

Readings

Please read the following selections in your coursepack:

- Gilyard, Keith and Anissa Wardi. *African American Literature*.
 - Chapter 6 Introduction, “Stories of Migration”
 - Rainey, Ma. “Traveling Blues”
 - Smith, Bessie and Clara Smith. “Faraway Blues”
 - Morrison, Toni. Excerpt from *Jazz*
 - Ellison, Ralph. Excerpt from *Invisible Man*

Discussions

Unit 4: The Great Migration

Explain why the Great Migration is seen as a central event in African America the assigned writers convey the contradictions and assumptions inherent in t migration from a “home” called the South to the urban landscapes of the Noi is most effective? Use direct evidence from this unit’s assigned reading selec view.

Make your initial post by 11:59 p.m. U.S. EST/EDT on Day 4 of Unit 4. Then, and respond to at least two of them. Make your final posts by 11:59 p.m. U.S unit.

- Gilyard, Keith and Anissa Wardi. *African American Literature*.
 - Chapter 6 Introduction, “Stories of Migration”
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 - Morrison, Toni. Excerpt from *Jazz*
 - Ellison, Ralph. Excerpt from *Invisible Man*

Migration is one of the dominant themes in the African American artistic tradition. Treatments of migration can be found in spirituals, blues songs, folktales, visual artworks, and literary texts. Movement, both forced and chosen, has been a major factor in determining the contours of African American culture. During the antebellum period, movement was severely limited, as enslaved peoples were not permitted the choice of where or how they would live and were often required to carry passes simply to move outside of plantation boundaries. Even free African Americans in the South were restricted when attempting to cross state lines. After the abolition of the international slave trade in 1808, there was still a great deal of forced domestic migration. In fact, the laws prohibiting the international slave trade did not eradicate the importation of Africans to the Americas, but they further created a sense of labor shortage that slave traders capitalized on, selling captives to the deep South and West in unprecedented numbers. In this way, forced dislocation and the consequent familial separation for African Americans actually increased as a result of these laws.

Therefore, the ability to choose one's destination is a marker of freedom in African American culture and has found expression in a number of venues. One of the most prominent migratory experiences in African American culture and literature is the post-Reconstruction movement from the rural South to urban northern centers. The Great Migration, as it is often labeled, refers to the first wave of mass migration, from 1915–1940, and is considered one of the largest American internal migrations to date. The heaviest flow of this migration occurred after the onset of World War I. From 1916–1919,

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approximately half a million African Americans left their Southern homes, and another million followed in the 1920s.

A series of incidents and conditions led to this mass migration. In the decade before World War I, a boll weevil infestation devastated cotton crops. The boll weevil, which originated in Mexico, is a small insect that attacks cotton plants; the damage it wreaked on crop yields during that period was as high as 50 percent. Many Southern African American sharecroppers were hit hard by these losses. In addition to the boll weevil infestation, a series of floods in the Mississippi Valley in the late nineteenth century compounded farmers' economic crises, often resulting in staggering levels of unemployment.

Another major factor that led to the first migration was wartime industry, which generated a great need for laborers who could work in factories in Northern industrial centers. As the flow of European immigration halted during World War I, and as many white soldiers were fighting overseas, the jobs that once had been closed to African Americans now welcomed this Southern migrant population. Some employment organizations sent agents to the South to recruit workers by promoting labor conditions in Northern mills and factories. These businesses' promise of higher wages was certainly a strong motivation for African Americans to relocate, for the money differential between similar jobs in the South and North was considerable. For example, female domestics in Chicago earned on average \$2 a day, which was what they could expect to earn for a week's worth of work in the South, and unskilled factory workers could earn as much as \$5 per day in the North.

While all of these factors certainly created conditions that made it more amenable for Blacks to uproot and move North, the need for wartime labor and harsh economic conditions cannot alone explain this massive relocation. Much of the movement North undoubtedly was spurred by the oppressive social conditions of the South. From injustices in the court system to all forms of mistreatment, sanctioned through either laws or customs, African American lives in the South were circumscribed by institutionalized forms of white racism.

Of all of the horrors, lynching was the emblematic act of Southern terror, and men and women were lynched for a variety of reasons, including trying to vote, testifying against whites in court, seeking alternative employment, and being “disrespectful” to whites. African American men, who made up the majority of lynching victims, were often charged with the crime of raping white women, and, while the vast majority of these cases were based on trumped-up charges, protecting white womanhood was a rallying cry that prompted masses of whites to gather for grotesque

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lynching and burning spectacles. Statistics indicate that between 1890 and 1917, two to three African Americans were lynched and burned every week in the American South. As demographic studies reveal, a great number of African Americans would flee to the North after a highly public lynching, making this phenomenon a significant factor in migration. This raises another important issue, namely, that urban migration was at times spontaneous and without structured leadership—although white resistance to African American migration could be quite organized. Many white Southerners were outraged by this enormous flight by the African American population; at times, they refused to sell railroad tickets to African American customers. Despite this resistance, many people did leave the South, ironically occupying segregated railroad cars that epitomized their living conditions there.

