind a wooden pushcart. At the top of the heap a graveyard of boxes that once protected sterile gauze. Each red cross is bold and bloody; the man is whistling.

I pass bookstores selling used items. I enter one. Smell like tinder for fireplaces. A hole in the roof spills sun on scattered back issues of magazines, turns their yellow pages the color of canteloupe. I pass my hand through the small sunlight; the hole in the roof is no larger than a canteloupe. I like the sun's touch, warm, liquid. In an American magazine thirteen months old I find one of my articles. In the accompanying photograph a black man infected with age and poverty slumps against the fence of a refuse-cluttered lot, on both sides walls of dark, sagging tenements. The fence is brand new, sparkling.

I am touching shoulders with a young woman who smells of perspiration. I look down, past her heavy breasts, her strong arms covered with brown hair and sunspots. Her ankles are thick. I want to say: See? This story? I wrote it. Malaika was alive then. We spent the first two weeks of that summer at Fire Island, in a small beach house by the edge of the sea. The first three days there was no sun, a heavy low sky that the water birthed and spit above us, and the sea was green and raging, frothing at its mouth. Malaika stood at the windows, bit her nails. *The sea is angry*, she said. *We come from the sea and the sea is angry*. I said something that didn't make her laugh. *Talk to me*, she said. *Tell me what you're feeling. I feel fine*, I said. On the fourth day the sky cleared, cerulean silk. Beyond the waves a sea that glistened flat to the horizon and embraced it. We took off our sweaters and huddled on the beach for love. At night a full moon blossomed in the sky. It lit the sea and the beach. It lit the nothingness. Malaika was frightened by the space between the moon and her, by the waste of so much light. The next day she walked to the water. I watched unnoticed from the dunes. Her head was bowed. I leapt to my feet, calling. It was useless, the surf swallowed my voice. I ran toward her. I fell, got up and ran again. The sand sucked at my feet, made my legs ache. *Malaika*, I called, *please, Malaika*. She edged her foot into the water, withdrew it. Arms stretched like slender, mahogany wings, she turned. *It's cold*, she said.

It's a question I don't want to face. I confess there was something doomed about her, reckless. In Mississippi, even before the change in her, she risked her life with impunity. Others saw it as strength, as courage; it frightened me. *Sit down, Malaika*, I said, *this is Mississippi, turn the lights out, it's not safe to stand like that, silhouettes invite bombs, gunshots from passing cars.*

I like light, she said.

Malaika, don't go out by yourself, don't taunt the troopers, don't scowl at those people.

There was a sadness about her daring, a resignation, a trembling. In New York, she bought sleeping pills.

For what, for God's sake, why?

I can't sleep. I have bad dreams. I can't get all those faces out of my mind. The baby's. His. In Biafra they're starving, they're murdering one another. I talked to my mother. A boy I went out with in high school was killed in Vietnam, sent home in pieces in a platic bag. They couldn't find his left leg.

Maybe you ought to talk to somebody.

Talk?

You know, professionally.

A shrink?

Yes.

I'm supposed to be able to adjust to this?

It wouldn't hurt to talk.

What am I going to tell him? That I let my baby die? That I preached non-violence, yet killed a man? He wasn't even a man, Michael. He was a boy.

The baby would have died whether you were there or not. And you didn't kill anybody. It was an accident. You did what you had to do.

I didn't have to do it. None of it.

I threw the pills away. We argued. We were arguing a lot then. When she insisted that the Buddhists who had immolated themselves in Vietnam were some kind of saints, I yelled at her and called her a fool. She disappeared for two days. Panic emptied my stomach; I tried to ignore it. When she came back, I didn't talk about it.

She was an excellent rider. I have seen her stand on the bare back of a trotting horse. I have watched on a morning drenched with mist and sunlight as she maneuvered through the most difficult of steeple chases. I went to the park. There were no holes in the bridle path, no obstructions. I don't know why she left the path and took off across the park at full gallop. There were no witnesses to her death, only a man wide awake enough to grow curious at a riderless horse and trace the hoofprints back to her broken body.

Come with me, she said.

IV.

It is growing cooler. Life floats level at my waist. Street noises come to the placid surface like pieces of debris, sodden, the hum of traffic, the curled edges of a foreign tongue. I can hear the splash of my footprints, feel the resistance at my navel. It would be pleasant to fall forward, float face down, let the water carry me through these graceless streets. I want another drink. I see a sign outside a cellar doorway. *Madame Dubonet. Fortunes Told.* Velvet drapes bleed in the window. I go down steps, open the door. A bell rings, a small tinkling like in Catholic Masses. I close the door behind me, the bell answers. The room is small, dim, smells of sharp, sweet incense. An enormous black woman thrusts through white curtains that cling to her arms and shoulders, then fall wistfully like the half-seen forms of apparitions.

"Good afternoon, sir," she says, in French. Fat rips from her chin, the skin beneath her eyes, her naked arms; she is swimming in fat. Earlobes dangle rings like bracelets. I don't say anything. Her eyes are large, in the poor light their expression hidden. Her face shimmers. I hear a car horn. I hear the drapes bleed.

"You wish your fortune told?"

Yes.

"Please, sit down."

I sit. There's nothing on the table and the wood is scarred.

She sits across from me, carefully, in the way that short-skirted women enter sports cars, and says something rapidly, lengthily, in French. I say I don't understand.

"You're American," she says, in English.

Yes.

"Me, too."

Oh?

She nods, movement that sets her eyes and earrings in motion, and leans toward me. Her body smells like the twisted hulks of wrecked cars left in rain.

"Where are you from?"

New York.

She mutters something in French.

Excuse me?

"Louisiana . . ." She smiles. I think it is a smile. "My mother was hoodoo princess."

I see.

"When I was born, a wind from the north for three days whipped at the ankles of my people, lifting the skirts of women, driving crawling things insane. It was a sign that I was chosen to work wonders."

I see.

Her expression says that I plainly do not see. She sinks back against her chair, her eyes fixed on the ceiling. "My childhood was unfettered, without restriction, while my powers grew. At the age of nine I could make predictions, at twelve, influence fate. When I was fifteen I was stolen from my people by an evil man, a man of cunning who would profit from my gift. I was smuggled into a ship. For three days I moaned in the hole, chained to a cot, calling to my spirits who would not answer. At night he would come and lie with me. On the fourth day I went above. The sea was infinite. The spirits spoke to me, saying: *There is only sky and sea, this ship and the purple fish that breaks the water. After that is silence, the bloated bodies of men, women and children, food for fish. Be still, you are above the grave of your ancestors.* In a vision I saw the men who crucified Christ. They wore helmets that burned like fire in the sun."

Tell me my fortune.

She nods, pulls from her lap a deck of cards.

How much will this cost?

She names a modest figure. She shuffles the cards. The whites of her nails blink like small lights at the tips of dark cigars of flesh. She deals the cards out on the table in rows of five. I count five rows. The card are larger than those in a regular deck, brightly colored, figures boldly drawn.

Are these cards called the Tarot?

"No."

I thought *they* were the cards of fortune-telling.

"For some."

She doesn't look at me. She looks at the faces of cards. Then, in a voice so certain I half believe her, she begins to read: "You will enter a period of uncertainty. You have suffered loss. This is your sign, the Wandering Jew. You will meet a woman who will change your life. See, here, the water? Fertility. Perhaps there will be a child."

My own?

"This is not revealed to me. Here is the lynched slave burning, stay near the water, fear death by fire. This card I am forbidden to see, the question of happiness, the sign of the young deer feeding, is clouded."

What does that mean? What are you saying?

"The future reveals itself only in general terms."

Then forget about the future. Tell me about the past.

"What might have been is speculation."

Not what might have been. What *was. Did she take her life? Did she?*

She shrugs. "What was, what might have been, there is no difference.

"You speak in riddles.

"What is glimpsed but never seen is always riddle."

Do you have a license for such nonsense?

She gestures. On a wall to her left, in a black wooden frame, hangs a paper. In its lower right-hand corner is a red seal of approval.

Outside, the light is bronze. People pass looking at their feet or nothing. On the corner a hunchback peddles white carnations. I wonder if all the flowers have wilted on Malaika's grave. I stop at a cafe and buy another gin. Such beautiful flowers, roses, chrysanthemums, lilies, lilacs, purples, reds, fragrant blues against the damp fresh dirt. It did not rain that day. The sun glinted on marble headstones, the silver shovels. Drawn faces circled the black wound in the earth, sighed and whispered, and the casket groaned with the weight of flowers. The sun was a thin, merciless disc, attacked the mucous membranes in my throat, my nose, turned the flesh there to parchment. Death had undone me. I was drenched with a feverish sweat, my knees buckled. I wanted to cry out, to scream at the sun, the God above it. Only stubbornness and a misplaced sense of propriety kept me from falling on my face, beating my fists against the world. A woman, face hidden by veil, handed me a lily across the gulf between us. Everyone was watching me. I stepped forward. They watched me. There was a stillness—drawn breaths and heat, desolation and collected grief. I tried to toss the lily. It stuck to my fingers, dangled like the broken neck of a strange blue bird.

I should have burned her. I should have burned her body, mixed ashes with flowers, eaten them. I should have eaten her flesh without burning. Before they gutted her, pumped her with that horrid fluid. I could smell it when I bent to kiss her. It slit like razor blades in my throat.

Here, at dusk, in a foreign city, I sit remembering. All the good times, the laughs, the loving, the silences, are touched with misforgivings. I could have said that then, or not said this, we could have gone there, done that. I could have accompanied her that morning. I know it is useless to think such thoughts. My drink's grown warm. Where has the day gone? Why has it taken the light and left this crude imitation? *I should have told her.* I leave my drink unfinished, wander streets. The figure is thin, steps in front of me. Teeth rotten, cheeks rouged. It says something in French. I say I don't understand.

"A night of happiness, *monsieur*?"

The lips are drawn tight. The Adam's apple large.

I don't like men, I say.

"Am I not a woman, *monsieur*?"

I'm not interested.

"Am I not a woman?" He smiles hideously. He has doused himself with a sickly perfume. His fingers are opening the filthy white blouse, baring his chest. The hair has been shaven. Stubbles are left. Breasts like those of girls entering adolescence.

I brush past him. I stop an old man and ask the way to *Rue Madame.* He sprays

my face with saliva and weaves to and fro, exhausted, as he tells me. I turn a corner, feel faint, lean my face against the warm stone of a building. The figure stands before me, legs spread, hands on hips, smiling that ghastly, rotten-toothed smile. I watch as it fades like grins of cats, leaving now the sick, sweet odor, the half-formed breasts, the genitalia of both sexes, luminious like phosphoresence.

Lights switch on in the eyes of buildings. *Malaika.* I should have eaten her body.

V.

"This is the worst time of the year to be in Paris," David says. "Prices go sky high. Streets crawling with Americans. . . ."

He is thinner than when I saw him two years ago. I'd seen him off at the airport. We'd promised to write one another. He said he didn't know when he was coming back; he'd had it with America. Now there is something in his face that says if he were touched he would sing before snapping. Already he has made me weary, for when he is like this, he needs to be handled. I'm sorry about this. David can be witty and fun to be with and I was looking forward to this meeting. But I'm in no shape to handle him.

"Do you feel like talking about it?" He is speaking with that hushed sincerity people reserve for the recently bereaved.

"How did it happen?"

"She fell. At full gallop the branch struck just below her throat. The impact smashed both collarbones and swept her from the horse. She landed on a rock the size of a beachball. Her back was broken."

"But she was such a good rider," he exclaims, as if excellence had promised immortality and now had failed to keep that promise.

"Yes," I say. "She was."

It is quiet here and very late. The music from the radio is European, soft, but not very interesting, and I detect above the smell of wine, the damp full odor of this Paris evening. We are sitting in a small cafe near my hotel, beneath a huge, garish painting of the chorus line at the Folies Bergere. There are a dozen tables here and a large fan suspended from the ceiling, its lethal blades throwing shadows like a dozing, sunstruck dragonfly. Along one side of the room is a zinc-plated bar that had, perhaps, once shone brightly, but which now, unless a miracle occurs, will never shine again. Little about this room holds promise of shining, certainly not the floor with its footprints from the evening rain that had, for five furious minutes, attacked the city. The lights in the low ceiling simply dull the somber faces of patrons, most of whom, huddled heavily over glasses of red wine or cognac, seem defeated halfway through their lives. In truth, the only brightness in this room smolders in the eyes of the woman perched like some vulturous bird behind the cash register, hair an impossible orange swept into a likeness of the Eiffel Tower, above which, like a warning, a strip of paper hangs studded with the flesh of flies. David has chosen this place because it does not attract tourists. I can understand why. Any tourist worth his curiousity, who was determined to witness that Paris so inaccurately described as "gay," would have turned from this room and fled.

Three tables away from us a young Frenchwoman rises, smooths wrinkles from a tangerine-colored skirt. She says something to the black man she's seated with and when she smiles her well-used face is transformed and I can see the girl she used to be. She carries her purse across the room and disappears behind a door.

"Did she suffer?"

"I wasn't there."

"You talk as if . . . you seem so calm." He has managed to keep his voice even, but his face accuses me. I am not fulfilling his expectations. There is always someone to disapprove of the way you do things, how you talk or dress or grieve. I watch David watch me, his eyes so dark they seem perfectly shaped holes left in his skull by precision instruments. He is waiting for me to say something that will convince him of my pain.

"Well," I answer, and I cannot, just then, look at him, "how else is there to talk about it? She's dead. She was alive and I loved her. Now she's dead." And if I hadn't caught myself, I would have shrugged.

"It's not real, is it? Her death's not real yet."

"It's real."

He sags back in his chair, swings to one side and smoothly crosses his legs. The arcs of his eyebrows reveal his disbelief, say that he is facing a man in a state of shock, a man not yet aware of the weight of his calamity. Maybe he is right. Maybe I'll awaken one morning and find it impossible to rise.

The young Frenchwoman returns. Her companion has had their glasses filled and she smiles in acknowledgement. The smile is beautiful in the way that a small, rare thing is beautiful, and I, my own glass at my lips, silently wish her well. I glance at David, but he is looking through the dirt-streaked cafe window, beyond which a group of young men pass, sharing a laughter sharp enough to slice flesh. They disappear, and David is still looking, in the way people stare when what they are seeing is inside them, and he makes a tentative gesture, two fingers across the lips, and begins speaking in a voice more uncertain than that gesture.

"I've been thinking about her. About down south. I was thinking how strong she was."

Now he turns from the window and looks at me and our eyes lock and his fall away. There is something in his face, a great tenderness, and confusion, and when he speaks again his voice is thick with love and wonder.

"She had a courage I *didn't* have. But I really didn't know her. When you cabled that she was dead, I said to myself that I knew her. But I didn't. And now, that it's too late, the question's driving me crazy. Who was she?"

He looks at me, as if I, of all people, have the answer, as if anyone could answer that question asked of himself, much less another. As we stare at one another I'm aware that only part of his pain is for Malaika, the rest is for himself. His life hasn't worked out the way he wanted it to. I wonder when he will learn that no one's life does, and what this discovery will do to him. But still I know I have to make an attempt at an answer, no matter how inadequate it is. I have a responsibility to David; we were in Mississippi together. I feel like all the world's fathers facing the child's imponderable query, and I say that Malaika was a woman, who, like all of us, was a mass of contradictions, and she was beautiful and I loved her. "No more, no less than that," I say, and David considers this

and finds it incomplete.

"Maybe," he says carefully, "you were too close to see how special she was."

"She was special. But I was also close enough to see the fear."

"What was she afraid of?"

"The dark. Failure. Guilt. Punishment. . . ."

"I'm afraid of that, too," he says, and something breaks and gathers in the space between us. David becomes very busy with his glass, finds something in that filthy floor to hold his watching. I sit absolutely still, in this awful room, in this awful city, using now as a focal point the bright, silly melody kicking into the room from the radio behind the bar. I don't want to talk about her anymore. Talking ruins it.

"Do you ever think about the people we worked with in the South?" There is a terrible drive in his voice. "Not the workers, the people. I wonder what they would say if they could see us now. I wonder if they think we failed them. I wonder if we did." He rubs a hand through his hair, and the thick curls leap as if jolted by electricity. "I feel like I've had this experience and I've missed the meaning of it all. It had to mean something. You don't risk your life for nothing."

I listen and I know what he's saying, but I can't find the energy to connect. People went to Mississippi because they wanted to change the world. That was the public expression, nobody talked about their private reasons. I don't know why anyone goes anywhere to risk his life. I didn't know I was risking my life. I went to Mississippi because I was curious. I would have gone anywhere that seemed interesting. The experience revealed to me the belly of America that, as far as I can see, is not unlike the belly of the world. Men believe in things and the fear that these things will be taken leads them into the most awkward and deadly of positions. Once there, of course, one must defend one's position, one must enlist others to assist. It doesn't matter that what is believed is not the result of one's own thinking. The older a belief, the dimmer its origin, the more powerful it is. You could see this on the white faces in Mississippi. I wish I'd had a camera. I had access to one in Vietnam. The photographer left to me all the shots of napalmed children, skin seared from their flesh. Disembowled mothers. Soldiers wthout arms and legs, decapitated, victims of land mines, booby traps. Men with medals, brave men who risked their lives for things that other people believed in. I talked to some of those men. They didn't believe. But they were there and they died, because there is time and space and men live in these, because as long as some men have expectations, other men will either choose or be forced to fulfill them.

Coming here, the two of us alone, was a mistake. We should have gone someplace where there was dancing and laughter; we should have picked up some girls and gotten drunk. David is talking again. I wish he'd shut up.

"I have nothing but admiration for Malaika. If more of us were like her. . . ."

"What?"

"We'd be free."

"Or dead."

It is a possibility he has not considered. He does not wish to consider it now, and he flares, his marvelous eyes alive with anger. "You have no faith, do you? You never did. Even when we went south, you had no faith. You walked around

knowing nothing would come of it."

"I give you the result."

"Give me an alternative! How will things change if people have no faith?"

"I don't know."

"Did people die for nothing?"

"They die for nothing all the time."

His face is hardened with contempt. "You don't suffer the way other people suffer, do you? That's why you can be so detached all the time."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You act like you've no idea of what suffering is."

I catch myself beginning to shrug again, but he sees the movement, thinks it and my silence are denial of his confusion, rather than helplessness before it.

"Don't you feel anything?" he asks. "Ever?"

I stare at him. I weigh the consequences and then I say it anyway. "I feel like you're full of shit. Don't *ever* tell me what I'm supposed to feel or that I don't know anything about suffering. I just buried my wife, remember?"

He winces. A long moment passes and then he says he's sorry. I don't answer. I'm not being fair. I should say something to make him feel better. He can't find anyplace to put his eyes, and his hands have become large and ungainly. His mouth won't form the shape he wants it to. Still I don't say anything. I'll be sorry later that I did this to him, but right now it feels good.

"Michael," he blurts. "I've got to be going."

"Of course."

"I'm sorry I was such rotten company." His face says he will never forgive me. "How long will you be here?"

"A few days. I think I need to get back to work."

"Well, we'll get together again. I'll call for you at the hotel. You'll meet Mari. The woman I live with."

I nod. He is avoiding my eyes. We stand together.

"I loved her too," he whispers fiercely.

"I know."

"Well . . ." He nods, at what I don't know. "I'll see you." He opens his arms. We embrace, briefly, like divorced lovers determined to remain friends, and he goes, hands in his pockets, head bowed. I watch him pass through the doorway with that graceful walk of his and I watch him stop on the sidewalk and look up and down the street as if he's unsure of his direction. The light from the street lamp spills over his head like a cup of glory. I'm thinking he's very young and promises to always be the baby he is now. He's probably thinking I'm some kind of freak, incapable of feeling whatever it is he feels. Maybe we're both right. Maybe the world consists of two groups, one incapable of controlling its feelings, the other incapable of showing them. I'm still standing and I turn toward the bar. All of them are sitting there looking at me. I wave to them and they nod, one after the other, and I'm laughing.

"He's my friend," I say. "From America. Have you ever been to America? We have the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, your gift to us. . . ."

I don't think one of them understands more than a word or two of English, but all are smiling and nodding at the crazy American. Except the woman at the cash register. She is watching me with an expression of absolute hatred.

"You must come to America and visit me. I live in New York, the greatest city on earth."

Suddenly the feeling in the room is ugly, the smiles are forced, and I sense that I am in the presence of danger. I sit abruptly at the table, lost in the emptiness David has deepened in me. When will it get better? How could anything hurt so much?

"Malaika," I whisper. "Look, love, what you've left me to."

VI.

August, New York.

I remember the schools of blue and sea bass thrown up on the beach one summer at Fire Island, the silver bodies writhing, turning purple in the sun. All day, their rods sunk in the sand, waving like pastel-colored plant stalks, the fishermen had waited, hands shading the eyes as they scanned the rough ocean for the omen of feeding gulls. When the birds came, the men made a mighty cry, snatched their gear and dashed to the water's edge. But the tide was too strong, the fish kept coming. The men wore crazed expressions. They cursed. They began to scoop the fish from the beach with their hands, to throw them back into the ocean. They screamed at the rest of us to help. The fish were heavy and wet; they had panicked. I couldn't hold them. I tried to move one with my foot and succeeded in burying it. There were too many to save. They littered the beach, their open mouths black with exhilarated flies.

Here in New York, groin to buttocks on the subway, I watch faces and remember those fish. I watch the carefully cultivated masks of nonchalance. They conceal a panic and a common hostility spawned from a lack of space and air. When Nw York disintegrates it will begin in August, in the subways. It will begin with bared teeth, a low growl, and then a high, keening wail of hopelessness. The engineer will shriek the train to a halt in that corridor beneath the earth, he, too, shrieking. The conductor will weep. The patrolman will empty his revolver into passengers' faces. Children will sink teeth into the soft throats of their mothers. The sound will reverberate through the tunnels, incense the copulating rats, drive mad the stalking, feral cats, thrust like virulent weeds through concrete surfaces, infect the motorists, the cop on the corner, rise, swirling like plague around apartment buildings, higher, to the chilled cubicles of executives and office boys, all of whom are screaming: *Space, air to breathe. Please, air to breathe.*

I have begun to dream again about Malaika. Last night she wore a flowing brown robe with a hood and she walked away from me with someone I didn't know. I couldn't speak. I couldn't see her face. I awoke angry.

I have done little more than wander about the city looking for stories, none of which I have as yet discovered. I come home and move from room to room. There are six here and the view of the Hudson River, though obstructed by trees, is pleasant, especially at sunset.

In the streets, in the subways, faint with lack of space, I think of her. I think of her in the earth, in that box with no room, no air, impossible even to turn over on her stomach, which is how she always slept. I think of her spirit awakening in the dark, she, who left all the lamps burning. I think of her awakening and being unable to move, to breathe, for the box I bought, they said, was as close to being air-tight as a box could be. It was heavy and metal to retard decay, to keep the worms, the maggots from her mouth.

It was night and the door to my parents' house was locked. I went around the side to a window whose shade was not completely drawn. I saw my wife sitting on the parlor floor, the rubber tubing around her arm bulging the darkening vein. The room was lit more brightly than it need be, the details were larger than life, as if I were looking through a telescope. Malaika was wearing the riding habit I'd given her two Christmases ago. Her boots were caked with mud. As she held the shining needle above her arm, she looked up to see me. There was no shock on her face, no shame, just a calm, quiet staring. I don't know how long I stood there, watching not her face, but the pulsing vein that was now red-black beneath the tautness of her skin. When the needle plunged I felt it in my stomach. I turned away from the window. My mother was on the sidewalk talking to a woman I didn't know. "How could Malaika fall off a horse?" my mother asked. "She was high," I said. "Heroin. Malaika was a junkie." "That's heavy," my mother sighed. "All that beauty. All that pain." I was furious at my mother. "There are other things for pain than junk," I said. "There are things that don't kill you." "Well, you should have been there for her," my mother said, "you should have said something about how you felt," and I swung at her, and she laughed, sadly, and I felt her cheekbone turn to cotton beneath my fist.

I awake sobbing, beating a pillow that had once held Malaika's head.

You have to understand that I can deal with grief. It's the mystery, the not knowing that I can't lick. I attempt to console myself with the idea that if Malaika's falling off a horse was improbable, it is improbability that most often defines our lives, and that the question of accident or suicide is really not important; the answer will not bring her back. But I can't shake the feeling of responsibility, the notion that if she did take her life, there were things I could have done to prevent it.

I review the details. Malaika had her demons. The evening following the night Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman were found, she came to me, distraught. We walked into the Mississippi night and sat in darkness. The tale was haltingly told, first in a low voice drained of emotion, then quickening with terror. When she was sixteen she'd had a baby by an older man, a factory worker in a Boston mill, a man who had fled the area to avoid reprisal. Her parents had wanted her to have an abortion. She refused, and in due time a boy child entered the world, malformed, blind, the victim of an enlarged brain. Without consulting her, her parents had arranged for the baby to be placed in an institution where he had remained for three years. This morning a letter from her mother had revealed the baby's death and immediate burial.

I just felt—so guilty. That I was being punished for what I'd done. I didn't have to leave him there.

She'd gone off to be by herself. She'd walked aimlessly, across open fields, past the bound heads of workers bent above the soil, through groves of wood, moving from white sunlight to shade to sun and then into the trees again.

She was hot, the shack was in the clearing, she called, but no one came. She had drunk from the pump, the water sweet and numbing cold, she had washed her face and turned to see him. A young white man, a boy of eighteen or nineteen years of age, standing indolently in the doorway. She remembered his slenderness—so sharp it seemed painful—bare feet, a thatch of thin blond hair. Neither spoke, nor moved, only stared at one another, and then, one hand cupping his groin, mouth widening in a calculating grin, he began to walk toward her. To run, she sensed, would be useless, and besides she was as yet unafraid, possessed by an inexplicable calm, a sun-baked tranquility. And now as he stood before her, blue eyes careful, the smile stripped of cunning, wonder fell like sunlight across his face and he reached and touched her breast. Malaika was absolutely still, aware that behind him, tilled with care, grew a garden of flowers, riotous colors of gold, purple and blood-red, visited just then by a brace of bees, a dragonfly suspended, irridescent and untamed. . . .

And I thought of my baby, if flowers decorated his grave, and I wondered if in the moment before his death he was wondering where I was.

The bees hummed, the sun beat. He reached for her hand, took it and placed it upon the swelling at his groin. His smile was gone, the eyes glazed now with lust, and Malaika said she considered falling to the ground there in the middle of that afternoon in that clearing in the middle of a Mississippi wilderness, for to do so would be to bear her guilt.

But as he bent to her, the sun sliced through the thin blond hair, lit the death white of his scalp. And she realized, she said, that this rite in which she had been about to join had been acted out a million times, that white men had, without compunction, forever taken out their longings on the bodies of black women, and that she had a responsibility to all those who had sheathed the white lance, in weeping, in gnashing of teeth, and yes, because the heart cannot bear too much brutality, sometimes in what could pass for joy.

She had spoken in a clear, quiet voice, *No*, and he looked up, confused. She wanted to tell him why, she wanted to speak to him of history. But his eyes had changed, grown hard and menacing, and she knew that whatever had been human in their brief relationship was ended, knew that he had consulted the same history and it revealed to him not unpardonable crimes, not the blood, but that they were alone, in a secluded place, that he was male and she female, he white, she black, he the possessor of certain rights, she of none.

She could not at first reconstruct that sunlit struggle, could not create for me its choreography, could only say that it was brief and desperate, without sound except the breathing, without detail except the sweat sheened on his face, the smell of straining flesh. There were errant and ineffectual blows, a hand clawing at her breast, and when the opening was there she had driven her knee into that heaviness between his thighs. His curses were anguished, the hand locked behind her waist loosened, and she twisted, used all her strength to send him sprawling, experiencing one moment of relief before the sickening thud of his head against the pump spout, the caved-in temple, the brillant smear of blood.

For a moment I stood there. And then I went to him. I don't know why I didn't run. I put

a hand on his shoulder. His eyes were open. I put a hand on his heart. I tried his pulse.

I was petrified. That history again. The fear must be in our blood, in our genes. I could only think that I was black and in Mississippi and that I'd killed a white man. I only knew I had to do something, to hide what I'd done. I dragged the body into the house. I found rags, went back out, washed the pump. Smoothed the ground with my hand.

In the house she moved swiftly, maneuvered the body to the floor next to the potbellied stove. With the cloth transferred blood and hair to the stove's edge. Found the bottle of bourbon. Poured it.

His eyes were open, watching me.

Smashed the kerosene lamp. Struck the match. Ran. . . .

Hold me.

I held her.

You know what drives me crazy? That he wasn't dead. That he awakened on fire.

Far away I heard the baying of hounds. I imagined them tethered, pacing restlessly the lengths of rope that held them captive.

I held her while she cried. I would never leave or fail her. I would be there forever, a lover, a friend.

"Go on, Malaika, cry it out. But don't blame yourself. You did what you had to do. You hear me?"

I didn't have to do it. None of it.

So there you have it. I refuse to believe that she committed suicide. I don't want to deal with what it would say about her. I don't want to face what it would say about me and my responsibility for all the times she asked me to tell her what I was feeling, and I said "Fine," or "Nothing." I couldn't say that I was afraid, terrified of losing her, of being alone on this shitty planet. I couldn't stand the feeling of having it out there, alive between us. It would have burdened her; it would have left me unprotected. I know now that I should have said it, but I couldn't then.

"Oh," I hear you say, "he's not the cynic he's cracked himself up to be, him with his detachment, his pretense of impartial viewing. He, too, is grasping for something to hold to. That's what this melodrama is all about."

I admit it. Knowing what you know of life, what else did you expect?

Sheila Roberts

A MIXED AFFAIR

We walked arm in arm down the broad darkened sidewalks with their old-fashioned dim streetlights, the dignified houses of an earlier time each isolated from the other, gloomy and still, only the gleam behind a curtain here or there showing that people were living on these seemingly abandoned streets. The one-time gemstone hub of the universe turning into a town of soughing wraiths, thought, listening to the leaves rub against one another.

I held your arm, and you posed it folded across your chest, the way men do who are accustomed to giving women their arms. We seemed married, perhaps because I knew you were married and you gave me your arm as if I were indeed your wife. Also, walking slowly down a surburban street seemed something a husband and wife would do, not lovers who had escaped to a country hotel to be untroubled together.

We were dressed in our best clothes and had stepped out of the hotel to stroll away the lassitude following an afternoon on the enormous hotel bed, making love in orderly fashion in the curtained room, again like married people, the sunlight being allowed only to frame the drapes on either side and not burn onto us to create ineradicable photo-negatives behind our eyes. Now we had decided to walk a bit and then return to the hotel for a good dinner, for fillet mignon, I hoped, and new potatoes and a tossed salad and creme caramel and, perhaps, Irish coffee. You had once said that if one sense was aroused, it stimulated the others, and for the moment that seemed true as I held your arm and listened to our footfalls on the uneven paving stones. I was aware of your body moving in your clothes and the way your feet came down steadily, possessing this earth.

We began following the fence of what looked like a large estate with grassy grounds and tennis courts and black important buildings well back from the road. At a rusty molded iron gate I read a sign saying *Kimberley Boys' High School.*

"Why, this is the very school a good friend of mine went to," I said, astonished to come upon it so suddenly without warning, the school and the friend not having been in my mind at all that day, though an intimation, a remembrance must have been lurking there that I could recognize that name so instantaneously. "Brannim," I said, "went to Kimberley Boys' High." I thought of the man, a journalist, a political activist, now sitting in jail. Somebody had told me that they had released him from two-years' solitary and were letting him grow tomatoes in the prison garden.

"Did he?" you said.

"Yes. But it must have changed since he was a boy. He told me how he had always wanted to go to a boarding school, you know, and . . ."

"I *hated* my boarding school," you said.

" . . . and how he arrived at night on the train from Zimbabwe. He had hardly been able to sleep for wanting to see what he imagined would be green cricket fields and vineclad stone buildings. He'd been reading too many British schoolboy books, you see. Well, the next morning when he leapt out of bed and ran to the window, all he could see was hard flattened red dusty South African earth. No trees, no grass, no flowers, no vines, just sand and desolation."

"Poor chap."

"Yes, poor chap," I said, hugging your arm to my breast. "But since then it looks as if the grass has grown."

"There might have been a drought at that time," you murmured, probably also listening to the clopping sound my heels made, almost an intrusion in that shadowing neighborhood of other people's finished lives.

"Brannim's father went there too, and his father before him," I said, sadly proud that I knew a family that acknowledged tradition of a sort when my own played, each generation differently, at disguising identity in order to escape shame. The South African skin-shame. Bleach, bleach, bleach it out. We should marry them until they're white, an Afrikaner politician had said about us once.

"I think my grandfather gave an endowment to that school," you said cautiously, as if trying to remember exactly.

"Did he? Imagine that! My dear Brannim's grandfather attending a school that *your* grandfather endowed!"

"That makes us related in some obscure fashion, doesn't it?" you said, laughing softly into my neck and kissing my earring.

"Oh it does!"

"I hated my boarding school," you repeated; "and to make my distaste clear, I refused to play any sports. In fact, I refused to do anything except read," you continued, old anger in your voice.

"I thought all South African boys were sports crazy," I said, leaning against your shoulder.

"Well, I wasn't. And I hated that school utterly. My parents, bless their good loyal British colonial hearts, sent me away to school in England when I was thirteen. I nearly died of homesickness for this place."

"*This* place?"

"Yes, for God's sake, this place, this earth, this sky, this veld. The sun every day, our farm. I hated, hated, hated Limeyland, Pommieland, Saltprickland." You blew noisily through your nose.

"Wouldn't they let you come home?"

"No," you said, "no, they wouldn't."

"So what happened?"

"I was despised by the masters. I was caned a lot. The other fellows called me *Zulu* to mock me."

"Zulu? You? You with your blond hair and blue eyes?" I laughed stiffly, though laughing was not called for at that moment, nor was I amused.

"But I didn't care. I merely lived for the day when I would get back here."

"That was when you were eighteen?"

"No, damn it all. My parents then stuck me in Merton College for three years."

"Oxford," I sighed, my laughter subsiding into honest reverence. "Oh,

Oxford," I said. "Imagine being allowed to go to Oxford. . . ." You squeezed my arm to your side. Little girl, little girl, you know so little, the pressure seemed to say.

