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Karem, Jeff. *The Romance of Authenticity: The Cultural Politics of Regional and Ethnic Literatures*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004. Ch. 3.

Lambert, Raphaël. "Race and the Tragic Mode in Ernest J. Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men*." *The Southern Literary Journal* 42.2 (2010): 106–125.

Tucker, Terrence. "(Re)Claiming Legacy in the Post-Civil Rights South in Richard Wright's 'Down by the Riverside' and Ernest Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men*." *The Southern Literary Journal* 43.2 (2011): 105–124.

Extract from A Lesson Before Dying

Chapter 27¹

After church, the minister came back to the house with my aunt, Miss Eloise, Miss Emma, and Inez for coffee and cake. I lay across the bed in my room, looking out the window at the stack of bean poles in the garden. As far back as I could remember, my aunt would pull up the rows of poles at the end of each season and stack them in that same corner of the garden, until a new crop of beans was ready to be poled. Beyond the poles, on the other side of the road, I could see the tops of the pecan trees in Farrell Jarreau's backyard. The trees had begun to bud again. The buds looked black from this distance. I could see above the trees how heavy, low, and gray the sky was. I had intended to go for a drive, but I was afraid it might rain while I was gone, making the road too muddy for me to drive back down the quarter. Anyway, I had work to do. But as usual, I ended up doing only a little, because of the singing and praying up at the church. After Tante Lou and her company had been at the house awhile, she came into my room.

"You 'sleep?" she asked.

"I'm awake."

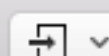
"Reverend Ambrose like to talk to you."

"What about?"

I lay on my back, gazing up at the ceiling, my hands clasped behind my head so that my arms stuck out, forming a cross.

"I done told you that's bad luck," my aunt said.

Without shifting my eyes from the ceiling, I unclasped my hands from behind my head and clasped them on my chest.



Tante Lou stood there looking at me.

“He can come in?”

“Sure. He can come in.”

“You go’n put on your shoes and tuck in that shirt?” she asked.

“I’ll put on my shoes and tuck in my shirt,” I said.

She stood there watching me awhile, then she left the room. I sat up on the bed and passed my hands over my face. When the minister came into the room, I had tucked in my shirt and put on my shoes, and I was standing at the window looking out at the garden. My aunt had prepared a half-dozen rows about thirty feet long for spring planting. She would start her planting the week after Easter if the ground was dry enough.

The minister stood behind me, and I turned from the window to look at him.

“Care to sit down, Reverend?”

There were only two chairs in the room, the one at my desk and a rocker by the fireplace.

“You go’n sit down?” he asked me.

“I don’t mind standing.”

He looked at my desk.

“I see you been working.”

“I tried to. Afraid I didn’t get too much done.”

He sat down in the chair and looked up at me.

“They learning anything?”

“I do my best, Reverend.”

He nodded his bald head. “I do the same. My best.”

My back to the window, I waited to hear what he wanted to talk to me about. He looked down at his hands and rubbed them together. For a man his size, he had really big hands. He rubbed them again before raising his eyes to me.

“There ain’t much time.”

“Jefferson?”

“Yes.”

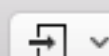
“Three weeks.”

“Not quite.”

“Minus couple days,” I said.

He nodded his head, a small, tired little man. He had preached a long sermon today, and it showed in his face.

“He ain’t saved.”



"I can't help you there, Reverend."

"That's where you wrong. He listen to you."

I turned my back on him and looked out on the garden.

"You ever think of anybody else but yourself?"

I didn't answer him.

"I ask you, 'You ever think of anybody but yourself?'"

"I have my work to do, Reverend, you have yours," I said, without looking around at him. "Mine is reading, writing, and arithmetic, yours is saving souls."

"He don't need no more reading, writing, and 'rithmetic."

"That's where you come in, Reverend."

I stared beyond the garden toward the budding pecan trees in Farrell Jarreau's backyard. The sky was so low the trees seemed nearly to touch it.

"When you going back?" Reverend Ambrose asked behind me.

"I don't know. One day next week, I suppose."

"And what you go'n talk about?"

"I don't know, Reverend."

"I'm going back with Sis' Emma tomorrow. I'm go'n talk about God."

"I'm sure he needs to hear that, Reverend."

"You sure you sure?"

"Maybe not. Maybe I'm not sure about anything."