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Many of the oppressive conditions for African Americans in the South were the result of the United States’ Supreme Court’s 1896 decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which affirmed the constitutionality of laws that mandated separate but equal accommodations for African Americans. These segregation statutes were commonly known as “Jim Crow” laws and extended to all areas of life in the South, including schools, buses, hospitals, bank windows, elevators, and trains. Indeed, the Jim Crow train cars were connected to baggage cars that were dirty and filled with exhaust. Despite these unsanitary conditions, the railway cars often were so crowded that some passengers had to stand in the aisles throughout the journey. In the South, the dining car was closed to African American travelers, as were restroom facilities. Despite these restraints, many people persevered, and some passengers marked the momentous crossing of the Mason-Dixon line by singing, praying, and rejoicing for their new lives.

The use of trains as a symbol for freedom was especially significant during slavery, as the network of freed and escaped African Americans and white abolitionists who provided temporary shelter to them, and the secret routes that spanned from the deep South to Canada, was known as the “Underground Railroad.” While not a literal railroad, this important association aided fugitive slaves in their often-harrowing journey to the North and Canada by providing cover despite the dangers involved. Some historians have posited that participants in the Underground Railroad communicated secret messages of escape and meetings to one another through the lyrics of spirituals that thematize movement, such as “There’s a great camp meeting in the Promised Land.” In fact, migration is, as noted in Chapter Two, a recurrent theme in African American spirituals.

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These longings for freedom through movement, so pronounced in earlier years, are central concerns throughout the twentieth century as well. As evidenced in blues songs and migration novels, the African American expressive tradition has continued to focus on travel, yet this treatment is anything but monolithic. Although many works retain the impulse to travel as a marker of freedom and agency, as the selections in this chapter attest, there were losses associated with relocation. Whereas Ma Rainey’s “Traveling Blues” revoices the train as the primary means of movement and reinforces the act of travel as potentially liberating, she has no particular destination in mind, and thus it is the mere fact of movement, not any vision of an ideal location at the end of her journey, that assures her of freedom. By contrast, “Far Away Blues” suggests that travel itself constitutes the blues. Unlike the aimless journeying in Ma Rainey’s song, Bessie and Clara Smith address Northern migration as potentially damaging and cite it as a source of solitude and despair. In fact, many treatments of Northern migration in the African American tradition are characterized by expressions of communal displacement. This is particularly true of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods* (1901), which is generally considered the first major migration novel. The story chronicles Southern injustices while revealing the pernicious effects of New York City on the moral character of the Hamilton family, which results in a reverse migration back to the South.

Likewise, we see a rather complicated treatment of Harlem, as a

Likewise, we see a rather complicated treatment of Harlem, as a primary destination of migration in the early twentieth century, with the inclusion of pieces by Alain Locke and Toni Morrison. “The New Negro,” the title essay of Locke’s 1925 anthology, captures the tenor of the New Negro Movement, or what we now label the Harlem Renaissance. Although the essay reveals Locke’s elitist position, as it speaks both to and for the concerns of the educated classes, Locke clearly recognizes that it is the migrants who are changing Harlem into a “race capital,” a virtual Mecca for African Diasporic people. Morrison’s *Jazz* (1991), also representing 1920s Harlem, balances Locke’s optimistic view with a critique of urban social conditions of the time. Harlem, referred to merely as the “City” in Morrison’s novel, is at once a site of freedom for migrants Joe and Violet Trace and the source of their alienation and estrangement. Ralph Ellison, too, offers an expression of migration as a complicated and at times contradictory ritual. In *Invisible Man* (1952), Ellison deftly uses the motif of food as a marker of home and identity and thus explores

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migration as an act of dislocation. Given the exigencies of Southern life in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, it is reasonable to conclude that the move from South to North was coterminous with a desire to forget the past and claim new, often citified personas. Thus, it is noteworthy that in the passage from *Invisible Man* included here, it is food from home—yams—that materializes for the migrants the costs associated with migration.

We end this chapter with a selection from Arthur Flowers’s *Another*

sonas. Thus, it is noteworthy that in the passage from *Invisible Man* included here, it is food from home—yams—that materializes for the migrants the costs associated with migration.

We end this chapter with a selection from Arthur Flowers’s *Another Good Loving Blues* (1993) because it showcases a salient migratory experience that was contained below the Mason-Dixon border. This is an important narrative of migration because it charts the move from the rural to the urban South, which itself represented a radical shift of lifestyle, culture, and home.

Further Reading:

- Adero, Malaika, ed. *Up South: Stories, Studies, and Letters of this Century’s African-American Migrations*. New York: The New Press, 1993.
- Griffin, Farah Jasmine. “Who Set You Flowin’?: The African-American Migration Narrative.” New York: Oxford, 1995.
- Grossman, James R. *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners and the Great Migration*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- LeMann, Nicholas. *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America*. New York: Knopf, 1991.
- Litwack, Leon F. *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*. New York: Vintage Books, 1998.
- Steppt, Robert. *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991.
- Wright, Richard. 1941. *12 Million Black Voices*. New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1988.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

(1872–1906)

For biographical information on Dunbar see page 62 (Chapter One). Following is Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods*, a seminal novel in African American letters that tells the story of the Hamilton family’s struggle to survive in Harlem during the turn of the twentieth century.

sophical dimensions of the New Negro movement, Locke is remembered

Toni Morrison

(1931–)

For biographical information about Toni Morrison see page 36 (Chapter One). In the following excerpt from Morrison's sixth novel, Jazz, she captures the excitement and fear that accompanied the Southerners' migration. Focusing specifically on Joe and Violet Trace, who "train-danced" their way into Harlem, Morrison explores the perils of city life.