"To spite everyone I studied Russian and Chinese, and . . ."

"And?"

"And I had my first sexual affair, not with a peaches-and-cream British lass but with a swarthy wealthy French girl."

"Ah . . .." I wished we could talk about something else now. "I'm so glad we could get away for the weekend," I said. "I've always wanted to visit Kimberley. . . ."

"She got pregnant," you said somberly.

"On dear. What did you two do?"

"Nothing. She wouldn't let me marry her. She said I had no name."

"No name?"

"No name."

"But you have a famous name!"

"Perhaps. But only to South Africans, and they're nobodies as far as Europeans and Pommies are concerned."

"So what did she do?"

"She went immediately back to France to marry her fiance . . . who had a name."

"I see."

"So, why aren't you asking the right questions? Obviously I must have a twenty-three-year old child somewhere in France at this very moment. Boy or girl, I will never know. Wouldn't you be interested to know?"

"Let's turn up here," I suggested.

"You remind me of that French girl, you with your dark eyes and olive skin," you said.

We turned, heading toward the better-lit main street on which our hotel stood.

We did eat fillet mignon and creme caramel and drink wine and liqueurs and fill ourselves to a state of sighs and silences. We slept that night huddled together like two betrothed refugees floating on the smooth raft of the oversized bed, you and I rocking on our separate dreams of the past, of schools and grandfathers, of your determination to be South African and my family's irregular pretence, changing from person to person, of being of Portuguese or Spanish or, yes, of French descent but, in any event, of being *white* and therefore, like you, fully South African.

The next morning late, stretching out of bed, I pulled the curtains to a cloud-tumbled, pink and turquoise sky and the sound of heavy clear insistent churchbells. I opened the window. Across the wide street, along the path to a large pseudo-Gothic Anglican Cathedral, a small procession of altar boys all in red and white smocks trooped to service. I was unready for such a sight, one so out of time and place.

"This is what Oxford must be like," I said.

"The bells, perhaps," your sleep-crumpled face mumbled from the pillow. "The sky from here looks a little like an English one . . . at its bloody best."

"And this is only Kimberley," I said, feeling oddly triumphant as I climbed into the warmth behind your back.

Surely the Sundays of stolen adulterous weekends must be the worst on earth? At breakfast we seemed to have very little to say, and you kept glancing obliquely at the headlines from the thick folded Sunday papers lying on a chair. *Weekends away are simply no good for some men*, my sister once told me, *unless you contrive to give them time alone for a couple of hours. They can't stand your constant presence.* I wondered if you were such a one and where I could go to give you time to yourself.

"Let's drive a bit," you said, finishing your coffee.

We drove a bit and parked the car. We walked a lot, using our bodies to ease that vague dis-ease of people unaccustomed to each other and yet growing too hastily familiar. We looked into old pubs and at ramshackle private boarding houses, and paid to examine the contents of a small Anglo-Boer War museum. You showed me painstakingly around the Diamond Institute Collection, explaining the workings of obsolete machines, and identifying stiff moustached faces in yellowed photographs, men who had influenced the course of history for us here. There were many photos of your grandfather, the most impressive being a large profile study in excellently balanced light and shade, his right palm outstretched to show the massive Bellinger diamond.

"You know, of course, that he gave it to the Queen," you said matter-of-factly.

"Gave it?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Why not? What else was he to do with it?"

I recalled some story of another huge diamond (was it the Kohinur?) that had to be cut, but in the cutting if the cutter made a minuscule mistake the whole diamond would be spoilt. The craftsman, pale and palpitating, made his cut. Exact. Perfect. Then the poor man fell in a dead faint.

There were no photos in the Institute of my mother's father, who later died of phthisis when he moved to the goldmines. But my grandmother used to have a large group study of maybe fifty miners sitting against a mound of earth near the Big Hole. She was the only one in the family who could pick out a small face and say, *There's my Pieter*. My grandfather had been about eighteen at the time and was sitting in his shabby clothes, brown face sllen, obviously uninterested in being photographed. And *this* surely by mistake: to one side a totally black man stood, thin and wild, his loins wrapped in a cloth and most of the rest of his body caked and smeared with clay. I had heard that the almost naked blacks used to cover themselves in this way for protection against both heat and cold. Had he stepped nearer the group just as the photographer pressed the lever for the print to start taking? Or perhaps the photographer included him so that he could earn a further shilling selling a copy.

We found a sunny, sleezy stoep at the Diggings Hotel to have some lunch, and then we sat and drank, watching the heavy locals tramp in and out, hearing the raucous talk from the men's-only bar and smelling the urine from the nearby toilet so very actively in use.

"Before you were sent away to school in England, did you go to school here?" I asked.

"No. The war was on. My father decided to employ a white governess for us. Incongruously a German woman applied and was taken on. A bloody Boche, can you believe it?"

"Wasn't she nice?"

"I hardly remember. What I do recall is absolutely loathing Germans because we used to play war games all the time and none of the kids wanted to be the Germans. The Germans always had to lose, so we forced the sissy chaps to be the Germans. So I must have decided not to like Ilse because she was German, well not really German: her parents had been born in Bavaria but she right here in Kimberley."

"Did she know you didn't like her?"

"Eventually, yes. What happened was this: she was bathing me. I was standing up in the tub and she was soaping me down. Suddenly she started singing some song, her mouth wide open as she warbled and yodeled. So . . . I don't know what got into me . . . I lifted my little penis and promptly peed into her mouth."

"What!"

"Yes." You snickered softly to yourself.

"And then?"

"Once I was dried and dressed, my father took me to his study and gave me six of the best. Ilse did not resign, but Matati the cook gave me my baths after that."

"Little horror, you were," I said, trying to imagine the taste of a small boy's warm urine in my mouth. I pushed my tepid glass of beer aside.

"I am still a horror," you said, blue eyes in experienced folded lids smiling or frowning at me.

We stood on a wooden platform at the Big Hole and listened to a stone drop hollowly from a distance, the plopping sound echoing round the green and purple ragged walls of the pit, and saw a swallow rise and dip. We just stood in silence.

We tried to peer inside Cecil Rhodes's private train standing as a monument to a man that wanted the British Empire in Africa linked up from the Cape to Cairo, but we could not see very much.

"Do you really think Rhodes was impotent?" I asked, "and that's why he wanted territorial power?"

"I don't know."

"Or gay?"

"Perhaps."

"Or simply hopelessly unendowed, like George Bernard Shaw?" I teased.

"Darling, how the hell should I know. I was too young to think of asking my grandfather questions like that when he would have been in any mental condition to answer them."

"Was Jan van Riebeeck a colored man?" I asked, stupidly off (or on) the point.

"Sweetheart, I *don't* know."

By the time we got back to our hotel that evening, you were pretty drunk from all the beer, but also very festive in an unsteady way. I lolled back on the beautifully made bed while you danced for me, arms wide like a disintegrating aircraft, body like a tree in a circling wind, and your feet lifting carefully one then the other to stamp ritually on the carpet, as my naked ancestors must have done three hundred years ago when they watched Van Riebeeck's white sails, billowing, approach their Cape.

Then you pulled out the bottle you had packed in your suitcase and started

drinking brandy. You sang *liedjen* to me, but I was no longer laughing. I didn't like your holding the brandy bottle by the neck in that white-trash way, nor the fixed look in your eyes. I felt for a fleeting moment that *I* was more fitting to have a grandfather that gave diamonds to queens than you were. I could clearly see you peeing in somebody's mouth.

We didn't go down to dinner. You sprawled across me and I put out the light. We cuddled for a while, then you fell asleep, one arm and leg across mine, your mouth still at my unbuttoned blouse. When your breathing deepened, loving you and hating my own complicity in your petty intolerances and my huge family falsehoods, I gently pushed you away and got up. I arranged myself quietly at the little hotel-room table with the circle of light and tried to read.

Do you remember how sore your head felt at breakfast and how guiltily solicitous you were toward me; how you ordered only coffee and orange juice for yourself? I dug into a mountain of scrambled eggs with bacon, not caring if I eventually died of clogged arteries, as you warned.

Unexpectedly you spoke, lowering your voice in tenderness and hangover.

"This isn't the time, I know," you said, "to ask you. . . ." I was smearing an inch of marmalade onto the wholewheat toast. "But don't you think we should ah settle down together one of these days. I, I really shall have to get divorced."

My mouth had filled with saliva for the food, but I didn't bite into the toast. I put it down, swallowed, and dusted my jammy crumby fingers on the napkin.

"I meant to mention it before, Friday in fact, but the right moment didn't seem to present itself," you grimaced, your head throbbing.

"This can't be the right moment for you now," I said, feeling nervous, touching your hand with one finger.

"Well . . . a weekend away should . . . "

"Do . . . do you think we . . . suit each other?" I mumbled.

"Why certainly. There is the age difference. You're such a . . . a girl," you said with a half-smile. "But I think we get on well. Don't you?"

"Well, there is this, this *thing*," I said, hoping for courage at last.

"What thing?"

"It's that, well, we would have to live outside South Africa."

"Good God, why? I thought you understood. I love this place. I thought you loved it too. . . ."

"I do. But I . . . I would want us to live out of it."

"Oh Lord," you groaned, "I don't believe this . . ." You massaged your forehead and gulped some coffee, not looking at me. I wished I could have had the guts to tell you why we would have to leave, but I didn't. I was afraid. Afraid you might push your chair back and look at me with new eyes. I smoothed the marmalade backwards and forwards over the toast.

"We could make a good life here, you and I," you said. "I wouldn't mind starting another family even (you chortled) at my age."

We held hands like brave young teenagers prepared to face hostile parents. We acted our parts, not knowing how to disengage, diffuse the scene of a wordless tension.

"You never mentioned before wanting to leave South Africa," you said at last, withdrawing your hand. "You never told me, never even suggested it. I'm, well, surprised . . ."

I should have answered you, but did not. After a pause, to save our faces, yours dissolute with drink, and mine with lies, you picked up the check and pretended to study it.

"Do you want to talk about it some other time?" you asked, not looking at me.

"Yes, some other time. More fully. If you don't mind . . ." my well-trained tongue said and I tried to sweeten my mouth by licking at a fleck of marmalade on my finger.

INTERVIEW

AN INTERVIEW WITH SAMUEL R. DELANY

Samuel R. Delany responded in writing to Lloyd Hemingway's questions during a visit to Lawrence in October 1986.

LH: When did you first discover science fiction, and what was the experience like?

SRD: Your question suggests a moment of discontinuity before which—for the young and eager reader—there was no science fiction but after which science fiction, with its panoply of luminous and vivid worlds, lay there, in all its potential, to explore. But the rhetoric of revelation, the suggestion of a transcendent vision carried by so innocent a phrase as "the discovery of science fiction" is part of the inflationary practice by which genres propagate themselves.

Though it's sometimes fun to talk about them as if, indeed, that's the way they hit us, genres don't really come to us like that.

As curious and embattled children, busily absorbing the culture of childhood, first we hear a little bit about them. Then we see a book cover or an illustration. We might catch an older person reading something we already know to belong to that genre—in my case, in the case of science fiction, it was an older and very tall camp counselor named Roy (Bunk Seven), who read *Galaxy* every month, stretched out on his cot, sneakers crossed on the iron frame at the foot, while the rest of us took our afternoon nap periods.

In the same bunk, my bed was next to a camper named Eugene Gold, whose father was the editor of the same magazine. Mr. Gold used to send Gene cover proofs of the new issues, and I remember sitting with Gene and looking at the Ed Emshwiller cover illustrations for the first magazine publication of *Gladiators at Law* and, later, *Caves of Steel*. At the same summer camp, perhaps a year later, I remember standing on the matting that ran along the deep end of the pool, both of us beaded with water, talking to the swimming counselor, a balding, beefy man named Barny in black bathing briefs, who explained how disappointed he had been in Bradbury's first novel, *Farenheit 451*. He'd been a fan of Bradbury's short stories for some years and had been looking forward to the first book. But when it had come out, he'd found it thin.

I had just read my first two or three Bradbury stories that week, knowing nothing about Bradbury's special reputation within the field at the time—or that, indeed, anyone else had ever read anything he'd written besides me. I just knew he wrote science fiction. But somehow the name had come up, and there beside the pool I'd been treated to this surprising burst of genre criticism—before, moments later, we were both back in the water.

But before you decide that this particular summer camp was a hotbed of '50s science fiction readers, I have to say that I could recount being on the receiving end of any number of such conversations during those summers, with topics ranging from T. S. Eliot's *Cocktail Party* (standing on the swings with an older camper named Julius Novick—thin, blond, and bespectacled—who discoursed

as sunset turned to darkness about "closet drama," Eliot's plays, and *Prometheus Unbound*) to the merits of Paddy Chayefsky's screenplay for the film *Marty* which we watched in the camp recreation hall, one blowly Thursday evening.

Somewhere between these various summers' events, I actually *read* my first science fiction story all the way through. (Several times before I'd picked up one SF magazine or another, tried some tale by Sturgeon—a favorite of Roy's: I think it was "Granny Won't Knit"—or by Heinlein—already Gene's preferred writer: I believe it was "The Man Who Sold the Moon," in an issue of *Amazing* belonging to some older camper—and found them both wholly dull and opaque; I abandoned them after a few pages. I was probably ten.) It was during a brief, autumn hospital stay; I was supposed to be observed for twenty-four hours, as I'd injured myself in some ridiculous school prank. In the patients' lounge were some oversized copies of *Amazing*. What I remember most clearly was the illustrations—I suspect they were Finleys. Men in bulky spacesuits were entering some cave in which hung lascivious, all-but-nude female vampires with bat wings. In another picture some wizened little aliens with immense, veined heads, stood about examining a sleeping Siegfried-like young man, encased in a great glass tube.

The only thing I recall from the actual story was that the secret weapon turned out to be light, whose speed had somehow been dramatically slowed down—which meant that, correspondingly, its energy had gone way up. And by that time, I'd read enough George Gamow books on popular science, relativity, and such to have an inkling of what the writer probably meant.

But by now my elementary school friends Johnny and Robert were thrusting this book and that book at me—most of them Heinlein or Clark juveniles, some of which I read and some of which I balked at—while my friend and confidante Pracilla, in a two-and-a-half hour phone call, detailed the plot of *Titus Groan*, over some evening or other in the seventh grade.

I entered high school an avid science fiction and fantasy reader.

The point of all this anecdote, however, is that reading is a murky business; and it always has a social side. While some of us—more and more rarely—will come upon an individual title, pick it up, and read it, knowing nothing in advance about book or writer, none of us *ever* reads a whole book in a genre we have heard nothing of before. And when, on occasion, we start such a book, we usually find it unreadable.

I've already mentioned the process of generic inflation.

All genres survive, propagate, and reproduce themselves by taking some value and inflating it, then declaring that this is the value the reader may obtain by submitting to its texts. The paraliterary genres—such as science fiction—survive through the inflation of "entertainment value." The literary genres survive through the inflation of "literary value." (Proust analyzes the process beautifully in the "Combrey" section of *A la Recherche du temps perdu*.) But both *are* inflationary processes. And in neither case will the value sought ever correspond exactly with the experience of the text itself—the particular pleasure of the text, which is always the result of a masochistic submission *to* the text, a submission composed as much of our own shifting attentions and misreadings, backtrackings, rereadings, and sudden uncovering of associations, some conscious and some unconscious, some effervescent and joyous, some cool and cerebral, but all

incomplete and thick with play and blindness.

In short, one does not so much "discover" science fiction; one stumbles into it, hesitantly, humbly, eyes always narrowed against the social glare of what one has heard of it already—the reading experience always lagging behind or shooting ahead of those expectations . . . in those moments when something clears enough to widen the eyes a while—before we return to our plodding and reploddings, with the squint of hazy comprehension that is what most reading, after all, is, even as we strive for a mastery *over* our chosen texts, a mastery which turns out, at best, to be more or less benevolent enslavement *to* those texts.

LH: This question may be tantamount to asking, "Why do you write?" but what is there about science fiction that makes it an ideal medium for your aesthetic and imaginative faculties and your thematic concerns?

SRD: Here the presupposition I glimpse behind your question is the image of a writer, endowed with a kind of transcendental talent, complete, formed, and mastered, a writer with, as well, a set of "themes," "concerns," and "ideas," who stands outside of any and every genre, facing them all, surveying them for the one that best fits his wholly present set of intentions—till, in a moment of auctorial assumption, he or she declares, "There—!" at which point the writer assumes that genre like a new suit or a pair of contact lenses: though there is some settling in, some learning how to be comfortable within it, basically writer and genre now cleave together in a perfect fit.

But just as no text can ever escape at least one (if not several) generic marks (there is no genreless text), there is no writerly talent that exists outside of at least one (or several) genre(s).

But the fit, of course, is never perfect. And the cleavage, whether one takes the word to mean the joining of genre and writer or the split between them, is wholly problematic. The unsteady, progressive, and irreducible social process by which the reader assumes the genre is, we must remember, the *same* process by which the writer assumes it. We must remember that, before all, the writer is a reader of the text—perhaps the most violent reader in that she or he can always strike words away from the text and substitute others, but a reader nevertheless. And it is *readings* that form the writer's themes, concerns, ideas—and even talent.

I feel it would be just as accurate to say that science fiction has given me my themes and ideas as it would to say that I have brought certain themes and ideas to science fiction.

Nor can we forget that the genres exist in a certain tension with one another. And intergeneric tensions are always changing. We've seen a twenty-five year period in which sex has been radically politicized, but where, in the last fifteen years, a highly conservative socio-economic field has grown up in the preserve traditionally thought of as the field for politics as such. These are changes that have altered the course of my own personal life. These changes *are* the tensions between genres, between types of discourse, the tensions that have contoured so many different practices of writing.

You say your question is tantamount to asking, "Why do you write?" Well, my answer is tantamount of explaining how, in my view, writing gets done at all. It is the articulating responses to just such tensions between genres, between

discourses, but always under the mark of one discourse—one genre—or another, which generate texts.

LH: Some would find the overt concerns with language and contemporary literary theory in much of your work to be odd thematic material for science fiction and fantasy. Do you see yourself as breaking new ground in these genres by using them to express these concerns, or are you dealing with ideas that have been implicit in the genres all along?

SRD: Your question invites me to boast, which I've always thought bad for the soul. I also find myself somewhat distrustful of your original/imminent distinction. Since the theory we speak of is a theory of language, of writing, presumably it should have some connection with the material practices of textuality. The simplest answer, however, is simply to say that science fiction has often spoken of itself as the literature of ideas. It dramatizes notions of critical theory in much the same way that it dramatizes notions from any other hard or soft science. It approaches the notion of deconstruction much the way it would approach navens or ion transfers in the myalin sheath or problems of mason decay.

Critical theory as it has been recently practiced is very much a marginal activity—but it is a marginal activity that throws the whole notion of a firm and fixed social center into question.

Now I've always seen literature's enterprise as marginal. And I see SF's enterprise as marginal to literature. And I see my own current enterprise as marginal to SF . . . But I really don't think our society *has* a center—nor, I suspect, did it ever have one. Centrality was, at best, a stabilizing illusion. All I think there is or was is a system of intersecting margins, so that the progression of margins neither stops nor starts with literature, with science fiction—nor with me.

This model of society as an all-but-endless intersecting system of marginal activities puts into question both the traditional Marxist division of infrastructure and superstructure as well as the Gramscian notion of cultural hegemony that attempts to revise it.

The margin of the margin . . .

The phrase recalls Derrida's "the signifier of the signifier" as the model for all signification.

Analogously, I suspect, the margin of the margin may be a rich model for the place of all cultural productions, whether it be properly aesthetic productions (like operas or poems or science fiction) or whether it be industrial productions: just recently *Consumers' Union* published a list of the fifty products that have most changed the nature of our day-to-day lives in the last fifty years. It was a fascinating compilation, including air conditioners, disposable diapers, and waterbase house paint . . . All of these, taken individually, I think you'd have to call marginal products. Yet, all together, I don't think you can argue with their "centrality"—clearly the wrong word—in the organization of material contemporary life.

Science fiction has certainly had a long leaning toward a materialist explanation of history. I don't think there's anything particularly new in the Neveryon series (or its overture, *Triton*) there. The rather fanciful discussions you get on the

social development represented by, say, the switch from three-legged pots to four-legged pots, or from two-pronged yam sticks to three-pronged yam sticks, is pretty much in the same tradition as the one that prompted Asimov's disquisition on the economy of metals that comprises the first three tales of his Foundation series. There may be a bit more irony in my series than in Asimov's—my primitive materialists, while they have, indeed, laid hold of an idea, are really just congratulating themselves on the progress of their own technology, under the guise of a materialist insight. But the two series are certainly in a dialogical—if not a dialectical—relation.

LH: Judging from your output, it would seem that you have a predilection for the novel over the short story. Which is the more traditional format for science fiction? Why do you tend to produce more long works than short ones?

SRD: It's been argued that the novelette or the novella-length is actually the ideal form for science fiction. In their *Science Fiction Hall of Fame* anthology, the Science Fiction Writers of America have devoted two volumes of it to novella-length tales. During the time I was trying to write SF short stories, I always had an uncomfortable sense that they were trying to swell to novella-length. That may be one reason why I've more or less given up the form. Even in the Neveryon series, out of the ten tales that now comprise it, there're only two proper short stories. The rest are short (or long) novel-length.

The longer work certainly has a different form from the shorter one. Oddly enough, it strikes me that the *overall* structure of the longer work must be simpler than the structure of the shorter. Indeed, in the six-hundred- to a thousand-page novel, if the overall form doesn't move in a fairly simple manner, the various subplots and diversions, which give the long work its sense of range and breadth, will simply fall apart.

Nietzsche once called Wagner (probably the prime example of an artist drawn to huge, swollen, mega-artistic enterprises—the *Ring* takes some sixteen hours to hear from end to end) the "great miniaturist." I've heard the *Ring* through several times. But I've only seen it performed once—when the Boston Lyric Opera brought it to New York and performed it over four nights at the Beacon Theater. By the middle of the second evening, Nietzsche's comment, which till then I'd always thought one of those half-mad quips the philosopher, whose mind was already slipping when he wrote *Ecce Homo* and *The Case of Wagner*, would throw out to be provocative, came back to me. Somewhere in the second act of *Die Walküre*, I suddenly saw what he meant. The whole work was an endless series of tiny psychological portraits, in music and words, this one thirty seconds long, this one a minute and a half, this one ten seconds long, now one (among the longest) lasting a full three minutes, all of them linked end to end, finally to form the sixteen hour whole. Most of these portraits really are quite brilliant. But they *are* psychological miniatures.

And certainly when one tackles the immense works of Proust or Musil, one finds oneself most comfortable when one moves through them—in the case of Proust—Proustian sentence by Proustian sentence or—in the case of Musil—vignette by vignette. I have no idea if this notion translates into science fiction. I have yet to notice any particular miniature unit comprising, say, the *Dune* epic. Still, it's an idea.

LH: Writers who are not white and writers working outside the realm of mainstream fiction often find themselves pigeonholed by the reading public, a process that gives you the unusual distinction of being doubly labeled as a black writer and a science fiction writer. In what ways do you think your work fulfills the unique expectations created by the combination of these two roles? Or are such attempts to categorize writers even relevant?

SRD: You have left out—from what presumed politeness or well-intentioned disingenuousness, I would not dare to guess—that I am a gay writer as well, who indeed writes about experiences that concern the gay community. My most recent published book, *Flight from Nevèryon*, includes a short novel, "The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals," about AIDS.

The idea that these are irrelevant categories—either of human experience or as a grounding from which to observe our society, comment on it and to write, is itself only a kind of disarticulating embarrassment that finds itself uncomfortable in the face of any and every social difference that constitutes our society, uncomfortable before the whole range of socially enforced distinctions—not to mention uncomfortable before any attempt to protest or oppose that enforcement, at whatever level of complexity.

That the readerly expectations associated with any of these categories (black writing, gay writing, science fiction) are, if not unique, at least highly limited is not the problem of the writer but the problem of the reader.

The very real and constant experiences I have as a black man, as a gay man, as a science fiction writer in racist, sexist, homophobic America, with its intellectual hierarchy of high art and low, colors and contours every sentence I write. But it does not delimit and demarcate those sentences, either in their compass or style. It does not reduce them in any way. And the expectations you mentioned in your question are, if only by their uniqueness (as I hope we can all recognize), reductive.

To remind anyone at this point that one of my protagonists is markedly brown, that another is an Oriental woman, or that still another is half American Indian, or that now and again one or another of my characters yearns for something other than standard missionary contact with the socially proper member of the socially prescribed sex, seems a tiresome and futile strategy whose only conceivable use would be to establish a preposterously disjunctive category (Not-Exclusively-Caucasian-and-Often-Polymorphous-Science-Fiction), a category whose only conceivable function would be as some sort of satirical object—an object whose satiric thrust was entirely toward the genre that, however momentarily this new one might be allowed conceptually to exist, we would have to distinguish it from, would have to stand it up against.

The speaking subject (or indeed, the writing subject) must always speak (or write) from a real, material, and specific social position. But this position is just that: a *position* from which to observe, from which to speak and write. It represents neither a perimeter around a given set of subject matters, around a certain predictable content, nor is it a signature that will always be discernable in some inescapable rhetorical flourish either to the ideology or to the style.

When writers write from the same position, sometimes we can recognize a shared horizon—if, indeed, these writers have all set their sites *on* the horizon.

But when their observations are focused on the specificity of the material and mental life directly before the imaginative eye, it is up to the reader, knowing that a position is involved, to read its trajectories, its angles of incidence and reflection, with some sort of creative vigor.

And the assumption that such a reading can be carried out by an appeal to any set of unique expectations—and you have chosen the proper word for them—is the first step toward a critical tyranny.

Samuel R. Delany was born in Harlem in 1942 and still resides in New York City. He has won many awards for his science fiction: his novels *Babel-17* and *The Einstein Intersection*, along with the short story "Aye, and Gomorrah," all won Nebula awards, and his story "Time Considered as a Helix of Semi-Precious Stones" won both a Hugo and a Nebula award. His sprawling novel *Dhalgren* (1974) is his most controversial work and is considered by many his most important. Delany is also one of the most respected and challenging critics in the field of science fiction today. Some of his essays are collected in the volume *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw*. Recently, his fiction has moved into the realm of fantasy, using the imaginary world of Neveryon as a setting for the exploration of intellectual and aesthetic issues not commonly associated with that genre.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Frank Marshall Davis

LIVIN' THE BLUES MEMOIRS OF A BLACK JOURNALIST AND POET

[*COTTONWOOD is privileged indeed to be allowed to present this section, chapter 1, from Frank Marshall Davis's autobiography.*]

1.

A soft night in late Spring, 1923, at Arkansas City, Kansas, a yawn town 50 miles south of Wichita, five miles north of Oklahoma, and east and west of nowhere worth remembering.

I fidget in my hard chair on the mazda bombed stage of the Senior High School Auditorium awaiting completion of the annual commencement exercises. At last the principal calls my name and I stand, grinning faintly and apologetically. Although I am six feet one and weigh 190 at the age of 17, I feel more like one foot six for I am black and inferiority has been hammered into me at school and in my daily life away from home. Three other black boys conspicuously float in this sea of white kids and the four of us are the most ever to finish high school at one time. There are no black girls. Who needs a diploma to wash clothes and cook in white kitchens?

I accept my sheet of parchment and sit, hand clutching the rolled diploma showing I have completed twelve years of formal study that prepares none of us, white or black, for life in a multiracial democratic nation. This is a mixed school, mixed in attendance, mixed up in attitudes. White classmates unquestionably accept superiority as a natural right; we of the black quartet turn and twist but we can find no way out of the hellhole of inferiority. We are niggers, the scum of the nation, and even our black brothers outside laugh bitterly and derisively as they tell us, "Niggers ain't shit!" Our high school education has prepared us only to exist at a low level within the degrading status quo.

Nevertheless, I *know* I am superior to Negroes reared in Dixie for they have not attended school with whites. I view them with contempt; they are *my* inferiors. Further, although I can never equal the achievements of a Thomas Edison or a George Washington or an Isaac Newton (they were white, weren't they?) I can accomplish as much as any other Negro, for what had we done in thousands of years of human history that mattered a damn? My white classmates and I learned from our textbooks that my ancestors were naked savages exposed for the first

time to uplifting civilization when slave traders brought them from the jungles of Africa to America. Had not their kindly white masters granted these primitive heathens the chance to save their souls by becoming Christians? And had not benign white Northerners unselfishly fought, bled and died in the Civil War to free us? Yes, I did hear in school about one smart darky, Booker T. Washington, who once lunched at the White House with the President. But that was it, man, that was all our history found in the books. We were otherwise nonentities, a happy, simple childlike folk who got along all right as long as we knew our place and didn't get uppity and marry white women like that goddamned nigger, Jack Johnson.

And so, having no black heroes to identify with in this small town on the Kansas prairies, I fell victim to this brainwashing and ran spiritually with the racist white herd, a pitiful black tag-a-long.

But I ran disturbed.

I had done my best to conform to white standards as I knew them. Silently I begged for acceptance by trying to prove I was not like Those Others. Scrupulously I avoided following the known stereotypes—a task doubly difficult when certain stereotypes contradicted each other. No matter how hard I tried to act white, nothing had worked. I was still a big nigger kid tolerated only because "state law said they must."

I look around at my classmates, knowing this is the last time we will be together. And I am glad. There are only three or four white youths, boys who treated me as an equal and a friend, that I care to remember. From now on the rest can go to hell. My eyes rest briefly on the Class Prophet who, in the class annual predicted I would become "a small truck farmer." As a student I have been about average, but emotionally I am graduating Magna Cum Laude in bitterness.

My twelve years of public schooling have taught me to be white. But I am black. And those who taught me to be white at the same time reject me because of my blackness. The whites had let me look longingly inside their home of equal opportunity then barred the door. Meanwhile, I have rejected the shabby shack of the only black world I know. I am suspended uncertainly in that limbo between white and black, not yet knowing who I am.

In other words, I am the product of integrated schools that do not integrate. And if I have learned anything of lasting value from those formative years, it is that mixed schooling of itself is only one step toward equality.

2.

Obviously when I finished high school in 1923 I knew only the rough outlines of prejudice. But it was enough. I had already learned that white hypocrisy and black oppression were a basic part of the American Way of Life. And I have never been content with the little corner where the white broom tried to sweep me. I honestly think that had I continued living in my birthplace of Arkansas City I would have eventually become so filled with hate that one day I would have gone berserk and seized a weapon with the intention of killing as many whites as I could reach until I was exterminated by the forces of Law and Order—also white.

Yet I do not doubt that most whites in my home town thought they were treating us right, perhaps even too well. Kansas prided itself on being a liberal state and flaunted its tolerance over the neighboring South. They could have pointed out that Negroes voted, attended mixed schools, were not jim crowed on transportation, and not required to address whites as Mr. or Mrs. while in turn being called only by their first names. What more could a nigger want? And had you answered, "Dignity and respect as a human being," they would not have understood.

Arkansas City during my childhood had a population of around 10,000 with between 300 and 400 blacks. There were Mexicans who came up to work in railroad gangs, and a smattering of integrated Indians—integrated primarily because they received fat incomes from Oklahoma oil wells. The overwhelming majority of the population was WASP, mainly small merchants, tradesmen and farmers: bedrock of the nation, Kansas Gothic. Physically, the town itself was pleasant enough. Streets were wide, trees plentiful. Large lots surrounded most homes, leaving room in the backyard to grow vegetables and poultry, and on the sides to cultivate fruit trees for family consumption. Farms stepped on city boundaries and there was a small meat packing plant. Enough vegetables, fruit, grain, beef and pork were produced to make the community self-sufficient. Located near the juncture of two rivers, the Walnut and the Arkansas (fishing was excellent in both), Indian lore had it that we were safe from tornadoes. Occasionally after heavy rains the rivers overflowed, but since only the poor lived in the low lands it was not considered a major problem by Establishment whites.

Most blacks lived in the noisy, dirty sections hard by the two main railroad tracks, Sante Fe on the east and 'Frisco on the west, not because of residential restrictions but because rent was cheaper. Many owned their small homes. In addition there was a disreputable area known as "the bottoms" which held a miniscule concentration of the city's dusky prostitutes, pimps, gamblers and bootleggers. Our black community was well rounded.

Probably because of its location only five miles from the Oklahoma border, Arkansas City had no consistent policy on how to treat Negroes and thus sat uncomfortably impaled on the spike of its own indecision. In some ways it was as blatantly segregated as neighboring Oklahoma of that era; in others it was liberal. Thus we had the anomaly of mixed schools with the silent understanding that black children would not participate in certain activities. Negro teachers were unthinkable. For many years all three movie houses were lily white; the one theatre presenting live shows, with opium dreams of opulence calling itself the Fifth Avenue Opera House, "reserved" the second balcony "for colored only" which was dubbed "nigger heaven." Both city parks were open to everybody and we could rent boats to row all over the lake at Paris Park but were barred from swimming. (This policy was grudgingly suspended for the moment if a black boater accidentally fell overboard, but even this had better not happen too often.) When the Ku Klux Klan organized a local klavern, many whites would put on nightshirts and parade, then come home and invite black neighbors in for ice cream.

We could buy or rent homes in any part of the town our funds would allow. But we could attend no white church other than the Seventh Day Adventist. We rented store space and operated small businesses in the heart of the small

downtown area next door to white merchants, but we could eat in none of their restaurants unless we sat in the kitchen.

Such was the town where I was born of poor parents on December 31, 1905; I came out at 11 o'clock at night. The family had the supreme proof of honesty: We were supremely poor. Another hour and I'd have been a New Year's baby. But you cannot blame my mother for not holding out until midnight. I weighed in at 12 pounds and she must have been understandably tired of carrying around this burden.

My old man, Sam Davis, floated into town from some place in the state of Arkansas. An itinerant barber and musician (he blew baritone horn, undoubtedly with a heavy seasoning of the blues) he met and married my mother, fathered me, hung around long enough to see what he and God had wrought, then drifted on. They were divorced before I was a year old and I've never heard of him since. For all I know, the old boy played similar gigs in several towns and I may be related to a lot of people I never heard of.