"I know I'm sure," he said. "Yes, I know I'm sure."

I looked out at the newly turned rows of earth, and I wished I could just lie down between the rows and not hear and not be a part of any of this.

"This is a mean world. But there is a better one. I wish to prepare him for that better world. But I need your help."

"I don't believe in that other world, Reverend."

"Don't believe in God?"

"I believe in God, Reverend," I said, looking beyond the rows of turned-up earth, toward the budding pecan trees across the road. "I believe in God. Every day of my life I believe in God."

"Just not that other world?"

I didn't answer him.

"And how could they go on? You ever thought about that?"

I looked at the buds on the trees, and I did not answer him.

“Well?” he said to my back.

I turned from the window and looked at him where he sat at my desk. School papers, notebooks, textbooks, and pencils were spread out on the table behind him.

“She told me to help him walk to that chair like a man – not like a hog – and I’m doing the best I can, Reverend. The rest is up to you.”

He got up from the chair and came toward me. He peered at me intently, his face showing pain and confusion. He stopped at arm’s distance from me, and I could smell in his clothes the sweat from his preaching.

“You think you educated?”

“I went to college.”

“But what did you learn?”

“To teach reading, writing, and arithmetic, Reverend.”

“What did you learn about your own people? What did you learn about her – her ’round there?” he said, gesturing toward the other room and trying to keep his voice down.

I didn’t answer him.

“No, you not educated, boy,” he said, shaking his head. “You far from being educated. You learned your reading, writing, and ’rithmetic, but you don’t know nothing. You don’t even know yourself. Well?”

“You’re doing the talking, Reverend.”

“And educated, boy,” he said, thumping his chest. “I’m the one that’s educated. I know people like you look down on people like me, but” – he touched his chest again – “I’m the one that’s educated.”

He stared at me as if he could not make up his mind whether to hit me or scream.

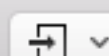
“Grief, oh, grief.” He muffled his cry. “When will you cease? Oh, when?” He drew a deep breath, then he began to speak faster. “When they had nothing else but grief, where was the release? None, none till He rose. And He said there’s relief from grief across yon river, and she believed, and there was relief from grief. Do you know what I’m trying to say to you, boy?”

“I hear you talking, Reverend.”

“You hear me talking. But are you listening? No, you ain’t listening.”

His eyes examined me, from the top of my head to my chest, and I could see the rage in his face, see his mouth trembling. He was doing all he could to control his voice so that the others, back in the kitchen, would not hear him.

“I won’t let you send that boy’s soul to hell,” he said. “I’ll fight you with all the strength I have left in this body, and I’ll win.”



"You don't have to fight me, Reverend," I told him. "You can have him all to yourself. I don't even have to go back up there, if that's all you want."

"You going back," he said, nodding his bald head, and still trying hard to control his voice. "You owe her much as I owe her. And long as I can stand on my feet, I owe her and all the others every ounce of my being. And you do too."

"I don't owe anybody anything, Reverend," I said, and turned toward the window.

I felt his hand gripping my shoulder and pulling me around to face him.

"Don't you turn your back on me, boy."

"My name is Grant," I said.

"When you act educated, I'll call you Grant. I'll even call you Mr. Grant, when you act like a man." His hand still grasped my shoulder, and I needed all my willpower to keep from knocking it off. He could see what I was thinking, and he slowly released his grip and brought his hand to his side. "You think you the only one ever felt this way?" he asked. "You think I never felt this way? You think she never felt this way? Every last one of them back there one time in they life wanted to give up. She want to give up now. You know that? You got any idea how sick she is? Soon after he go, she's going too. I won't give her another year. I want her to believe he'll be up there waiting for her. And you can help me do it. And you the only one."

"How?"

"Tell him to fall down on his knees 'fore he walk to that chair. Tell him to fall down on his knees 'fore her. You the only one he'll listen to. He won't listen to me."

"No," I said. "I won't tell him to kneel. I'll tell him to listen to you – but I won't tell him to kneel. I will try to help him stand."

"You think a man can't kneel and stand?"

"It hasn't helped me."

The minister drew back from me. His head was shining; so was his face. I could see his mouth working as though he wanted to say something but didn't know how to say it.

"You're just lost," he said. "That's all. You're just lost."

"Yes, sir, I'm lost. Like most men, I'm lost."

"Not all men," he said. "Me, I'm found."