Jazz

1 They met in Vesper County, Virginia, under a walnut tree. She had been working in the fields like everybody else, and stayed past picking time to live with a family twenty miles away from her own. They knew people in common; and suspected they had at least one relative in common. They were drawn together because they had been put together, and all they decided for themselves was when and where to meet at night.

2 Violet and Joe left Tyrell, a railway stop through Vesper County, in 1906, and boarded the colored section of the Southern Sky. When the train trembled approaching the water surrounding the City, they thought it was like them: nervous at having gotten there at last, but terrified of what was on the other side. Eager, a little scared, they did not even nap during the fourteen hours of a ride smoother than a rocking cradle. The quick darkness in the carriage cars when they shot through a tunnel made them wonder if maybe there was a wall ahead to crash into or a cliff hanging over nothing. The train shivered with them at the thought but went on and sure enough there was ground up ahead and the trembling became the dancing under their feet. Joe stood up, his fingers clutching the baggage rack above his head. He felt the dancing better that way, and told Violet to do the same.

3 They were hanging there, a young country couple, laughing and tapping back at the tracks, when the attendant came through, please

the dancing better that way, and told Violet to do the same.

3 They were hanging there, a young country couple, laughing and tapping back at the tracks, when the attendant came through, pleasant but unsmiling now that he didn't have to smile in this car full of colored people.

4 "Breakfast in the dining car. Breakfast in the dining car. Good morning. Full breakfast in the dining car." He held a carriage blanket over his arm and from underneath it drew a pint bottle of milk,

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which he placed in the hands of a young woman with a baby asleep across her knees. "Full breakfast."

5 He never got his way, this attendant. He wanted the whole coach to file into the dining car, now that they could. Immediately, now that they were out of Delaware and a long way from Maryland there would be no green-as-poison curtain separating the colored people eating from the rest of the diners. The cooks would not feel obliged to pile extra helpings on the plates headed for the curtain; three lemon slices in the iced tea, two pieces of coconut cake arranged to look like one—to take the sting out of the curtain; homey it up with a little extra on the plate. Now, skirting the City, there were no green curtains; the whole car could be full of colored people and everybody on a first-come first-serve basis. If only they would. If only they would tuck those little boxes and baskets underneath the seat; close those paper bags, for once, put the bacon-stuffed biscuits back into the cloth they were wrapped in, and troop single file through the five cars ahead on into the dining car, where the table linen was at least as white as the sheets they dried on juniper bushes; where the napkins were folded with a crease as stiff as the ones they ironed for Sunday dinner; where the gravy was as smooth as their own, and the biscuits did

folded with a crease as stiff as the ones they ironed for Sunday dinner; where the gravy was as smooth as their own, and the biscuits did not take second place to the bacon-stuffed ones they wrapped in cloth. Once in a while it happened. Some well-shod woman with two young girls, a preacherly kind of man with a watch chain and a rolled-brim hat might stand up, adjust their clothes and weave through the coaches toward the tables, foamy white with heavy silvery knives and forks. Presided over and waited upon by a black man who did not have to lace his dignity with a smile.

6 Joe and Violet wouldn't think of it—paying money for a meal they had not missed and that required them to sit still at, or worse, separated by, a table. Not now. Not entering the lip of the City dancing all the way. Her hip bones rubbed his thigh as they stood in the aisle unable to stop smiling. They weren't even there yet and already the City was speaking to them. They were dancing. And like a million others, chests pounding, tracks controlling their feet, they stared out the windows for first sight of the City that danced with them, proving already how much it loved them. Like a million more they could hardly wait to get there and love it back.

7 Some were slow about it and traveled from Georgia to Illinois, to the City, back to Georgia, out to San Diego and finally, shaking their heads, surrendered themselves to the City. Others knew right away that it was for them, this City and no other. They came on a whim

because there it was and why not? They came after much planning, many letters written to and from, to make sure and know how and how much and where. They came for a visit and forgot to go back to tall cotton or short. Discharged with or without honor, fired with or without severance, dispossessed with or without notice, they hung around for a while and then could not imagine themselves anywhere else. Others came because a relative or hometown buddy said, Man, you best see this place before you die; or, We got room now, so pack your suitcase and don't bring no high-top shoes.

- 8 However they came, when or why, the minute the leather of their soles hit the pavement—there was no turning around. Even if the room they rented was smaller than the heifer's stall and darker than a morning privy, they stayed to look at their number, hear themselves in an audience, feel themselves moving down the street among hundreds of others who moved the way they did, and who, when they spoke, regardless of the accent, treated language like the same intricate, malleable toy designed for their play. Part of why they loved it was the specter they left behind. The slumped spines of the veterans of the 27th Battalion betrayed by the commander for whom they had fought like lunatics. The eyes of thousands, stupefied with disgust at having been imported by Mr. Armour, Mr. Swift, Mr. Montgomery Ward to break strikes then dismissed for having done so. The broken shoes of two thousand Galveston longshoremen that Mr. Mallory would never pay fifty cents an hour like the white ones. The praying palms, the raspy breathing, the quiet children of the ones who had escaped from Springfield Ohio, Springfield Indiana, Greensburg Indiana, Wilmington Delaware, New Orleans Louisiana, after ravaging whites had foamed all over the lanes and yards of home.

- 9 The wave of black people running from want and violence

Indiana, Wilmington Delaware, New Orleans Louisiana, after ravaging whites had foamed all over the lanes and yards of home.