Mother was a tall, big woman, cinnamon brown and freckled. She was also mild of disposition, asthmatic, and a compulsive tongue chewer. Her father, Henry Marshall, lived in Wichita. Stocky and bullnecked, his yellow brown complexion came from a Negro father and a Mexican mother. Like virtually all Afro-Americans—and a high percentage of whites—I am ethnic hash. I have no idea what I may be other than African and one-eighth Mexican. Mother had a younger sister named Hattie, lighter in weight and color, who was a real swinger. Their only brother, Robert Marshall, made his way to Japan around 1910 and never wrote home. It's possible a few cousins may have died when The Bomb exploded over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. That's another reason why I hate war. You don't really know what corpse may be your kin.

I was Mother's first and last child. Possibly I discouraged her for when I was two she left with a white family for California to work as their maid for a couple of years. Since Aunt Hattie had already split the ho-hum prairie scene for Kansas City where there was more action, that left my care and feeding to Mrs. Amanda Porter, my great grandmother.

Granny had been a slave in Kentucky, losing her first husband, a Northern soldier, early in the Civil War. Promptly marrying again, she lost number two in one of the closing battles. With her luck, she dared not try again. She was one of those *fired*, not freed, by the Emancipation Proclamation as leader-writer Floyd McKissick so aptly puts it. They were kicked out into a hostile world with no severance pay or any provision for making a living. Immediately they became a huge unemployed surplus on the American market. In all fairness, their descendants should still be reimbursed by the descendants of the bosses, North and South, who canned them over 100 years ago. The cold hard fact is that many offspring of these whites still look upon us from a master-slave point of view. The United States was the only slave-holding nation in the New World that completely dehumanized Africans by considering them as chattels, placing them in the same category as horses, cattle and furniture. This attitude, still held by too many American whites, helps account for the fact that blacks have won greater acceptance in Brazil and other lands where our forefathers were once held in bondage, but not dehumanized.

Granny had been conditioned to acceptance as an inferior born to be

subservient. A docile product of the system, she was neither anti-white nor bitter and all her life maintained respect for the children of her former masters, among them a lawyer, C. T. Atkinson, who lived in one of the largest and most pretentious homes near the heart of town and kept a stable of pure-white thoroughbred horses. Granny worked in the Atkinson kitchen, now getting a small amount of pay for services, which as a slave she once performed free, and I went there with her. Since this was the period when Jack Johnson was chasing Tommy Burns all over the planet for a shot at the heavyweight crown, Lawyer Atkinson would often bend over, pretend to spar with me, and tell Granny I was going to grow up to be another Jack Johnson. And do you know, as I look back upon the interracial aspects of my life, in certain respects his prophecy was true.

She told me of incidents while a slave, which remained fresh on her mind. I sat openmouthed as she related stories she had witnessed, among them the drama of a fellow slave who took an axe, laid his right hand on a chopping block and deliberately hacked off three fingers so he would have little market value when he learned his owner planned to sell him away from his wife and children. She had also seen bloody fighting in the Civil War, and had gazed upon Union soldiers so desparately thirsty they crawled to puddles of urine left by passing horses to moisten their parched lips.

Granny had only one child, my mother's mother, who passed away long before I was born. From then on both granddaughters lived with her in Arkansas City rather than with their father who had settled in Wichita.

As the widow of a Union soldier, she received a small pension from Uncle Sam. With these funds and by working for "quality white folks" she had been able to build a modest three room cottage near the northern end of the town's main street. That was my home from as early as I can remember until I went to college. For several years no other blacks lived nearby; we held a monopoly on integrating the neighborhood.

Granny was past 70 when Mother went to California but she was spry and healthy. She took me on my maiden train ride when I was three, a trip to Kansas City, Missouri, where I remember making my first visit to a saloon, tagging along with several older kids to buy a half-gallon bucket of beer for supper.

There were no open saloons in Kansas; the state was legally dry before I was born. Selling cigarets or even giving them away was also then against the law. Shows, dances and sporting events were banned on Sunday. Unless you got your kicks from attending church, there was only one major way to enjoy yourself. I have always been amazed that the state did not have an unusually high birth rate.

Nevertheless, I had my first drink of hard liquor at three, shortly after returning from Kansas City. Being from Kentucky, Granny loved her juice. A deacon in the Second Baptist Church which she attended regularly, periodically supplied her with a gallon of corn whiskey. One cold night she decided I ought to have a hot toddy before tucking me in. The innovation was so overwhelmingly successful I was soon insisting on a nightly nip. Apparently Granny started having visions of me drinking myself to death before the age of five because she stopped my toddy without prior warning. I won't say I had withdrawal symptoms but I was outstandingly unhappy. Then by chance she discovered the only way I would willingly take castor oil (a cure-all for kid pains then) was as the center of a whiskey sandwich. First liqour, then castor oil, and on top more liquor. Until

Granny caught on, I was the sickliest child in town—and also owned the cleanest guts.

Had Granny been in the Garden of Eden, Eve never would have had a chance to take that apple. As soon as the snake appeared, Granny would have immediately clubbed it to death or ran—possibly both. When I was three she gave me such a thorough indoctrination into the pathological fear of serpents it has remained with me ever since. Graphically she described in detail the attributes of the coach whip snake, which she said ran along beside stagecoaches and whipped horses with its tail until they ran in fright, causing the vehicle to overturn and killing or crippling its occupants; the hoop snake, which took its tail in its mouth and ran along the road like a wheel looking for someone to bite; and the jointed snake, which was so brittle a blow would break it into a dozen motionless pieces until 'night when under cover of darkness the parts would reassemble themselves and the snake would crawl away. Granny warned me I must never, never touch any kind of snake because all were poisonous. I was impressed. One day a friend of hers, not knowing how well she had brainwashed me, came by with a gift for me in a closed hand. When I extended mine he gave me a fistful of crawling, squirming angle worms. In my three-year-old mind I saw them as snakes and I became hysterical. Granny's friend was abashed, astounded and penitent—but this traumatic experience further served to underline my already paranoid fear of snakes.

Mother returned when I was four, to my great relief. Granny staunchly believed sparing the rod spoiled the child. During these two years of Mother's absence, Granny had done such an efficient job of beating hell out of me that I gave a minimum of trouble the rest of my childhood. Mother was far less physical. Soon after she returned, Aunt Hattie made one of her trips back home. She and Mother earned money by doing laundry together at home for assorted white families. Our backyard clotheslines stayed full of drying clothes. Occasionally a garment they no longer needed was tossed in by their employers for me. I was thus expected to wear outmoded clothing to cover my body while their outworn ideas on black-white relationships were passed on to cover my mind.

One day there descended upon Arkansas City from down in Oklahoma a large contingent of Boganeys, including father, mother, and assorted sons and daughters, many with their own children. Among them was a son, James Monroe Boganey, then in his late 20's, who had travelled all over the country working at various jobs. Although he was two inches shorter than Mother's five nine, he had a powerful physique and for a short time had been a professional boxer. But he was now ready to settle down. Mother met him at a church social and soon settled him. They were married a few months later and at the age of four I had my first real father.

Dad, whose formal schooling stopped at the third grade, had an abundant quota of common sense and mother wit. He got a job as common laborer at the material yard of the Santa Fe railroad, a key storage and repair point for the entire system, working there some 10 years, and moved in with us since by now Aunt Hattie's itchy feet had taken her to St. Louis. Our three rooms were adequate for the four of us but became overcrowded when a brother-in-law of Dad's descended on us for two weeks after arriving from Oklahoma shortly after the rest of the Boganeys packed up and left en masse to invade Coffeyville some

100 miles to the east.

His name was Gaffney and he was an herb doctor, making his own medicines. He spent hours in the woods hunting specific weeds and grasses, but that was acceptable. What unnerved me was the first time I spotted him picking up and minutely examining fresh excrement from our hens, then selecting choice tidbits for his brews. Immediately I became radiantly healthy, never a moment of sickness until he returned to Oklahoma. I frankly admit I was too chicken to take any of his fowl concoctions, although later I understand he amassed a modest fortune.

Kansas Collection, University of Kansas Libraries

Arkansas City Schoolchildren, Class of 1888

I successfully dodged the Gaffney gambit, but I had my share of other home remedies. A doctor was called only in dire emergencies, such as when I had pneumonia at the age of four, often a fatal illness before the age of miracle drugs. For an ordinary chest cold I received a tablespoon of sugar with a half dozen drops of coal oil, a cup of some queer kind of tea and a chest rub with genuine goose grease. For a sore throat I gargled with four drops of carbolic acid in a half cup of hot water. To ward off illness, my first year in school I wore a hunk of vile-smelling asafetida hanging from a string around my neck; this was amazingly effective in warding off disease since it kept away other kids who wouldn't get close enough to give me their germs. As for cuts or nails stuck in my foot (during barefoot season I usually wore at least one bandage somewhere) there was a cleaning with hydrogen peroxide followed by a generous dousing with turpentine. A poke from a rusty nail received no special consideration; you merely hoped the old rag you wore for a bandage was clean enough and you wouldn't get

lockjaw. This was the accepted practice among the people I knew; if a kid fell from a tree and could make it home, or if he suffered a severe cut and was able to move the injured member without leaving something behind, he received a home remedy. First aid kits consisted mainly of peroxide, turpentine and clean-looking rags. And somehow we mangaged to survive.

3.

With no other black children living in the neighborhood and oddly enough, no white boys my age, my first pre-school playmates were white girls—which established a habit. However, their parents broke it temporarily. Frequent newspaper stories detailed lynchings brought on, the ariticles solemnly said, because "a burly black brute raped a white woman." Mothers and fathers watched with growing concern as I became noticeably bigger by the month. By the time I was five I was quite large for my age. Now, in their eyes, I had sprouted into a sexual threat to their innocent little darlings and no longer was allowed to play with them. Obviously I was a burly black brute. I was puzzled; I was then too young to understand Caucasian culture.

Fact is, I was completely ignorant of race prejudice when I started school. I had attached no significance to my skin being darker than that of my white girl playmates. True, Granny had been a slave, but I did not know this condition was restricted to those of African ancestry. But I learned fast, on the second day of school.

I was the only Negro child in the first grade. Only five or six were enrolled in the entire school. Most "culled" children attended the other three. I had already learned how to read and write at home so I had a definite jump on most of the other first graders.

On the second day a white boy grinned and asked very politely, "Do you mind if I call you nigger?" I thought it over briefly. Why should I object? I'd heard that term used by other blacks so I assumed it was acceptable. It seemed to me he wanted only to be my friend. I told him uh-huh. "Thanks," he said, then gleefully pointed at me and shouted, "Nigger, nigger, nigger!"

I was momentarily surprised, but then dismissed it as exuberance. When I reached home I told my Mother about the nice, friendly little boy who asked permission to call me nigger.

She quit chewing her tongue, then asked quietly, "What did you tell him?"

"I said he could."

Mother clouded up and exploded like a thunderstorm.

"Soon as you get to school tomorrow, you find that nasty little peckerwood an' tell him if he ever calls you nigger again, you'll beat him until he can't see straight. And you'd better!" Then she gave me my first lecture on race relations.

Next day I looked up this boy before class and withdrew permission. And I had my first fist fight.

I also became acquainted with another epithet, but in a somewhat unconventional way. A few days later, on the way home after school, I had a name-calling bout with still another white boy. We stood a half block apart hurling invective at the top of our first grade voices. After we had both exhausted our verbal ammunition (for some reason he never once called me "nigger") another white

lad who had been looking on came close and suggested confidentially, "Call him a darky."

"A what?" I asked. The word was new to me.

"A darky. Means an old Chinaman."

Sounded like a good idea. Right away I shouted, "You're a real darky!"

A white man had been strolling along the sidewalk and was now almost abreast of my adversary. He stopped suddenly and turned in my direction. Then he looked at my pale oral foe and sharply again at me. I wondered why he had such a queer expression on his face. But he said nothing. He merely shook his head and stumbled on as if in a trance.

"Yah, you old darky!" I shouted again.

The white man hunched his shoulders as if he had been slapped hard on the back and quickened his step. The boy down the block, evidently unable to think of a comeback, hesitated a moment, then turned and walked on.

Cocky from my triumph, as soon as I got home I told Mother about this brand new word which had been so devastating.

My story left her both speechless and motionless for several seconds. I had the distinct impression her shoulders fell into a hunch like that of the white man. Then she explained in a somewhat strained voice, "Son, that's a bad word po' white trash calls us. It don't mean an old Chinaman. It really don't."

Well, you learn something new every day.

And I also learned about white violence, at the age of five, when later that fall I was personally selected for a lynching. Both daily papers must have carried another Southern social note about this popular pastime of that era and a couple of third graders, evidently after hearing their parents discuss it with approval, decided to stage their own junior necktie party. I was on my way home alone crossing a vacant lot when these white boys, who had been lying in wait, jumped me. They threw me to the ground and held me down while one lad produced a rope and slipped it over my head. I kicked and screamed. Just as one started to snatch the noose tight around my neck, a white man appeared. He took one look, chased the boys away, freed me and helped brush dirt and trash off my clothes. He walked with me until I was close to home nearly a mile away then turned around and went on about his business. I never learned who he was, nor could I single out the embryo lynchers at school next day. Naturally, school officials did not push their probe. I was still alive and unharmed, wasn't I? Besides, I was black.

Like most boys I got into an occasional battle but I never liked to fight just for the hell of it. However, I learned as years passed that I was able to take care of myself more than merely adequately when sufficiently aroused. When I was 21 I considered becoming a professional fighter but this aberration subsided before anything drastic occurred. Fact is, I haven't had a real fist fight since high school. Oh, I've riled plenty of people but without exception they have been able to rigidly control any inclination to take a poke at me. The fact that my size and looks later frequently caused me to be mistaken for Joe Louis may have had something to do with it.

But let's return to the first grade.

A few weeks after the near lynching I began arriving home unusually early after school let out at four p.m. Mother noticed I was out of breath, and after this

happened several days straight she asked me why. I told her about a white boy in the second grade who chased me home every afternoon. He couldn't catch me, so I was actually benefitting from this enforced exercise: it was helping my speed, wind and legs. Residents on the route between school and home were now able to set their clocks by me. On the dot I would dash past, leading my pursuer by some 20 feet.

I knew my tormentor's name. Mother told Dad, who worked at the same place as the kid's father. Dad called it to the attention of the white boy's old man and asked him to stop his son from chasing me home.

"Wouldn't think of it," the white man laughed. "You know boys are gonna be boys."

When he came home that night, Dad ordered me to stop running and fight. If I didn't, he promised me, he would personally give me a worse licking than I could possibly get from anybody in the second grade.

Next afternoon the Davis Derby began promptly on schedule. I was running some 20 feet in the lead, when suddenly Dad stepped from behind a tree and stood in the middle of the sidewalk blocking my path. He had quit early that day to look in on the event.

As I said earlier, Dad wasn't big but he was powerful and far more of a menace than my pursuer. I braked and reversed direction so fast that the surprised white kid slammed into me head on and we both went down. I got up swinging and in a couple of minutes had completed a pretty fair job of junior mayhem. My foe had a bloody nose, a scraped eye, plus a few assorted lumps and a strong case of the weeps. We started running again. This time I was doing the chasing but Dad caught me and took me home.

Next day at work the white lad's father was incensed and demanded that Dad punish me for beating up his son. He called me a "brute" and a "bully."

"Think nothing of it," Dad said he replied and laughed. "Jus' like you told me yourself, 'Boys will be boys.'"

After that I had little trouble the rest of my six years at elementary school, although for a time I was the only black kid enrolled. As I look back now, it's surprising I didn't get ganged up on. Sometimes, even through the fourth grade, I would develop a crush on a little blonde or redheaded classmate and walk beside her, carrying her books. However, one day, quite by chance, Mother happened to spot me as I strolled leisurely along, laughing and talking and occasionally pulling on a little doll with long black pigtails and a milkwhite face who seemed to be enjoying it as much as I. Mother very nearly suffered a heart attack. Following a lengthy lecture by both parents that evening, I ceased this kind of activity.

At home we functioned quite happily without the devices even slum-dwellers take for granted today. Our light was from coal-oil lamps and our heating system was a potbellied stove in the front room, a range in the kitchen and optimism in the middle room. Both stoves ate what seemed gluttonous amounts of fuel since I had to chop the wood and bring it and coal to keep them fed. Water we got from pumps in the yards of neighbors on both sides of our house. I brought it in five-gallon buckets; I needed a bath every Saturday night just from carrying water. I was in the sixth grade before we piped in city water, electricity and gas. We never had a telephone.

I did not realize the extent of our poverty—until later. There was little, if any, starvation in my part of Kansas but almost everybody was poor, some more so than others. Material possessions were comparatively scarce. Automobiles were few and costly. This was also before the advent of radios; television sets were not even conceived of except by some dreamers.

As I looked back later, economically my family was in the lower ten percent. In place of an overcoat, for the first few years of school in cold weather I wore one of Dad's discarded jackets. But I did not mind. Somehow I realized Dad and Mother were doing the best they could with their small, hard-won income. And they saw that I had enough to eat and scraped together enough to provide my necessities.

Obviously our toilet facilities were primitively functional. We had a two-seated privvy, furnished with an outdated Sears-Roebuck or Montgomery Ward catalog, in the backyard some 40 feet from the house, past the grapevines and with a mulberry tree on one side and dewberry bushes on the other. During winter it seemed miles away but on those summer days when the temperature rose to a 110° and the occasional hot breeze blew toward the house, a blind stranger could have found it without direction. When the mercury hovered around zero or below or we had a wild Kansas blizzard, we used our hold-everything-until-the-last-minute technique. We bundled up as if scheduled for a rendezvous at the North Pole, then awaited our internal countdown. We all became proficient at timing ourselves to reach the outhouse at exactly zero, thus keeping our visit short so we could dash back to the warming fire. Come to think if it, those of us who used privvies must have been tougher than that brass monkey; nobody ever had anything actually frozen off.

I was in the second grade when one of Granny's friends, also an ex-slave, succumbed to modernity and wed the town's water system to her outhouse. It was just my luck to stop off after school that day and ask to use her toilet.

I paused and briefly considered going on home when I opened the privvy door in her backyard and saw this strange contraption with the front end of the wooden seat elevated some three inches. I did not trust this unfamiliar thing but necessity spoke in a commanding voice. Dropping my knickers, I sat gingerly down.

Immediately there was a roar like a dam breaking. I leaped up and ran screaming out, britches sliding down around my ankles. I didn't know whether that thing in there was going to chase me or explode.

Granny's friend hurried out of her kitchen and asked what was wrong. When I excitedly told her, she doubled up laughing. When she got control of herself she explained the roar was merely the water closet filling, an action starting automatically when the front of the seat was pressed down. It was perfectly harmless, she said, but by then I'd had it scared out of me and didn't need to use the toilet.

4.

At seven I turned into a bookworm through sheer necessity. I had learned that away from school, white and black kids moved in different worlds. Playing with other children my color was a rarity except on those memorable occasions when

an entire family visited us or we descended on another family. My family was not yet able to afford a "talking machine." Movie shows were lily white—although one Saturday night in summer I was downtown with Dad and he stopped in front of a theatre door which had accidentally been left open. On the screen were the closing scenes of a film showing Jack Johnson whipping some White Hope. I shall never forget the look of ecstatic satisfaction on Dad's face as Li'l Arthur kayoed his pale foe.

However, Sundays were full. I went to Baptist Sunday School promptly at nine, then after a short lull sat through regular morning services, beginning at eleven. This meant hours of listening to a fire-and-brimstone sermon. On those days when our pastor was in good voice and the Amens came loud and often, a three- or four-hour service was not unusual. After that we went to somebody's house for Sunday dinner or they came to ours. Then back at six p.m. for the Baptist Young People's Union and afterwards the regular evening services, which seldom ended before 10:30. For many years I spent from seven to nine hours every Sunday in church, rain, snow or shine.

It was the weekdays that bothered me. Playing alone in the evening and on Saturday was a real drag. Then one day, wandering around downtown by myself after school, I walked out of curiosity into the public library and discovered Books. First the juvenile section, then I advanced to the adult area and by the age of nine had read both volumes of *Les Miserables*.

I read and lived with King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table; fought beside Achilles in the Trojan War and travelled home with Aeneas; I was a companion of Beowulf, Sir Galahad, Sohrab and Rustem, Charlemagne, Ivanhoe; I sought the Golden Fleece with Jason and conquered the known world with Alexander. With hammer and saw and nails and paint I made a lance and shield and stood alone for hours on our tiny back porch guarding the castle from blackguard (whiteguard?) and villain, or with a different shield and wooden sword I performed sentry duty in our backyard as a Spartan. (These heroes, of course, were white for I had not yet heard of any African heroes.) My imagination kept me busy; forced to play by myself I made the most of it and was alone no more. I spent so much time at the library that the head librarian, a plump, bespectacled, friendly white woman, called me her "bodyguard."

And, of course, I walked virtually everywhere. The town boasted one dinky streetcar, evidently saved on the ark by a compassionate Noah, which passed our house each half hour going towards town during daylight and early evening. After that it was put to bed until next day. I rode it only during a blizzard or heavy rain, paying a nickle. Each morning I walked slightly over a mile to school, walked back home for lunch and to school again (except in subzero weather when I packed a sandwich), then home again in the afternoon. That was more than four miles. If I were sent back to Clapp's Grocery, halfway to school, or Sutherland's for a quart of milk, that was more mileage. When I received the added chore of calling each evening for our mail at the general delivery window of the post office, that was still another mile. But I accepted this as perfectly natural, although now and then I hitched a ride on a farmer's wagon or a delivery hack just for the fun of it. Later, when I was old enough to run around alone at night, my daily average was at least 10 miles and I believe this laid the basis for good health in later years. However, my early training in learning how

to amuse myself made me essentially a loner.

During these young years I began to eagerly await certain annual events. The Emancipation Day picnic and celebration at Wilson Park each August Fourth was largest and most important. Farmers drove in from the country and neighboring Winfield by wagon and buggy with the more affluent coming in Fords, Dodge Brothers, Maxwells and Saxons. One owned a big Cole 8, the envy of the black community. In addition to loaded baskets of food, on sale were barbecued ribs, hamburgers, watermelon hearts, sweet potato pie, ice cream and soda pop. Faces from near-white to ebony bobbled by in a constant stream. The park was a moving, laughing sea of black. I especially enjoyed it for I could play with other boys and girls I rarely saw except at an occasional church picnic in summer, usually at Green's Farm, or maybe in the fall when whole families got together and spent a day in the country gathering walnuts and pecans. Other than a few curiosity seekers, the only whites were politicians (Republican of course) who would never dream of letting a mass gathering pass without appearing on the afternoon program to make stilted speeches praising "the progress you people have made since that gr-r-reat Republican, Abraham Lincoln, freed the slaves." Inevitably one would seek to establish real rapport by reminiscing fondly of "my black mammy at whose breast I suckled when I was a baby," and some of the younger listeners, such as Dad, would start angry murmurs.

(Years later, when I thought back to these formative days, I realized how emotionally distant we were from our fellow white Arkansas Citians. As black folk we lived among ourselves in our own three-dimensional sphere, but existed in only two dimensions in that vaster world of the Caucasian. They accepted our length and breadth but by and large we were mere shadows, incomplete beings lacking depth. We could be ourselves, moving as men and women, only when we closed the door and shut ourselves in our small back room.)

I have a very special reason for remembering 'Mancipation Day in 1917 when I was eleven. This was World War I time with fireworks unavailable. However, I learned that by scissoring heads off long kitchen matches I could fire them in my cap pistol. Dad and I prepared a whole box and I slipped the snipped heads in my hip pocket to fire at the celebration. This August 4th was a broiling day, over 100 above. In mid-afternoon, with most still unused, I sat innocently down on the iron seat of a swing which had stood for hours in the sun. There was a swoosh and sudden heat on my right hip. I was on fire. Fortunately some resourceful soul emptied a bottle of soda pop over my buttocks and doused the flames, but with my clothing burned to the bare me I went immediately home. For the next week I ate standing up or reclining like those people in paintings of Roman orgies.

Even before I started school Granny sometimes took me to the heart of town on Saturdays where in summer Indians came in covered wagons. Tying their horses to hitching posts at Summit and Central, they then fastened their naked children to the wagons with 10 foot ropes and went off to shop. Adults were wrapped in bright blankets, men wearing large Stetson hats and women bareheaded with their blue-black hair hanging in two long glistening braids. Granny said when she first settled here, gunfights between cowboys and Indians still erupted. This was a tough little town until the big rush south at the opening of the Oklahoma territory to settlers. In the social strata of Arkansas City,

Indians were in the middle class, primarily because of the wealthy Osages.

Local whites looked down on members of other tribes, particularly the young attending Chilocco Indian School just across the Oklahoma border who came to town well chaperoned and dressed in conservative uniforms. But the Osages—they were different! Some of those with whom I attended school had incomes reportedly as high as $10,000 per day from oil in neighboring Oklahoma; with this kind of money to spend nobody dared discriminate against Osages. They were far friendlier to me than paleface boys and girls. But many of them died young through fast living and fast cars.

At the bottom of the social scale were Negroes and Mexicans—niggers and greasers. And we had an affinity for each other, not only from gringo oppression which we both suffered but because many Mexicans and blacks worked side by side in the railroad yards and became close despite language barriers. I had also learned that down in Oklahoma many Indian tribes had high percentages of African blood, the result of runaway slaves finding sanctuary with red men. There were also a few blacks who had become oil wealthy. And this set the stage for one of the most fantastic stories of my youth.

One day when I was around 12 or 13, a young Afro-American in his early 20's, mild as a minnow, came to town and landed a garage job. Self-effacing, he got along well with everybody. After living there a year or so, he made the front pages of both dailies. Headlines shouted the discovery of oil on land he had inherited near Sapulpa, Oklahoma. He had already been offered a cool half million bucks for his property plus royalties. Immediately the presidents of both banks became his panting suitors, advancing him 15 grand for spending change. Auto dealers gave him the pick of their best cars and he chose a Stutz Bear Cat and a Pierce Arrow. Department stores outfitted him in their best clothing and he selected a site and had plans drawn up to build a big fancy $25,000 home. Naturally he would pay every penny back (with plenty of interest, of course) when he received his money. Leading citizens, with dollars in their eyes, forgot his color as they assured him this was the ideal community to settle in permanently and invest his dough. Even white women, who might have yelled "rape" had he smiled at them before the stories broke, flooded him with letters proposing marriage. He had it made in every direction and for a couple of months was the Black Emperor of Arkansas City.

When the novelty started wearing thin, he announced he was returning to Sapulpa to complete the transaction. A committee of fawning Leading White Citizens chauffeured him to the Santa Fe station and saw that he was comfortably ensconced aboard the jim crow coach (separate accommodations for Southern travel began at Arkansas City).

One week passed, then a second and third. Nobody had heard from him. Finally one banker, impatient at the silence, took a special trip to Sapulpa, returning redfaced and subdued. He could find no trace of the missing "heir." Further, there had been no oil strike. The mild young brother owned no property. Instead a gang of slick promoters had dreamed up the scheme to unload ordinary land at inflated prices. Knowing the pattern of white thinking, they assumed correctly the city's leading citizens would never believe a simple nigger was smart enough to be involved in this kind of confidence game and had made Grade A suckers out of them, unloading land worth no more than $20,000 for

better than a quarter of a million dollars.

The entire black community howled with glee at one of us pulling a fast one on those smart white pricks. I had grown more sour each year over my treatment by the majority purely because of color. Often, after I started attending grade school and when walking along, I had been stopped by white men, sometimes with their women, who ordered me to dance for them. "All you niggers know how to do the buck and wing. It's just natural for you folks to sing and dance," they would tell me. If they blocked my path I would stare silently and unsmilingly back until, finding their efforts fruitless, they would step aside and let me pass. Frankly I have never learned how to tap dance; I'm one of God's chillun who don't got that kind of rhythm.

The Mexicans were as vindictively glad as we were when the oil scam was explained. In certain respects they were treated worse than blacks. They were foreigners and all foreigners were looked down on in this community of native white, farm-oriented Protestant Americans. Further, they were swarthy and Catholic. Unlike us, they didn't belong at all. The dirty greasers would go back home taking their savings with them whenever they felt like it. Hostility toward Mexicans was openly aired. Niggers, on the other hand, were here to stay and overt antagonism rarely showed its face as long as we stayed in what whites called "your place."

Some of the Mexicans had come here with their families and these were the ones who became especially friendly with fellow black workers. They invited our family to their little shacks for dinners of chile, hot tamales, enchiladas, and frijoles so spicy hot I could hardly eat for crying. I'm sure this developed in me the taste for peppery foods I have retained. That and the barbecued ribs that were also part of my fare. In return Dad invited them over for feeds of our kind of food: fried chicken, cornbread, blackeyed peas and sweet potato pie.

One night when I was 14 there came as guests a Mexican couple who brought along their niece, also 14, who had just arrived for a visit. Her name was Teresa and she was easily the prettiest girl I had ever seen. She could speak no English and it was just as well; I was so overcome I couldn't have talked anyway. I sat and stared at her long black hair with the sheen of silk, her eyes big and dark and flashing, and her skin softly rich as pale honey. I thought of a luscious ripened plum and I longed to kiss her all over. I actually could have devoured her, lingering long as I savored each individual atom. When she turned suddenly, caught me gawking and shyly smiled, she was so beautiful I expected her to vanish. I sat all evening, suspended in space, stunned by her loveliness, and wished I were older so I could ask her then and there to marry me. Although ordinarily I was quite talented with a knife and fork, that night I could not eat. As soon as they left, Mother started teasing me but I heard little. She had never before seen me show any interest in a girl, and I recall she commented on my resemblance to a colicky calf. But for the most part her remarks bounced off me for already I was looking forward to our visit with them and another chance to adore Teresa for an evening.

Time passed slowly. Two weeks later (it seemed like two years) we were to go to their house. But a couple of days before, Dad came home and casually mentioned Teresa had gone home to Mexico after her two weeks' visit. Suddenly the sky caved in. For the next few days I stumbled around like one who is only half awake

among strange ruins. Of course I never saw her again, and for many years after I grew to adulthood I sometimes wondered if she was as unbelievable as I believed.

5.

Like most boys, I went fishing several times each summer, usually with Mother and a group of her friends. Only occasionally could Dad accompany us. He worked 10 hours daily, six days per week, and to fish meant he had to lay off from his job. If we wanted carp and buffalo fish, we climbed several gates and walked through pastures until we hit the main dirt road east of town and followed it until we came to the bridge across the Walnut River some four or five miles away. I did not care especially for either variety: too bony. I preferred the large, succulent catfish found in the Arkansas River, equidistant to the west. Catfish were plentiful around both the dam and the headgates. They grew big; many times I saw two men walking along with a huge monster hanging from a pole carried on both men's shoulders. Catfish had fewer bones and when fried in deep fat encrusted in cornmeal and egg I could eat all they sat before me.

But unlike most kids, I really did not care to fish because I was almost certain to run into at least one snake. Granny had made me so deathly afraid of the creatures that nothing could make me believe that all of these slithering reptiles were not dangerous.

Although only two varieties around my home were poisonous, copperheads and water moccasins, and so far as I knew nobody had ever died from the bite of either, I lumped all 57 varieties together and tried to keep my distance. In summer this was particularly difficult for on hot days garter and milk snakes invaded our yard or rested underneath the grape, dewberry and gooseberry vines near the privvy. When I went fishing I spent more time looking around for the crawling creatures than in watching my lines for a bite.

I wouldn't even bait my hooks with fishing worms because their wriggling reminded me of snakes. Either somebody put worms on my hook or I used what was called dough bait, made mainly from flour, water and cotton.

I greatly preferred hunting to fishing. From late Fall to early Spring I knew there would be few snakes around. Using a single shot .22 rifle, I went primarily after cottontail rabbit and became expert enough to bring them down on the run. I enjoyed many good meals of fried rabbit, mashed potatoes and gravy, and hot biscuits dripping with butter and loaded with some of Mother's homemade jellies and jams.

When it was too cold to hunt, I set traps in the underbrush back of our house before the city improved it for residences. These steel traps were placed where small animal traffic seemed heaviest. I visited them each morning and night (unless there was a blizzard) and caught rabbits, an occasional opossum and many cats. Wanting only their hides, I tacked their skins on the back wall of our house until they dried out, then sold them to Old Man Dawson at the tannery for spending change. My first two attempts at skinning civet cats (a two-striped cousin to a skunk) were di-STINK-ly memorable. My knife slipped and the entire neighborhood immediately assumed an olfactory character differing from its usual image. Luckily nobody complained and soon I was able to speedily skin the small animal without puncturing the odoriferous sac.

I needed the money from hides for show fare every Saturday. When I was in the third or fourth grade at First Ward School my entire class was taken to see the silent movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. I was not barred. After a couple of other school-sponsored films at the same theatre, the management realized it had a good thing going and began slanting Saturday shows for school kids all over town. No attempt was made to either bar or give us Special Seats. When this mixing created no problem, the ban on black attendance in general was lifted. In order to get in on the gravy, the other two film houses rapidly followed suit, although the largest of the trio and the only one with a balcony did reserve the left half "for colored only." Meanwhile I was hooked and began living from Saturday to Saturday to see the next episode of the hair-raising serials. I simply had to learn how Pearl White escaped from that infernal machine in *Perils of Pauline* and how Eddie Polo avoided falling from that cliff. And the one and two reel comedies! Charlie Chaplin, Fatty Arbuckle, the Keystone Cops and the Mack Sennett bathing beauties daringly showing female legs and knees and sometimes part of the thigh!

Occasionally there were black faces in the comedies. At first I was thrilled to see people my color on the screen, but rapidly this turned to embarrassment. My face burned when white kids laughed uproariously at niggers running from ghosts and showing the whites of their eyes, stealing chickens and watermelons, or threatening each other with oversized razors big as scythes. That was obviously how we looked to whites, and yet I knew no blacks in Arkansas City who fit such descriptions. I soon came to prefer all-white movies.

Mother, Dad and I would attend the show together when there was a new William S. Hart film or a picture as adventurous as *Tarzan* with Elmo Lincoln. We'd talk about it and relive the experience for weeks—especially if the piano player failed to follow the action and romped through *Alexander's Ragtime Band* when the dear old white-haired mother of the heroine lay on her deathbed, gasping her last.