"Then you're one of the lucky ones, Reverend."

"And I won't let you lose his soul in hell."

"I want him in heaven as much as you do, Reverend."

"A place you can't believe in?"

“No, I don’t believe in it, Reverend.”

“And how can you tell him to believe in it?”

“I’ll never tell him not to believe in it.”

“And suppose he ask you if it’s there, then what? Suppose he write on that tablet you give him, is it there? Then what?”

“I’ll tell him I don’t know.”

“You the teacher.”

“Yes. But I was taught to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic. Not the gospel. I’d tell him I heard it was there, but I don’t know.”

“And suppose he ask you if you believe in heaven? Then what?”

“I hope he doesn’t, Reverend.”

“Suppose he do?”

“I hope he doesn’t.”

“You couldn’t say yes?”

“No, Reverend, I couldn’t say yes. I couldn’t lie to him at this moment. I will never tell him another lie, no matter what.”

“Not for her sake?”

“No, sir.”

The minister nodded his bald head and grunted to himself. His dark-brown eyes in that tired, weary face continued to stare back at me.

“You think you educated, but you not. You think you the only person ever had to lie? You think I never had to lie?”

“I don’t know, Reverend.”

“Yes, you know. You know, all right. That’s why you look down on me, because you know I lie. At wakes, at funerals, at weddings – yes, I lie. I lie at wakes and funerals to relieve pain. ’Cause reading, writing, and ’rithmetic is not enough. You think that’s all they sent you to school for? They sent you to school to relieve pain, to relieve hurt – and if you have to lie to do it, then you lie. You lie and you lie and you lie. When you tell yourself you feeling good when you sick, you lying. When you tell other people you feeling well when you feeling sick, you lying. You tell them that ’cause they have pain too, and you don’t want to add yours – and you lie. She been lying every day of her life, your aunt in there. That’s how you got through that university – cheating herself here, cheating herself there, but always telling you she’s all right. I’ve seen her hands bleed from picking cotton. I’ve seen the blisters from the hoe and the cane knife. At that church, crying on her knees. You ever looked at the scabs on her knees, boy? Course you never. ’Cause she never wanted you to

see it. And that's the difference between me and you, boy; that make me the educated one, and you the gump. I know my people. I know what they gone through. I know they done cheated themselves, lied to themselves – hoping that one they all love and trust can come back and help relieve the pain."

Chapter 28

I went into the cell with a paper bag full of baked sweet potatoes. The deputy locked the heavy door behind me.

"How's it going, partner?"

Jefferson nodded.

"How do you feel?"

"I'm all right."

"I brought you a little something."

Jefferson was sitting on the bunk, with his hands clasped together. I put the bag beside him on the bunk and sat down. I could hear the radio, on the floor against the wall, playing a sad cowboy song. I saw the notebook and the pencil on the floor, next to the radio. This was my first visit since I'd given him the notebook and pencil, and I could see that the lead on the pencil was worn down to the wood. I could also see that he had used the eraser a lot. We were quiet awhile.

"Hungry?" I asked.

"Maybe later."

"I see you've been writing."

He didn't answer.

"Personal, or can I look at it?"

"It ain't nothing."

"Do you mind?" I asked.

"If you want,"

I got the notebook and came back to the bunk. The fellow on the radio was saying what a beautiful day it was in Baton Rouge.

Jefferson had filled three quarters of the first page. The letters were large and awkward, the way someone would write who could barely see. He had written across the lines instead of above them. He had used the eraser so much that in some places the paper was worn through. Nothing was capitalized, and there were no punctuation marks. The letters were thin at the beginning, but became broader as the lead was worn down. As closely as I could figure, he had written:

I dreamt it again last night. They was taking me somewhere. I wasn't crying. I wasn't begging. I was just going, going with them. Then I woke up. I couldn't go back to sleep. I didn't want go back to sleep. I didn't want dream no more. There was a lot of erasing, then he wrote: If I ain't nothing but a hog, how come they just don't knock me in the head like a hog? Starb me like a hog? More erasing, then: Man walk on two foots; hogs on four hoofs.

The last couple of words were barely visible, because the lead had been worn down all the way to the wood. I read it over a second time before closing the notebook. I didn't know what to say to him. He was staring at the wall, his hands clasped together.