- 9 The wave of black people running from want and violence crested in the 1870s; the '80s; the '90s but was a steady stream in 1906 when Joe and Violet joined it. Like the others, they were country people, but how soon country people forget. When they fall in love with a city, it is for forever, and it is like forever. As though there never was a time when they didn't love it. The minute they arrive at the train station or get off the ferry and glimpse the wide streets and the wasteful lamps lighting them, they know they are born for it. There, in a city, they are not so much new as themselves: their stronger, riskier selves. And in the beginning when they first arrive, and twenty years later when they and the City have grown up, they love that part of themselves so much they forget what loving other people was like—if they ever knew, that is. I don't

mean they hate them, no, just that what they start to love is the way a person is in the City; the way a schoolgirl never pauses at a stoplight but looks up and down the street before stepping off the curb; how men accommodate themselves to tall buildings and wee porches, what a woman looks like moving in a crowd, or how shocking her profile is against the backdrop of the East River. The restfulness in kitchen chores when she knows the lamp oil or the staple is just around the corner and not seven miles away; the amazement of throwing open the window and being hypnotized for hours by people on the street below.

- 10 Little of that makes for love, but it does pump desire. The woman

hours by people on the street below.

- 10 Little of that makes for love, but it does pump desire. The woman who churned a man's blood as she leaned all alone on a fence by a country road might not expect even to catch his eye in the City. But if she is clipping quickly down the big-city street in heels, swinging her purse, or sitting on a stoop with a cool beer in her hand, dangling her shoe from the toes of her foot, the man, reacting to her posture, to soft skin on stone, the weight of the building stressing the delicate, dangling shoe, is captured. And he'd think it was the woman he wanted, and not some combination of curved stone, and a swinging, high-heeled shoe moving in and out of sunlight. He would know right away the deception, the trick of shapes and light and movement, but it wouldn't matter at all because the deception was part of it too. Anyway, he could feel his lungs going in and out. There is no air in the City but there is breath, and every morning it races through him like laughing gas brightening his eyes, his talk, and his expectations. In no time at all he forgets little pebbly creeks and apple trees so old they lay their branches along the ground and you have to reach down or stoop to pick the fruit. He forgets a sun that used to slide up like the yolk of a good country egg, thick and red-orange at the bottom of the sky, and he doesn't miss it, doesn't look up to see what happened to it or to stars made irrelevant by the light of thrilling, wasteful street lamps.

- 11 That kind of fascination, permanent and out of control, seizes children, young girls, men of every description, mothers, brides, and barfly women, and if they have their way and get to the City, they feel more like themselves, more like the people they always believed they were. Nothing can pry them away from that; the City is what they want it to be: thriftless, warm, scary and full of amiable strangers. No wonder they forget pebbly creeks and when they do not forget the sky completely think of it as a tiny piece of information about the time of day or night.

12 But I have seen the City do an unbelievable sky. Redcaps and dining-car attendants who wouldn't think of moving out of the City sometimes go on at great length about country skies they have seen from the windows of trains. But there is nothing to beat what the City can make of a night sky. It can empty itself of surface, and more like the ocean than the ocean itself, go deep, starless. Close up on the tops of buildings, near, nearer than the cap you are wearing, such a city sky presses and retreats, presses and retreats, making me think of the free but illegal love of sweethearts before they are discovered. Looking at it, this night sky booming over a glittering city, it's possible for me to avoid dreaming of what I know is in the ocean, and the bays and tributaries it feeds: the two-seat aeroplanes, nose down in the muck, pilot and passenger staring at schools of passing bluefish; money, soaked and salty in canvas bags, or waving their edges gently from metal bands made to hold them forever. They are down there, along with yellow flowers that eat water beetles and eggs floating away from thrashing fins; along with the children who made a mistake in the parents they chose; along with slabs of Carrara pried from unfashionable buildings. There are bottles too, made of glass beautiful enough to rival stars I cannot see above me because the city sky has hidden them. Otherwise, if it wanted to, it could show me stars cut from the lamé gowns of chorus girls, or mirrored in the eyes of sweethearts furtive and happy under the pressure of a deep, touchable sky.

13 But that's not all a city sky can do. It can go purple and keep an orange heart so the clothes of the people on the streets glow like dance-hall costumes. I have seen women stir shirts into boiled starch or put the tiniest stitches into their hose while a girl straightens the hair of her sister at the stove, and all the while heaven, unnoticed and as beautiful as an Iroquois, drifts past their windows. As well as the windows where sweethearts, free and illegal, tell each other things.

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14 Twenty years after Joe and Violet train-danced on into the City, they were still a couple but barely speaking to each other, let alone laughing together or acting like the ground was a dance-hall floor. Convinced that he alone remembers those days, and wants them back, aware of what it looked like but not at all of what it felt like, he coupled himself elsewhere. He rented a room from a neighbor who knows the exact cost of her discretion. Six hours a week he has purchased. Time for the city sky to move from a thin ice blue to purple with a heart of gold. And time enough, when the sun sinks, to tell his new love things he never told his wife.

