

Randall Kenan

# LET THE DEAD BURY THEIR DEAD

AND OTHER STORIES

A Harvest Book

Harcourt Brace & Company  
San Diego New York London

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For "This Far, or, A Body in Motion," the author makes grateful acknowledgment to Louis R. Harlan's *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader, 1856-1901 and Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915* (Oxford); and to Washington's own *Up from Slavery*.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Kenan, Randall.

Let the dead bury their dead and other stories/Randall Kenan.—

1st ed.

p. cm.

Contents: Clarence and The dead—Things of this world, or, Angels unawares—The foundations of the earth—The origin of whales—Cornstalk—The strange and tragic ballad of Mabel Pearrell—This far, or, A body in motion—Run, mourner, run—What are days?—Ragnarok! The day the gods die—Tell me, tell me—Let the dead bury their dead.

ISBN 0-15-149886-5

ISBN 0-15-650515-0 (pbk.)

1. North Carolina—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3561.E4228L48 1992

813'.54—dc20 91-36179

Designed by Tina Stahl

Printed in the United States of America  
First Harvest edition 1993

B C D E F

How can a man *not* appreciate a sight as fine as you is, gal? and stop calling me Reverend. Now come here to me gal and let me give you some loving)

; and I am not aggrieved to eulogize her here today, for I know I will see her in that great getting-up morning where every day will be Sunday ever after on the Other Side; I am not in despair to see her body there still before me, for I know that all flesh is grass and that this flesh too shall melt away to the eternal dust from whence we all came. But I stand here this morning, Brothers and Sisters, moved by the idea of mortality, my mortality as well as your own. Moved to think on how I too shall one day follow this sweet sister, and how I must ask as everyone under the sound of my voice must ask: Will I be ready? Dearly Beloved,

(Sweet sweet beloved hot pussy—like those madams cried to the troops over in Seoul: Hot pussy, boys, hot-hot pussy, come and get it, and it was good, steamy and stanky, Daddy, is it good to ya? Oh baby baby baby Louise Louise, Sweet Mother of Jesus, is it as good to you, gal? Is Daddy sweet—? Ha-Glory! Sarah was never so sweet . . . Sarah)

*In his mind he sees Sarah. Sarah Barden née Phillips. From the Piedmont. Statesville. Plump in middle age, in his vision destined to leave him a widower soon, at fifty-five. She died of leukemia at fifty-two. He sees her through the honey-toned and sepia-tinted memories of domesticity. He sees her grown too wide, too plain, too quiet; he sees her long-suffering; he sees her at her daily chores, mopping, cooking, weeding the*

## RAGNARÖK! THE DAY THE GODS DIE

**B**ROTHERS AND SISTERS, I stand before you a shaken man, a man steeled in the face of mortality. I knew Sister Tate as you all did, I knew her vitality, I knew her strength, her dedication to family, her generosity, her kind words in the time of need. I am not sad to see her part company with us this day. No, for as the Psalm-writer said: "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, blessed be—O blessed be—the name of the Lord."

(I see her sitting on the bed that way with her back arched like a cat and her titties just as pert and them nipples just as hard as dimes, Sweet Jesus, you's a fine gal, Louise. Well, I'm glad you appreciate it, Reverend.

garden; he sees her fast asleep, becalmed by dreams of her Lord. He feels jealousy at her relationship with her God, she knows some awesome peace that has eluded him since he picked up his calling, but that is why he married her in the first place, he thinks, a sanctified, simple girl, daughter of a poor farmer, bedazzled by this veteran of a foreign war, this Barden. In truth he had never been with a woman who gave herself, yet a virgin, with such tremulous fear. This thrilled him. This made her his wife. The wife of a newly ordained minister. He gave her a child—he sees her full, he sees her, his heart full of strange joy, with babe in arms, he sees her give suck and remembers twinges of shamed delight at that sight, unusually stirred. He gave her a home. He gave her heartache. He remembers her “female problems” at thirty-three and the end of the prospect for more children. He sees her now cooler, now resigned, now more a saint than a woman, less a wife than a helpmeet. Not that he felt an overwhelming desire for her in the beginning, just a thrill he mistook for lust; so unlike lust was his excitement that he mislabeled it love. But it matters little. Did he come to love her? He does not really know. He tells himself—flashing faded holy images of her in his memory—that he did. Yes. I loved her.