"Do you want me to bring you a pencil sharpener?" I asked after a while. "The little ones you hold in your hand?"

"If you can find one."

"I'm sure I can," I said. "You know, Paul would have sharpened this pencil for you. He wouldn't mind."

Jefferson had unclasped his hands, and now he was scraping the ends of his left fingernails with the index finger of the right hand. His fingernails were hard and purplish.

"When's Easter?" he asked.

"Tomorrow is Good Friday."

"That's when He rose?"

"No. He rose on Easter."

"That's when He died," Jefferson said to himself. "Never said a mumbling word. That's right. Not a word."

"Did you talk to Reverend Ambrose when he came to visit you?" I asked Jefferson.

"Some."

"You ought to talk to him. It's good for your nannan. She wants you to talk to him."

"He told me to pray."

"Do you?"

"No."

"It would be good for your nannan."

He looked at me. His eyes were large and sad and reddened.

"You think I'm going to heaven?" he asked.

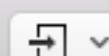
"I don't know."

"You think Mr. Gropé went to heaven? You think Brother and Bear went to heaven?"

"I don't know."

"Then what I'm go'n pray for?"

"For your nannan."



“Nannan don’t need me to help her get to heaven. She’ll make it if it’s up there.”

“She wants you there with her, where there’s no pain and no sorrow.”

He grinned at me, a brief cynical grin.

“You pray, Mr. Wiggins?”

“No, Jefferson, I don’t.”

He grunted.

“But then I’m lost, Jefferson,” I said, looking at him closely. “At this moment I don’t believe in anything. Like your nannan does, like Reverend Ambrose does, and like I want you to believe. I want you to believe so that one day maybe I will.”

“In heaven, Mr. Wiggins?”

“If it helps others down here on earth, Jefferson.”

“Reverend Ambrose say I have to give up what’s down here. Say there ain’t nothing down here on this earth for me no more.”

“He meant possessions, Jefferson. Cars, money, clothes – things like that.”

“You ever seen me with a car, Mr. Wiggins?”

“No.”

“With more than a dollar in my pocket?”

“No.”

“More than two pair shoes, Mr. Wiggins? One for Sunday, one for working in?”

“No, Jefferson.”

“Then what on earth I got to give up, Mr. Wiggins?”

“You’ve never had any possessions to give up, Jefferson. But there is something greater than possessions – and that is love. I know you love her and would do anything for her. Didn’t you eat the gumbo when you weren’t hungry, just to please her? That’s all we’re asking for now, Jefferson – do something to please her.”

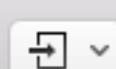
“What about me, Mr. Wiggins? What people, done done to please me?”

“Hasn’t she done many things to please you, Jefferson? Cooked for you, washed for you, taken care of you when you were sick? She is sick now, Jefferson, and she is asking for only one thing in this world. Walk like a man. Meet her up there.”

“Y’all asking a lot, Mr. Wiggins, from a poor old nigger who never had nothing.”

“She would do it for you.”

“She go to that chair for me, Mr. Wiggins? You? Anybody?”



"Nannan don't need me to help her get to heaven. She'll make it if it's up there."
"She wants you there with her, where there's no pain and no sorrow."
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"What about me, Mr. Wiggins? What people, done done to please me?"
"Hasn't she done many things to please you, Jefferson? Cooked for you, washed for you, taken care of you when you were sick? She is sick now, Jefferson, and she is asking for only one thing in this world. Walk like a man. Meet her up there."
"Y'all asking a lot, Mr. Wiggins, from a poor old nigger who never had nothing."
"She would do it for you."
"She go to that chair for me, Mr. Wiggins? You? Anybody?"
He waited for me to answer him. I wouldn't.
"No, Mr. Wiggins, I got to go myself. Just me, Mr. Wiggins. Reverend Ambrose say God'd be there if I axe Him. You think He be there if I axe Him, Mr. Wiggins?"
"That's what they say, Jefferson."
"You believe in God, Mr. Wiggins?"
"Yes, Jefferson, I believe in God."
"How?"
"I think it's God that makes people care for people, Jefferson. I think it's God makes children play and people sing. I believe it's God that brings loved ones together. I believe it's God that makes trees bud and food grow out of the earth."
"Who make people kill people, Mr. Wiggins?"
"They killed His Son, Jefferson."
"And He never said a mumbling word."
"That's what they say."
"That's how I want to go, Mr. Wiggins. Not a mumbling word."
Another cowboy song was playing on the radio, but it was quiet and not disturbing. I could hear inmates down the cell-block calling to one another. Jefferson sat forward on the bunk, his big hands clasped together again. I still had the notebook. I started to open it, but changed my mind.
"You need anything, Jefferson?"
"No, I don't need nothing, Mr. Wiggins. Reverend Ambrose say I don't need nothing down here no more."
"I'll get you that sharpener," I said.