Ralph Ellison

(1913–1994)

*Named for Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ralph Waldo Ellison was born on March 1, 1913, in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, to Lewis Alfred and Ida Millsap Ellison, who moved from the South to Oklahoma in order to provide better opportunities for their two sons. Educated in segregated schools, Ellison graduated from high school in 1931 and attended Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, where he continued his conservatory training and study of music theory from 1933 to 1936. Ellison became interested in modern literature at Tuskegee, and before he could complete an undergraduate degree, he left the school for New York City, where he participated in the Federal Writers' Project and met such notables as Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and Alain Locke. Ellison lectured on African American folklore and music and taught at many universities, including Columbia, Princeton, and New York University, where he taught for many years and was named the Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities. Ellison published collections of essays and stories, including *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986), as well as one novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), for which he won the National Book Award in 1953. *Invisible Man*, considered Ellison's magnum opus, is a richly textured bildungsroman (a novel about the moral and psychological growth of the main character) replete with allusions to African American folklore, history, and culture. *Invisible Man* remains one of the most significant novels in the American literary tradition. After Ellison's death, a second, unfinished novel, *Juneteenth* (1999), was published.*

- 1 At first I had turned away from the window and tried to read but my mind kept wandering back to my old problems and, unable to endure it any longer, I rushed from the house, extremely agitated but determined to get away from my hot thoughts into the chill air.
- 2 At the entrance I bumped against a woman who called me a filthy name, only causing me to increase my speed. In a few minutes I was several blocks away, having moved to the next avenue and downtown. The streets were covered with ice and soot-flecked snow and from above a feeble sun filtered through the haze. I walked with my head down, feeling the biting air. And yet I was hot, burning with an inner

fever. I barely raised my eyes until a car, passing with a thudding of skid chains whirled completely around on the ice, then turned cautiously and thudded off again.

- 3 I walked slowly on, blinking my eyes in the chill air, my mind a blur with the hot inner argument continuing. The whole of Harlem seemed to fall apart in the swirl of snow. I imagined I was lost and for a moment there was an eerie quiet. I imagined I heard the fall of snow upon snow. What did it mean? I walked, my eyes focused into the endless succession of barber shops, beauty parlors, confectioneries, luncheonettes, fish houses, and hog maw joints, walking close to the windows, the snowflakes lacing swift between, simultaneously forming a curtain, a veil, and stripping it aside. A flash of red and gold from a window filled with religious articles caught my eye. And behind the film of frost etching the glass I saw two brashly painted plaster images of Mary and Jesus surrounded by dream books, love powders, God-Is-Love signs, money-drawing oil and plastic dice. A black statue of a nude

of Mary and Jesus surrounded by dream books, love powders, God-Is-Love signs, money-drawing oil and plastic dice. A black statue of a nude Nubian slave grinned out at me from beneath a turban of gold. I passed on to a window decorated with switches of wiry false hair, ointments guaranteed to produce the miracle of whitening black skin. "You too can be truly beautiful," a sign proclaimed. "Win greater happiness with whiter complexion. Be outstanding in your social set."

- 4 I hurried on, suppressing a savage urge to push my fist through the pane. A wind was rising, the snow thinning. Where would I go? To a movie? Could I sleep there? I ignored the windows now and walked along, becoming aware that I was muttering to myself again. Then far down at the corner I saw an old man warming his hands against the sides of an odd-looking wagon, from which a stove pipe reeled off a thin spiral of smoke that drifted the odor of baking yams slowly to me, bringing a stab of swift nostalgia. I stopped as though struck by a shot, deeply inhaling, remembering, my mind surging back, back. At home we'd bake them in the hot coals of the fireplace, had carried them cold to school for lunch; munched them secretly, squeezing the sweet pulp from the soft peel as we hid from the teacher behind the largest book, the *World's Geography*. Yes,

secretly, squeezing the sweet pulp from the soft peel as we hid from the teacher behind the largest book, the *World's Geography*. Yes, and we'd loved them candied, or baked in a cobbler, deep-fat fried in a pocket of dough, or roasted with pork and glazed with the well-browned fat; had chewed them raw—yams and years ago. More yams than years ago, though the time seemed endlessly expanded, stretched thin as the spiraling smoke beyond all recall.

I moved again. "Get yo' hot, baked Carolina yam," he called. At the corner the old man, wrapped in an army overcoat, his feet covered

with gunny sacks, his head in a knitted cap, was puttering with a stack of paper bags. I saw a crude sign on the side of the wagon proclaiming YAMS, as I walked flush into the warmth thrown by the coals that glowed in a grate underneath.

- 6 "How much are your yams?" I said, suddenly hungry.
- 7 "They ten cents and they sweet," he said, his voice quavering with age. "These ain't none of them binding ones neither. These here is real, sweet, yaller yams. How many?"
- 8 "One," I said, "If they're that good, one should be enough."
- 9 He gave me a searching glance. There was a tear in the corner of his eye. He chuckled and opened the door of the improvised oven, reaching gingerly with his gloved hand. The yams, some bubbling with syrup, lay on a wire rack above glowing coals that leaped to low blue flame when struck by the draft of air. The flash of warmth set my face aglow as he removed one of the yams and shut the door.
- 10 "Here you are, suh," he said, starting to put the yam into a bag.
- 11 "Never mind the bag, I'm going to eat it. Here . . ."
- 12 "Thanks." He took the dime. "If that ain't a sweet one, I'll give you another one free of charge."

you another one free of charge."

13 I knew that it was sweet before I broke it; bubbles of brown syrup had burst the skin.

14 "Go ahead and break it," the old man said. "Break it and I'll give you some butter since you gon' eat it right here. Lots of folks takes 'em home. They got their own butter at home."

15 I broke it, seeing the sugary pulp steaming in the cold.

16 "Hold it over here," he said. He took a crock from a rack on the side of the wagon. "Right here."