I became a cowboy without horse the summer I was 12. Previous vacations had been spent working in our gardens. For two years Dad had rented an extra acre nearby and planted it primarily in sweet corn. The second year brought such a bountiful crop that I walked all over town pulling a little wagon and selling roasting ears at 15 cents a dozen. I made enough to buy most of my school clothes that fall. But in my 12th year I devoted time primarily to my herd.

Each day I walked 15 cows to pasture three miles from town and brought them back each evening. Arising at 5:30 every morning except Sunday I went from house to house gathering my charges from townspeople, mostly white, who liked to keep cattle for their own milk supply. They fed them in their barns during winter but in summer the owners wanted them to graze. I strode behind my herd with a long stick down the main highway north of town to a large pasture owned by Paul Alston, the county's most successful black farmer. Early traffic was usually light, but I had to be ready to drive my herd into ditches on both sides of the road when I heard an auto approach as well as keep them off the tracks over which hourly passed an interurban trolley connecting Arkansas City with Winfield, the county seat. When I reached the pasture I turned them loose for the day and walked back to town unless I was lucky enough to bum a ride. I was free then until four p.m. when I must return to the pasture to assemble my herd,

drive them back to town and deliver each to her owner.

Since hitchhiking was uncertain in those days of comparatively few cars, this meant walking a minimum of 13 miles daily, deliveries and all—if I was lucky. Usually I wasn't that fortunate. Although Kansas is thought of as a flat prairie state, the Alston pasture occupied several square miles of little hills rising as high as 50 feet, sometimes with sheer drops to small ravines. There were many tiny streams and one low, heavily wooded area with high grass. I was especially unhappy when the cows were in this section, for frequently I saw unnerving green snakes slithering through the thick undergrowth or entwined around tree branches. Since my charges were not the only cattle in the pasture, I had the double duty of identifying, isolating and driving them toward the gate while watching warily for snakes. On high ground I often saw black snakes and bull snakes, but there was room enough to give them a wide berth of at least 10 feet. As for the little lizards known as mountain boomers which race from one clump of cactus and rock to another. they bothered me not at all.

I was paid a dollar per month for each cow. This $15 every 30 days seemed a small fortune and I was willing to put up with the daily hikes and the snakes for the most money I'd ever had at one time. But one morning in August I wished I had never seen cows.

As I drove my herd past the town limits, I noticed three white boys around my own age idling along the trolley tracks shooting at birds with a .22 rifle. I was soon ahead of them and had forgotten their presence until I heard a ping and saw dust kick up in the road a few feet from me. I looked back. The white boys were gazing into trees beside the tracks on a diagonal between us. As I watched, one took aim and fired toward the trees and for a second time a .22 pellet kicked up dust less than 10 feet away. I yelled back but if they heard me, they gave no indication. I started to walk back toward them and almost immediately heard a Holstein heifer leave the herd and crash through weeds and bushes toward a field bordering the highway. I had no choice but to run and head her off, realizing with a sinking stomach that I couldn't leave my cows long enough to dash back and ask the boys to shoot in another direction. I was forced to walk on, praying I would not get hit. At least 20 times bullets kicked up dust from five to 30 feet away but luckily neither I nor any of my herd was hit. When I finally locked them in the pasture after what seemed like a twenty-mile walk under fire, the white youths were nowhere in sight. I could never decide if the barrage was malicious or innocently accidental.

Next summer I joined a street paving gang. Big for my age and growing strong, I saw no reason why I could not pick up six bricks from the wagon and carry them to the bricklayers throughout a full working day. I'd heard grown men call this hard labor, and for the first hour I laughed to myself at their weakness. Then I realized either the others had speeded up or I had slowed down, and wondered if somebody hadn't started bringing in bars of lead. After a couple of hours I was puffing and sweat poured off me. The foreman, a friend of Dad's, came over laughing and told me to take a break. I was glad to oblige. With short rest periods every hour I managed to make it through the day.

Right after dinner I fell into bed, exhausted. It seemed I had hardly closed my eyes before Mother called me to get up. It was six in the morning. I arose slowly, stifling a groan for my body was so sore and stiff it felt like a great big boil.

Nevertheless I managed to dress and get to the job on time, to the surprise of the entire gang. Frankly, I didn't feel up to it but I was determined not to be a quitter. I intended to work even if it killed me—and that now seemed possible. After an hour of torture which equalled anything Torquemada could have dreamed up, the foreman suggested I switch to pouring tar. I literally leaped at the chance; I'd have been willing then to fight a tiger with my bare hands rather than tote bricks.

I had to be dressed especially for this job, legs and feet wrapped in several thicknesses of burlap and a pair of thick, padded gauntlets on my hands. The foreman demonstrated how to properly hold a coal scuttle, draw boiling tar through a spigot in the vat, and slosh it over the newly set bricks with little splash. Physically, it was far easier than handling those damned bricks but this job had its own hazards. Hot tar spattered in all directions, especially if the scuttle was held too high when you let go with a wide sweeping motion through a semicircle. That evening when I got home I had recruited a small army of burns on arms, hands and legs that turned to blisters overnight. Next morning I was sore in an entirely different way. But through sheer bullheadedness (I told you I was a Capricorn) I nevertheless staggered through the month-long week, then drew my pay and told the gang goodbye. I had proven to myself that at 13 I could do hard physical labor like a grown man if I wanted to. However, I saw no need to run it into the ground. The rest of that summer was spent manicuring white people's lawns.

I also joined the first black Boy Scout troop formed in my hometown. Scoutmaster was a young, soft-spoken, dark brown man named Travis Dean who worked for the ice plant. I managed to get together all essential equipment including a pup tent and made my own sleeping bag. I looked forward eagerly to overnight camping tramps with only three or four boys. These hikes I considered quite educational for I learned how to roll my own cigarets and smoke a pipe. In town I had to be careful for fear of being caught, although periodically a bunch of us would go snipe hunting. This meant walking along looking down for only partially smoked cigaret butts, or snipes. When we had collected all we needed, we'd make it to some vacant lot or unoccupied house and have a group smoke-in. When the snipes were gone, somebody would pass around Sen-Sen to kill our breath and we'd go home. How we avoided picking up some contagious disease from these discarded butts is still a mystery. But on overnight hikes, away from grownups, we never had to worry about being caught, nor did we smoke snipes.

Since I was still primarily a loner, I diligently studied the Scout Manual, getting my Second Class badge in the minimum time, and was soon ready for First Class tests. But there I ran into a problem. The required fourteen-mile hike was a snap; one morning I walked to Winfield, 15 miles away, intending to return by trolley. Then I thought long and hard over what I could do with that half buck I would spend for fare, and after three hours' rest decided to walk back home that afternoon. The problem was in my swimming test.

There was no place for us to swim. The facilities at Paris Park and the new municipal pool were barred to us. We had only the two swiftly moving rivers on both sides of town, and both Mother and Dad had impressed on me their danger. Already two boys I knew had drowned in them that year. (Incidentally, this explains why so many blacks in my generation never learned how to swim.)

Scoutmaster Dean dumped the problem in the lap of the citywide scouting council, which had never before faced such a dilemma. After kicking it around for several weeks, that resourceful group brilliantly decided that rather than allow a nigger to pollute the water of their sacred pools, they would waive this requirement and allow me to become a First Class Scout without this basic test. I went on to win merit badges and so far as I know I may be the only person in America to become an Eagle Scout without learning how to swim.

6.

The blues? We were formally introduced when I was eight; even then I had the feeling we weren't really strangers. So when the blues grabbed me and held on, it was like meeting a long lost brother.

Other major events occurred that same year. Granny suffered a stroke and died; I learned THE difference between boys and girls, and I got my first buddy. Despite my growing affair with books I did need a close friend my age.

When Granny, then past 80, became paralyzed and unable to move her left arm and legs, she was placed in the iron bed in the front room beside a window. For seven months her world was condensed to the family, occasional vistors and what little she could see beyond the glass pane. By day she sat propped against a wooden chair laid across the bed and softened by a pillow. At night the chair was removed and she rested flat on her back. It must have been a grimly monotonous existence, this endless waiting, for she could neither read nor write. Yet she never complained and was convinced until her death that she would recover. I think her determination to regain control of her limbs was motivated largely by her promise to give me the licking of my life "for being so sassy." As for me, I was ambivalent. Despite her mastery of the rod I loved her and wanted her to recover, but at the same time I did not look longingly toward her promised use of the switch. I confess a feeling of sincere regret tempered with genuine relief when she passed away one morning while I was at school.

Mother had the job of lifting Granny bodily and placing her atop the bedpan. Usually I was sent out of the room, but one afternoon they forgot and I lingered. Finally noticing, they ordered my out—too late. I had made the shattering discovery that everybody was not alike.

I was puzzled. Were all girls this way or just elderly females like Granny? Were they born with this strange physical condition or did it happen when they grew old? I couldn't ask anybody at school since this was summer, and at the time there were no other kids living in the neighborhood. I didn't dare question either parent; once before I had asked Mother where babies come from and she hemmed and hawed before finally telling me, in the pattern of that period, "You'll find out when you're older." There had also been the time when I saw Aunt Hattie nude from the waist up and stared in wonder at those jiggling globes on her chest until she called Mother, who gave me a real bawling out.

But a couple of weeks later a white family moved next door with a boy my age and his four-year-old sister. I asked him about it the day after we got acquainted. He informed me girls were born different and with the directness of eight proved it graphically with his little sister. It was amazing to learn from him that all human females had holes.

"Girls just gotta be different from boys," he explained, "or else they couldn't fuck."

Yes, but what in the world was fuck?

"Oh, that's something grown-ups do."

Since I wasn't adult, I let it drop. But later that day I began brooding. How did they do it? Why? I questioned him again. But he wasn't much help. He knew only that the areas from which people "made water" were somehow involved.

I tried to figure it out for myself. After much pondering, I came up with what I considered the logical answer. Grown-ups must put their mouths on each other down there. That had to be it, and also explained why boys and girls were different: if they were alike, there would be no incentive. I didn't understand why they had to, but presumed I'd know when I became adult. Frankly, I was proud of myself for solving this strange riddle. And more significantly, this undoubtedly triggered my life-long oral orientation; it had to start somewhere.

Before summer ended the white family moved away to be replaced by Afro-Americans. For the first time we had our own kind as neighbors. They were the Perrys and there were five of them: three girls, a boy and the mother. Mrs. Perry was light brown, wore her hair in a bun, was pigeon-toed and walked as if she were stepping on eggs costing two dollars a dozen. She had the mountainous task of working all day for a white family and trying to rear four kids with only the token help of their father, who cooked someplace in Oklahoma and made infrequent trips to see his brood. The girls were Mary, oldest and quiet; Esther, raucous and sexy; and Daisy, cowed by the emotional weight of the others. In between the two younger girls was Donald, a slender hellion who waged a constant fight for masculine identity among all those females and who became my first buddy.

Don and I were both eight but there the similarity ended. He cussed, found things before they were lost and played hooky from school. I suppose I was fond of him because he did everything I didn't dare. He was also a good friend to fight with, usually with fists but occasionally with a handy tree limb. But we never let such discomforts as black eyes and bloody noses interfere more than momentarily with the relationship we both needed—particularly when we ran into small gangs of bellicose white boys. It was also Don who helped my theory on copulation.

Gradually I became friendly with other rainbow boys, among them, a very dark lad with a high, loud voice. His name, ironically enough, was Solomon, and one day he wised us up on how babies were born.

"It's simple," said Solomon solemnly. "A man gits on top of a woman, sticks his thing in, does it to her an' that's how they gits babies."

"That's all there is to it?" one of us asked.

"Yea, that's all."

"How long you gotta wait before a baby comes?"

Solomon looked patronizingly at his interrogator and with the calm voice of authority replied, "You don't."

"Nah." He sounded exasperated. How could we be so stupid? "They gits birthed right away." He became quite confidential. "One night on Uncle Mack's farm down in Tennessee I heard a noise in the next room. It was bedsprings creakin'! Uncle Mack and Aunt Millie thought I was asleep. So I gits up an' tiptoes to the door and peeks in through the keyhole. There they was, moanin'

and groanin' and grindin'. But when Uncle Mack is all through an' starts to git up, he can't. He looks down an' there hangin' on to his pecker with both hands was a brand new baby. He'd gone and made hisself another child."

It sounded strange even to imaginative eight- and nine-year-olds, but who were we to question the authority of an eyewitness?

That was our concept of procreation until, several days later, older boys set us straight. We went immediately as a kind of committee to Solomon's house to discuss this new information which differed so drastically from what he swore he had seen, but learned he had just been shipped off permanently to—it pains me to say—Uncle Mack's farm in Tennessee.

During the same period that I was acquiring initial sex misinformation, I became conscious of the blues and evolving jazz. It's quite logical to discuss sex and jazz together; the music had developed for dancing and people went to shindigs for close contact with members of the opposite sex which, with luck and opportunity, might end up in bed. Further, jazz meant both a kind of music as well as the sex act itself. It was obvious what the composer had in mind when he wrote *Jazz Me Blues*.

After Granny died, Mother and Dad took me one Friday night to the monthly dance at the little Knight of Pythias Lodge Hall. They had no choice; all the Perrys were out and there was no place to park me. Neither parent danced. They were both good Baptists and if you were a Baptist you'd damned well better not dance. But Dad was a lodge officer and had to be present; evidently it was not a sin to listen to dance music. However, if Old Satan lured you to the floor, you'd hear about it next Sunday from the pulpit. Rev. Woods, a heavyset man with a pockmarked face and a fire alarm voice, would all but read you out of the congregation, and if you were behind in dollar donations even that might happen.

Most of the dancing young belonged to the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which was far less strict. Both congregations carried on an ecclesiastical civil war. Close friends during the week drew battle lines on Sunday. Each was certain his denomination rode the only highway to heaven—although one young man named Ernest Sayer, who belonged to the A.M.E. Church, would sometimes get drunk Sunday afternoon and attend Baptist services that evening where he would help lead the singing and put a greenback in the collection. But generally speaking, A.M.E.'s were contemptuous of the harsh regulations and total immersion of the Baptist faith; the latter looked upon Methodists and their dainty sprinkling ritual as only a few degrees above complete damnation. A popular story of the period told of a Methodist meeting a Baptist on the street. "When you die, you going to heaven?" the Methodist asked. "Of course," replied the Baptist, "if I don't drown first."

The walk from home to the lodge hall took twenty minutes. I lagged behind so I could look at Dad. When he was togged down he wore a blue serge box back suit with the coat hanging in a rectangle from his broad shoulders, and the edges of the box were pressed sharp enough to shave with. His trousers were voluminous pegtops tapering to narrow cuffless bottoms breaking once above highly polished long shoes—"Stetson last" he called them. On his head a derby perched jauntily. He looked as slick as a sweet man from Saint Louis, and could have been the sartorial inspiration for *Dying Gambler's Blues*.

A small hall was on the second floor of an old wooden building on the northern edge of the business district. Overhead hung paper Japanese lanterns softenting the light on ancient former church pews and hard straight-backed chairs lining the walls. A small room on one side of the entrance was set apart for refreshments. Two ice-filled tubs cooled soda pop selling for a nickle. A bowl of hot Mexican chili cost a dime and a plate of barbecued ribs with cole slaw went for fifteen cents. At the far end of the main hall was a tiny stage. Bass, snare drums and elementary cymbals sat before an empty chair. Alongside was a battered upright piano. Relaxing on the stool, tossing up a big golden doughnut of a watch and catching it, was an elongated, sadfaced ginger brown man.

"That's Texas Slim," Dad said. "Sure glad he's here tonight."

Shortly a big broad buffalo-like man sat down at the drums and unleashed a quiet roll. Slim pushed his watch into his vest pocket, turned facing the piano, made a couple of brief exploratory right-hand runs and began pounding out a slow, bleeding blues.

That was the whole orchestra, piano and "traps," but nothing more was needed. After the first few bars I was hooked for life. Even at the age of eight I knew this music was part of me. I'd had the usual exposure to concert and operatic recordings at white neighbors' homes, band recitals at Wilson Park and the classic songs taught at school but that was generally boring. I rarely felt even minimal emotional kinship with that kind of music. I did not relate. But the blues—well, this I understood. I dug it in a way impossible with the most brilliant concepts of Wagner and Verdi and Chopin. All that was alien; the blues talked my language. The blues were basic, vital black music; the rapport was natural.

Eventually I noticed couples on the narrow floor, performing what I later learned was the *Hesitation Schottische*. The schottische was a dance originating in Scotland, but not even a Scotch-soused Scot could have dreamed what would happen when Duskyamerica grabbed hold.

Couples danced in a line, moving slowly two abreast. Leaders were a man known as "Foots" and his girl friend. Foots called the set moves, but the actual rhythm of the dancers is as hard to describe as an old Louis Armstrong trumpet solo. On command they strutted, turned right or left, executed complicated double time steps, about-faced, tapped toes and heels in unison, danced backwards, swayed, then broke into more double time. Finally Foots shouted, "Slow drag it, everybody," and the couples turned face to face to dance closely with their bodies, feet hardly moving. When the leader yelled, "Quit it an' get wit' it," they returned to their original patterns.

Texas Slim told a basic, gripping story on the keys and I could have listened all night. At last he stopped and I came back from wherever you go when something sends you out of this world. I turned and saw Dad looking at me with an odd smile.

"Kinda liked that, didn't you, boy?" he asked. "I'm glad you do. I was beginnin' to think you din' like nothin' but readin' and eatin'."

He told me that white people knew nothing about the blues, which he said was "colored folks' music and workin' people's at that." He'd first heard the blues down in Texas and liked them because they said what he felt and couldn't express.

Slim and his drummer broke into fast ragtime as a change of pace, but the

blues were their meat. They were shuffling slow, shaking medium tempo or hopping fast with roaring bass (later known as boogie woogie), but they were all stewed in the same salty urgency.

Texas Slim also sang in a voice dark as licorice and rough as untanned leather. I still remember the first I ever heard:

> My mama tol' me, my papa tol' me too
> I say my mama tol' me, my papa tol' me too
> Don't let no yelluh woman make a fatmouth outta you.

Afterwards I went regularly to the monthly dances, even when I was old enough to stay home alone. Maybe there'd be another piano player floating through town, but unless he could beat it out mean and lowdown, he was nowhere. For some six months the duo expanded to a trio with the addition of an itinerant saxophonist who was also indigo steeped, but most of the time it was just piano and trap drums.

As I grew older and more discerning I discovered that often the sound of an unaccompanied vocal blues was disturbingly close, both rhythmically and harmonically, to the gospel singing at Second Baptist Church, especially at revival meetings and on Testifying Sunday.

Testifying Sunday was the first morning service each month. There was no sermon. Instead members stood up and told how their religion had helped them fight their battles. On a day when the meeting caught fire, it might last five or six hours. Somebody wouuld start a rousing spiritual or jubilee song (they were all a capella, often with a verse sung by the leader of the moment and unison response), a stirring hell-and-brimstone prayer would follow, and strong religious fervor would cascade over everybody. Inhibitions vanished. Amid a wild but somehow rhythmic cacophony of shouts and shrieks, men and women rose in turn, faces lighted by fire within, to speak in praise of their Lord. Brothers cried, sisters wept for joy. Sometimes a sister ran screaming up and down the aisles, falling finally in a faint, her arms and legs jerking convulsively as others nearby fanned her face. Service never stopped; if anything it increased in intensity. "Yes, I know my Redeemer lives" cut through a joyous shout, and others carried on with "Amen!" "Speak, Brother!" Only with the entire assemblage exhausted and wrung out would the meeting end.

There were cynics who swore some of the fainting females planned everything in advance. If, for instance, Sister Brown was sore at Sister White, she'd become filled with the Holy Ghost and run shouting down the aisles until she reached Sister White's pew, then with a wild cry fling out her arm and clip Sister White on the kisser as she fell in a faint. Of course the victim would be skeptical of Sister Brown's holy seizure, thinking the devil had entered the act, but she had no recourse until next Testifying Sunday when she would become possessed and reap her revenge by bopping Sister Brown.

I might add that a shouting sister more than once had been known to faint in the arms of a church brother for whom she had an unholy desire. Maybe that's what was meant by applied religion.

From the songs and vocal style heard on Testifying Sunday and at revival meetings I got the same kind of pulse-quickening charge that shot through me

when Texas Slim laid it on. This bothered me for I had been taught that a "sinful song" had nothing in common with spirituals and jubilees. But this was false. Years later I learned that black secular and religious songs were opposite sides of the same cultural coin and those who sang them unconsciously applied the same strong, surviving Africanisms, shaping both into a distinctive black music, a major segment of common group heritage.

Until white America gave an approving pat, spirituals, blues and jazz were noisily rejected by Negro "strivers" as a group. Although regrettable, it was understandable. In the nervous fight of that era for white acceptance, to prove they were no different, really, from Caucasians except for happenstance of color, it was then fashionable for souls trying to be "cultured" to condemn such music as "low class" and "a disgrace to our people." They felt that if they showed by actions and interests they were the same as whites, they would be accepted as equals. So they tried mightily to become carbonized Caucasians, doing their upmost to wash away their black identity, both physical and cultural. This opened the door for smart operators (most of them white) to become millionaires by dangling the promise of eradicating physical differences. Sales of skin bleaches, lip thinners and hair straighteners were gigantic. As a child more than once I had my hair fried with hot combs wielded by friends of Mother's and during high school I bought several Satin Tops, a chemical process removing all kinks, from the town's barber. However, I gave this up forever after leaving home.

But I was never caught in the no-blues-trap. Dad, strictly of the laboring class, and Granny, an ex-slave, being fartherest down on the social scale, felt no compulsion to indiscriminately copy white culture. They did not fight surviving Africanisms. I was able, therefore, to avoid the hypocrisy of those who publicly condemned black music while getting their kicks on the sly. Later I observed some of the loudest dusky detractors virtually pat a hole in the floor when they thought nobody was looking.

So I listened all I could. I heard traditional blues verses whose origin nobody knew as well as the latest compositions making their way there or concocted by those around me. I learned gradually that blues lyrics, to catch on, had to be vital, real and mirror group experiences. I memorized the explicit sex verses which the other boys and I sang over and over among ourselves, not only because we liked them but because they were forbidden by our parents. They were a kind of springboard for our group miseducation about sex.

7.

At the age of puberty, painfully conscious of strong new hungers released in our bodies, we had no grown-ups to give us guidance. In this respect, black parents were as deficient as white parents. Maybe they hoped that if they closed their eyes and plugged their ears our need for knowledge would vanish. Of course this didn't happen. Their silence, instead, made it possible for us to accept weird myths and develop our own juicy and expressive vocabulary.

However, one activity was sure to bring a severe lecture from the old man. That was when a boy was caught "playing with himself." To hear an irate father tell it, never in his whole life had he jacked off and it was a "shame and disgrace"

to whomp your own. Boys who masturbated "ruined their health," became "weak and sickly," and were likely to end up "in the crazy house." These beliefs, oddly enough, were supported by many physicians, with leading medical authorities writing dissertations and books on this "nefarious evil."

Of course any luckless lad caught in the act would be properly repentant and promise the old man he would never, never do it again. Sometimes he'd even keep the promise for two or three days.

Many boys never admitted indulging, even to their closest friends, but there were a brazen few who kept no secrets from their buddies. Proud of their ability, they often slipped away to a vacant house or some secluded spot and staged contests to see who could ejaculate the greatest distance. And should a new boy between 12 and 14 come to town and want to join the gang, he would first be initiated by being grabbed and held down on the ground by two or three kids while another masturbated him to climax.

Older youths who had been through all this had a standard routine which worked with the unwary young who swore they never indulged. Two or three would get a green lad of 12 or 13 alone and ask, "Boy, do you jack off?" The answer was an outraged "no." Whereupon the interrogator gravely said, "That's good, 'cause if you do a hair will start growing in the palm of your hand." Nine times out of 10 the younger boy immediately opened his hand to take a quick glance at his palm. The older fellows doubled in derisive laughter. "If you don't jack off, how come you looked at your hand?" one finally gasped and their victim would drop his eyes and grin sheepishly as he realized he had been tricked. I know, because I was once caught in this fashion. However, I was never discovered performing this act. I'd probably have dropped dead of mortification if anyone had; I was so shy that even in high school I was embarrassed when other lads saw me nude in the shower after physical education classes. This, too, was a manifestation of the inferiority complex being hammered into me by the white world.

All of this, however, was part of growing up, and we learned many things from each other by comparing notes, listening to conversations of older lads, and from an occasional bit accidentally dropped by a parent. Our mothers and fathers would have been shocked into sudden senility had they heard us talking at length among ourselves, but we took great pains to avoid using our expressive jargon around our elders. When a forbidden word accidentally slipped out, it meant a trip to the woodshed. But among ourselves, a large part of our conversation dealt with sex.

Our juicy vocabulary included few dictionary words. Some of what we said would have been unintelligible to whitey. Had anybody said "coitus" in front of us he would have received a blank stare. But we all knew what it meant to jazz a jane, whip that jellyroll to a fare-thee-well, or get a piece of tail or ass. A woman had a pussy, peehole, poontang, sack-a-madam or booty (in school we giggled naughtily when the teacher told how Romans burned and sacked conquered cities after gathering all the booty.) She also had a cock. When we learned that whites used that term for the male organ, we felt contempt for their dumbness. The penis was a prick, dick, jock, peter or pecker. It was never a cock.

I suppose some of the fellows I grew up with have never yet heard of a clitoris, but at an early age we talked about a purr-tongue or a boy-in-the-boat. Since our

meaning of the key word was the exact opposite of common parlance elsewhere, a cocksucker logically engaged in cunnilingus. Fellatio was beyond our ken, but we all knew what happened when a person gobbled the goo. Anybody with both male and female characteristics was a morfydyke, and a bulldagger screwed other women, just like a man. All such people, incidentally, were freaks.

Anal intercourse was cornholing, and funky was not a way of playing jazz music but described the odor of unwashed genitalia. Nobody was ever pregnant. A babe was knocked up; when we were quite polite we spoke of her as being in family way or mother way.

If you wanted to drive a gal wild you put on a French Tickler; to avoid blue balls, a dose, or sores with a strange broad you used either a Fish Skin or a thin rubber called a Merry Widow. But there really wasn't much point in dodging claps; you weren't a man until you'd had at least one dose. Besides, it wasn't any worse than a bad cold. A male with a small penis was too little in the poop. And the only time you could knock up a gal was right before or during her monthlies.

From all the secret talk among us and our new desires, most of us were eager for our first piece—and scared to get it. Some found a compromise. They bought big rag dolls that looked like girls or swiped them from their sisters, cut a hole in the proper place, then banged hell out of them in private. Imagination is a wonderful gift.

Around girls our age we assumed an aggressive boldness. We learned sex verses to blues tunes and retained them far longer than lessons in school. We sang them around young females with salacious snickers, fully aware of who could be trusted not to tell their parents. The young things snickered back, just as salaciously.

To the tune of W. C. Handy's *Hesitation Blues* we'd chant:

Got a hole in my shoe
Got a hole in my sock
A bowlegged woman's
Got a hole in her cock;
Oh tell me how long
Do I have to wait?
Can I get it now
Or must I hesitate.

I suppose if some "fast" little chick had sung back, "You don't have to hesitate, I'm ready for you right now," most of us would have fainted from fright. Not all, because a few got in the groove real early, but those who "signified" by singing loudest would have run home and hid.

We had a number of little jingles we habitually sang to each other whenever our gang gathered:

Before I pay a dollar for cock
I'll let my dick get hard as a rock
I'll cut it off an' stick it in the flo'
An keep it there 'til booty gits low.

Or maybe it would be:

Ol' Aunt Dinah sittin' on a rock
Shavin' all the hairs off her big fat cock
Razor slipped an' you know what it do?
It cut that good stuff half in two.

When we were fifteen or so and smoking fairly regularly, we had a special recitation before bumming a "coffin nail" or "pimp stick":

All you whores come fall in line
Goin' down to the river to wash your behind
I ain't lyin' and I ain't jokin'
One o' you dudes better give me some smokin'.

We also learned how to hooraw, a vocal pastime consisting of poking fun at another boy's physical peculiarities. You prepared your own comeback while your opponent of the moment spouted off to the uproarious delight of the listeners. Sometimes a victim would become fightin' mad, but usually it ended in a draw with the gang passing on to some other activity.

I recall once when somebody was hoorawing Napoleon Berry, a slow-talking youth who ordinarily was quiet. The topic was ugliness.

"You know," the other guy sounded off, "you ain't ever gonna die. You're just gonna ugly on away from here."

"Talkin' about looking bad," Napoleon came back in a slow drawl, "when you was made it was done on the installment plan. You had to show up on different days to get all your parts. But somehow you got the days all mixed up. You made a mistake and came on face day for your ass and on ass day for your face. Now you're always constipated 'cause when a good shit gets started it don't know which way to go."

My first opportunity to score with a girl came late in my thirteenth summer, the year I worked on the street-paving gang. The place was Coffeyville, Kansas. Annually Dad received a railroad pass and I visited his numerous relatives for a week. I liked Coffeyville; I always got a girl friend as soon as I hit town. The black population was four or five times larger than that of Arkansas City, and Coffeyville itself was twice as big. Furthermore, Dad's kin lived in the heart of the westside ghetto. Because I was a new boy and a stranger, the little neighborhood gals would fall over their young selves to solicit my attention. At home I wasn't interested in any of the available girls but in Coffeyville I made up for lost time.

This year there was one sassy little chick who staked a strong claim as soon as I arrived. Her name was Irene and she was a year older than I, light brown, good-looking, aggressive and sexy. She lived a couple of blocks away and during the day took care of a younger brother and sister while her parents worked. Next door to me lived a lad named Ernest who, although only ten, was my main playmate. Everyday we went over to Irene's house.

On the third day Irene announced we were going to play mama and papa. We went back to her parents' bedroom and began roughhousing on the unmade bed.

Shortly she shooed out her brother and sister to visit in the next block and sent Ernest on an errand that would tie him up for almost an hour. Now that we were alone, she pulled the sheets back, lay down, grabbed my arm and yanked me over on the bed, then started kissing me. We'd kissed before but they'd been quick pecks, nothing drawn out like this. I felt queer.

In a few moments she stopped and lay flat on her back.

"Get on top of me, face down," she commanded.

"What for?" I asked.

"Well," she said coyly, "I just wanna see how much longer you are than me."

"But I already know," I protested. "I'm two inches taller." Then I got up and sat in a chair until Ernest returned. I knew what she had in mind but I was just plain scared.

However, this failure did not discourage Irene. The night before I was to return home, she tried again. Ernest and I were playing in front of his house shortly after dark and I looked up to see Irene and a girl friend strolling leisurely by, arm in arm and giggling. Irene called Ernest, whispered something to him as both girls giggled even more, then walked on.

Ernest came directly to me.

"I got a message for you. Irene told me to tell you that if you want some, meet her at the Wilcox barn in half an hour."

Well, here it was, my moment of truth. At last I had a chance to do what some of my friends already bragged about. I thought of the time we'd sung those verses to *Hesitation Blues* in front of the girls in Arkansas City. I could take home a story and be a hero with the gang. In my mind I could hear them saying with awe, "Ol' Frank got his first piece." Even the older lads would be forced to respect me when the word got around.

But there was one drawback. I simply didn't have the nerve. My knees weakened and my stomach went in for advanced acrobatics as I contemplated the actual act. Instead of becoming hard with anticipation, I think the poor little thing must have crawled up inside my abdomen to hide in fright.

An hour passed while I played uneasily and halfheartedly with Ernest. Then Irene and her friend, evidently tired of waiting, strolled by again. They stopped on the sidewalk and called me. I started sweating as I walked reluctantly over.

"Frank," Irene began, "didn't you tell Ernest you wanted some of my poontang? I'm ready an' waiting."

I looked at her for one of those eternal moments. I thought, what the devil is wrong with me? A gal I'm nuts about flings it at me and I'm too big a coward to accept. I wish I was back home.

Finally, I spoke.

"No, I didn't tell Ernest any such a thing." And as I uttered the fatal words, I was mentally kicking myself with size fifteen boots as I shrank to four inches high. I despised myself for acting like a sissy, but I could not help it.

Irene and her pal laughed scornfully. "Fraidy cat," Irene said derisively and walked on, wriggling her hips. Her companion looked back at me with complete contempt, as if I were some kind of crawling creature. My face felt as if it were inside a roaring furnace, and I was visibly trembling.

I was so unnerved I was actually sick to my stomach. I had to quit playing and go directly to bed. Next day on the train I called myself every kind of chump I

could think of. Then an idea flashed. Since Don Perry and the rest of the gang would not know the truth, why not tell them I had banged my first broad? Then I'd get the reputation anyway. By the time I reached Arkansas City I had my lie ready.

As soon as I saw the fellows, I tried to look both wise and cool. When they asked about my trip, I spouted off about this hot little mama who wouldn't leave me alone.

"Man, I almost had to fight her off," I bragged. "She kept begging me to take her on. She even pulled me in bed and tried to make me get on top of her. She hung around and bothered me all the time I was in Coffeyville."

"What'd you do?" Don asked.

"Well, las' night I broke down an' tapped that thing."

"You mean you actually got a piece?" somebody asked me with awe.

"Of course," I said casually, as if it were a habit with me.

"How was it?"

"Man, it was great!" I rolled my eyes and sighed.

It was just my luck that an older youth of about eighteen who already had a reputation as a cocksman chose to wander up and hear part of the conversation.

"How long did it last?" he asked curiously.

Why in hell did a kibitzer have to show up at this precise moment? I hadn't counted on this kind of question. So I fished around wildly in my mind and hooked what I prayed would be a satisfactory answer.

"Oh, 'bout an hour." I tried to sound matter of fact.

"You mean you screwed this jane for 'bout an hour before you shot off?" he asked significantly.

"More or less," I said, but I realized I didn't sound quite convincing.

He almost ruptured a blood vessel laughing scornfully, and I was wishing he would. Meanwhile I stood looking at him, a silly grin on my face, waiting for some kind of blow to fall.