"I ain't got nothing more to say, Mr. Wiggins."

"I'm sure you have."

"I hope the time just hurry up and get here. Cut out all this waiting."

"I wish I knew what to do, Jefferson."

"I'm the one got to do everything, Mr. Wiggins. I'm the one."

He got up from the bunk and went to the window and looked up at the buds on the higher branches of the sycamore tree. Through the branches of the tree I could see the sky, blue and lovely and clear. "You Are My Sunshine" was playing on the radio. Jefferson turned his back to the window and looked at me. "Me, Mr. Wiggins. Me. Me to take the cross. Your cross, nannan's cross, my own cross. Me, Mr. Wiggins. This old stumbling nigger. Y'all axe a lot, Mr. Wiggins." He went to the cell door and grasped it with both hands. He started to jerk on the door, but changed his mind and turned back to look at me. "Who ever car'd my cross, Mr. Wiggins? My mama? My daddy? They dropped me when I wasn't nothing. Still don't know where they at this minute. I went in the field when I was six, driving that old water cart. I done pulled that cotton sack, I done cut cane, load cane, swung that ax, chop ditch banks, since I was six." He was standing over me now. "Yes, I'm youman, Mr. Wiggins. But nobody didn't know that 'fore now. Cuss for nothing. Beat for nothing. Work for nothing. Grinned to get by. Everybody thought that's how it was s'pose to be. You too, Mr. Wiggins. You never thought I was nothing else. I didn't neither. Thought I was doing what the Lord had put me on this earth to do." He went to the window and turned to look at me. "Now all y'all want me to be better than ever'body else. How, Mr. Wiggins? You tell me."

"I don't know, Jefferson."

"What I got left, Mr. Wiggins – two weeks?"

"I think it's something like that – if nothing happens."

"Nothing go'n happen, Mr. Wiggins. And it ain't 'something like that.' That's all I got on this here earth. I got to face that, Mr. Wiggins. It's all right for y'all to say 'something like that.' For me, it's 'that' – 'that,' that's all. And like Reverend Ambrose say, then I'll have to give up this old earth. But ain't that where I'm going, Mr. Wiggins, back in the earth?"

My head down, I didn't answer him.

"You can look at me, Mr. Wiggins; I don't mind."

I raised my head, and I saw him standing there under the window, big and tall, and not stooped as he had been in chains.

"I'm go'n do my best, Mr. Wiggins. That's all I can promise. My best."

"You're more a man than I am, Jefferson."

"Cause I'm go'n die soon? That make me a man, Mr. Wiggins?"

"My eyes were closed before this moment, Jefferson. My eyes have been closed all my life. Yes, we all need you. Every last one of us."

He studied me awhile, then he turned his back and looked up at the window.

"So pretty out there," he said. "So pretty. I ain't never seen it so pretty." I looked at him standing there big and tall, his broad back toward me. "What it go'n be like, Mr. Wiggins?"

I thought I knew what he was talking about, but I didn't answer him. He turned around to face me.

"What it go'n feel like, Mr. Wiggins?"

I shook my head. I felt my eyes burning.

"I hope it ain't long."

"It's not long, Jefferson," I said.

"How you know, Mr. Wiggins?"

"I read it."

I was not looking at him. I was looking at the wall. It had been in the newspaper. The first jolt, if everything is right, immediately knocked a person unconscious.

He came back and sat down on the bunk.

"I'm all right, Mr. Wiggins."

I nodded without looking at him.

"Care for a 'tato, Mr. Wiggins?" he said, opening the paper bag.

"Sure," I said.