17 I held it, watching him pour a spoonful of melted butter over the yam and the butter seeping in.

18 "Thanks."

19 "You welcome. And I'll tell you something."

20 "What's that?" I said.

21 "If that ain't the best eating you had in a long time, I give you your money back."

22 "You don't have to convince me," I said. "I can look at it and see it's good."

23 "You right, but everything what looks good ain't necessarily good," he said. "But these is."

24 I took a bite, finding it as sweet and hot as any I'd ever had, and was overcome with such a surge of homesickness that I turned away

to keep my control. I walked along, munching the yam, just as suddenly overcome by an intense feeling of freedom—simply because I was eating while walking along the street. It was exhilarating. I

to keep my control. I walked along, munching the yam, just as suddenly overcome by an intense feeling of freedom—simply because I was eating while walking along the street. It was exhilarating. I no longer had to worry about who saw me or about what was proper. To hell with all that, and as sweet as the yam actually was, it became like nectar with the thought. If only someone who had known me at school or at home would come along and see me now. How shocked they'd be! I'd push them into a side street and smear their faces with the peel. What a group of people we were, I thought. Why, you could cause us the greatest humiliation simply by confronting us with something we liked. Not *all* of us, but so many. Simply by walking up and shaking a set of chitterlings or a well-boiled hog maw at them during the clear light of day! What consternation it would cause! And I saw myself advancing upon Bledsoe, standing bare of his false humility in the crowded lobby of Men's House, and seeing him there and him seeing me and ignoring me and me enraged and suddenly whipping out a foot or two of chitterlings, raw, uncleaned and dripping sticky circles on the floor as I shake them in his face, shouting:

25 "Bledsoe, you're a shameless chitterling eater! I accuse you of relishing hog bowels! Ha! And not only do you eat them, you sneak and eat them in *private* when you think you're unobserved! You're a sneaking chitterling lover! I accuse you of indulging in a filthy habit, Bledsoe! Lug them out of there, Bledsoe! Lug them out so we can see! I accuse you before the eyes of the world!" And he lugs them out, yards of them, with mustard greens, and racks of pigs' ears, and pork chops and black-eyed peas with dull accusing eyes.

chops and black-eyed peas with dull accusing eyes.

26 I let out a wild laugh, almost choking over the yam as the scene spun before me. Why, with others present, it would be worse than if I had accused him of raping an old woman of ninety-nine years, weighing ninety pounds . . . blind in one eye and lame in the hip! Bledsoe would disintegrate, disinflate! With a profound sigh he'd drop his head in shame. He'd lose caste. The weekly newspapers would attack him. The captions over his picture: *Prominent Educator Reverts to Field-Niggerism!* His rivals would denounce him as a bad example for the youth. Editorials would demand that he either recant or retire from public life. In the South his white folks would desert him; he would be discussed far and wide, and all of the trustees' money couldn't prop up his sagging prestige. He'd end up an exile washing dishes at the Automat. For down South he'd be unable to get a job on the honey wagon.

27 This is all very wild and childish, I thought, but to hell with being ashamed of what you liked. No more of that for me. I am what I am! I wolfed down the yam and ran back to the old man and handed him twenty cents. "Give me two more," I said.

28 "Sho, all you want, long as I got 'em. I can see you a serious yam eater, young fellow. You eating them right away?"

29 "As soon as you give them to me," I said.

30 "You want 'em buttered?"

31 "Please."

32 "Sho, that way you can get the most out of 'em. Yessuh," he said, handing over the yams, "I can see you one of these old-fashioned yam eaters."

33 "They're my birthmark," I said. "I yam what I am!"

34 "Then you must be from South Carolina," he said with a grin.

35 "South Carolina nothing, where I come from we really go for yams."

36 "Come back tonight or tomorrow if you can eat some more," he called after me. "My old lady'll be out here with some hot sweet potato fried pies."

37 Hot fried pies, I thought sadly, moving away. I would probably have indigestion if I ate one—now that I no longer felt ashamed of the things I had always loved, I probably could no longer digest very many of them. What and how much had I lost by trying to do only what was expected of me instead of what I myself had wished to do? What a waste, what a senseless waste! But what of those things which you actually didn't like, not because you were not supposed to like them, not because to dislike them was considered a mark of refinement and education—but because you actually found them distasteful? The very idea annoyed me. How could you know? It involved a problem of choice. I would have to weigh many things carefully before deciding and there would be some things that would cause quite a bit of trouble, simply because I had never formed a personal attitude toward so much. I had accepted the accepted attitudes and it had made life seem simple . . .

38 But not yams, I had no problem concerning them and I would eat them whenever and wherever I took the notion. Continue on the yam level and life would be sweet—though somewhat yellowish. Yet the freedom to eat yams on the street was far less than I had expected upon coming to the city. An unpleasant taste bloomed in my mouth now as I bit the end of the yam and threw it into the street; it had been frost-bitten.

39 The wind drove me into a side street where a group of boys had set a packing box afire. The gray smoke hung low and seemed to thicken as I walked with my head down and eyes closed, trying to avoid the fumes. My lungs began to pain: then emerging, wiping my eyes and coughing, I almost stumbled over it: It was piled in a jumble along the walk and over the curb into the street, like a lot of junk waiting to be hauled away. Then I saw the sullen-faced crowd, looking at a building where two white men were totting out a chair in which an old woman sat: who, as I watched, struck at them feebly with her fists. A motherly-looking old woman with her head tied in a handkerchief, wearing a man's shoes and a man's heavy blue sweater. It was startling: The crowd watching silently, the two white men lugging the chair and trying to dodge the blows and the old woman's face streaming with angry tears as she thrashed at them with her fists. I couldn't believe it. Something, a sense of foreboding, filled me, a quick sense of uncleanness.