I want you all to look with me today to my text, Ezekiel, Chapter Thirty-seven, Verses One through Fourteen. “The hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in the Spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones.”

(The first time. Before we both were married, before

you knew ole Goose and I knew Sarah, yeah, before I could smell my own musk good, and them there monster titties of yours were just little bumps. I had you out there in the huckleberry patch, or more like you had me, remember? They called you fast in them days. I didn't know how fast till that day. Seems it was better back then, don't it? Mosquitos biting your rump; gnats going up your nose. Scared of getting caught. Scared you might make a baby. Scared the Lord might damn you then and there. Just scared. It put a sweet edge to it, didn't it? Like putting hawk-eyed gravy on your grits. I look at these youngins today, they come to me pregnant and scared, boys come asking what to do, you know: Reverend, what's the *right thing* to do? And I look at them, young, in fine health, I can see them getting that little taste of tail, their eyes wild with it, cunt and cock crazy, and I see them in the act of passion, skin and sweat and scent, and I try to be stern and forgiving and tell them they should turn from temptation and consecrate the act in Holy Matrimony, of course I say that, what else can I say? Though deep down I'm thinking, The Lord's army is in trouble cause the Devil's arsenal is mighty, mighty sweet. I stand as a witness)

Now witness with me, Brothers and Sisters. “And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest.

“Again he said unto me, Prophecy upon these bones: and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.

“So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I

prophesied, there was a noise, and, behold, a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to its bone."

(Carl. Bone of my bone. Flesh of my flesh. Son. Whither goest my son? My bone. You're a hypocrite, Papa. Son, don't talk like that, it hurts me. Papa, I can't sit here and watch you make a fool of my mama, a fool of the church, and a fool of me. Son, you just don't under—I understand plenty, you're a charlatan, a fake, a licentious old—Son, please, I beg of you. Beg? Did I truly beg? Maybe I should have begged, begged on my knees, bone of my bone. Where are you? You are my flesh, my flesh, full of the same weaknesses I suffer, that Jesus suffered, he turned away from temptation and I should have, but at least you should understand. Have mercy, son. I should have begged. You called and spoke to Sarah, hung up if I answered, I knew it was you, you knew I knew. Son, your spite is not godly . . . bone of my bone)

*He worried about having a son, remembered, ruminated over all those whispered and snickered tales of preachers' boys. A preacher's son. Wild. Devilish. Hateful. He did not know how his own son would turn out and it worried him. It preoccupied him. It gave him sleepless nights. He'd go to the crib and peer into the child's face. Who will you be? Carl Henry Barden. A fine young man he became. Smart. A good student. First in his class. An athlete. A boy a father could be proud of, especially a preacher. Nothing like the nightmares Barden dreamed; worse. Too straight, too hard, too sure of himself, morally, mentally, physically. Barden loved and feared the boy; Carl hated Barden. Welling up for such a long time, it*

*seemed, this young boy's hatred, as though from the womb he loathed his father. As a child he was secretive, and possessive of his mother. Barden knows he resented Louise—but how did he know? Barden ponders; so well-kept a secret, a preacher and a parishioner, of course they were careful. The boy left for college and rarely returned for a visit, and then, after strong words following his graduation, vanished up north, refusing to speak to his father again. Barden sometimes goes into Carl's room, left the way it had been when Carl was a boy, and tries to see the child. All he can conjure is the image of a young man's face twisted in anger.*

"And when I beheld, lo, the sinews and the flesh came up upon them, and the skin covered them above: but there was no breath in them.

*(Breathe strength into me, my Father. Though I have forsaken thee I long for the cleansing fire of your nostrils . . . This is the prayer I want to pray)*

"Then said He unto me, Prophecy unto the wind, prophecy, son of man, and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.

*(Fire. Nostrils. The four winds. Breath. Her breath. Some days stale, some days sweet, some days stinking of fish and onions, O but the breath, hot on my neck, in the middle of pumping, clawing, grunting. The young think they own loving, but we all need a little sometimes, O Father, O Son, O Holy Ghost, O Sarah, don't I have needs? Am I so wicked? So weak? So evil for having needs? I needed your breath, Louise, your touching, it wasn't about getting my rocks off, it was*

about rocking in my sweet baby's arms, ain't that the way Hank Williams sings it, Rolling in My Sweet Baby's Arms? Who will rock me now? Louise)

"So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army.