"You ain't nothing but a bag of wind and you know you's lying," he finally said. "You couldn't last more'n five or maybe ten minutes—an' even that's longer'n most. You might fool these tadpoles," he went on, waving his hand toward the younger boys who by now were laughing just as derisively as they gazed into my flushed and embarrassed face, "but you gotta put down somethin' straighter'n that for an old ace like me. You ain't never had nothin' but ol' Minnie Five Fingers!"

8.

I have no nostalgia for my school days. Generally speaking, they were pretty drab. I was almost fanatically religious, accepting the literal fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible put before us by our pastor. I found no conflict between religion and my sex vocabulary used around other boys, for nobody told me it was a sin to use four-letter words. In fact, our pastor had seemingly charted our course in a sexless sea for he never referred to anything erotic except to occasionally make a snide remark from the pulpit about "running after other men's wives" when some brother was caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. At twelve I was baptized, then I taught Sunday School and was an assistant

B.Y.P.U. superintendent. Oh, I smoked secretly and took an occasional swig of Choc beer, which was almost the standard drink of that region. Apparently, it was brew originating among the Choctaw Indians and it kicked like a happy mule.

I was what the town's parents pointed to as a "good boy." None of them ever heard me cuss and I didn't gamble or steal or get into the kind of mischief usually expected of a teenager. Although I was crazy about jazz and the blues, I neither danced nor dated. For this there was an excellent reason; in girls I desired only the unattainable. Only two interested me. One was a teasin' brown gal, bowlegged but nevertheless very sexy and pretty, named Lillian. She was the girl friend of a stud called Drummy who was four or five years older than I and one of the wildest and toughest youths in that part of the state, so all I dared do was wish. The other was Alline Brown, a lucious lass who went to school in Kansas City and spent her summers at home with her family. But she was dated regularly by DeFrantz Williams, a year ahead of me in school and with a gift of gab none of the rest of us could match. Frustration here, too. In addition I had this growing oral fixation, an activity condemned by everybody I knew.

Of course there were many white chicks who made my tongue hang out, but I wasn't ready to commit suicide. The town's mores prevented saying hello to a white girl in public even though you had been in the same class together since the first grade. Twice in junior and senior high, black lads were beaten up after school by white boys swearing their dusky victims had "insulted" some Caucasian coed. Once in the eighth grade, the principal had to step in and by firm action avert what loomed as a potential gang battle between the handful of black students and a group of honkey youths. I laboriously filed and sharpened a six-inch steel railroad spike which I carried with me until tensions eased. I prepared for violence—which would have been started, as usual, by whites.

With but one or two exceptions, as a group we were tolerated by white kids on campus but away from the school we were customarily treated as if we were invisible. More than once I surprised white high-school couples enthusiastically fornicating at night in secluded areas of both parks; they cowered in fear and guilt until they saw my brown face, then resumed as if they were alone. Once, while delivering handbills, I stepped on a porch and looked through the window at three couples, stripped down to underclothing and drinking. I recognized all of them as students in my classes, but they, too, glanced in my direction, then continued as if they had seen nobody. In the boys' lavatory I would often hear white youths comparing notes and bragging about their conquests, or filling previously used condoms with water to test for leaks with an eye to re-use before discarding.

However, should you by chance see a white girl alone you often became human. One Saturday I ran into an appealing damsel named Hortense I'd been wild about for a couple of years. It was at the drinking fountain in Wilson Park and nobody else was within a block. She smiled and spoke. I was stunned, but recovered quickly. We laughed and talked for at least ten minutes and when we parted, I had to stoop down to touch the moon. Monday I saw her in the hall at school. For the moment forgetting prevailing patterns, I grinned and spoke. She neither changed expression nor opened her mouth. I was again the invisible man.

I had far better luck with jazz than with the janes. The first live band I ever

heard was a white five-piece outfit from Kansas City, the Kuhne-Chaquette Jazz Band, which came to Arkansas City to play at some local celebration. Trombone, C-Melody sax, drums, banjo and accordion comprised this group. Present also were a large string orchestra and a military band, but when the jazz boys cut loose, especially with *Alcoholic Blues*, the crowd came running to dig these exciting and strange new sounds. Shortly afterward I visited my grandfather in Wichita and raved for weeks after hearing W. C. Handy and His Orchestra of Memphis with a woman blues singer. Following the exodus from New Orleans when the cops cleaned up Storyville, a band gigged in Arkansas City for a black dance at the pavilion in Paris Park. I don't know its name but I remember it had two trumpets, trombone, tuba, banjo, piano and drums. The second trumpet was muted and soft, sounding like a sax and playing what ordinarily would have been the clarinet part; the lead horn sizzled and seared. These cats from the Delta had everybody within earshot shouting and shuffling; since we had the dance floor, whites got up and danced on the grass.

One day I came home from school and almost flipped when I found a phonograph dominating the front room. I think it was a Magnola; anyway, it had a turn-around head for Edison and Pathe discs made with a different kind of groove. Lt. Jim Europe, one of the first blacks to record, was back from World War I and making a name for himself with waxings of *St. Louis Blues*, *How Ya Gonna Keep 'Em Down on the Farm*, *Memphis Blues* and *It's a Long Way to Tipperary*. Almost every nickle I could lay hands on went for records.

I got a personal itch to make music when two blues playing brothers near my age came to town. Their instrument was steel guitar; they used the bottom of a closed pocketknife to get low down, whining effects, like Hawaiian guitar but immeasureably dirtier. I talked Dad into sending away to Slingerland for a mail order course in Hawaiian guitar, which included the instrument, intending to rush through the basics so these brothers could teach me to moan and cry on the strings. Unfortunately for me, they moved away just before Lesson No. 2 arrived. I learned how to schmaltz my way poorly through several uninteresting pop tunes but by myself couldn't get the hang of pulling out gully-low blues. Finally I gave it up in disgust and later in Wichita became interested in tenor banjo. Finding one I liked, I traded in my guitar, as a down payment, then was too broke to continue payments and never got it. It ended as a charitable gift to a music store, although I hadn't intended it that way.

But no matter; I could always listen. I was in the tenth grade in 1921, when I heard the fabulous Ma Rainey. She came to town with a carnival, starring in her Georgia Frolics sideshow. Rumor had it that she actually owned the entire carnival and was the wife of the white manager. Could be. Obviously she would have been called out on strikes had she roamed the nation trying to run the works.

Ma Rainey was acknowledged as the greatest blues singer in the world. Opening night of the one-week stand in the crowd around her tent was so black you had to light another match to see if the first had gone out. And, as usual in an impatient and milling crowd, tempers were short.

"Ow! Git off my feets!" I heard somebody shout.

"Put yo' feet in yo' pocket and nobody'll stand on 'em," came the reply. "There's more of you layin' on the ground than there is stickin' up in the air.

Cut you off at the ankles and you's shoot up like a balloon."

"You oughta be the las' person on earth to talk about anybody, the way you looks. If I had your nose fulla nickles, I'd be rich."

"Who you talkin' to?"

"Who? 'Who.' You ain't no owl 'cause your feet sure don't fit no limb."

"I oughta try yo' jaw."

"Can't keep you from tryin' but I bet a fat man I can sho break you of the habit."

"You clowns shut up," another said. "Ev'ry time a bunch of us gits out in public, somebody's gotta cut a hog.* No wonder the white folks don't want us around."

"Don't pay 'em no mind," said still another. "They's jus' woffin."**

Inside the bulging, breathless tent we watched the corny jokes and dancing until, at last, Ma Rainey appeared.

Ma Rainey was a large, mahogany brown woman. You first noticed her necklace. Made of highly polished $5 gold pieces, it glowed brazenly across her mighty bosom under the harsh overhead lights. After becoming adjusted to this fantastic sight, you paid attention to her face. Like the old people said, she was as ugly as home-made sin. But when she opened her mouth and began to sing, she made Mary Pickford seem as nondescript as a scrubwoman. She commanded a big, deep, fat-meat-and-greens voice, rich as pure chocolate, and her words told of common group experiences. It was like everybody shaking out his heart. Way, way low down it was and hurting good.

I remember her first song:

> Trouble in mind, I'm blue
> But I won't be blue always
> The sun's gonna shine
> In my back door some day . . .

She sang others, tension mounting as her lemon-squeezer voice extracted every drop of emotion from each word. One gal jerked to her feet and in a tortured voice rasped, "Great God! Stop her, somebody! I can't stand it no mo'!" We heard her only thickly, as through a dream.

When the show was over, I went out and immediately bought another ticket for a second performance. I scraped together four bits twice that week to go back and hear Ma Rainey, and each time was as thrilling as the first.

If possible, I became even wilder about blues and jazz, so when the *Crisis Magazine* carried an advertisement from the new Black Swan Record Company, first of the Negro firms, seeking distributors, I wrote in and began selling discs. Every month I bought one copy of each new platter and took them from house to house as demonstrators, getting orders for later delivery. I lived from month to month awaiting new waxings by Ethel Waters; when Trixie Smith came on the scene after winning a national blues singing contest, she, too, became a best-seller. I expanded to add Okeh and Paramount; Ma Rainey, Sara Martin,

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* commit a social error

** barking instead of biting; spouting off

Mamie Smith, first to record, Clara Smith and other early singing stars now grooved in black homes all over town. My customers wanted vocal blues; I sold few instrumental numbers. They had to buy from me, for the white music stores would not stock these labels. The only topnotch black stars generally available were Mamie Smith, Fletcher Henderson and Johnny Dunn, who recorded for Columbia.

I sold reords until the 1922 rail strike. The Santa Fe laid off its black hired hands, who then had to hold on to their cash for food and housing. Since the railroad was by far our biggest employer, the community suffered. By now my sales had increased enough for me to begin stocking records; I suffered with the rest of Arkansas City since I had over a hundred brand new records I couldn't move, which to me represented a considerable investment. Today they would be worth a small fortune to collectors, but then they were only a headache.

The rail strike brought other changes. In an attempt to bust the lily-white rail brotherhoods, Dad and brother laborers were offered jobs as locomotive engineers, flagmen and brakesmen—duties which they often performed expertly in a pinch but from which they were officially barred by the trade unions. However, Dad convinced the others to turn down these jobs even though they meant two or three times more pay and a chance to get even with the racist brotherhoods. Dad would not play the bosses' game of putting black against white to the detriment of both, pointing out that eventually both would suffer if blacks scabbed. Instead he went into business for himself.

He opened the Dew Drop Inn, a small cafe in the basement of the Gladstone Hotel downtown. The upper floors were white in this mixed-up burgh but in the basement were two other brownskin businesses, a pool hall and a tailor shop. We didn't go upstairs and whites didn't descend to the basement, which had outside steps leading up directly to the street. Mother and Dad spent most of their waking hours in the Dew Drop Inn and I helped after school. And it was here that I met Eatin' John Horton.

Here's what I personally saw Eatin' John put away at different times:

One whole case (twelve dozen) of eggs
One twelve-pound ham
A dozen loaves of bread
An entire medium-size stalk of bananas
Two one-gallon jugs of water.

You don't believe it? That's how Eatin' John made his living, converting scoffers into true believers. Those who considered such feats impossible would bet him he couldn't, only to lose. By the time I saw him, his reputation had extended from Kansas to Colorado, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Wyoming and Montana and he was finding it increasingly difficult to locate suckers. Most of the time now he merely went from town to town, charging the curious for eating demonstrations. He had turned down lucrative offers from Sells-Floto, Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey and Hagenback and Wallace circuses, who wanted him for a sideshow attraction.

There was an often told story that he had broken these same circuses of the custom of offering all the lemonade you could drink for a dime. In those days

hawkers would stand beside washtubs full of ice-cold pink lemonade crying their specialty. Rarely could anyone consume more than two glasses, even on those broiling days when the mercury stuck at 118 above. These pitchmen, through some secret formula, had universally hit upon a way of making their drink so cold you almost had to chip it with an ice pick.

According to the story, Eatin' John asked, "What's that for?"

"Why, it's your lemonade, of course."

"The hell you say! Pour it back."

Whereupon Eatin' John knelt down beside the tub, tilted it, and drained the contents as the hawker and onlookers stared, eyes popping and mouths gaping.

He was not a tremendously big man, standing around five ten, and I doubt that he weighed much over two hundred. His belly was not large, but he was quite broad. He looked like any ordinary black working man. You wondered how he could eat such tremendous amounts. After consuming these prodigious meals, he would shortly retire and regurgitate. He actually digested little more than a normal man.

When I knew him, he had been hospitalized twice as the aftermath of bets which he won. Once he ate a quantity of Portland Cement which set on his stomach and he had to have an operation. Later he drank carbolic acid and again had to spend a few days in a hospital.

I was in Chicago when Eatin' John died around 1928. I recall reading in the *New York Times* a long feature story about his death. For years I saved it to convince those who had doubted my stories about him. I have yet to meet another who was anywhere near his equal at putting away the groceries.

Two other characters hit town and headquartered at the Dew Drop Inn, Big Skeet and Little Skeet. Big Skeet, the older, was quiet and a pool shark so talented he was rumored to have made the old maestro, Willie Hoppe, all but cry uncle. A real hustler, he traveled all around, separating suckers from their loose loot. But the glamour boy was Little Skeet.

Little Skeet, around 25, looked like a college lad. A professional gambler, he once let me look through a "magician's catalog" from a Chicago firm showing marked cards, loaded dice and all kinds of paraphernalia. He often went to Oklahoma for action, once returning with $5,000, which he asked Dad to hold. Two weeks later he went back with one grand, sent messengers to Dad twice for the rest, and had to borrow train fare back to Arkansas City. Six days later he flashed a big wad of $50 bills. But that's the way it is with gamblers, sauteed pheasant breast today, feather soup tomorrow.

With his smooth line of chatter, women both single and married fell for Little Skeet. To top it off he was a sharp dresser, wearing the first jazz model suit with bell bottom trousers seen in our town. Shortly afterwards a touring company of the Miller and Lyles Broadway musical, *Shuffle Along*, (Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake), played at the Opera House with all the male members sporting this new style and I, too, succumbed.

This was shortly after World War I when Victorian morals started crumbling. Jazz music was the New Thing. Rudolph Valentino was the Great Lover of the silent screen and made women sigh and soil their step-ins. A boy was a "sheik" and a girl was a "sheba." The age of the flapper and bath-tub gin had come upon us.

Gals for the first time wore dresses ending inches above their knees. Although not as short as the mini-skirts of the 1960's, they were far more shocking, for the break with the long skirts of the past was greater. Even as now, parents of that day predicted the wild young generation was going to the dogs. The flappers of 60 years ago, with short skirts and rolled hose, are the grandmothers of today who predict the wild new generation is going to the dogs.

In the early 1920's dresses were so short many girls were afraid to sit; they had to have leaning places. One woman reportedly told a small boy, "That's a pretty tie you have on, son. Wish I had a dress made out of it." Bobbed hair, with puffs concealing ears, was the popular style which gave birth to another joke: "Why do girls wear ear puffs?" "So they'll have something new to show the men."

The young male wasn't slighted:

"Ma, what's a sheik?"

"A sheik, my child, is a guy who has to have the drawbridge raised when he floats down the river on his back."

The jazz model suit was the unofficial uniform of the sheik, lounge lizard, cake eater, jelly bean or drugstore cowboy. The jacket was long and high waisted, flaring out from the bottom of the rib cage down. All buttons were close together two or three inches above the navel. If double-breasted, they were ornamental rather than functional, with the two sides touching and held together by auxiliary buttons in the holes. A vest was vitally important, usually two-toned with long points at the bottom. But it was the bell bottom pants that counted.

In 1966 bell bottoms made a comeback, this time for both sexes. The conservative stylish of the earlier era were content with trousers skintight at the knee then blooming wide over the shoes, but we of the bronze brigade let our imagination run wild. We opened each trouser leg 12 to 14 inches from the bottom and sewed in contrasting cloth in red, orange, yellow or some other vivid color. Often it was accordion pleated. Also there might be a narrow strip or two of cloth running across the insert and fastened with big buttons on both sides. Some added cords and tassles which flapped around as they walked along and a few bought small metal bells which jingled with every step. Top this off with a hat turned up both front and back and a 14-inch cigaret holder and you were a really sharp sheik, bound to attract the attention of the wildest sheba.

There were valid socio-economic reasons for our flashy extreme styles, just as in the 1940's when we went in for the most eye-blasting zoot suits along with Mexicans, Filipinos and members of other repressed minorities. Denied equality by the Establishment, it was a form of visual protest. For that reason I felt emotional kinship with the hippies or free people of the 1960's. In the 1920's our dress was a form of rebellion against the conservative social structure just as later the free people, the flower children and new youth by their nonconformist dress, mod styles, beads and bells rebelled against this same Establishment, which drove us to mass murder in Vietnam and manufactures mental robots in our sick society.

9.

In addition to the revolution in morals, music and dress after World War I, we witnessed another major change in communications. Beginning around 1922,

radio broadcasting hit the scene with literally thousands of stations, some as tiny as five watts, sprouting overnight. Radio magazines flooded the newsstands, most filled with articles on how to make your own receiving sets. I made my first crystal set in 1922, winding my own coils around oatmeal boxes, and sat up night after night wearing headphones and moving a cat's whisker over a small piece of galena searching for the closest station in Wichita some 50 miles away. I had plenty of time since I was still basically a loner.

Although I was old enough to associate at will with other youths my age and spent considerable time with them at night and on weekends, these years of learning how to amuse myself alone had developed strong self-consciousness. Usually quiet and retiring, I had little to say around girls with the result that I was seldom invited to parties. Learning that many adults considered me a "queer kid" and socially "backward" even though I was a "good boy" did not flatter my ego. My inferiority complex mushroomed daily.

Through sheer necessity there had been unusually close relationships with the other three members of the black graduating quartet. A few white kids had been friendly, among them a lad named Robert Bays. He lived on the route from First Ward School to the post office and almost every evening we walked together. Later in both Junior and Senior High he was one of the few I still looked upon with real affection. There had also been the Loenickes, who lived next door to us for several years. First it was Mrs. Loenicke, a chiropractor, who gratuitously worked the kinks out of many childhood complaints. She also had two friendly daughters. When she left, other Loenickes moved in. This was an entire family (they were all of German ancestry, incidentally) with several sons around my age. Rug makers, they built a small shop operated by the family, frequently with me looking on. Often I accompanied them to the regular services of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, although I saw no logical reason for holding services on Saturday instead of Sunday or eating cold food between sundown Friday and sundown Saturday. Nevertheless, I went along, with mine the only black face in the congregation, until the family moved elsewhere when I was 12 or 13.

Oldest of our quartet was Frank Brown, whose father was janitor at the biggest bank in town. Frank also helped out after school and for short periods I filled in. At the very beginning the senior Brown warned me not to pocket cash left "accidentally" on the floor and in tellers' cages. My honesty was being tested, he said, since supposedly "all niggers steal." Rarely a day passed when I did not gather up paper money, silver and postage stamps left under wastebaskets, in dark corners and on counters, and place it in a pile where it would be immediately noticed the following morning. Although it did not dent the overall stereotype, undoubtedly the Browns and I disappointed some rabid racists.

At the age of 17 I had reached my full upward growth of 6 feet 1 and weighed 190 pounds. Even today I could hardly be classed as a midget; in 1922-23 when average height and weight were far less than now, I was big enough, as the other boys told me, "to go bear huntin' with your fists." And yet, with generous physical attributes, in a day when all-American guards in college football sometimes weighed no more than 150, I took no part in high-school athletics. The same fate befell another of the quartet, Courtland West, who was an inch or two shorter and at least 25 pounds heavier, most of it solid flesh obtained through hard work on his old man's farm. We were simply the wrong color. The coaches

romanced white boys with far less physical equipment but looked through us. We were black and therefore invisible.

The fourth was Napoleon Berry. In the annual inter-class track and field meet he decided on his own to enter the quarter mile run and with no formal training, finished a close third behind the two regulars on the track team. Obviously he had natural ability and with coaching might have become not only the best in school but possibly a state champion. I suspect the track coach felt greatly relieved when Napoleon, in his only race, did not beat the regulars.

Thus with no possibility of even trying out for school athletic teams, we engaged only in sandlot activities, playing football and baseball among ourselves. When somebody produced a set of boxing gloves we staged our own tournaments at night under street corner lights. Not only were we forced into a narrow world socially but even in sports—except at those times when black boy and white boy fought each other through anger and hate.

The sole opportunity for organized athletics came the winter before I graduated, and then on a strictly racial basis. Taking over as city Y.M.C.A. secretary was a new man brought from another town. Seeing no program for black youth, he organized a Hi-Y group among us and, noting we had the talent, a basketball team. He got the high-school gym where we could practice at night. I was named manager and substitute center behind Fred Higgins, who was my height but much lighter in weight, and greyhound fast. Frankly, he was good enough to have played center on the varsity had he been white. There was also a top-notch forward named Leroy Preston, also capable enough for the varsity. The rest of us were merely competent. But through long hours of practice, we whipped together a respectable team and scheduled a game with a black five of similar age from Wichita.

I felt somewhat below par day before the game but nevertheless intended to work out in the final practice that night. I was ready to go to the gym when Mother took one look at my face and kept me at home. I had a big fat case of mumps. To my extreme disgust, I was too sick even to attend the game. However, the contest was an important success although my team lost, mainly through inexperience. It was a great morale booster, not only for the players but for the town's black population, most of whom had never before had any reason to set foot inside the high-school gym. Later that year we went to the tournament in Wichita where we lost immediately at the soda fountains. Most of the boys had never before tasted an ice cream soda or a chocolate malt; they so gorged themselves on these unaccustomed gastronomic delights they could hardly move around on the court.

Shortly after the tournament, the secretary was fired by the Y.M.C.A. board for "spending too much time with them nigger kids. We didn't hire you for that."

There had been only one black youth prior to our graduation to participate in extracurricular activities. He was DeFrantz Williams, who finished in 1922. His forensic ability was so outstanding the teaching staff was forced to take notice. Not only was he by far the best debater in school, he represented Arkansas City in oratorical contests and won a number of honors, including a college scholarship, and was allowed to act in the class play. Later he became a practicing attorney in Chicago.

As for me, I was aware of no special talent. Although I had no incentive to make high grades, I was looked upon as a "bright boy." Fact is, I spent little time studying anything except algebra and geometry. Since I did not like mathematics, I tried to get it out of the way as quickly as possible and made my highest grades in this field. I had known for some time that I would go to college. Mother had finished the 10th grade—unique for a black girl of her generation in Arkansas City. Dad was determined that I get the formal education denied him. And I had almost a phobia to get away from most of the whites I knew.

There had not been too much trouble with individual white kids the past few years. Because of my size they meticulously avoided any one-on-one confrontation. But when together, a group of three or more, they'd make loud cracks about "niggers," "coons," "darkies," "Rastus," "Sambo" or "Snowball." One funny clown might tell the others, "I think it's gonna rain; I see a black cloud." But I learned to keep a poker face and act as if I were deaf. I found through experience that if I socked one, the rest would gang up on me, and they were itching for the opportunity. I also learned that if you ignored them, they would tire of the baiting and clam up. Fighting man to man was the last thing they wanted. And yet they had the audacity to chant:

Two on one
That's nigger fun.

Although I could not participate, I avidly followed the high-school athletic teams, often being the only black person present at contests. But I was cured of that, too.

It happened one night during a basketball game as I sat in the midst of white spectators, as usual the only Duskyamerican, intently following the action. Suddenly I found myself shoved hard to the floor. Looking up in surprised disbelief, I saw two young drunks staring belligerently down. I was conscious of giggles and a woman's voice asking, "Why'd you do that? He wasn't bothering you." One of the duo replied, "Why the hell not? Look WHAT he is!" I sprang up fighting mad. Immediately several men grabbed me and asked me to cool down. Nobody seized the drunken pair and, except for the lone woman, nobody protested their action. I was not released until the pair staggered away and got lost in the crowd. Humiliated and disgusted, I left immediately and never again attended a game.

School officials were not above displaying raw racism. In the 10th grade, water pistols became such a schoolwide nuisance that Principal Funk (that really was his name) one day personally visited all classrooms to confiscate these toys. I was in science class and, like the rest of the kids, I had one. Using a wicker basket, the principal stopped before each of us and asked for his pistol. He had collected a dozen or more when he came to me. Like the others, I handed mine over. Immediately the head of the school picked it up, aimed at my face and squeezed the trigger. The class roared, of course, as water dripped from my cheeks. I was the only black student in this class—and I was the only person he humiliated. I never forgave this sadistic act of a white educator in authority making me the laughingstock of white kids.

The curriculum, of course, was designed to uphold white supremacy. In the

eighth grade I studied a course called "American Beginnings in Europe." We were taught history and cultural backgrounds of the Spanish, Portuguese, English, French, Dutch, German and Italian peoples—every European group whose patterns had any demonstrable effect on American development. This indoctrination continued in Senior High. As for my black ancestors, nothing. Seemingly, they existed like animals until slave traders brought a boatload to Jamestown in 1619, and afterwards they were meek bondsmen until Lincoln freed them in the Civil War. Thus, by a calculated omission, mixed public schools promoted vicious racism to maintain white supremacy.

And the students learned well these lessons in Chauvinism. They were indoctrinated to feel superior not only to blacks but to Oriental peoples as well.

One day in my senior year the instructor in a current history class explained the new Oriental Exclusion Act barring Japanese from becoming American citizens.

"What we should do," he commented, "is tell them we are different and can never assimilate each other's culture. Tell them we realize they are just as good as we are, and we're not barring them because we don't think they're our equals—"

"Don't tell 'em that," interrupted one of the football stars. "I know I'm better'n any Jap or Chink."

"Me, too," chorused others.

The instructor smiled. "I didn't say they really *are* as good as us, I said we ought to tell them that to make them *feel* good."

The rest of the class was satisfied; the instructor had upheld their belief in white supremacy. But I was disturbed. There were no Orientals in town, so how could my pale peers know they were "better" than Chinese or Japanese? Did they presume white skin automatically made them superior to all darker people? I had read somewhere that gunpowder was invented by the Chinese; I knew nothing else other than they were "cruel and mysterious," a conclusion reached by reading Sax Rohmer's *Fu Manchu* terror novels. Of the Japanese I knew even less. However, there was one bright spot. This white chauvinism immediately made me feel kinship with Asians; if not brothers, we were at least cousins.

Even older blacks were looked down upon by my young white classmates. Will Logan and his wife, originally from Mississippi, were close friends of my parents. Of course I was taught to call him Mr. Logan. He worked for a bank downtown and more than once I saw white boys from school kick him or rub his balding head "for good luck." Sometimes they jokingly called him, "Will, you old son of a bitch." I also knew he was a tremendous natural fighter, with extraordinarily long arms, and great speed, and had seen him in action against other black men. But to the white boys he merely grinned and answered "Yessuh" and "Nosuh" no matter what liberties they took. Knowing he would not have tolerated such familiarity from me or any of our quartet, I resented this double standard of accepting Uncle Tom status around whites but demanding dignity and respect from us. (However, years later my attitude was softened—but not liquidated—after friends wrote me Will died, surprising the town by leaving an estate of around a quarter of a million. Seems that while he grinned and played the buffoon for Mr. Charlie, he carefully went through his boss's wastebasket nightly, rescued notations made by the banker about the condition of certain stocks and bonds, and himself bought and sold through outside agencies on the tips he

found. I rejoiced in learning he had put one over on Whitey—but to me that would not be enough compensation for the loss of human dignity.)

Each of us had to work out his own technique for survival in the white world. Will Logan had been conditioned in the vile racist jungle of Mississippi, but it was rotten enough in the more liberal atmosphere of Arkansas City. We were not only outnumbered but THEY made and administered the law. Determining when to keep quiet and when to stand up and fight back had been as important as anything taught in the classroom. I was learning how to quickly search their faces for one friend among all those pale foes for there might come a time when my very life would depend on the accuracy of split-second judgment. And I knew also I could be pushed to the point where I would die before yielding another inch.

What embittered me most was flagrant white hypocrisy. Virtually all aspects of daily life were geared to maintaining white supremacy. And yet, teachers, newspapers and speakers solemnly preached the doctrine that All Men Are Created Equal as they proudly pointed toward the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. I had come to learn the hard way that they meant only white men. I, and that tenth of the nation like me, did not have equality. Obviously the Establishment intended to maintain the status quo until eternity. But why did they lie? Why did they not come out and say flatly what was in their hearts: equality was not for black people? Why did they teach about democracy, then shove me back when I sought my just share? Why is hypocrisy a strong national trait of American whites?

And yet, rotten as the system was, I realized I fared better than my black brothers only a few miles south down in Oklahoma. There segregation at that time was legal. Some towns, like Blackwell, would not allow souls to remain overnight. I'd heard of hamlets with billboards just outside city limits reading, "Nigger, read and run. If you can't read, run anyway." My town, the jumping-off place for statutory Jim Crow, was where placards went up on trains headed south, announcing, "This Coach for Colored Only." Dad had told me about Brazos Bottoms in Texas where blacks must have passes signed by Mr. Charlie to come to town. He also spoke of a prosperous Negro farmer who bought the first automobile in his county in Texas. Envious whites immediately passed a law barring him from all public thoroughfares. The resourceful farmer, who owned several thousand acres, cleared a road just inside his fence and on Sundays took his family driving on his own land.

All Dixie was hard on blacks. When one boy left to spend the summer in Birmingham, several friends refused to write, saying they didn't even want their mail going to Alabama. Some adults said if they owned a plantation in Georgia and one in hell, they'd sell the land in Georgia and live in hell. As for honkies around home, Dad said some of them who tried to act uppity were "so po' they couldn't po' no mo'."

Despite the hard core of vicious young white supremacists in my school, I do not now believe most of my classmates harbored personal animosity toward me or my black peers. Caught in the web of color prejudice spun by the systems, they were simply indifferent. Under other mores, some might have become lifelong friends. In later years after my first two books of poetry were published, I heard from a few by mail and they revealed a warmth I would not have believed

existed. The real pity is that during those high-school years, like many whites even today, they followed blindly the inhuman trail of racism.

At graduation in 1923 as I sat with my class, I knew I had been "allowed" to attend school with whites only because state law prohibited separate schools in towns that size unless blacks themselves requested them. A few years earlier, Dad had taken the lead in defeating a move by two jobless Negro former teachers to start a separate school. He knew the fallacy of "separate but equal" education; in a tiny town like ours it would have been both a cruel travesty and a tragedy. So I had struggled through to commencement. I had gone to school with some of these boys and girls sitting on the platform with me for 12 years, yet I was on speaking terms with only three or four. But now at last it was over. I was going to Wichita and to college.

I had no idea what I would study in college nor how I would make a living later. At that time, there were no black judges, Congressmen or mayors except in a few all-black villages such as Boley, Oklahoma, and Mound Bayou, Mississippi. Several cities, like Chicago and New York, boasted aldermen. For a black educator to teach in a preponderantly white public school or college was unthinkable. Many plants and industries barred us from the most menial of jobs. Organized labor was lily-white. Pro sports, such as baseball, had an unshakeable color bar. Tex Rickard, the mogul of boxing, would allow none of us to fight for the heavyweight title. Except as blackface clowns, musicians, and a few jobs singing and dancing, the entertainment world was out of our reach. Financial institutions refused to recognize our existence. Custom and the courts enforced racism: civil rights laws and court decisions banning discrimination were scarce.

Sound black business enterprises were quite limited in number. Law, medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, the ministry and teaching offered by far the best opportunities for the pitifully small minority who made it through college. Graduate engineers, architects and scientists usually ended up teaching in some black school, working at service jobs, or, if they were lucky, in the Post Office. This situation served as the basis for one of my early poems:

GILES JOHNSON, PH.D.
Giles Johnson
had four college degrees
knew the whyfore of this
the wherefore of that
could orate in Latin
or cuss in Greek
and, having learned such things
he died of starvation
because he wouldn't teach
and he couldn't porter.

Nevertheless, I was going to college. And if eventually I had to make my living as a flunky, I would be an educated flunky living some place other than Arkansas City.

ESSAYS

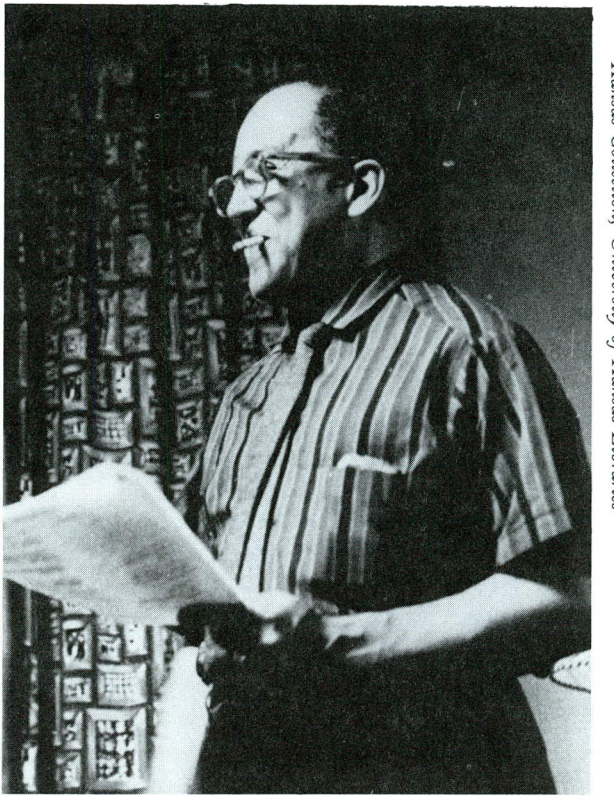
Richard Barksdale

HUGHES AND THE LAWRENCE YEARS— NO CRYSTAL STAIR BUT THE DREAM WAS THERE

According to Arnold Rampersad, the author of the first volume of what will probably be the most definitive biography to date on Langston Hughes,[1] Afro-America's foremost author experienced nothing but sorrow and woe as a youth in Lawrence, Kansas. Most of his 13 years in that highly segregated city were years of social isolation, economic deprivation, and what Rampersad chooses to call "childhood hurt." Undoubtedly, a major reason for the "childhood hurt" was the poet's separation from his parents. The parents had parted ways when Langston was a baby; and, after an abortive attempt at a reconciliation in Mexico City in 1907, his father remained in Toluca, Mexico, and his mother, thoroughly frustrated by adverse circumstances, deposited the troubled and lonely six-year-older with his 75-year-old grandmother in Lawrence.