Chapter 29

Jefferson’s Diary

mr wigin you say rite somethin but i dont kno what to rite an you say i must be thinkin bout things i aint telin nobody an i order put it on paper but i dont kno what to put on paper cause i aint never rote nothin but homework i aint never rote a leter in all my life cause nanan use to get other chiren to rite her leter an read her leter for her not me so i cant think of too much to say but maybe nex time

its evenin an i done eat my rice an beans an i done had my cup of milk an the sun comin in the windo cause i can see it splashin on the flo and I can yer ned an them talkin an thats bout all for now

* * *

i coudn sleep las nite cause i kept dremin it and i dont want dreem it cause im jus walkin to somwher but i dont kno wher its at an fore i get to the door i wake up an i want to rite in the tablet las nite but you aint got no lite in yer but the moon so im ritin this monin soon is sunup but now i done fogot what i want to say

nanan brot me some easter egg an i et one an nanan et one an reven ambros he et one an reven ambros ax me if i know why the lord die an he say he die for me so i can meet him in heven an all he want me to do is say i want be up ther wit him an the angels an say if i mean it wit all my heart an sol ill go to heven an nanan start cryin again an mis lou got to hug her an nanan say all i need to do an make her life wors livin is ax the lord forgiv me in the pardn of my sin an her an reven ambros was on they knee an mis lou was still in the cher huggin her an i was glad when paul come an got me

i dont kno what day it is but las nite i coudn sleep an i cud yer ned down the way snoin an i laid ther and thot bout samson sayin if the lord love me how com he let my wife die an leave me an them chiren an how come he dont come here an take way people like them matin brothers on the st charl river stead of messin wit po ol foks who aint never done nothin but try an do all they kno how to serv him

it look like the lord just work for wite folks cause ever sens i wasn nothin but a litle boy i been on my on haulin water to the fiel on that ol water cart wit all them dime bukets an that dipper jus hittin an old dorthy just trottin and trottin an me up their hittin her wit that rope an all them dime bukets an that dipper jus hittin an hittin gainst that bal of water so i can git the peple they food an they water on time an the peple see me an drop they hoe an com and git they buket cause they kno they string or they mark on the top an boo sittin under a bloodweed wit his wite.

beans an rice and goin wher he at wher he at this yer very minit an how com he dont giv a man a little breeze if he so mercful an mis rachel wit her rice an grens sayin keep it up jus keep it up an see if a clap of litenin dont come ther an nok the fool out you an boo sayin let him i dont care cause a ded niger is beter of an a live one any weekday an saddy im gittin drunk an say it agin an saddy standin in the midle the road hollin up in the air sayin com on an git me com on an git me see if i care an fallin down in the dich an rollin out in the road an holin up the botle so the lord coud see it an rollin back in the dich an rollin back in the road an drinkin and holin the botle up so the lord coud see it an sayin i kno you dont love nobody but wite folks cause you they god not mine an com on an tho you litenin if you want cause no niger aint got no god an the church goin people closin they doors an windos to keep from herin boo blasfemin the lord but me an the rest of the chiren in the quarter like boo cause he always boght us candy an cake

i jus cant sleep no mo cause evertime i shet my eyes i see that door an fore i git ther i wake up an i dont go back to sleep cause i dont want walk to that door no mo cause i dont know what back o ther if its wher they gon put that cher or if it spose to mean def or the grave or heven i dont know i wonder if boo went to heven cause i know he didn git religin firs

mr wigin you say you like what i got here but you say you stil cant giv me a a jus a b cause you say i aint gone deep in me yet an you kno i can if i try hard an when i ax you what you mean deep in me you say jus say whats on my mind so one day you can be save an you can save the chiren and i say i don’t kno what you mean an you say i do kno what you mean an you look so tied sometime mr wigin i just feel like tellin you i like you but i dont kno how to say this cause i aint never say it to nobody before an nobody aint never say it to me

* * *

i kno i care for nanan but i dont kno if love is care cause cuttin wood and haulin water and things like that i dont know if thats love or jus work to do an you say thats love but you



say you kno i got mo an jus that to say an when i lay ther at nite and cant sleep i try an think what you mean i got mo cause i aint done this much thinkin and this much writin in all my life befor

its munday an i aint got but just a few days lef an i hope i see my nanan jus one mo time cause mis lou and reven ambros say she aint fairin too good an coudn make it wit them this time but the lord kno mr wigin i hope i can see her one mo time on this earth fore i go is that love mr wigin when you want see sombody bad bad mr wigin thank you for sayin im doin b + work an you know the a aint too far