40 "Leave us alone," she cried, "leave us alone!" as the men pulled their heads out of range and sat her down abruptly at the curb, hurrying back in the building.

41 What on earth, I thought, looking above me. What on earth? The old woman sobbed, pointing to the stuff piled along the curb. "Just look what they doing to us. Just look," looking straight at me. And I realized that what I'd taken for junk was actually worn household furnishings.

42 "Just look at what they're doing," she said, her teary eyes upon my face.

43 I looked away embarrassed, staring into the rapidly growing crowd. Faces were peering sullenly from the windows above. And now as the two men reappeared at the top of the steps carrying a battered chest of drawers, I saw a third man come out and stand behind them, pulling at his ear as he looked out over the crowd.

44 "Shake it up, you fellows," he said, "shake it up. We don't have all day."

... way.

45 Then the men came down with the chest and I saw the crowd give way sullenly, the men trudging through, grunting and putting the chest at the curb, then returning into the building without a glance to left or right.

46 "Look at that," a slender man near me said. "We ought to beat the hell out of those paddies!"

47 I looked silently into his face, taut and ashy in the cold, his eyes trained upon the men going up the steps.

48 "Sho, we ought to stop 'em," another man said, "but ain't that much nerve in the whole bunch."

49 "There's plenty nerve," the slender man said. "All they need is someone to set it off. All they need is a leader. You mean *you* don't have the nerve."

50 "Who me?" the man said. "Who me?"

51 "Yes, you."

52 "Just look," the old woman said, "just look," her face still turned toward mine. I turned away, edging closer to the two men.

53 "Who are those men?" I said, edging closer.

54 "Marshals or something. I don't give a damn who they is."

55 "Marshals, hell," another man said. "Those guys doing all the totting ain't nothing but trusties. Soon as they get through they'll lock 'em up again."

56 "I don't care who they are, they got no business putting these old folks out on the sidewalk."

57 "You mean they're putting them out of their apartment?" I said. "They can do that up *here*?"

57 "You mean they're putting them out of their apartment?" I said.
 58 "They can do that up *here*?"
 59 "Man, where *you* from?" he said, swinging toward me. "What does
 it look they puttin' them out of, a Pullman car? They being evicted!"
 59 I was embarrassed; others were turning to stare. I had never seen
 an eviction. Someone snickered.
 60 "Where did *he* come from?"
 61 A flash of heat went over me and I turned. "Look, friend," I said,
 hearing a hot edge coming into my voice. "I asked a civil question.
 If you don't care to answer, don't, but don't try to make me look
 ridiculous."
 62 "Ridiculous? Hell, all scobos is ridiculous. Who the hell is you?"
 63 "Never mind, I am who I am. Just don't beat up your gums at me,"
 I said, throwing him a newly acquired phrase.
 64 Just then one of the men came down the steps with an armful of
 articles, and I saw the old woman reach up, yelling, "Take your hands
 off my Bible!" And the crowd surged forward.
 65 The white man's hot eyes swept the crowd. "Where, lady?" he
 said. "I don't see any Bible."
 66 And I saw her snatch the Book from his arms, clutching it fiercely
 and sending forth a shriek. "They can come in your home and do
 what they want to you," she said. "Just come stomping and jerk your
 life up by the roots! But this here's the last straw. They ain't going
 to bother with my Bible!"

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67 The white man eyed the crowd. "Look, lady," he said, more to the
 rest of us than to her, "I don't want to do this, I *have* to do it. They
 sent me up here to do it. If it was left to me, you could stay here till
 hell freezes over . . ."
 68 "These white folks, Lord. These white folks," she moaned, her
 eyes turned toward the sky, as an old man pushed past me and went
 to her.
 69 "Hon. Hon," he said, placing his hand on her shoulder. "It's the
 agent, not these gentlemen. He's the one. He says it's in the bank,
 but you know he's the one. We've done business with him for over
 twenty years."
 70 "Don't tell me," she said. "It's all the white folks, not just one.
 They all against us. Every stinking low-down one of them."
 71 "She's right!" a hoarse voice said. "She's right! They *all* is!"
 72 Something had been working fiercely inside me, and for a moment
 I had forgotten the rest of the crowd. Now I recognized a self-con-
 sciousness about them, as though they, we, were ashamed to witness
 the eviction, as though we were all unwilling intruders upon some
 shameful event; and thus we were careful not to touch or stare too
 hard at the effects that lined the curb; for we were witnesses of what
 we did not wish to see, though curious, fascinated, despite our shame,
 and through it all the old female, mind-plunging crying.
 73 I looked at the old people, feeling my eyes burn, my throat tighten.
 The old woman's sobbing was having a strange effect upon me—as
 when a child, seeing the tears of its parents is moved by both fear and
 sympathy to cry. I turned away, feeling myself being drawn to the
 old couple by a warm, dark, rising whirlpool of emotion which I
 feared. I was wary of what the sight of them crying there on the side-
 walk was making me begin to feel. I wanted to leave, but was too
 ashamed to leave, was rapidly becoming too much a part of it to leave.