In the author's own memoirs, Mary Sampson Patterson Leary Langston emerges as a woman worn down with sorrow and poverty. All of the disillusionment and pain suffered by Blacks during the post-Reconstruction years weighed especially heavily on her. The death of her first husband, Lewis Sheridan Leary, in John Brown's attack on Harpers Ferry in 1859 left her in poverty-stricken widowhood until she married Charles Langston in 1867. By this time, the war was over; 4 million slaves had been freed, but the newly married couple encountered a bitter racism wherever they went. This was particularly true of Lawrence where they finally settled in 1872. During the 1850s when John Brown joined his sons at Osawatomie, Kansas, to fight against Kansan proslavers, Lawrence was a racially liberal haven for free Blacks and a center for anti-slavery activity. Twenty years later it had become the tightly segregated center for race-baiting conservatives. After Charles Langston's death in 1892, Mary Langston's already precarious economic plight worsened. One incident exacerbating her sense of loneliness and deprivation was the death of her son, Henry, in an industrial accident in 1897. An attempt to obtain compensation from the mill owners had negative results. Thus, by the time her grandson came to live with her in 1904, Mary Langston's sorrow, loneliness, and poverty had become almost overwhelming. And, as her famous grandson recalled, she carefully husbanded her bitter memories and whatever material substance she had. So they often dined on meager diets of dandelion greens, cereals or cheap canned goods and, only by desperate maneuvers, escaped foreclosure of their residence at 732 Alabama Street. And the grandson also recalled how his grandmother

spent long evenings quietly rocking away her memories, saying little, and leaving a lonely youth to his fantasies and to reading whatever books he was able to borrow from the local library.



Kansas Collection, University of Kansas Libraries

Langston Hughes

But Langston Hughes also recalled that the years with his grandmother were not completely empty years. She told him stories about the heroes of Black America—about John Brown and Lewis Leary, about John Mercer Langston, his distinguished great uncle, and about Frederick Douglass. And, on some occasions, she wrapped him in the bullet-riddled scarf which Leary had worn during the ill-fated Harpers Ferry raid and which had been returned to her as a blood-soaked memento of her first husband. Undoubtedly, the memory of John Brown's exploits was sharpened for the youthful Langston when, in August 1910, he accompanied his grandmother to Osawatomie to attend the dedication of the John Brown Memorial Battlefield. It was a memorable occasion. Ex-President Theodore Roosevelt gave the principal address, and Mary Langston, as the last surviving widow of the Harpers Ferry force, occupied a seat of honor on the speaker's platform.

Some reflections of this aspect of his Lawrence experiences are seen in the

poetry that Hughes wrote early in his career. "Aunt Sue's Stories," for example, in a sort of oblique way, refers to the stories told to him by his grandmother.

Aunt Sue has a head full of stories,
Aunt Sue has a whole heart full of stories
Summer nights on the front porch
Aunt Sue cuddles a brown-faced child to her bosom
And tells him stories.

It can also be argued that his grandmother's tales of Black heroism were the source of the social and political idealism found in some of Hughes' dream poetry of the 1930s and 1940s. For at the same time that the poet was venting his anger against American racism in "Christ in Alabama," "Goodbye Christ," and "A New Song," the poet was also writing his dream poems in which he expressed his optimism about America fulfilling its dreams about its democratic future. He wrote:

Hold fast to dreams,
For if dreams die,
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

And in 1936 in his Haitian Opera, *Troubled Island*, he wrote:

I dream a world where all
Will know sweet freedom's way,
Where greed no longer saps the soul
Nor avarice blights our day.

A world I dream where black or white,
Whatever race you be
Will share the bounties of the earth
And every man is free.

His most forceful expressions of his dream poetry are found in "Let America be America Again" and in "Freedom's Plough." "Let America be America Again" was published in 1938 in *A New Song*, a volume of poems which Hughes published under Communist auspices. Ironically, the poem contains the poet's most patriotic statement.

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above . . .

The dream idealism is repeated in "Freedom's Plough," a wartime declamatory piece written for Paul Muni and featured on a major radio program in New York in 1943. The poet wrote:

America is a dream.
The poet says it was promises
The people say it is promises—that
  will come true.

America!
Land created in common,
Dream nourished in common,
Keep your hand on the plough,
Hold on!

It should be noted that these dream poems were written during periods of great stress in America—during a time of racial violence augmented by a severe

Kansas Collection, University of Kansas Libraries

Pinckney School, Lawrence, KS, ca. 1900. A school Langston Hughes attended.

economic depression and during World War II when the Free World faced the marching hordes of fascism. So one can deduce that the dream poems were not inspired by contemporary events nor by the atmosphere of the times. And one may further deduce the possibility that in the dream poems we have the precious emotional residue of Hughes' Lawrence years—a time when a youth listened to his grandmother's stories about the earlier dreams and hopes of Black heroes of yesteryear. For the dream poems do reflect what Frederick Douglass and John Mercer Langston desired and what John Brown and Sheridan Leary fought for, and what Mary Langston remembered. So, although the Lawrence years were, for the poet, filled with loneliness, poverty, and "childhood hurt," it is more than probable that the poet distilled his "dreamkeeper" poems from memories rooted in "Aunt Sue's Stories." This conclusion not only confirms the Wordsworthian assumption that "The child is father to the man" but that, in many instances, a young man's dreams and hopes are tethered to a child's fancies and imaginings.

[1] Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*. Vol. I. Oxford Univ. Press (New York), 1986.

Gerald Early

Some Notes Toward the Genealogy of Afro-American Life: A Conversation with Audrey Jones

. . . and in their presence we sense the full, moony glory of womanhood in all its mystery—maid, matron, and matriarch.

—Ralph Ellison's "As the Spirit Moves Mahalia"

I had decided I was through turning tricks as a call girl. But I had also decided I wasn't going to be anybody's damn maid.

—Billie Holiday's *God Bless the Child*

It was around the fall semester of my junior year at the University of Pennsylvania—the year, then, is 1973—that I began the strange ritual of, each afternoon, in fair weather or foul, walking past the home of Paul Robeson. The great actor, singer, linguist, athlete, and political radical lived his final days with his sister in complete obscurity in a West Philadelphia rowhouse, within walking distance of Penn's campus. I wanted more than anything else to talk to him, not precisely because he had been famous, one of the most eminent black persons on the planet; or because he was, at that time, a sick old man, as giant a recluse as he had ever been a remarkable artist and intellectual. I thought he would have something to say about the vast mysterious black American past that looms up like some great ambiguous shadow before the eyes of every young black person. There is always the variant of that question that, when young, one wishes to ask virtually every older black person one meets: What did you do in the War for black humanity? I thought, in short, that Robeson could teach me something about how to live as a black person. It was for that reason, more than any other, that I wanted to speak to him. I wanted to know, simply enough, what he had lost and gained and what sort of reckoning up might be expected of me in the long run? Robeson was for me the brilliant and arcane fool on the hill. So, it was, even then, apparent to me that to be black and American was to be engaged in a quest for wholeness, for healing, for soldering the loose, rag-tag ends of one's heritage, one's legacy, one's spiritual genealogy, if you will.

One rainy afternoon, as I walked by the house, a huge elderly man was standing at the front window, gazing out quite aimlessly. I am sure that the man was Robeson himself. I stopped in the rain and stared at him and he, after a moment, looked at me. He waved at me and smiled wanly and I waved back and

smiled in return. There, on a warm, wet afternoon, the old great black man and the young anonymous black boy, the past and present of some enormous autobiography, met briefly. He quietly, like a slow fade without score, shut the blinds and disappeared and I walked away, drenched, thinking that I needn't walk this way again. I had learned the story of that discourse. And the story is discontent and its culture and the craving for kindred acknowledgement.

To be black is to be part of a culture of discontent. Think of the black American's highest cultural achievement: his music, jazz, blues, gospel, spirituals, early rock and roll, all virtuosic expressions of discontent. But within the wide matrices of this discontent, rather than true existential despair, is the yearning for real intimacy and the memory of how that intimacy had been so cruelly denied. Thus, the Afro-American's music, like the life that it reflects, never attains dread and alienation. Rather, it demands always the act or the hope of reconciliation, of the possibility of intimacy in a chaotic world.

Photograph by Roadell Hickman

Gerald Early and Audrey Jones

There is a general disposition among black folk that has probably existed since the nineteenth century but has become coherent only in the last thirty or so years. It is a predilection based on the desire, fired by the need for the true and the real, to learn the black American past, to get the story right, to retrieve the text from the ashes (which, for instance, Professor Henry Louis Gates almost literally did in his rediscovery of the 19th century black literary classic, *Our Nig*). Alex

Haley's mid-1970s work, *Roots*, is perhaps the most famous and most celebrated literary investigation and expression of this black quest for historical consciousness and reconstructed story but it is far from being the only one. Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident*, Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Flight to Canada*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* are among several titles of black novels that try to reclaim the black past, works fired by discontent but wishing to express real reconciliation in the end. Even non-fiction books such as Amiri Baraka's *Blues People* and Albert Murray's *Stomping the Blues* seem to be trying to do the same thing as actual revisionist cultural histories. Other books from the recent two-volume life of nineteenth century black piano prodigy Blind Tom by Geneva H. Southall to Dempsey Travis's *An Autobiography of Black Jazz* seem part of this quest for a usable and reconciled black past.

In the last few years, the story of the black woman, the buried text of the most buried life, has begun to emerge, this discontent that ultimately seeks the intimacy of sisterhood, marriage, family. The works of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison (particularly *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye*), Paule Marshall, Gayle Jones, and Gloria Naylor have virtually made the black woman's past a sub-theme in highbrow American popular culture and Dorothy Sterling's and Paula Giddings' non-fiction works have further unearthed a deeply submerged plot.

No book about black women has struck me with the force of D. Antoinette Handy's *The International Sweethearts of Rhythm*, the study of a swing band organized in the late 1930s and originally made up of poor and orphaned black girls in Mississippi. It is not a great book or even a very good one, in one sense; but it tells a truly amazing story about a homely band-turned-professional that virtually no one nowadays ever knew existed because scarcely no standard history of jazz even mentions it. It made me wonder what would happen to black American history if such black women as Lovie Austin, Valaida Snow, Ida Cox, and Mamie Smith are completely forgotten. Would blacks be able to reconcile themselves to themselves if they are unable to reconcile to an entire past? Can all the usable stories be saved? In this regard, Ralph Ellison's monumental novel, *Invisible Man*, seems to say that it is the duty of young blacks to listen and write the stories of the elders (the Truebloods, the Homer Barbees, the Mary Rambos, the Peetie Wheatstraws, and all the others) in order to create reconciliation, to humanize discontent, to add pieces to the puzzle of black mythmaking. Ellison's book is a story about black storytelling, its techniques and its power. But how many usable stories of the black past have been lost already and forever? And from those that are saved, can the spaces between maid and matron, between call girl and mother (the typical occupational limitations for a black woman) be filled in?. Will the storytelling of black women shift the terms of black woman mythmaking?

So, in the end, meeting Audrey Jones was not simply a pleasure but a kind of holistic instruction. It was a warm autumn night in the fall of 1986 and she was in the midst of moving. Her home was in utter disarray, boxes scattered about, many items missing. Broken and old musical instruments were on the floor and empty spaces were lined with bric-a-brac. On one shelf she had pictures, almost daguerreotypes of two white girls. It was the typical home of an old black woman: a collection of memories that resisted to the very end becoming an unseemly

rubbish on the sidewalk. She was born and raised on Water Street in Kansas City, Kansas. Her father was a hod carrier and her mother a seamstress, both from Oklahoma, a state whose importance in Afro-American cultural history has yet to be fully documented. In 1920, she ran away from home at the age of fifteen (as so many other black women have done: from Memphis Minnie to Billie Holiday to my grandmother, the latter escaping from the dark side of Mobile, Alabama, and a future of cotton picking). Audrey Jones joined the Jazz Babies and later performed with Stewart's Darktown Strutters. She lived in St. Louis ("a young man took me there," she said), worked for Carnegie Steel in Chicago (one of the first thirteen women to do so) handling hot steel ingots, and finally settled in Lawrence, Kansas, in 1944, becoming the cook for the Gamma Phi Beta house, a job from which she retired more than 20 years later. She is a quite tall woman, with a lively manner, a mop of curly white hair, surprisingly smooth skin, and a penchant to play and sing for anyone who cares to listen. We sat facing each other, in her two remaining kitchen chairs, no table between, television droning very quietly in the background, and talked for more than two hours. This is her narrative:

"My brother was very musical. I had a brother taught me everything. And he was—well, they call them homosexual now—we called them sissies; he was eight years older than me. And he taught me how to play, sing, dance, everything. I suppose he was trying to make me be like he wanted to be. You see what I mean?

"And he taught me everything. I mean, me and him used to play duets on the piano. He'd play up here and I'd play the bass. And he'd play the other parts. I never knew how he could remember all of that. And I had three other brothers. Big old he-men. Yeah, you know, they would say 'Get out!' 'Get out of the way!'

"Oh, did I *want* to be in show business! I run off when I was a kid.

"Around 1920. I run off and went with the show. And then I came back and Mama had to put me under guardeens. I was crazy. And you know, if she wasn't as strict as she was, I'd be dead by now. I used to drink plenty of whisky. Fact is, I used to sell whisky for a while. But they was hard on that dope mess back then. You know 'Minnie the Moocher':(sings) 'She was a low-down hoochie choocher. He took her down to Chinatown and showed her how to kick the gong around. Hidehidehideho!' They was doing it then. But I didn't know nothing about it. I am lucky I didn't get in that dope mess. Old as I am I like to drink. I'll drink vodka right now. But I never did get into dope. Fast as I was I would've been dead. I wasn't no better than none of the rest of 'em. I wasn't any better. I was right in there. You know, I used to see 'em gambling and they was throwing the money out and they, these musicians, they put this little white stuff in their handkerchieves and sniff up. I didn't know nothing. I just wanted to be in show business. I'm eighty years old now. Wasn't I lucky?

"When I went into show business, I went into show business dancin'. I wasn't doing anything else. I was in the chorus. I was one of the taller women. I played comedienne. I used to black up with the cork and do all that. I was in the show 'The First Darktown Strutters' and I never will forget. We crossed our legs and we looked slick: (sings) 'I'll be down there to meet you in a taxi, honey; I wanta be ready at half past eight. Oh, honey, don't be late; I wanta be there when the band starts playin'.

"Stepin Fetchit was in the show. He always was slow and shuffled along, you know. I wasn't nothing but a kid then, and he was a young man.

"I was a young kid when I left. And then I came back home and my Mama put me under guardeens because I wasn't but fifteen when I left. I didn't get too far 'cause Mama always pulled me back. 'I don't know how you got that way, none of my people never done it. And you ain't got no business doing it neither.'

"I went back to do shows two, three times. I went with 'The Jazz Babies' and 'Darktown Strutters.' And then I went with Louis Minstrel Show. Mama thought it was terrible, wearing short dresses and tights. See, we had to do the show in tights. We had tights and things and was so buckled down in front we couldn't breath 'cause they didn't want you to shake. Mama thought that was awful, but nevertheless we wore it.

"After I left show business I went to Chicago and during this period, I was the first one in the family got let on, got hired, at the Carnegie Illinois Mill.

"I was pushing them wheelbarrows on the track. And I was pulling them big ingots out. We was way up in this thing and the men would be in the cranes, on them cranes. And this big old red hot steel be coming from somewhere. I *worked* there. The men was on them cranes. And the women was up in there and all we had to do was pull them levers down. And then them big old ingots would come, them big old red hot ingots.

"I worked there 'bout a year. Then, I come back to Kansas City, Kansas. That's my home. 'Cause I was born and raised in Kansas City. And then, after a while, I come here to Lawrence.

"My brother Floyd was goin' with a girl that lived here in Lawrence and she worked at the Elks Club. And so she say, 'Audrey, can you cook?' and I say, 'Yeah, I can cook.' And she say, 'Come on.' And I cooked at the Elks Club for four years. Then I left the Elks Club and I went with Gamma Phi Beta house. And I cooked there for more than sixteen years. Bought this house from it. And then I decided to retire. I cooked for Bob Hall and all these big people here. I really did. And then I decided to retire. I did good. And then I tried to retire. And I said, 'I'm gonna stop.' And they called me over to Sigma Nu. And they said 'to help out.' I went over there to help out and I got stuck for four years. Feeding these big old jocks, you know. So I was up there, I forget how long.

"I play the ukulele and I play the piano. I always played the piano. And now I go up here to the senior citizens' place and I play there and in the nursing home. I played at this church when they had this here—what is it?—colored people's heritage thing, you see. And they remembered me to come up and play for our heritage thing. You know, our heritage is blues and gospel. And I can play all of those things. They asked me to come up there and I did go. 'St. Louis Blues,' and gospel and all that. I can play all those. Sing 'em, too: (sings) 'St. Louis woman, she wears a diamond ring.' Now I can play all of them and gospel and all of that: (sings) 'He touched me. Yes, Jesus touched me.'

"I just *love* music and everything. Give me that [a guitar], I can play you a piece on that. I ain't got the piano here.

" 'Who's sorry now? Who's sorry now? Whose heart is aching for breaking each vow? Who's sad and blue? Baby, who's crying too? Just like I cried over you. Right to the end, just like a friend, I tried to warn you somehow. You had your way, Baby, now you must pay. And I'm glad that you're sorry now.'

"The church calls that 'devil's music.' But I don't pay no attention to church. All them people in the church they bigger devils than you. They still think blues is the devil's music. You make a whole lot of money with the devil's music and you think if I say, 'I'll buy a bus for the church,' they ain't gonna say they ain't gonna take it." I never did get to New York. Mama thought this show business was a bad thing. That was the reason I didn't get nowhere. Mama pulled me back. Mama and them pulled me back. They was always pulling. . . . Come home. . . . Come home. I didn't have nobody to push me. Now, when I was a kid—eight years old—Mama started to give me, tried to give me these music lessons. And this old lady—I never will forget her, Phyllis Perkins—would give 'em to me. And she'd try to give me music lessons. And she'd come, and try, too. And the only thing I liked about it was that I could get off from school early. After she give me the music lesson, she'd play something for Mama. I look at her and I play it. I play what she was playing for Mama. They didn't know how to push a child like me back in them days. I just played what I could hear. Me, I just play everything by ear.

"Colored people in the days I was growing up didn't do so bad. In fact, we didn't pay much attention to segregation and things like that. We didn't pay much heed. You see, the thing of it is, in Kansas City, Kansas, they had all-colored schools, all colored students and everything. They had all colored

Photograph by Roadell Hickman

Audrey Jones

teachers, too. And we knowed we was colored and didn't think any thing of that. We had our places and stuff like that. I can't remember nothing that we paid much attention to people's race or to white people or thinking they was doing any wrong to us or nothing. You just went your way and they went theirs.

"I didn't go any farther than the eighth grade. We went to the eighth grade then. And after the eighth you went to some high school. Not everybody went to high school, some did. So I didn't get to go to school any more or nothing like that after the eighth grade.

"But I don't feel too bad about that. Some people, if they can't look in a book and read it, they don't know a damn thing. It takes mother wit and common sense. I done lived this long, so I musta learned something. I can do more than a lot of these educated people can.

"I like the music of today. I like music period. I don't dislike today's music. The only thing I dislike in the music of today, some of it I can't hear. I don't know the words. It's too fast. But what I can understand, I love. And I love the beat. Now I can be laying there in bed, old as I am, and they can be playing and my toe will be moving.

"And back in my day was blues. Louis Armstrong and them. Cab Calloway way back in there. Hidehidehidehideho. My little boy . . . one time we was next door to where my Mama lived and we had him say 'Hidehidehide Ha! Bump! Bump! Bump! Bump!' Mama say, 'Ya'll stop that. Quit singing like that.' Mama was hollering across the way, 'Stop that kid from singing like that.'

"You know, this is my real voice. I say I talk just like my Mama. But people always say I sound just like Moms Mabley. Moms Mabley, she made up her voice but this is my real voice. And you know I listen to Moms Mabley once and they was right. I sound just as much as Moms Mabley as anything. I laughed to die when I found that out. I laughed at myself.

"I enjoyed my life. You know, I drink plenty of whisky. I still like whisky. And I likes to travel but I don't do that as much as I used to. I'm lucky that I got around.

"You really taping all this? Why you so interested in hearing me talk? It ain't what you used to was, it's what you now am. That's what counts."

John Edgar Tidwell

THE ART OF TALL TALE IN THE SLIM GREER POEMS

A well-known story goes something like this: "One time a fellow was walking across the river road when he seen a hat laying in the road, so he gave it a kick and it was on a man's head. He asked him if he needed help and he said, 'I guess not; I'm on horseback.' "[1] While the story's brevity and hyperbole deliberately understate the horseman's predicament, they heighten his bravado, self-reliance, and courage to endure hardship. Such qualities place this improbable story at the heart of the tall tale tradition.

Among folklorists, collectors of tales, and even literary critics, some agreement exists that the "lie" is an exacting art form, which means that it has its own structural integrity and coherence. While some writers determine the quality of the achievement by the size of the tale's exaggeration, others, including Sterling A. Brown, lament that the size of the exaggeration supplants the more important "fixin's," much to the detriment of the tradition.[2] The truer artistic expression, in other words, is found in the many stylistic devices employed by the speaker, including understatement, the occasional truthful element, its logic and structure (that is, its development from plausibility to climax), and the crucial pause at the point of highest suspense (intended to induce a listener to ask a question, therefore, revealing his gullibility).[3]

By a rather shrewd adaptation of these characteristics, Brown exploits the literary potential of an essentially oral art form. In his Slim Greer poems, where the most obvious examples of this interpolation occur, Brown experiments with the "lie" shared casually at the barbershop, at the "jook-joint," or on the street corner, where superb storytellers transform prosaic experience into performances celebrating their uncommon valor and heroic exploits. The vernacular speech and sense of "style" of these raconteurs, however, contain a potential for something greater than entertainment: the "lie," as an exacting art form, communicates a way of life and a way by which people make philosophic sense of an often hostile world. Although the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, and James Weldon Johnson is suffused with the extraordinary experiences and language of Black folk, none equals Brown's studied integration of traditional Euro-American and Black American folk forms. The success Brown enjoyed results from his recognition of what lies between inchoate experience and finished art—in other words, *technique*. By examining Brown's use of techniques from American tall tale, we can discover the distinctive manner in which his poetry celebrates the heroic character of Black folk life and sets forth a Black vernacular vision.

The aesthetic view Brown brings to the Slim Greer poems is shaped by different but complementary academic and actual experiences. The New Eng-

land-Yankee-Puritan traditions of Williams College (1918-1922, Phi Beta Kappa, BA) and Harvard University (1922-1923, MA) coalesce in Brown to become a form of intellectual equipment enabling him to develop a critical appreciation for literatures as diverse as *The Song of Roland* and the new American Poetry. In several interviews, Brown has pointed specifically to the importance of his study under distinguished faculty, such as Harvard's George Lyman Kittredge, and of his discovery of seminal studies, including Louis Untermeyer's anthologies of American and British literature. While it is clear these sources are quite significant, calculating their influence is, in Ellison's metaphor, a little like commanding a smoky genie to retreat orderly back into its traditional bottle. Inasmuch as academic training is only capable of providing theory, we must turn to the many raconteurs from whom he gained actual experience as well as informal instruction into the art of Black folk storytelling.

One such instance occurred in 1926-1928 when, as professor of English at Lincoln University (Missouri) and teacher of French in its high school, Brown frequented a "socially-undesirable" section near campus called "The Foot." It is here, according to a retrospective view given by Nathaniel Sweets, a student of Brown's at the time, that Brown's association with popular characters like "Preacher," Duke Diggs, and Slim Greer actually took place.[4] Although little is known of the actual Greer, a sometimes hotel waiter and railroad porter, Brown has clearly stated Slim's importance as raconteur. In one anecdote, Brown acknowledges playfully something of this indebtedness: "[Slim] says I owe him some money because I shouldn't have taken his name."[5]

Although anecdotal and even a bit facetious, Brown's reminiscence is hardly an invitation to confuse the poem's Slim Greer for a transcription of the actual one. For the achievement of Brown rests not on duplicating but adapting the qualities of actual persons he met and places he'd seen. At best, Brown's characterization of Slim is a composite of many superb storytellers he encountered from Virginia to Missouri to Tennessee. What each of these master liars imparted was a profound revelation into the nature of narrative art and social satire; therefore, an examination of the poems' artifice, not their specific biographic references, is in order.

When the poem "Slim Greer" opens with "Listen to the tale / Of Ole Slim Greer . . . Talkinges' guy / An' biggest liar, / With always a new lie / On the fire," the reader is invited to share in a "lie."[6] But the "lie" is hardly credible with such exploits as "passing" for white ("An' he no lighter / than a dark midnight"), falling in love with an Arkansas white woman, and escaping the territory just ahead of the lynch mob that discovered in his mournful playing of the Blues his actual racial identity. One of the immediate questions posed by the poem concerns the form and function of the "lie." Is the purpose of the lie to deceive, as in something dishonest or lacking in truth? Is it supposed to entertain? Or is the lie a form of deception in which listeners or audience are tricked into understanding, awareness, or even self-knowledge?

At some level, perhaps all these functions can be demonstrated in the poem, although dishonesty and entertainment are the two least desirable readings. When S. P. Fullinwider observes that Slim is an incipient "con man," brought to maturity by the 1960s Black Aestheticians,[7] his argument, in effect, centers on Slim's supposed basic dishonesty. But the image of Slim as a 1960s urban hustler,

for whom "money talks and bullshit walks" and for whom jive talk and the ability to "rap" define the self, is hardly consistent with the Southern and essentially rural folk storytellers Brown knew. Instead of rapid fire rap, Slim tells his story "in a long-drawled / Careless tone, / As solemn as a Baptist / Parson's moan" (p. 77). It is the familiar tall tale technique of the deadpan manner.

The success of a humorous story, Mark Twain writes in "How to Tell a Story," depends on the speaker's bland, innocent face and the restraint he exercises in not laughing at his own story.[8] The reason, of course, lies in the self-conscious, purposeful way in which the listener/reader is deceived into awareness of the story's humor. In the oral tradition, the extent to which the storyteller conceals his knowledge of anything remotely funny becomes a litmus test of his artistry.

In "Slim Greer," part of the remarkable achievement of the poem owes to the successful adaptation of Twain's principle. The purposeful use of tall tale techniques begins the process of artfully deceiving the reader by first creating a performative environment, such as a barbershop or a "jook joint," and by making the customers become a hypostatized audience. In the interplay between speaker and audience, then, the act of narration becomes a performance much like the ones given by the actual Slim reer and other master yarnspinners.

Slim's mode of narration, then, as "long-drawled, careless tone" not only "conceals" his knowledge of something funny, but builds dramatically, rhythmically towards climax. At the snapper ending, the audience no doubt would question the veracity of the tale, as is the custom. It is here that Brown employs the familiar technique of feigning hurt surprise at any question of the tale's truth: Slim sells out "With lightnin' speed," and proclaims to his listeners: "Hope I may die, sir— / Yes, indeed. . . ." Even though he "swears" to the truth of his story, his "listeners" would perhaps see the tale as sheer entertainment, and might be moved to question its truth as a ploy to egg the speaker on. But because we know that Slim is darker "Than a dark midnight," the narrator's and therefore Brown's point is not entertainment. For the story's purpose lies in its "deception," which is intended to laugh us into an awareness of the ludicrousness of racial segregation.

The other poems in the series—"Slim Hears 'The Call,' " "Slim in Atlanta," "Slim in Hell," and "Slim Lands a Job?"—contain many of these same features. For example, "Slim Lands a Job?" reenacts a form of exaggeration called "the impossibility that is the actuality of the poem." The unemployed Slim wanders down to Arkansas into Big Pete's Cafe seeking a job waiting tables. Big Pete is described in Herculean terms as "a six foot / Hard-boiled man / Wid a forty-four dungeon / In his han'." In a deliberate play on the "slowness" of Pete's current waiter, the employee is described this way: "A noise rung out / In a rush a man / Wid a tray on his head / An' one on each han / Wid de silver in his mouf / An' de soup plates in his vest / Pullin' / A red wagon / Wid all de rest." The self-consciously contrived play on "slowness," in one regard, induces pure, gut-bucket laughter. But part of the contrivance accomplished by using tall tale techniques makes the story a poignant discussion of labor conditions. How slow the "slow coon" and "wuthless lazy waiter" is is not the point of the poem. But the *actual* conditions of his employment are. The poem thus creates a dramatic situation which uses humor as a way of leveling a scathing social commentary.

"Slim in Atlanta," which develops a similar theme, begins on the note of exaggeration by introducing a Georgia law forbidding "all de niggers / From laughin' outdoors." Using the technique of appealing to the audience, the speaker states: "Hope to Gawd I may die / If I ain't speakin' truth / Make de niggers do deir laughin' / In a telefoam booth." The poem is then developed in terms of the overpowering comedic impact this scene has on the peripatetic Slim. His sight of all these Black folk in misery because they're forced to hold in their laughter sends him into convulsions of laughter, requiring him to break through the suffering crowd of Blacks waiting their turn in line at the telephone booth.

Although the stupidity of segregation is the point of the poem, it is not conveyed in such bald terms. Similarly, "Slim Hears 'The Call,' " the least funny poem in the series, does not warrant the criticism that it surrenders to bald social statement. Critics have largely seen "Slim Hears 'The Call' " as sardonic because it is nearly Swiftian in its descent from a wry amusement at the folly of racism to a more vocal expression of outrage at religious hypocrisy. Understandably, the rather blatant warning that concludes the poem has incited many of these views: "An' I says to all de Bishops, / What is hearin' my song— / Ef de cap fits yo, brother, / Put it on" (p. 88). Jean Wagner was moved to observe in this poem a "greater bitterness and more chilling cynicism" that could only have been generated by the Marxist ideology that had an appeal for Black intellectuals after the Crash of 1929.[9] But although the harsher tone of this poem differs from that of the others, the use of tall tale techniques rescues it from the pessimistic mire to which Wagner condemns it. The ultimate effect of "Slim Hears 'The Call' " derives largely from its performance milieu and rhetorical embellishment. "Down at the barbershop / Slim had the floor" announces place and performative environment. As in the other poems, much of the subsequent exaggeration must be seen in the context of verbal jousting with an hypostatized audience. The nearly down and out Slim is "So ragged, I make a jaybird / About to moult, / Look like he got on gloves / An' a overcoat." Weakened physically and financially, Slim hears the Lord's "call" to come save lost souls, an idea nurtured by seeing a former card-playing buddy whose similar conversion has netted "a house / Like de State Capitol" and a "wife / As purty as sin, / An' his secketary, twict / As purty again' (p. 85). Clearly, the poem is scathing in its criticism of religious hypocrisy. But rhetorical embellishment, not Slim's "conversion," is the center of the poem. "An' I swear, as sure / As my name's Slim Greer, / He repohted to de school / Sixteen dollars clear" is another example of the familiar technique of appealing to the audience to believe in the veracity of the tale. Its use tones down the abusive criticism implied in the poem.

Like "Slim Hears 'The Call,' " "Slim in Hell" raises a question about the bitterness of its tone. In this poem, which seems to adapt the "Colored Man in Heaven" folktale and the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, the peripatetic Slim is sent by Saint Peter on one last journey before he's admitted to heaven's pearly gates. His mission is to fly to Hell to observe and report on the devil's latest tricks. Slim's use of the silvery wings to cavort like Lindy "in the Spirit / Of St. Louis Blues" is an object lesson in itself. But the incredible sights and sounds of Hell set forth the satirical point. Bawdy houses and cabarets remind Slim of New Orleans; roulette wheels and fighting people remind him of Rampart Street and Beale Street; and white devils using pitch forks to throw Black ones into the

furnace remind him of Vicksburg, Little Rock, Jackson, Waco, and Rome, coaxing him to say, "Dis makes / Me think of home." At this climactic moment, the devil changes into a "cracker" with a sheriff's star. Slim hauls out with unprecedented speed to report back to St. Peter: "De place was Dixie / Dat I took for Hell." Such naivete is not accorded ample preparation to enter the pearly gates and Slim is sent packing away.

In each of these poems, tall tale techniques point up a kind of absurdity. In its focus and kind, this absurdity differs from the existentialist philosophy wherein man is seen as isolated, cast out in an alien world and destined to return to the nothingness from which he started. For Brown's view of humankind affirms a belief in a potentially orderly social structure in which individual dignity and heroism are recognized and even rewarded. His is a world acknowledging not only self-worth and rugged individualism but the foibles and defeats of humankind too. The absurdity exposed in the poems is defined in terms of the whole cast of Jim Crow laws, which impinge upon the assertion of individual rights.

In his review of Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*, Ralph Ellison wrote: "Myrdal sees Negro culture and personality simply as the product of a 'social pathology.' "[10] The thrust of Brown's use of techniques from American tall tale is to disprove what Myrdal and so many other social scientists regarded as "the Negro problem." Instead of social aberration, a healthy Black humanity grew and took shape despite the efforts of Jim Crow laws to subjugate or depress Blacks. Blacks were not beaten down by segregation, in other words; they grew in spite of and perhaps because of it. In either case, Blacks grew. By borrowing from the store of tall tale techniques, Brown, unlike his Black contemporaries, understood one of the basic assumptions of American tall tale: its impulse toward democracy and egalitarianism.

Contained in the "lie" is a belief that one man is as good as the next and perhaps a whole lot better. In the oral tradition, one's ability to spin yarns held the potential for attracting respect from others, thereby creating a leveling effect in society. Brown recreates the illusion of leveling by transposing democratic ideals of the Old West to meet the needs of Black folk and their purpose for storytelling. The *process* Brown uses can be explained in terms of Levine's observation that "marginal" groups often tell jokes containing racial stereotypes about themselves as means for diffusing hurt and anger by stripping it naked and exposing it to scrutiny.[11] These motives in Brown's Slim Greer poems function as a need to get at truth, which means exposing the debilitating Jim Crow practices and holding them up as ridiculous. When the devil in "Slim in Hell" is changed into a "cracker" sheriff, the burden of this poem is not on some cynicism caused by racial oppression, but on its satire. Although diffusing the hurt and turning it into laughter do very little to alter actual social conditions, something even more remarkable is actually accomplished. Inverting the horrific into the comic becomes a celebration of the heroic character that sustains Black man- and womanhood and prevents degeneration into self-hate and other socio-pathic forms.