"Then he said unto me, son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel; behold, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off from our parts.

(There were times we didn't do it, remember, Louise? We'd sit in the quiet and talk and just hold each other the way we couldn't with our own. I wonder why? Those were sweet sweet times, almost better than the loving. Just sitting quiet. Why didn't I have the sense to marry *you*, gal? But would it have been any different? In the end? Why couldn't)

"Therefore, prophesy and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God: Behold, O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel.

"And ye shall know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and brought you up out of your graves."

(Stone-cold graves. Who will roll away the rock now? O my Jesus. O my people. O my family. O my Sarah. O my soul. I did love you, child. You knew that. Sarah. On your deathbed you forgave me, you wept. Don't cry, girl. I know I haven't been as good a wife—Don't say that, girl—as I should—Don't, Sarah—have been. Sarah, a man couldn't ask for a better—But Barden . . . She always called me by my last name, like in

the military, "Barden," it put a kind of formal ring to it, together in the Army of the Lord . . . But, Barden, a wife should tend to *all* her husband's needs, I didn't, Barden, God forgive me, you understand, please say you forgive—There ain't nothing to forgive, baby girl, please hush your crying, please, Sarah, you ain't done nothing. Barden, I know you had to seek comfort in another woman's bed, I—That's not true, Sarah. And she just closed her eyes *tight* and clenched her fists and shook her head from side to side and I knew she knew I was lying. I know, Barden, ain't no use in denying it, but I don't blame you, it's my fault. Lord, I cried. Salty, hot, stinging tears, I can feel them on my face like I'm crying now. But I can't cry here. Such shame. I ran to the rock to hide my face and the rock cried out: No hiding place, Where do you turn to hide such shame, O Lord, I'm ashamed)

"And shall put my Spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I, the Lord, have spoken it, and performed it, saith the Lord."

Listen to that again, Brothers and Sisters. These slain of Israel have been hitched together, bone to bone, flesh to flesh, and what do they say: "Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost; we are cut off from our parts." And the Lord says: *I shall put my Spirit in you, and ye shall live. Then shall ye know that I, the Lord, have spoken it, and performed it, saith the Lord. . . . Shall put my Spirit in you, and ye shall live.* What I want to talk about today, Beloved, is To Live Without Hope. To Live Without Hope. Now I say "live" but what kind of life can a man lead without hope? Oh, he can walk around, have a

good job, drive a fancy car, wear fine, expensive clothes, eat steak every night, be full of form and fashion and outside show to the world. But without hope? He's like those dried bones full of wind and sound, cut off from his parts. He is not *alive*, he just *exists*. There is no life without hope. It is hope and only hope which gives his existence meaning and gives him life. Hope which moves upon the flesh and gives it meaning. Who among us can dwell without hope? How many of us do? None who live.

(Am I so bad to want to live, son? *Live*, Papa? You have to dishonor my mother, sleeping around, a god-damned minister, in order to *live*? Jesus, Papa— You don't understand, son, understand what it means to . . . ? Talk talk talk words weak vessels for carrying meaning, if only I could have made him understand. *Live*, Louise, I lived for those meetings, those quick moments of sweet breath, in motel rooms in Jacksonville and Wilmington and Goldsboro and wherever we could and did, in a car in the woods, in your sister's house far from the eyes of the Lord's flock, my flock, when we should have been at work, when I should have been tending my flock, and you your husband, me my wife, my son, O my son, lies, lies to cover sin, sin breeds like hogs to the litter, littering my life with shame. That's what I'd tell him now, Carl, I couldn't bear the shame of it, son, don't you see to bear the shame I needed strength, physical strength, the spirit was willing but the flesh was so weak, son, you ought to know that, you're flesh and bone, my bone, strength Sarah wouldn't couldn't give, she wouldn't have me anymore, and once I fell I needed a hiding place, a place to hide my shame, and shame

bred more shame, and then I was sinking in shame, sinking in my sweet baby's arms. I need a hiding place, O God, where will I hide now? Hide me away. I wish the Lord would hide me)