74 I turned aside and looked at the clutter of household objects which
 the two men continued to pile on the walk. And as the crowd pushed
 me I looked down to see looking out of an oval frame a portrait of
 the old couple when young, seeing the sad, stiff dignity of the faces
 there; feeling strange memories awakening that began an echoing
 in my head like that of a hysterical voice stuttering in a dark street.
 Seeing them look back at me as though even then in that nineteenth-
 century day they had expected little, and this with a grim, unillu-
 sioned pride that suddenly seemed to me both a reproach and a
 warning. My eyes fell upon a pair of crudely carved and polished
 bones, "knocking bones," used to accompany music at country

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dances, used in black-face minstrels; the flat ribs of a cow, a steer
 or sheep, flat bones that gave off a sound, when struck, like heavy
 castanets (had he been a minstrel?) or the wooden block of a set of
 drums. Pots and pots of green plants were lined in the dirty snow, cer-
 tain to die of the cold; ivy, canna, a tomato plant. And in a basket I
 saw a straightening comb, switches of false hair, a curling iron, a card
 with silvery letters against a background of dark red velvet, reading
 "God Bless Our Home"; and scattered across the top of a chiffonier
 were nuggets of High John the Conqueror, the lucky stone; and as I
 watched the white men put down a basket in which I saw a whiskey
 bottle filled with rock candy and camphor, a small Ethiopian flag,
 a faded tintype of Abraham Lincoln, and the smiling image of a Hol-
 lywood star torn from a magazine. And on a pillow several badly
 cracked pieces of delicate china, a commemorative plate celebrat-
 ing the St. Louis World's Fair . . . I stood in a kind of daze, looking
 at an old folded lace fan studded with jet and mother-of-pearl.

at an old round face ran streaked with jet and mother-of-pearl.

- 75 The crowd surged as the white men came back, knocking over a drawer that spilled its contents in the snow at my feet. I stooped and starting replacing the articles: a bent Masonic emblem, a set of tarnished cuff links, three brass rings, a dime pierced with a nail hole so as to be worn about the ankle on a string for luck, an ornate greeting card with the message "Grandma, I love you" in childish scrawl; another card with a picture of what looked like a white man in black-face seated in the door of a cabin strumming a banjo beneath a bar of music and the lyric "Going back to my old cabin home"; a useless inhalant, a string of bright glass beads with a tarnished clasp, a rabbit foot, a celluloid baseball scoring card shaped like a catcher's mitt, registering a game won or lost years ago; an old breast pump with rubber bulb yellowed with age, a worn baby shoe and a dusty lock of infant hair tied with a faded and crumpled blue ribbon. I felt nauseated. In my hand I held three lapsed life insurance policies with perforated seals stamped "Void"; a yellowing newspaper portrait of a huge black man with the caption: MARCUS GARVEY DEPORTED.

- 76 I turned away, bending and searching the dirty snow for anything missed by my eyes, and my fingers closed upon something resting in a frozen footstep: a fragile paper, coming apart with age, written in black ink grown yellow. I read: FREE PAPERS. *Be it known to all men that my negro, Primus Provo, has been freed by me this sixth day of August, 1559. Signed: John Samuels. Macon.* . . . I folded it quickly, blotting out the single drop of melted snow which glistened on the yellowed page and dropped it back into the drawer. My hands

Arthur Flowers

(1950—)

Literary blues man Arthur Flowers was born in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1950, but has spent the majority of his adulthood in New York City. Flowers attended the Harlem Writers Guild workshop for more than a decade, and out of this experience Flowers cofounded the New Renaissance Writer's Guild in New York and a literary workshop in Memphis called the Griot Shop. Flowers's writing is steeped in the cultural landscape of his youth, highlighting the blues and jazz scene in Memphis's Beale Street, hoodoo, and oral traditions. Flowers's first novel, De Mojo Blues: De Quest of High John de Conquerer (1955), has autobiographical resonance, as he, like the protagonist, is a Vietnam War

were trembling, my breath rasping as if I had run a long distance or come upon a coiled snake in a busy street. *It has been longer than that, further removed in time.* I told myself, and yet I knew that it hadn't been. I replaced the drawer in the chest and pushed drunkenly to the curb.

- 77 But it wouldn't come up, only a bitter spurt of gall filled my mouth and splattered the old folk's possessions. I turned and stared again at the jumble, no longer looking at what was before my eyes, but inwardly-outwardly, around a corner into the dark, far-away-and-long-ago, not so much of my own-memory as of remembered words, of linked verbal echoes, images, heard even when not listening at home. And it was as though I myself was being dispossessed of some painful yet precious thing which I could not bear to lose: something confounding, like a rotted tooth that one would rather suffer indefinitely than endure the short, violent eruption of pain that would mark its removal. And with this sense of dispossession came a pang of vague recognition: this junk, these shabby chairs, these heavy, old-fashioned pressing irons, zinc wash tubs with dented bottoms—all throbbed within me with more meaning than there should have been: *And why did I, standing in the crowd, see like a vision my mother banging wash on a cold windy day; so cold that the warm clothes froze even before the vapor thinned and hung stiff on the line, and her hands white and raw in the skirt-swirling wind and her gray bead bare to the darkened sky—why were they causing me discomfort so far beyond their intrinsic meaning as objects? And why did I see them now, as behind a veil that threatened to lift, stirred by the cold wind in the narrow street?*