What separates Brown's social consciousness from others is his manner of expression and how technique promotes function. In these poems, the essential function of tall tale form approximates what James Cox has observed of *Roughing It*. That is to say, Twain "pursues the possibilities of the tall tale, evoking

humorous skepticism in relation to event. The skepticism is the essential act of form in *Roughing It.*"[12] The form and function of the lie ultimately lead the reader to see not a lie that deceives but one that reveals instead the truth.

Exposure as a motive of Brown's humor should not lead to the conclusion he's merely a debunker of racial stereotype. Although not inappropriate, this view is only narrowly applicable. An iconoclastic bent certainly runs throughout Brown's poetry, pointing up the racial myopia through which Black people have been viewed. But undue attention given to the exposure of social problems sacrifices the more compelling concern of the art of the poem. For the singular achievement of the Slim Greer poems is the manner in which social protest is turned into an act of art.

The techniques of tall tale at once dramatize and define the motives of the form in the Slim Greer poems. The lie in this "lie" is not intended to deceive or trick the listener but to expose the listener to the truth about Black social conditions. As James Cox explains, "In a world of lies, the tall tale is the only true lie because it does not mask as the truth but moves the listener to ask what the truth is."[13] The question of truth ultimately turns on exposing the absurd notions of those who would obscure or prevent the attainment of the democratic and egalitarian promise implied in the Constitution. When individual rights are assaulted, some form of response is required. And often it means rising above an ensnaring mire. In this regard, the religious hypocrisy in "Slim Hears 'The Call' " and the Jim Crow laws of "Slim in Atlanta" are equally "absurd" because each denies the completion of selfhood. It is not cynicism but exposure of those things preventing attainment of selfhood and individual worth that motivates these poems.

The use of vernacular language, casually inserted details that build up to the frantic impossibility, the bland self-righteous veracity that yielded to hurt surprise at any expression of doubt, the snapper climax or exposure at the end—these reveal for Brown character, a way of speech, and a way of life.[14] Because these qualities rendered by Brown as an act of art ran counter to the usual claptrap of stereotypes, a different view of Blacks emerged, one that was subversive. By astute adaptation, the techniques of tall tale transformed this experience into a liberating vision of art.

NOTES

[1] In Roger Welsch, *Shingling the Fog and Other Plains Lies* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972) 50. A variation of this "lie," as an example of bravado and bravery in folk tales, is quoted by Sterling A. Brown, "In the American Grain," *Vassar Alumnae Magazine*, 36.3 (1951):6.

[2] Brown 6.

[3] In addition to Brown and Welsch, see Gerald Thomas, *The Tall Tale and Philippe D'Alcripe* (St. John's, Newfoundland: Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1977); and Richard Dorson, *Jonathan Draws the Long Bow* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946).

[4] Nathaniel A. Sweets, "Prof. Brown at Lincoln Univ. The Roaring Twen-

tics," *Sterling A. Brown: A UMUM Tribute*, ed. Black History Museum Committee (Philadelphia: Black History Museum UMUM Publishers, 1982) 47 and 48. See also W. Sherman Savage, *The History of Lincoln University* (Jefferson City: Lincoln University, 1939) 179-228; and Raymond Wolters, *The New Negro on Campus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975) 192-229.

[5] Quoted by Joanne Gabbin, *Sterling A. Brown: Building a Black Aesthetic Tradition* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985) 136.

[6] The source for "Slim Greer" and the other poems in the series is Sterling A. Brown, *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown* (New York: Harper/Colophon Books, 1983) 77-92. The original 1980 edition contains textual errors and omissions.

[7] *The Mind and Mood of Black America* (Homewood, Ill.: The Dorsey Press, 1969) 215-16.

[8] *The Complete Essays of Mark Twain*, ed. Charles Neider (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963) 156.

[9] *Black Poets of the United States* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973) 493.

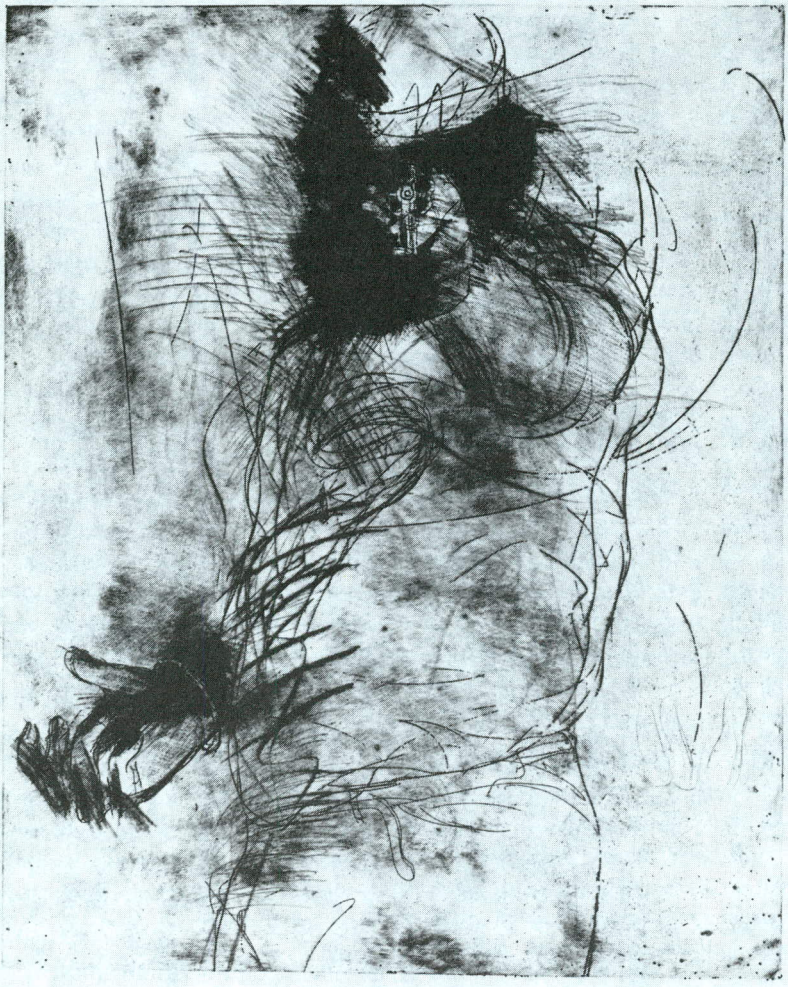
[10] *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964) 316.

[11] *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 336.

[12] *Mark Twain: The Fate of Humor* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966) 96.

[13] Cox 103.

[14] Brown, "In the American Grain" 6.



REVIEWS

Gerald Early

A Review-Essay of *Good Morning Blues: The Autobiography of Count Basie*

Good Morning Blues: The Autobiography of Count Basie as told to Albert Murray (New York: Random House, 1985) 399 pp. with index.

I. This Night, These Eyes

I think I was around 13 years old when I went through a momentary fascination with Count Basie or with the Count Basie Orchestra. I am never quite sure, when I have looked back on this, whether I was attracted to the man himself or to his orchestra. I can safely say that at that age I was not particularly attracted to his music. I had heard my uncles play Basie's records on the phonograph and was quite fond of the Neal Hefti tune "Lil Darling" and the original version of "One O'Clock Jump" but the rest of Basie's repertoire did not interest me overly much. Even then I had a great deal of respect for Basie's music, in part, I suppose, because I knew of no black people who did not revere Basie in a way. And so I did too. Men in the barbershops used to argue over who was the best bandleader: Ellington, Basie, Gerald Wilson, Lionel Hampton, Cab Calloway, or some others. And always we young boys had to bow to the superior knowledge of the old heads: we frequently had no idea about whom they were talking. "You young boys don't know shit about no music except that Rock and Roll you hear on the radio. Rock and Roll ain't new. Cats was playing that shit thirty years ago," and so with such statements as that we were effectively put in our place. But somehow by the age of 13 I had a tremendous desire to see the Basie orchestra live and to hear that band play a number entitled "The Night Has a Thousand Eyes." For some reason I had fallen madly in love with that tune after hearing John Coltrane's quartet play it on an album that my sister owned. Coltrane himself did not do much for me then, but I thought the song was extraordinary, even the title seemed marvelous. And I had gotten it into my head, in some totally inexplicable, weird way, that I wanted to hear the Basie band do the song on the stage.

At that time, Philadelphia, the city where I was raised, had a theater that was a considerably lesser version than New York's Apollo. It was called the Uptown and it was a major stopping place for a good many R and B artists on what was called the chit'ling circuit. Marvin Gaye, the Supremes, the Temptations, James Brown, the Shirelles, the Drifters, Ben E. King, Solomon Burke, Otis Redding, Carla and Rufus Thomas, Aretha Franklin, Sam and Dave, James and Bobby

Purify, the Jive Five, Dee Clark, Little Willie John, Art and Aaron Neville, Shep and the Limelights and a score of other famous and minor soul acts graced the Uptown's stage "for ten, big exciting days," as the d.j.s would say, during the fifties and sixties. I had learned about the Apollo theater in Harlem around the time I developed my obsession with Count Basie and "The Night Has a Thousand Eyes" and I learned that Basie made an annual pilgrimage to that "sepia Mecca," as it was called in *Jet* magazine. But Basie had never appeared at the Uptown theater. I remember asking my mother about this, about why Basie never appeared at the Uptown, and she looked at me as if I had gone slightly mad:

"Boy, are you crazy?" she said. "The Uptown theater can't hold no Count Basie band."

This remark, I discovered, had nothing to do with the size of the place, which was cavernous. It was a big, rundown show place in the middle of a huge, sprawling slum that went on for blocks and blocks as if one were walking the streets of the wild side of eternity. My mother meant that the Uptown, no more shabby in truth than the Apollo, could not contain the myth of Basie, the power of Basie. And when I went, on occasion, to the Uptown during my thirteenth year to see shows and I would sometimes look at the walls, the ceiling, the floor, the cracked leatherette seats, the place would seem so much like some Xanadu, some glitterdome gone in the teeth, I figured that my mother was right after all. Harlem and the Apollo had history and the magic of New York even if the Apollo was simply another "raggedy-ass joint," even if Harlem was simply row upon row of cut-up tenements and teeming projects. It was a place, a series of places—the Apollo, Harlem, New York—where black people wanted to be. The Uptown and Philadelphia were simply ugly places—a nigger theater in a ghetto where no one, except the people who lived there, would ever be caught. And even they could find no reason to want to be there.

When I finally saw the Basie band in person a few years ago in St. Louis at the Fox theater, a grandly refurbished glitterdome of epic proportions, it was as though I had waited too long, as if I was actually too late really to see anything. Basie was not even physically capable of leading the band. He came out on a little motor scooter, was helped to the piano bench, played with the band for a few tunes, never soloed, then got back on the scooter and rode offstage while the band played without him. Basie was no longer the rotund man who wore the yachtsman's cap, the man whose picture I saw on the albums that I used to finger in record stores when I was thirteen, absolutely bewildered by the stars he played with: Sammy Davis, Sarah Vaughan, Frank Sinatra, and Tony Bennett. He was, at the Fox on that night, from my vantage point, just a little old man who seemed very sick and weak. And the band itself did not sound legendary. It sounded like Woody Herman's band or the K.U. concert band or any good, competent college band filled with good, competent college-educated players performing good, sprightly arrangements. It seemed the ultimate sin had been committed: the Basie band was simply an imitation of itself, a kind of clockwork banality as it rattled off tune after tune in an effortless, faceless pastiche. It sounded exactly like the Tonight Show band, a band that could have been a Las Vegas lounge act. And, of course, the band did not play "The Night Has a Thousand Eyes," which relieved me a great deal. As someone told me later, that song was never in Basie's

book.

God, how I wish that Basie, when he was great, had played the Uptown. How I wish he had played the Uptown when I was thirteen. It was blasted, dilapidated rooms like that which were the true home for Bill Basie and his music; and it was just such a room that a weak, sick Bill Basie should have played at the end.

II. The Mighty Burner and the Giants of Jazz

The death of Count Basie was announced by the media and received by the public unlike the death of virtually any other American jazzman with the possible exceptions of Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and most recently, Benny Goodman. And even with these latter three, who had, of course, achieved a status of respectability as artists and marketability as name commodities that matched Basie's (otherwise their deaths would not have been noticed at all or would have been discussed only because of the tainted scent of some scandal), even here, there is a difference.

With Duke Ellington, for instance, there is always this unease in American critical and academic circles (largely resulting from the Pulitzer Prize Committee's refusal to grant him that award in music back in the early seventies) about his importance as a composer in a musical form that many feel to be so dubious. It is true that Ellington gave a concert at the Nixon White House on the occasion of his 70th birthday and that Yale University established a fellowship in his honor in 1972. Yet, for many, he remained always and only a jazz musician who, in the end, to some ears, such as those of Soviet poet Yevgeny Yeutushenko, sounded "a bit old-fashioned." Perhaps this critical anxiety about Ellington occurred because, for some, jazz and the art of composition seem almost to be contradictions in terms.

Basie does not present that problem since he never took himself seriously as a composer, and although he arranged many things in his head, probably never wrote a single composition down on staff paper in his entire life. It is Basie's unschooled-ness, his lack of interest in creating concertoes, masses, musicals, and ballets—the highbrow musical enterprises of Ellington—which I think makes him so much easier to embrace for the musical establishment. Basie wound up being considered a musical genius of sorts, ironically, not despite the modesty of his talents but rather because of it. He was not a brilliant composer; he was not a brilliant arranger; he was not a brilliant pianist (although he was, stylistically, a very important and intriguing one). Ellington, at various points in his career, could lay claim to being all three. And it is perhaps the very grandeur of Ellington's jazz genius, the sweep that may at times border on the mannered and the pretentious, that finally makes Ellington such a difficult artist for the American mind to grasp. Ellington's genius has gotten in the way of the recognition of his genius or I might say the assumptions of his genius have gotten in the way of an understanding of what his genius assumed. Even the tunes from Ellington's early years, works such as "East St. Louis Toodle-00," "Creole Love Call," "The Jeep is Jumpin," and "Ko-Ko" (Charlie Parker's "ko-ko" was a bit of related-unrelated musical revisionism) are all dense pieces that Ellington tended to make parodic or arcane during the course of his career, although they

never ceased to be listenable. Basie, on the other hand, was so much like the music he played, or at least so much like people thought his music was: the mighty burning of the unassuming.

Jazz historian Stanley Dance was probably right when he wrote that in effect Basie was a source of influence while Ellington was a source of inspiration. Ellington was even an inspiration for Basie himself. In *The World of Count Basie*, the great bandleader says the following about Ellington:

> My biggest thrill as a listener came one night back in, I think, it was, 1951.
>
> The so-called progressive jazz was going big then, and here comes Duke Ellington on opening night at Birdland. He had just revamped his band, and no one knew just what he'd have. We all dropped in to catch him—and what we heard! What a thrill that was!
>
> The Duke was swinging. All this "progressive" talk, and the Duke played the old swing. He scared a lot of people that night. It was just wonderful. Of course, the Duke has always had the greatest band at all times. There's never been another band for me, year in and year out.

In his autobiography, Basie devises the rhetorical strategy of comparing Ellington to Joe Louis, not only the highest compliment that a person of Basie's generation could pay to another black person, but also an indication that Basie felt that Ellington's achievement as an artist was comparable to Louis's as an athlete: they both met and defeated white supremacy on its own turf:

> He was just glorious. I loved him so much. I used to get a kick out of being near him. Just like I also used to get so much of a kick every time I'd get a chance to be next to and talk to another champion, one by the name of Joe Louis. Standing next to him, you felt so big. Just to sit down by Duke did me a world of good.

Louis Armstrong was surely the most beloved of any American musician, black or white, in the history of white popular taste in America. Yet, in recent years, even before his death in 1971, the Armstrong image of mugging, grinning, and singing pop songs and coon tunes like "Snowball" and "Sleepy Time Down South" had become increasingly distasteful to blacks and a source of concern to many thoughtful whites. Did the whites love Armstrong for his undeniably powerful musicality or because he was a one-man revival of ministrelsy without blackface? What did they think they were watching when they saw the old black man in his final years singing "Hello Dolly" and "C'est Si Bon" on television talk shows? Could his genius be contained only by having it entrapped in a halo of intolerable nostalgia, of degrading sentiment about darkies on the southern campground? The cool imperturbable Basie is not and does not present an image problem, although Basie possessed no more political consciousness than Armstrong, and some might say after reading the autobiography that he, in fact, possessed less political awareness than Armstrong. No one can recall Basie

making statements against Governor Faubus of Arkansas during the school integration days at Little Rock's Central High in the 1950s. Armstrong did. Here are a few examples, culled from the autobiography, of what I mean about Basie and politics:

> Truthfully, I really didn't know anything about all those things Marcus Garvey was into. But of course everybody in Harlem knew about him because his people used to be in those parades. But my main thing in those days was show business and stumbling in and out of these joints, digging music, and trying to cop another gig.
>
> As for going down into the Deep South for the first time, I've been asked about that many times, and some reporters have written up what *they* thought it *must* have been like, but truthfully, I didn't actually think about Jim Crow and things like that much. (Emphasis Basie)

I do not mean to imply here that either Basie or Armstrong were Uncle Toms, although the latter was perceived by the black public to be pretty much just that. The case about politics and the black artist cannot be so easily stated and so easily dismissed. Basie never aspired to live in an integrated world. Many blacks of the 1920s and the 1930s did not, especially blacks who were not middle class. Therefore, they were not bothered by segregation very much at all. Basie says, for instance, in the autobiography, that he rarely ventured beyond a ten-block area while in Kansas City, those ten blocks being the black ghetto of the city where the music was happening. He said that he never once set foot in downtown Kansas City and, in fact, had no idea how the rest of the city looked. He did not venture into downtown Kansas City not because he *could* not go there; he simply did not *want* to go there. Also, I don't think Basie ever wanted his blackness to be used by liberal, left-wing whites for a cause. I think this is certainly suggested in the second quotation above when Basie speaks about Jim Crow. He never wanted to be presented as a down-and-out, victimized black man.

But, more important in explaining the fact that Basie got away with being non-political while Armstrong did not, is that neither Basie's presence nor his music conjured up images of the American past that seemed to present blackness as a dangerously ambiguous condition or state of mind—which, in effect, is what Armstrong did. In part, this is because Basie was never self-conscious about himself or the implications of his self-mythology as Armstrong was. Also, one supposes that somehow Kansas City, where Basie cut his musical teeth as a young man, is a good deal less ambiguous, less foreign, less self-conscious in providing people with a sense of place (and a sense of unthreatening modernity) than New Orleans, the place where Armstrong developed his talent. The one city in the entire American landscape that remains irresistibly and frighteningly alien to the dominant, protestant American sense of self is New Orleans. Basie made matters less complicated by being a transplanted midwesterner and so the mighty burning of the unassuming was freed from bad politics and suspect myth.

Benny Goodman's presence in the history of jazz as a major innovator has always been viewed with suspicion, contempt, anger, dismay, or some combination of the four by most blacks. As LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) wrote in *Blues*

People, his famous study of Afro-American music:

> By the thirties quite a few white bands had mastered the swing idiom of big-band jazz with varying degrees of authenticity. One of the most successful of these bands, the Benny Goodman orchestra, even began to buy arrangements from Negro arrangers so that it would have more of an authentic tone. The arranger became one of the most important men in big-band jazz, demonstrating how far jazz had gotten from earlier Afro-American musical tradition. (Fletcher Henderson, however, was paid only $37.50 per arrangement by Goodman before Goodman actually hired him as the band's chief arranger.)

Goodman's presence is to jazz what Elvis Presley's is to 1950s Rock and Roll, a sign of oppression and cultural theft, at least to some; or a sign that the art of black folk can only be legitimized by whites who copy it. This distorted view has power inasmuch as, like any distortion, it reveals a very important truth. But the relationship between black American artists and white audiences and white patrons is surely more complex than most people think. Consider quotation from Jones above. First of all, black big-band jazz of the 1920s and 1930s had become an arranger's music. Henderson had been arranging pieces for his own band for years; so had Ellington, Cab Calloway, Bennie Moten, Andy Kirk, Louis Armstrong and nearly every other black performer working with a big band used written arrangements, so this was not a new feature introduced into Afro-American music by "trained" whites. True, blacks did use a lot of head arrangements as well (musicians just making up riffs on the spot and tossing together an arrangement from memory) but it is a mistake to think that a large number of professional black musicians of this era could not read or write music or that black jazz is more authentic or less inhibited by white cultural standards, as it were, because head arrangements were sometimes used. Second, Jones implies that Henderson was down-and-out and was being used by Goodman. Henderson was still running his own band when Goodman first asked him to write arrangements. And Henderson's band, over the years, was a respected and commercially successful one. Moreover, Jones fails to note the significance of the Goodman band hiring a black, at *standard wages*, to be an arranger.

It is a strange fact of American culture that while it is true that whites made Benny Goodman an artistic and commercial success, they also made Count Basie a success in the same way. Basie's band could have wound up like Erskine Hawkins's or the Savoy Sultans' or Alphonso Trent's or the other good black bands who played for black audiences almost exclusively. Long before Michael Jackson and Prince, black artists had crossover audiences: Fats Waller, Art Tatum, Billie Holiday, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Bessie Smith just to name a few. As jazz historian James Lincoln Collier has pointed out ("The Faking of Jazz," *The New Republic*, November 18, 1985): jazz has always had a strong and sympathetic white audience willing to support black artists. In fact, if it had not been for the support of this white audience and several white patrons, black jazz would never have been recorded or have developed as rapidly as it did. Besides, it is always difficult to tell who is copying whom: Glenn Miller's hit recording of Erskine Hawkins's "Tuxedo Junction" is an obvious case of a white

artist "covering" a black tune for a white audience in order to make it more acceptable and to make money. But Goodman's band was in full flower before Basie left the Reno Club in Kansas City to become a big name. In fact, Basie was first introduced in the east as the band discovered by Benny Goodman (a point that Basie mildly resents in his autobiography). And it was Basie who borrowed Goodman's arrangements for one of his performances when he was in need of music and not the other way around. But the feeling of unease is there.

The presence of whites such as Goodman in jazz and his enormous success and fame, achieved in playing what was in essence a black music, has become a discomfort for some whites and a point of outrage for most blacks. Was Goodman's success purely on the basis of his artistry or did the existence of American Apartheid in the 1930s and 1940s necessitate that black swing music,

Joseph J. Pennell Collection, Kansas Collection, University of Kansas Libraries

Paul Evans, Junction City, KS, 1923

growing ever more popular with whites, be co-opted by a white male presence? Does the presence of whites deny the authenticity of Afro-American music? Can whites even play it? Basie does not present dilemmas of this sort for the American public. His blackness, for better or worse, makes him the real thing, the uncrowned king of swing, for both whites and blacks. In short, Basie's death could be greeted in the manner that it was largely because Basie's life and music was so unproblematical. "Mighty burning" is authentic non-ambiguity.

Basie's death was seen as the loss of a cherished institution or a cherished tradition. It is always a bit disconcerting and dislocating for any artist who has reached that status to die because it almost always means that he has lived too long and has virtually been embalmed for a number of years before his death. This was not particularly true with Basie, or at least not true before his major heart attack in 1976 and the other health problems that began to plague him in the late 1970s. In the seventies until that point, Basie was recording very fine music on Pablo, jazz impresario Norman Granz's latest label; these recordings featured small groups with Zoot Sims and Sweets Harry Edison, the big band, jam sessions with an assortment of past and present Basie men, duets with Oscar Peterson, and accompaniment for Ella Fitzgerald. But certainly from the late seventies until his death in 1984, Basie's life as any kind of artist was over. He was simply physically unable to lead the band anymore. And even the extraordinary stream of albums in the seventies did little more than consolidate his gains, rearticulate his artistic creed. Basie as a true force in contemporary jazz saw his end when Joe Williams left his 1950s band. But the rearticulation of the seventies was quite necessary to assure his position as a cherished tradition, as a cherished institution.

I am forced to wonder if Basie would have ever written an autobiography, ever bothered to try to collect the scattered materials of his memory and life to finish one if his capabilities as a musician had not been diminished to the point where reflection became not only the greater part of valor but the greater part of being alive, so that the band itself had begun to recede in importance. Basie was always an extremely reticent man and so the publication of his book, to me and many other jazz fans, came as something of a shock. Bill Basie talked for 400 pages? Incredible! I don't think he would have ever felt the need to do the autobiographical project if the band had still been able to speak for him. He simply would have continued talking about doing an autobiography, would have continued talking about doing a project that required talking about himself as if this talking about the act of talking about was a sort of game.

"You were always moving on to the next gig," Basie writes near the end of his book, and one cannot help but think that Basie realized a sort of existential absurdity in this. Perhaps he was tired of moving on to the next gig. Perhaps the next place was just like the last one. Maybe the book was a way, at last, of keeping still for a moment. Maybe Basie wrote his autobiography because he was weary of the Basie who was simply moving on to gig after gig. Finally, after Basie became ill, what else was there to think about but other things, not one's work or one's sex life, but one's self in relation to some meaning beyond work and sex, straddling the difficulties of testimony and confession. The passages of one's life are truly the stages of one's faith.

Or maybe Basie really wanted to write an autobiography because he wanted to

free himself from his band; for his greatness, the very fixture and diction of his stature as an artist, was tied to a corporate entity: Count Basie's Orchestra, the Basie band, Sixteen Men Swinging. There was a d.j. in Philadelphia back in the 1960s named Sonny Hopson who called himself the Mighty Burner. After having heard the original version of "One O'Clock Jump" when I was boy, when I went through my period of fascination with the Basie band when I was 13, I concluded there was only really one mighty burner and it was not that d.j. In fact, it was not even the Basie band but little old Bill Basie himself. I remember while standing around in the barbershop one afternoon listening to the old heads talking about jazz while some others were getting their heads cut. (One never gets a haircut in a black barbershop. One is always getting one's head cut. In the black beauty parlor the women are getting their heads done, not their hair.) And I, quite timidly, interjected a little note about Basie:

"He's a mighty burner," I said.

And one of the older men laughed loud and raucous, saying:

"Why, lookahere, the young boy tryin' to snap out. The young boy tryin' to know something. Why, one day, he might even know who Bill Basie is. But he learning."

It was Bill Basie and no one else who made the Basie band possible and it was time for him to step forward and tell the tale. And time for all of us to learn it.

III. First Moten, then Reno, then Birdland

> I was with that band. I was with the Blue Devils. I was a Blue Devil, and that meant everything to me. Those guys were so wonderful.

Nobody knows that Count Basie was born and raised in Red Bank, New Jersey, and nobody needs to know it. The only important fact that one needs to know about Basie's childhood—other than the fact that he took piano lessons—was that, like most great black men, he did not want to grow up and be like his father:

> My father had been trying to talk me into going into work with him cleaning up those houses and cutting lawns on those big estates. I really couldn't see myself getting into that line of work.

Later, Basie describes the breakup of his parents' marriage and what amounted to the final estrangement from his father. Basie remained close to his mother for the rest of her life but his father became a remote figure. Perhaps he could not forgive his father for not going back to his mother, although the breakup occurred after Basie had left home and was out struggling as a jazz pianist:

> Meanwhile, every time I was back in Red Bank from then on, I would try to talk my father into patching things up. I remember one time in particular.
>
> "Let's just straighten this thing out," I said, and he just looked at me like I was still a little boy in knee pants. "If you all don't straighten this thing out, I just feel like I don't ever want to come back down here no more."

"Well," he said, "if that's the way you're going about it, that's the way it'll have to be. Because, after all, she's your mother, and I know you love her, but she was my sweetheart and my wife."

The conflict with his father that culminated not over the issue of Basie's role as son and heir who had just flown the coop but over the father's role as husband and lover was probably responsible for generating Basie's own peripatetic personality and his own failure in some respects as a husband, lover, and father, a failure that was inevitable since he was never home. Basie's rootlessness was a response, a defensive response, to the precarious nature of his father's own *rooted* experience of menial labor and a busted marriage. In other words, Basie's fascination with show business as a child and an adolescent had to be partly a result of his own awareness that such a life offered him a built-in excuse should he fail in the way his father did in a domestic life. If fact, show business nearly gave him the right and opportunity to fail. He could, after all, claim that being in show business meant succeeding at one kind of life at the expense of another. This is why I believe he is right when he asserts that joining the Blue Devils is such a momentous episode in his life. Basie had finally found a group of young black men exactly like himself: rootless, consumed with a sort of ambition for artistic and commercial success, in desperate need of an identity. It was precisely men of this sort that Basie was to be around for the rest of his life, the nomadic tribe of lonely men who make up the road show of American jazz. It was always to be for Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Jo Jones, Ben Webster, and Basie himself the dogged quest of assurance and employment, even when assurance was not necessary, even when jobs could be had for the asking. The life was always, in Basie's own words quoted above, "stumbling in and out of joints, digging music, and trying to cop another gig."

So, the first important fact in Basie's musical life is his meeting with the great Harlem stride pianist, Fats Waller, and then his membership in the great Oklahoma territorial band, the Blue Devils. Meeting Waller in New York was important for several reasons. First, Basie learned how to play the organ from Waller and vastly increased his fund of musical knowledge. Second, he learned how to play along with silent movies (Waller taught him to play the organ at a movie theater) and this enabled him to get a job at the Eblon Theater in Kansas City and keep himself going when things were rough in the early days. Third, Waller gave him the confidence he needed to continue in his attempt to become a professional musician. The scene where Basie describes in detail the lessons Waller gave him is a very good one and a rare moment of cooperation between an older established musician and an unknown novice. (It should be compared to the scene where Basie as a young cat on the make is "cut" on the piano by the legendary Art Tatum whose reputation, along with those of Wille "The Lion" Smith and James P. Johnson, frightened the average pianist out of his skull.) Jazz, the reader discovers in this book, is a tough fraternity to join; initiation is painful and aggressive in a particularly masculine and peculiarly Afro-American way. Jazz is highly competitive and one always lived in fear that when one showed up for the gig that night that there could be a new person blowing or strumming or beating your instrument on the bandstand. It was one of the hazards of a fiercely predatory existence. Someone "cuts" you out of a job and so you must

"cut" someone else. But it was just this kind of pressure exerted doubly by the forces of economics and shame that honed the skill of the jazz musician as sharply as if he had attended a conservatory.

The Basie career really begins when he joins the Blue Devils in 1927 after having heard the band while in Tulsa, Oklahoma, on tour with another group. The other stuff of Basie's early career, playing black vaudeville shows and going on the TOBA (Theater Owners' Booking Agency, which marketed black acts, better known as Tough as Black Asses) circuit with various bands was simply juvenilia; he learned some important aspects of the black musician's life (and so does the reader) but he is simply getting his feet wet. Going to Kansas City was Basie's real entry to a university; for it was there that he played with the Blue Devils and met the nucleus of musicians (Jimmy Rushing, Walter Page, Hot Lips Page, Eddie Durham, Ben Webster, and others) who were to form the core of the Bennie Moten band in the early 1930s and it was the Bennie Moten band that was to become to a man the famous Count Basie orchestra that John Hammond, jazz writer and record company executive, was to hear at the Reno Club and to bring back to New York by way of Chicago.

But what kind of place was Kansas City during the 1920s and the 1930s? Why did it become a mecca for black jazz music? Ross Russell, whose *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest* is the only major study to have been done on the history of black music in that region, writes the following series of explanations:

> Kansas City was just another one of those large, unremarkable, untidy, and undistinguished cities located somewhere on the American plain. Yet it was here in Kansas City, Missouri, that the same kind of musical renaissance that had occurred in New Orleans was about to take place, though with somewhat altered material, a different cast of players, and a different set of backdrops: for the honky-tonk we substitute the cabaret; for the street parade, the jam session. Kansas City jazz started from scratch. From the beginning it was a grass-roots movement, and so it was to remain for the greater part of its life. . . .
>
> Another remarkable feature of Kansas City in those years was "Pendergast prosperity." Free spending and easy money were common enough all over America until the stock market crash of 1929. In Kansas City, night life carried on at the same old pace, and employment for musicians reached its best levels. As a result, Kansas City bands managed to stay together through the panicky years from 1930 to 1934 when theaters, nightclubs, and dance halls were folding all over the country, when many of the name orchestras were obliged to disband, and when practically all recording activity ceased. Those were just the years needed to bring Kansas City style to its full flower. . . .
>
> A jam session is a foregathering of jazz men to engage in a musical free-for-all. Its locale is most frequently a nightclub, but musicians will jam in public halls, ball-rooms, backstage at a theater, or even a hotel room. Their purpose is to play for the sheer fun of playing, without any commercial restrictions on what they are doing, to extend their ideas as far as they will

reach by means of free improvisation, and to test their ability under competitive conditions. The jam session was a Kansas City specialty. . . .

Albert Murray, co-author of the Basie autobiography and a fine jazz writer himself, describes the scene in Kansas City in this way in *Stomping the Blues*:

> It was a good-time town where a lot of people went out to eat and drink and socialize every night. So there were big bands as well as combos, quartets, trios, and accompanied soloists working somewhere all during the week as well as Fridays and Saturdays and holidays; and when on special occasions the big ballrooms and outdoor pavilions used to sponsor a battle of the bands as an added feature, the excitement, anticipation, and the partisanship would be all but indistinguishable from that generated by a championship boxing match or baseball game.

Joseph J. Pennell Collection, Kansas Collection, University of Kansas Libraries

Troop A, 9th Cavalry Band, Ft. Riley, KS 1906

Murray goes on to describe the jam session:

> The Kansas City jam sessions, whose influence on most contemporary blues musicianship has been far more direct than, say, the old New Orleans street parades, were already a matter of legend and myth even then. Most often mentioned are the ones at the Sunset, the Subway, the Reno, and the

> Cherry Blossom. But as almost everybody who was there remembers it now, since there was a piano (and as often as not, a set of drums also) in almost every joint, there was no telling when or where the next one would get going. Nor was there ever any telling when one would break up. It was quite common for musicians to improvise on one number for more than an hour at such times, and sometimes the session would run well into the next day . . .