Ole Goose. Barden sees Goose as a boy (Richard Allen Tate, who they called Goose because of his long neck), hard-working, youngest of thirteen children. Fatherless. All in a house with broken Miss Luella Tate. Goose the runt of the litter. Sees Goose being chased by Haz Jones with a chicken snake. Goose hated snakes. Goose stuttered. Sees Goose as a man, thin and wiry, but a good worker still, a hard worker, a good man, selfless. He'd give you the shoes off his feet. Sees his family: his wife, Louise; his daughters, Marie, Phyllis, Corine. Sees the old house of Miss Luella's that Goose tries to keep up while holding two jobs and farming a little too. Sees him trying to keep ahead, especially after getting Louise Simpson to marry him, the apple of his heart. Sees him fighting bills, always behind, sees him fretting over his daughters, who will not work, and the one who is pregnant . . . again. Sees him help his brothers and sisters and anybody he knows in need, though they always seem to have more than he does. Funny, ain't it? He wouldn't deny a soul. Not Goose. Sees people laugh at him when his greying head is turned, calling him a fool. Sees them accept any and all help he will offer and tell him to his face what a good man he is. Barden thinks: Of all men to cuckold, why good ole Goose?

And where does hope come from? Ezekiel tells us. From one place. I shall put my Spirit in you, and ye shall live. Ye shall live, saith the Lord. With hope. Hope from

the Spirit. Hope is a spirit. A spirit from the Lord. If you have breath, if you have muscles and gus, if you have bones and you have not hope, you are as dead twigs in the dust. But if you have the Spirit of God, then you shall live, as it says in Titus, Chapter One, Verse Two: "In hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised before the world began." Hope, before the world began. Hope, Brothers and Sisters. Hope that we shall not die; hope that though our flesh decay, our breath rush out of us, our bones shatter asunder, we shall be free. We shall have eternal life. Hope.

(You lie here before me, baby girl, it's hard to believe. You're cold, child. I wish I could warm you. You're cold and I'm scared and feeling so alone up here, lying, lying, lying. Look at you. Just look. Who would have thought that to see you—thin in those days, your face all cheeks and dimples, your smiling lips painted bright red, and the way you kept yourself dressed so fine in your pumps and tight dresses—Oh, they whispered about you the way they always whisper, just jealous of your melons, gal—smelling sweet . . . Who would have thought to see you here now, cold and dead. Your face is chalky, Louise, and I am scared to look upon you. Cold. I'll be there soon and very soon, I can feel it in my joints when the weather changes, see the jowls hanging lower each year, and, Louise, I'm losing more hair, I'm growing balder and balder and) That's what I'm talking about this morning, my children. Can I get an Amen? . . . Hope. Hope which springeth eternal and reneweth life. Hope which parts the Red Sea and makes a dry bed for your feet; hope

which is a pillar of fire for us to see by night and a billowing cloud to guide us by day; hope which makes the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the halt to walk; hope which turns water to wine, O sweet Jesus, and feeds the multitude and calms the raging sea, peace, be still, peace, be still, for I have hope; hope, O my beloved, which comes to us as a dove bearing the olive branch, and which can cast out demons and raise the dead. Hope, O my Brother, O my Sister, hope which can raise dry bones, clothe them in meat, give them breath, and make them whole again. Hope to make *you* whole.

(Once I felt whole. But that was so long ago I can barely remember. Has it been twenty years? Years in which we'd mostly sit, of an evening, alone before the TV, at home, fruit of our labors, after a day of collecting insurance for the Mutual I'd come home to a meal of Sarah's neck bones and rice and cabbage and sit before the TV and nod, in our house of which we were both so proud, in our house, in my chair before the TV, nodding, not talking, not awake, not living, existing, Sarah knitting or doing the crosswords, neither one of us paying any attention to the TV, in our red brick house with the three bedrooms, the dining room, the living room we rarely used, the two bathrooms, all dustless and spotless from her constant attention, everything in its place, all full of nice polished furniture with the carpet and the plants and the pictures of family, and we'd just sit and I'd dream of nothing, just nod, not tired but weary, just like now, weary, Lord, weary of sin, weary of existence, you've taken them both and left me to find out what I've been preaching all these years, left me to



come at it face to face. Maybe I'll call Carl tonight and say: Son, I've come face to face with shame, I can't run anymore, the Lord took away my hiding place, I can't run anymore, I'm too weary, son, of running, Lord, I want to hide, like Jonah in the belly of the whale, don't send me back to that house, full of shame)