Kansas City, strangely enough, became the focal point of a geographical area that was bounded on the east by Chicago and St. Louis, on the south by Oklahoma City and Dallas, and on the west by Denver and Albuquerque. And it was in this area, as culturally barren, one might suppose, as any stretch of territory in the United States, that the major contra-Dixieland jazz style developed. Scott Joplin and James Scott created ragtime in Missouri; Basie, Bennie Moten, Lester Young, Ben Webster, Mary Lou Williams, Charlie Christian and a score of others came from the Oklahoma-Texas-Kansas City axis and created swing; Miles Davis, Clark Terry (both from Illinois by way of St. Louis), Charlie Parker (Kansas City), and John Lewis (New Mexico) became leaders in Bebop and cool jazz. Music departments of such black high schools as Lincoln High in Kansas City and Douglass High in Oklahoma City produced many musicians of note including pianist Pete Johnson, Parker, Christian, Harlan Leonard, Walter Page, and Jasper Jap Allen. This all became possible, in part, because blacks had been migrating steadily from the Deep South since the end of World War I and they were not always settling in Chicago or New York; they went where they had family members or relatives or where jobs were available. The pressures of southern racism and the Depression combined not only to make migration a sensible solution to a host of problems but to make being a musician more attractive than ever for a black male who even with a college education could find nothing better for life's work than being a Pullman car porter or working in the post office.

It is in this environment of transition and transiency, corrupt machine politics and gangsters, a major world crisis in capitalism, and a major change in black American social history as black people went from being a rural folk to an urban proletariat that Basie came into his own as a musician. To be sure, the autobiography is at its strongest describing life in Kansas City and traveling in the southwest with the Blue Devils and Benny Moten. The incidents Basie describes are marvelous reading: Playing swing music while accompanying the silent movies at the Eblon theater; the jam session with Lester Young, Herschel Evans, and a freshly repatriated Colemen Hawkins calling out "for those badass keys" that only pianist Mary Lou Williams could accommodate; copping free meals from Jimmy Rushing's father's restaurant; the battles of music with other black bands of the area, "head-chopping time"; the story of how he joined Moten's band as an arranger who could not write down arrangements and who needed quite a bit of alcoholic refreshment to fuel the energies of his muse; the story about the formulation of the phrase "Every Tub" which became the title of a famous Basie tune; or what the lingo "throwing your head back" means. All of this offers a view of black jazz and black life in artistic circles (which is very different from white life in artistic circles) that is rarely encountered.

I think after the shocking recounting of the death of Benny Moten and Basie's heroic determination to put Moten's band back together again the book falls down. But not before Basie's own understated musical vision is articulated (a thematic climax), not before we are made privy to the drive that made the band possible:

> By the time we first started getting that band together at the Reno, I already had some pretty clear ideas about how I wanted a band to sound. I knew how I wanted each section to sound. So I also knew what each of the guys should sound like. I knew what I wanted them there for. . . .
>
> I have my own little ideas about how to get certain guys into certain numbers and how to get them out. I had my own way of opening the door for them to let them come in and sit around awhile. Then I would exit them. . . .

Once Basie's own artistic method is finally realized with the Reno band, once the reader comes to know clearly and powerfully that that band and all Basie bands are merely extensions of the Basie will, the book is not nearly so interesting. Success seems to bring a life, not of creativity, but of one-nighters, as if the dreary, wearying journey has begun simply in the art and craft of making a living which is quite different from making music. Nothing can be so defeating for any hero as the discovery that life is not the meaning of life or the poetry of the meaning of life but simply gathering the means in order to stay alive. But Basie never found this life disheartening; he thought it was glorious. Musicians come and go in waves and the reader is constantly given updated rosters. And all the personalities we have come to know and love from the early days such as Rushing, Lester Young, Jo Jones, Herschel Evans, and others begin to disappear. Some of the new people such as Buck Clayton, Buddy Tate, Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis, Joe Williams, Marshall Royal, and Frank Foster are interesting. But the reader learns less and less about the new musicians because Basie himself seems more removed from them.

I think the book picks up with the resurrection of the band from its own ashes at Birdland in New York in the early fifties. At a time when no major big band of the thirties can really make it anymore, Basie, at the urging of singer Billy Eckstine, put together a big unit almost in defiance of the times. It is particularly important that Basie triumphed in the club named for Kansas City's last great black jazz musician, Charlie Parker, great alto saxophonist, hipster extraordinaire, who lived the fastest life of any jazzman born. It was Parker, a progeny of K.C. swing and the Basie riff, who turned jazz on its head by revolting against the simplicity of the Basie edict of mighty burning and launched Bebop, another kind of mighty burning, fraught with intimidation for the squares and black political awareness for the outsider. If, as Albert Murray has stated in *Stomping the Blues*, black American music is "a matter of elegance," "a matter of style," then Parker took style and elegance to the very limits of the human imagination. And he pronounced them the last mad bulwarks against and beyond a culture of fear and loathing. It was for Basie and Bird a simple matter of seeing the blues in two related but different ways. It was fitting, therefore, that Basie, the rootless father

of the old-fashioned style and elegance, should bring all the children back home for a moment while playing in the temple built in honor of the rootless son, Parker, and his charismatic perversions and revisions.

There are two final observations to make about the Basie autobiography: one is that we learn at last the real story about the origin of the nickname Count which means we learn no story at all because while Basie denies the famous and standard account (which he started) of getting the name from a radio announcer (in much the same way bandleader and pianist Earl Hines got the name "Fatha"), the story that he tells about giving himself the name "Count" while he was still unknown in Kansas City is denied by other witnesses in his own text, most of whom tell the story that Benny Moten used to refer to his unreliable and sometimes tipsy arranger-pianist as "that no 'count Basie" and the name simply stuck as names like that often will. And there is a certain ironic pleasure in knowing (both for the reader and for Basie as well) that Count really doesn't refer to royalty or grandeur but to laziness and irresponsibility, stereotypical black traits turned on their head. The other observation is that Albert Murray, the book's co-writer, as he is called in the text, is probably the best qualified person in America to have written or to have helped to write this book. Besides his *Stomping the Blues*, he has written a novel (*Guitar Train Whistle*), and several books of non-fiction (*The Omni-Americans*, *South to a Very Old Place*, *The Hero and the Blues*). Basie, like Hemingway, is one of Murray's heroes and perhaps nothing reveals that more than this comment in *Stomping the Blues*:

> It was as if Count Basie edited the orchestrations for his repertoire of the 1930s to the late 40s on the principles of composition that Ernest Hemingway learned from the style sheet for prose writers at the *Kansas City Star* back in 1917: "Use short sentences. Use short first paragraphs. Use vigorous English. Be positive, not negative. Never use old slang . . . slang to be enjoyable must be fresh. Avoid the use of adjectives, especially such extravagant ones as splendid, gorgeous, grand, magnificent, etc." Basie stripped his own Harlem Stride-derived piano style down to the point that he could make *one note* swing. (Emphasis and ellipsis Murray)

I suspect that the only other writer capable of having co-authored this work is Ralph Ellison (incidentally, an ardent admirer of Murray) who worshipped the ground Basie walked on. Being an Oklahoma boy, Ellison, I am sure, was a Blue Devil at heart himself. But now that the book is here Ellison needn't worry about ever publishing his second novel; for the Ellisonian blues hero who does not gossip, signify, or sell woolf tickets has composed his own. (It could not even be wildly imagined that Basie would have written a sexually frank, put-on or despairing autobiography such as those by other jazzmen like Charles Mingus, Art Pepper, and Hampton Hawes. In the old school, elegance and style means of course discretion and grace.) As Ellison wrote about the blues:

> The blues is an art of ambiguity, an assertion of the irrepressibly human over all circumstance whether created by others or by one's own human failings. They are the only consistent art in the United States which

constantly remind us of our limitations while encouraging us to see how far we can actually go.

It's all here in Basie's autobiography, the whole story of the blues as the life of one man, as the life of a band, as the life of a section of the United States and the creative instinct of an artistic elite of a group of oppressed people. Basie knows that once you leave the woodshed or the basement, as it were, you just quietly take your axe and take care of the business of chopping heads. So, the Ellisonian blues hero has already told the story of what the Invisible Man does when he leaves his hole. As Basie himself said:

> It's the way you play it that makes it. What I say is, for Christ's sake, you don't have to *kill* yourself to swing. Play like you play. Play like you *think*, and then you got it, if you're going to get it. And whatever you get, that's you, so that's your story. (Emphasis Basie)

Essential Count Basie Discography

1. Kansas City Style: Young Bill Basie and the Bennie Moten Orchestra (RCA)
2. The Best of Count Basie (Decca)
3. Good Morning Blues (MCA)
4. Super Chief (Columbia)
5. Sixteen Men Swinging (Verve)
6. Count Basie Swings, Joe Williams Sings (Clef)
7. Basie Plays Hefti (Roulette)
8. Count Basie and His Kansas City Seven (Impulse)
9. Satch and Josh: Count Basie Encounters Oscar Peterson (Pablo)
10. Basie and Zoot: Count Basie and Zoot Sims (Pablo)

Stanley E. Banks

STRAIGHT FROM THE GUT

On September 13, 1982, the literary community of the Midwest was shaken by the death of the poet, Mbembe (Milton Smith). Normally, any death is a tragedy. But, when *a poet* jumps 18 floors to his death at a period in his life which was his most creative and prolific, it is a *major* tragedy.

The book, *Mbembe [Milton Smith]: Selected Poems*, demonstrates the growth and depth of Mbembe's poetry. Mbembe's style is gut-wrenching and at times relentless in its attack on institutional racism. Mbembe, who had written four published books, took his poetic skills to a higher level with each effort which was culminated in his last unpublished manuscript.

To Go On, *Allegory of the Bebop Walk*, *Playing Side Two* and *Consolation Prizes* are Mbembe's prior volumes of poetry, which ring with the rhythms of anger and despair over the conditions of his people, Black people. Despair and anger erupt in the mood of his poem "Survival Poem":

> we can slide into sleep in dead winter
> in front of the pool hall
> or in the alley behind the record shop
> denying that we are oppressed
> from *To Go On*

Mbembe uses words sparingly which flow with a pace that doesn't allow for the taking of a breath until the message is finished. This pace is evidenced in the poem "Pushing Dope for the Man (in memory of Roach)" in which the conditions of the dark side of inner-city Black life are explored by Mbembe:

> it wasn't just weed, Roach,
> or dark glasses at midnight.
> it was the way you climbed
> to the top of illusions
> like drugs were a beanstalk
> from *Allegory Of The Bebop Walk*

Black pride is often a subject of Mbembe's work. In his poem "Mood Poem," he tells of a neighborhood bar where, instead of a gathering of down-and-out men, there are regal men who perhaps were in one life or another men of royal blood. Note a few lines from "Mood Poem":

there's a certain kingliness
revealed in nylon ankle socks
distinguished shaving scars,
trimmed mustaches, spiced cologne smells
& five hundred dollar diamond rings
from *Playing Side Two*

Mbembe structures an uninterrupted flow of prose in his poetry. Further, Mbembe constructs his message in such a way that his conclusions are frequently stunning and surprising. For instance, in his poem "Voices," the recollection of teenage days is climaxed in the following manner:

the breeze tonight floats away,
& you can't say to breezes
that you don't play the dozens
& you can't talk
about a breeze's moma.
she don't speak your language.
she only speaks in whispers,
in disquieting strange tongues
'bout all you've lost
& all that's dead & gone.
from *Consolation Prizes*

The passion of Mbembe's words leaves one reeling long after the harsh imagery and non-stop exhausting metrical beat are consumed. Mbembe, in his poem "Making Poems," rejects traditional thoughts of why poets write, but at the same time the romantic zest of his passionate words is revealed in the following four lines:

i'll say it straightout—
i vomited the damn things up
from the bottom of the world
because i had to or go mad
from *Previously Uncollected Poems*

In some of his poems, Mbembe writes about such subjects as suicide, insanity, and love in a most personal way. For instance, in a poem like "Air Bag Fails to Save Man From Suicide," which was written eight months before his death, Mbembe details a suicide that comes hauntingly close to the way in which he evenutally committed suicide. Similarly, in regard to the subject of insanity, Mbembe takes a cold, satirical and personal look at the question of who defines insanity in his poem entitled "Did They Help Me At The State Hospital For The Criminally Insane?" Mbembe skillfully creates imagery in which he equates the therapeutic treatment that he received to the following:

Did Truman help the Japs?
By saving countless Kamikazes
From thoughtless death?
Did Hitler help the Jews?
With Jewish enterprise?
Sitcktogetherness?

from *Previously Uncollected Poems*

Then, there is the subject of love, a subject seldom associated with Mbembe's work. Mbembe frequently wrote on the subject of love, specifically the love a father has for his son. Mbembe wrote two poems for his son Tarik. Note the impassioned disclosure to his son in the poem "Ancestry as Reality (for Tarik)":

when the measles, the whooping coughs,
father's day get you, when at school
the skilled surgeons cut the good black stuff
from your head, i may not be there.
but you'll have the weekends, summers,
me pleading — "Tarik, daddy loves you,
do you love daddy?" weekends
when i rub you 'gainst my hairless chest
& try to convince you
i wanted to be a man.

from *Allegory Of The Bebop Walk*

The selected poems of Mbembe (Milton Smith) convey the struggling of a brooding soul wanting to know the *Whys* of the human condition. And with the gift of the metaphorical muse, Mbembe viewed the world in its most basic terms. Consequently, it is his brilliant searching consciousness that is left behind for consumption.

High Blood/Pressure by Michèlle T. Clinton. West End Press, Box 29147, Los Angeles, CA 90029. 45 pages. $4.95, paper.

These poems speak clearly, right out of the middle of our worst confusions. Clinton is a performance artist, and these poems mean to be heard. Their voices are flexible enough to take it all on—sex, race, the end of the world, the remaking of the world in love and art—in tough and/or tender ghetto speech, in lyrical and rhetorical extravagance, and a lot in between. I can remember the self-congratulatory tone taken by (mostly white) English teachers in the sixties discovering that ghetto speech was a "genuine dialect." I even remember the title of an early seventies book containing this information: *The Myth of Cultural Deprivation.*

This would give Clinton, social satirist, a good laugh. *High Blood/Pressure* begins with a poem, "I Wanna Be Black," that is a regret-filled evocation of

what she suspects is a myth: "that black people could love each other/ in the cool and dark of Watts America/ 1966." Clinton was a child in '66. The book ends with her vision of a future in which "the hands of racially mixed/ unborn children would . . . send a hope back into the past,/ our dirtied and angerfilled now,/ to greet and warm us." The framing provided by these two poems is important. In between is all the anger, sorrow, sickness and plain craziness of a young black woman (with a white grandmother—see "Mixed Hostility") who has "made it out" of the ghetto (only you never really do—see "Migration of the Rats").

Cultural deprivation is half Clinton's theme—the despair of men diseased by patriarchy and driven to violence ("Did She Bleed?" "Black Rape") and the various toughness of women. Clinton assumes many voices. She is, in one poem, "a decent woman," not like the "hoes" who live down the hall. In "Feminist Manifesto," she fervently refuses to take "respectability from men." She loves a man—see "On Sex in July"—but writes a poem "For Women Who Hate a Man." She remembers with sad precision the "dumb songs" about LOVE that were "implanted" in her, in our, adolescent brains.

The poems that articulate her pain about men and women are intimately related to the other half of what she has to tell us. In "International Coloreds: Say What?" she explores the consequences for her of mixed blood (under pressure), the "cross fire of homelessness." "[M]y people/ want a silent blending/ of my life into theirs &/ I wanna dialogue," she claims. The dialogue is here, in the cross fire of her voices. She has wanted to come to terms with herself by thinking that "regular folks could worked/ these problems out/ (by race mixing)" but she has been known to say, "Naw, I ain't mixed with shit./ It's all the way negro here," and in a poem which is partly about South Africa, she is clear about how she despises "america sweet assimilate."

"Assimilate," take note, is not "mix."

In the poem "Trying to Draw a Square Poet," she anatomizes ways which people (black and white) have of defining themselves against each other. This poem is maybe the funniest and scariest of all, though it is not the only one that can make a reader cringe and whimper.

Set against all the bitterness are images of women's efforts to get a little pleasure into the days. Her mother's doilies and macaroons, the plants she talked to, how she "scrubbed even the air." Making your own toast, just the way you like it, for yourself. The cookies and flowers and vegetables and casseroles of some white women the speaker of two poems knew for a while in the north country. Not enough. (A poem about women's "dead/ serious/ plan to fight" follows.)

The next-to-last poem tells just why it's not enough. One of several prose poems in the book, "God Promised Us Water That Was Wet" describes an ocelot in the Eureka zoo, with a "babbling brook" painted on the floor of its cage. The poem ends "They carried me out of the zoo that day. I missed certification by the skin of my teeth."

She has teeth all right, and can use them.

Sally McNall

Bedouin Hornbook by Nathaniel Mackey. University Press of Virginia, Box 3608, University Station, Charlottesville, VA 22903, 1986. 208 pages. $10.00, paper.

Nathaniel Mackey is an established poet, author of two chapbooks of poetry and of *Eroding Witness* (University of Illinois, 1983), a National Poetry Series selection. He is also the editor of *Hambone*. *Bedouin Handbook*, volume 2 of the Callaloo fiction series, provides further evidence, if any were needed, that what is going on at *Hambone*, at Callaloo, and in the work of Nathaniel Mackey is literary production of the highest quality.

Bedouin Hornbook, the first volume of *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*, is an epistolary novel, a series of letters from a composer/performer who signs himself "N." to a person called "Angel of Dust." The letters are a running account of N's exploration of himself in relation to his musical idiom and of the world and ideas of those who perform it. Responses from Angel of Dust are alluded to, but always in reference to N's music and the tapes he has sent with his letters. Conventional development of the relationship between N. and Angel of Dust is minimal.

N. is consumed with music in general, his own music in particular, and the ideas of his fellow musicians. Known as the Mystic Horn Society, they're first called the "Deconstructive Woodwind Chorus," a name they think "stilted" for a gig in Berkeley, and change to "East Bay Dread Ensemble." A longish piece they play for that concert, "Our Lady of the Lifted Skirts," is an improvisation that uses music to continue an argument begun on the way to the gig about what kind of music they are to play and what kind of musicians they really are. This method of composition, N. says, may account for the "somewhat contentious edge" Angel of Dust has heard on the tape of the composition.

Paraphrase cannot capture the excitement, the rush, the convincing reality of N.'s voice. It does suggest the combination of intellectual seriousness and surface humor with which N. manages to fill quite a few pages of letterpaper between 14 June '78 and 17 June '81. Halfway through this journal, N. is hospitalized for "dizziness," a condition one may explain both as physical and emotional exhaustion and as a result of his psychic preoccupation with music as the stuff of life. Letters surrounding this hospitalization are particularly rich and moving.

One day, the four band members come to visit him, each carrying an instrument. Aware that they cannot make "noise" in a hospital, they begin to play for him, mutely "going through the motions of playing while making sure no sound came out." N., who has already informed us that "at the onset of one of these attacks [he] hear[s] Ornette's version of 'Embraceable You' piped into [his] head like a subcortical muzak," gradually recognizes that what they are soundlessly playing is that song:

> I can truthfully state that I *heard* it in fact, so after my own heart was the mixed pace at which they took it (part waltz, part funeral march). It was like hearing my lush, longstanding absorption in "absence" at last harvested or come home to roost—a concert or concept, as I've already said, after my own heart. The mute withholding imposed on the band by the surroundings made for a music fueled with a feeling of loss or lack. . . . What [Aunt

Nancy, the violinist] did came close to magic in fact, investing the "charms about you/arms about you" rhyme in so convincing a way I felt I'd been laid on by a healing hand. I blinked my eyes, touched ever so lightly as by a winged, unquenchable kiss—brushed, it seemed, by feathers falling through the dark (though this was a bright, glaringly sunlit afternoon).

Small wonder that the following day N. is able to check out of the hospital.

This is a rich book, poetic, seriously engaged with the music of our times and of times past instant memory or easy recovery, rich in story, a story that does not end but rather comes to a stop, as might be expected of a volume in a series. Satisfying, thoroughly, in itself, but promising more. Whatever the next volume may be, one thing is certain, like the present book it will be one of a kind and excellent.

George F. Wedge

Accidental Grace by Luke (Joseph A. Brown). University Press of Virginia: Charlottesville, VA 22903, 1986. 58 pages. $5.00, paper.

looks like chrone the care-
taker got careless
again
when the lights went out last night
seems like he was rooting around
his junkroom and put in the wrong
size bulbs

folks say chrone

ain't had his mind on duty since
his boy ran away and got killed
overseas (or down south

folks

ain't sure which as if it mattered
anymore)
—from "Stories About Chrone"

Volume VI in the Callaloo Poetry Series, this collection presents a panorama of characters, religion, and cities in the U.S. and Europe, from a humanistic and sympathetic point of view. Everyday people, cultured events, and architectural landmarks are given stories and histories which make them easily imaginable and of unique interest. Old myths become new visions and are placed in a contemporary and real context.

* * *

Rainbow Roun Mah Shoulder by Linda Brown Bragg. Carolina Wren Press: 300 Barclay Road, Chapel Hill, NC 27514, 1984. 140 pages. $7.00, paper.

It looked like there were no more doors gonna open for her and no more ways to turn it round. He had brought her to the shining light of love returned. For the only time in her life, he had brought her to that secret spot, that place where her soul was balanced and the angels hummed, and now that she had lost it, all she had left was the desire not to feel. What did she do to end up with nothin? What had she ever done but answer the call? She carried her anger like a sack of fire, and it burned with a toxic fury that left her exhausted and drained after each dream.

Rainbow is a novel which traces the journey of Rebecca Florice, an early-20th-century Black woman healer, toward self-knowledge and enlightenment. Her ability to foresee the future is both a gift and a curse—it becomes a barrier which both protects as well as separates her from those she loves. The novel also is an exploration of what it is to be Black, a woman, and more importantly, what it is to be human. Bragg's style is unique; the action occurs through the telling of events and emotions in the characters' monologues. The novel is beautifully imagistic, engrossing, and enlightening.

* * *

Water Song by Michael S. Weaver. University Press of Virginia: Charlottesville, VA 22903, 1985. 72 pages. $5.00, paper.

In the house that has died,
the dead come down wooden stairs at midnight,
soft feet like cotton shuffling to the front porch,
sitting down to dangle over the edge, examining
the picnic table where children ate watermelon.
Grandaddy sits in his corner, napping, sleeping
in the nest of a big, empty heart, a sucking energy,
a song like Egyptian handmaidens over the lake,
the dark, moving silence around this world
—from "Water Song"

Volume V of the Callaloo Poetry Series, this collection presents sketches and stories of people and events, placed primarily in the South. The poems are political, cultural, and social explorations which together encompass and define the past and current history of Blacks. Weaver's writing is characterized by strong images, intimate details, and a beautiful sense of rhythm and line—these poems are powerful, and often painful, but always enlightening.

* * *

Steppingstones, ed. James B. Gwynne. Box 1856, Harlem, New York 10027.

James Gwynne writes in the First Anniversary issue that the purpose of *Steppingstones* is "to offer a vehicle for writers, and to examine issues and

questions that are relevant to our world *today*. That is why *Steppingstones* has published tributes to Black authors and scholars, who have and are giving us gifts, with limited reward or appreciation." The tribute issues, which have focused on such writers and figures as Malcolm X, Langston Hughes, and Amin Baraka, contain biographical sketches, essays, critiques, and tribute poems in addition to the writers' works. Other issues contain quality poetry and prose of relatively unknown Black writers. *Steppingstones* is truly a "Literary Anthology Toward Liberation" and is an instructive and enjoyable journal, well-worth exploring.

Shelle Rosenfeld

OTHER SUBMITTED WORKS NOT REVIEWED

Beyond The Strawberry Patch by Rose S. Bell. Winston-Derek Publishers, Penneywell Drive, P.O. Box 90883, Nashville, TN 37209, 1985. 126 pages. $5.95, paper.

Dead On Arrival by Jaki Shelton Green. Carolina Wren Press, 300 Barclay Road, Chapel Hill, NC 27514, 1983. 150 pages. $5.00, paper.

Objective Reality by Lloyd C. Daniel. Undercurrent Press, P.O. Box 6082, 1985. 70 pages. No price listed.

The Southern Review: An anniversary issue of Afro-American writing edited by James Olney and Lewis P. Simpson. 43 Allen Hall, LSU, Baton Rouge, LA 70803, 1985. 305 pages. $2.50, paper.

When We Were Colored by Big Mama (Nancy Ellen-Webb Williams). National Writers Press, 1450 South Havana, Aurora, CO 80012, 1986. 88 pages. $8.95, paper.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

Stanley E. Banks (7120 Indiana, Kansas City, MO 64132), a previous COTTONWOOD contributor, is a member of the Missouri Governor's Literature Advisory Committee. His work has appeared in FOCUS MIDWEST and NEW LETTERS, among others.

Richard Barksdale (College of Liberal Arts & Sciences, Lincoln Hall, 702 So. Wright St., Urbana, IL 61801) was recently Langston Hughes Professor at Kansas University and is Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Illinois. His books include LANGSTON HUGHES: THE POET AND HIS CRITICS (American Library Assoc.).

Phyllis Becker (4323 Mercier, Apt. 1N, Kansas City, MO 64111) attended Howard University and currently works for the Missouri Division of Youth Services. This is her first publication.

Linda Cousins (386 Sterling Pl., Brooklyn, NY 11238) edits The Universal Black Writers Press and has had a number of her plays produced. Her poetry has appeared in several anthologies as well as in a chapbook, FULL MOON OCTOBER 1 (Liberated Libra).

Frank Marshall Davis (c/o Fred Whitehead, Box 5224, Kansas City, KS 66119), a native Kansan who now resides in Hawaii, has published widely, including BLACK MAN'S VERSE (Black Cat, 1935), 47TH STREET (Decker, 1948) and PRECISION BRIDGE—A BID FOR EVERY OCCASION (Dorrance). His sexual autobiography, SEX REBEL: BLACK, appeared in 1968.

Rita Dove (631 W. 15th St., Tempe, AZ 85281), currently teaching at Arizona State Univ., received the Pulitzer Prize for her 1986 volume of poetry, THOMAS AND BEULAH (Carnegie-Mellon Univ.). She has also received a Lavan Younger Poets Award from the Academy of American Poets (1986), an NEA Grant and a Fulbright Fellowship. Her volumes of poetry include MUSEUM (Carnegie-Mellon) and THOMAS AND BEULAH. Her collection of stories, FIFTH SUNDAY, was the first volume in the Callaloo Fiction Series.

Gerald Early (722 Harvest Lane, Olivette, MO 63132), Guest Editor for this issue, is a post-doctoral fellow in English at the University of Kansas, as well as an Assistant Professor at Washington Univ. in St. Louis. His essays and poetry have appeared in KENYON REVIEW, AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW and HUDSON REVIEW, among others, and he recently had an essay reprint in BEST AMERICAN ESSAYS OF 1986.

Thomas Glave, Jr. (3245 Baychester Ave., Bronx, NY 10469-2620) has had poetry in MIDWEST POETRY REVIEW and PIEDMONT LITERARY REVIEW and has published a chapbook. He is a dancer with the Dance Theatre of Harlem.

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Lea Hopkins (6206 Harrison, Kansas City, MO 64110), a native Kansan, published WOMYN I HAVE KNOWN YOU in 1979 and her poetry recently appeared in HELICON NINE.

Terri Jewell (1815 E. Michigan Ave., Lansing, MI 48912) has work appearing or forthcoming in BLACK AMERICAN LITERATURE FORUM, BLUE UNICORN, SING HEAVENLY MUSE, and NEGATIVE CAPABILITY, among others.

Eugene Kraft (427 6th St. NE, Washington, D.C. 20002) teaches at the Georgetown School of Science and Arts. His work has appeared in ENGLISH LITERATURE IN TRANSITION, KANSAS ENGLISH and PRAIRIE SCHOONER.

Herbert W. Martin (Dept. of English, Univ. of Dayton, 300 College Park, Dayton, OH 45469-001) is poet-in-residence at the University of Dayton and has just finished editing an issue of DER RABE, a German language periodical published in Switzerland. He has four volumes of poetry to his credit, including THE FORMS OF SILENCE (Lotus).

Sally McNall (Dept. of English, Wescoe Hall, Univ. of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045) is a Lecturer in English at KU and is a former member of the COTTONWOOD staff. Her poetry has recently appeared in CAPE ROCK and PLAINSWOMAN among others.

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May Miller (1632 S Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20009) has contributed to many magazines and anthologies, including POETRY, ANTIOCH REVIEW and THE NATION. DUST OF UNCERTAIN JOURNEY (Lotus) is the most recent of seven volumes of poetry published by her. She has also been a poet-in-residence at several schools and universities, including the University of Wisconsin.

John Newman (2600 N. 12th St., Kansas City, KS 66104), Artist-in-Residence at the Kansas Penitentiary at Lansing, has shown his work at Avila College, William Jewell College, and Johnson County Community College. He also received an NEA grant in 1985.

Wanda C. Outlaw (305 V Street NE, Washington, D.C. 20002) has done poetry readings throughout the Washington, D.C. area. A poem recently appeared in AMERICAN POETRY ANTHOLOGY.

Gordon Parks (860 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017), a native of Fort Scott, Kansas, is well-known for his fiction, poetry and films, including of course his novel THE LEARNING TREE (Harper & Row), set in Eastern Kansas. In 1986 he was named Kansan of the Year.

Richard Perry (56-C Franklin St., Tenafly, NJ 07670) is an Associate Professor of English at Pratt Institute, Brooklyn. His novel MONTGOMERY'S CHILDREN (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich) won the 1985 Quality Paperback Books "New Voices" Award. One of his short stories was also selected by THE SOUTHERN REVIEW for inclusion in an anthology of short stories published over the last twenty years by that journal.

L. Poole (c/o 15 Stanmore Ct., Potomac, MD 20854) recently finished a Master's in Creative Writing at Brown University under the supervision of Michael Harper.

Sheila Roberts (English Dept., Michigan St. Univ., East Lansing, MI 48824) is an expatriate South African teaching contemporary literature at Michigan State University.

Shelle Rosenfeld (1023 Kentucky, Lawrence, KS 66044) is a graduate student in English at the University of Kansas. She has won two Carruth Memorial poetry awards, most recently in 1986. She is also COTTONWOOD'S Review Editor.

Philip M. Royster (Dept. of English, Denison Hall, Kansas State Univ., Manhattan, KS 66506), a former COTTONWOOD contributor, is Professor of English and Coordinator of the American Ethnic Studies Program at Kansas State University. His poems have appeared in such magazines as BLACK WORLD, ESSENCE, OBSIDIAN, KANSAS QUARTERLY, and BLACK AMERICAN LITERATURE FORUM. His most recent volume of poetry is SONGS AND DANCES (Lotus).

Edgar Tidwell (English Dept., Univ. of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40506-0027) is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Kentucky. A recent winner of an NEH Fellowship for Independent Study and Research, he's at work on a book tentatively entitled THE CRITICAL REALISM OF STERLING A. BROWN.

Martha K. Vertreace (5637 S. Kenwood Ave, Chicago, IL 60637) is poet-in-residence and Assistant Professor of English at Kennedy-King College in Chicago. Her work is forthcoming in COLLEGE ENGLISH, MIDWEST QUARTERLY, THE NEW LAUREL REVIEW and THE WORCESTER REVIEW. Her first volume of poetry, SECOND HOUSE FROM THE CORNER (Kennedy-King College), appeared in 1986.

Michael S. Weaver (29 South Munn Ave., Apt. 3H, East Orange, NJ 07018), is presently studying at Brown University and edits BLIND ALLEYS. His work has appeared in THE WASHINGTON REVIEW, SOUTHERN REVIEW, MARYLAND POETRY REVIEW and others. His collection of poetry WATER SONG (Univ. of Virginia) appeared in 1986 and is reviewed in this issue.

Alfred L. Woods (1525 East 53rd St., Suite 621, Chicago, IL 60615) grew up in Alabama and Chicago. He is the former Executive Director of the South Side Community Art Center and his work has appeared in such magazines as HANGING LOOSE, BLACK WORLD, FORMAT and NIT & WIT. He has also published two chapbooks, BE BORN AGAIN (Grassfield Writers Collective) and WINTER ONLY LAST ALL DAY (Cope).

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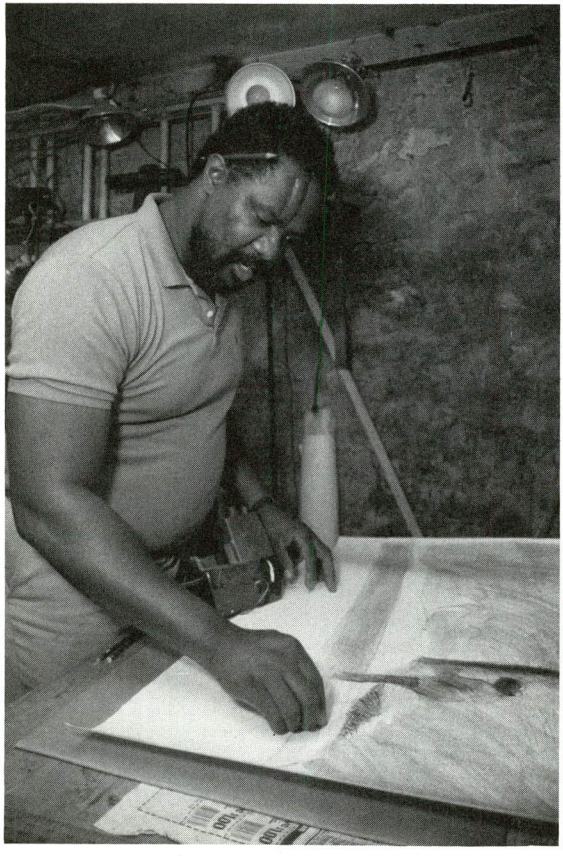

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