The preacher tells us in Ecclesiastes: "For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope; for a living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know that they shall die; but the dead know not anything." I stand as a witness today to tell you there's a lot of dead folk walking among us, children. Don't laugh. I ain't talking about them ghoulish movie pictures or what you see on TV. You all know what I'm talking about, they may *appear* to be lions in life, but there is no life to them. Why? Cause they have no hope. They are cut off from the one thing which could give their existence meaning, from the one port where they could seek safe harbor in the storm, from the place of comfort in times of sickness and despair, from that which steels us against the terror that flies by night and walks by day, from the eternal knowledge that the soul is safe in our Lord. Let the church say: Amen.

(Who shall hide me now? I have no place to go. I am the living dead denied the grave. No harbor. No nipple to suckle, no buttock to caress. I was a fool who lived by grace and I abused grace, I used grace like a whore. That's what I preach, that's how I lived: *Grace is sufficient*. But why doesn't grace comfort me? Have I murdered grace? Grace once had wings, but I rode it unto death)

For it is through hope that we attain grace, Dearly Beloved, and it is through God's grace that we attain salvation. Our sins are wiped clean and we are made pure again. Purified by the blood of the Lamb, who died so that we could be made whole.

(I shall never be purified. I cannot believe You will forgive me, Father, the prophets say your mercy is everlasting but in my heart I know I've run my course, so many many many sins. O my sins are thick and vile like working maggots. How can I approach the throne in prayer mottled as I am in filth and shame? I am a broken lyre, O Lord, beyond repair. Discard me, Yah-weh, snuff me out. I deserve no hope)

Hope, my Brothers and Sisters, leads to faith and faith to prayer and prayer to forgiveness and forgiveness to salvation. Hope is the building block. Hope is the first gift on which all else is built. Hope, faith, and charity. And above all these three charity, love, gives us hope, which leads us to salvation.

(Seeing her on the hospital bed took my hope away, I could hear it flutter away on sooty wings, amid all that gurgling from the tubes up her nose and highfalutin machinery flashing, Louise, I wished I could die for you, gal, all those moments of lust, rolling in my sweet baby's arms, I didn't feel shame then, I felt safe, you were my hope, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Moses, I worshipped your behind, your tender parts were the temple, even when I snuck into the hospital knowing ole Goose wouldn't be there, while I pretended to pray over you, all I could think of were those days of salvation between your legs. Why should I worry about your soul, my



soul, when your spirit was upon me? And when you got sick and I should have returned to Jehovah, my hope remained in you, I never asked about your soul, child. Were you right with God, Louise?

I knew Sister Tate as we all did, Beloved, I look on her husband and daughters before me and before God, and I offer you comfort in knowing she knew hope. How could we know her and not remember her kindness, her strength, her work for the Lord? Yes, she had hope, my children. Grieve not for her, for the Lord has claimed his own.

(One way or the other you were claimed, Louise, by damnation or divine heaven, claimed. What will you claim of me, sweet Louise, claim of us?)

Fear not, my blessed ones. If you have hope, true hope, ye shall live.

(Whither goeth Thy prophet, O Lord? Have You seen him of late? There he is, Lord! Lurking twixt the thighs of Babylon, the weak fool! Nuzzling at the teat of iniquity like a babe forlorn. What happened to him, Lord? Why did he claim false gods? Why does he just to drink poison as though it were milk? How can he prophesy with the Devil's passion on his lips? How can he preach salvation while drooling lies? As for me and my house, there is no hope, I have no wings to veil my face, O Lord)

For salvation rests with those who against hope believe in hope.

("The fool hath said in his heart there is no God." What kind of fool am I who'd rather deny God than face Him? Do I hear wings? Do they come or do they go? Or is it just the sound of the wind?)

Trust in the Lord, for it is He who shall deliver you in this and all other hours of need, in your time of trouble, and in your moment of despair. Trust in the Lord, who cannot lie, who maketh the crooked edges straight and the rough road smooth. Blessed be the name of the Lord. Amen. Amen. Amen.