the shef an mr picho and mr mogan come in the cell today an mr picho ax me how im doin an i tell him im doin all rite an he say yes he can see im all rite an he ax me if he can do somthin for me an i tell him nosir im all rite and he ax if i want a brand new pencil wit a penny erase on it an i tol him i wud take the pencil but i dont need the erase cause you tol me to jus put down anything come in my hed an if it aint rite jus scratch over it an go on an he say yes he can see that an he ax me if i want him to shopen my pencil an i say yesir an he shopen the pencil on a teeny perl hanle nife an i look at the nife an i seen mr picho look up at shef guiry an mr mogan an the shef look back at him but mr mogan never stop lookin at me like he was tryin to figer me an mr picho ax me if i want the litle nife an i tell him yesir i didn mind an he unhook the litle gole chan from his belt lope an han me the nife an the chan an he say it was all mine an i say just for a few days an you can hav it back an i helt the litle nife in my han an the chan in my other han an jus look at it an i yer mr picho say well an i yer mr mogan say it aint fridy yet an mr picho say you want double that bet you want add that troter an mr mogan say it still aint fridy yet

* * *

ole clark been comin roun too tryin to act like a youman but i can see in his face he aint no good an i dont even look at him when he ax me if im doin all rite and can he git me somthin no i jus go on ritin in my tablet an i dont care if he do see it after im dead and gone

paul trying to be hod when he aint like he dont want get too close to me no mo an all the time he is the only one rond yer kno how to talk like a youman to people i kno you paul an i kno ole clark an i kno you too shef guiry and you mr picho and mr mogan an all the rest of yall i jus never say non of this befor but i know yall ever las one of yall

lord have merce sweet jesus mr wigin where all them peple come from when you ax me if some chiren can com up here an speak to me i didn kno you was meanin all them chiren in yo clas an jus sitin ther on the flo all quite in they clean close lookin at me an i coud see som was scard o me but mos was brave an spoke an my litle cosin estel even com up an kiss me on the jaw an i coudn hol it back no mo

then after the chiren here com the ole folks an look like everbody from the quarter was here mis julia an joe an mis haret an ant agnes an mr noman an mis sara an mis lilia an mr harry an mis lena an god kno who all an mr ofal an mis felia wit her beeds an jus prayin an all the peple sayin how good i look an lord hav merce sweet jesus mr wigin how you got bok yer in that suit that suit look like it half bok siz cause i member mis rita got him that suit way back ten leben yers back an bok babbin ther like he kno me an mis rita sayin he want say he glad to see me an he want give me one of hiss aggis an me jus lookin at bok shakin my hed an shakin my hed an i cant stop sayin ole bok ole bok ole bok you want giv me one o you aggis but ole bok woudn turn it loose til mis rita had to tell him let go bok few times an still bok woudn turn loose till mis rita pri it out his han and han it to me an bok start babbin ther til mis rita had to reach out her han fo me to giv it back to her an she giv it back to bok an bok put it back in his pocket an start rattlin it wit all the others in ther an mis rita say she was sho he want to giv me somthin thats why he want to com an i tol her it was all rite i didn't need nothin but she say bok woudn res tonite if he didn giv me somethin an she tol him to giv me a diffen one if he didn want give me the aggi an ole bok lookin way over yonder kep rattlin the marbles in his pocket an jus kep on lookin way over yonder rattlin the marbles til he fond the litles one he had in his pocket an han me that

this was the firs time i cry when they lok that door bahind me the very firs time an i jus set on my bunk cryin but not let them see or yer me cause i didn want them think rong but i was cryin cause of bok an the marble he giv me and cause o the peple com to see me cause they hadn never done nothin lik that for me befor

i dont want sleep at nite no mo jus catnap in the day while they got lite and they got noise cause i dont want drem bout that door ever time i shet my eyes

when they brot me in the room an i seen nanan at the table i seen how ole she look an how tied she look an i tol her i love her an i tol her i was strong an she jus look ole and tied an pull me to her an kiss me an it was the firs time she never done that an it felt good an i let her hol me long is she want cause you say it was good for her an i tol her i was strong an she didn need to come back no mo cause i was strong an she just set ther wit her eyes mos shet like she want to go to sleep lookin at me all the time til reven and mis lou have to hep her up an take her back home

* * *

mr wigin when i see you girlfren an yall together i see how pretty she is an im sorry how i talk that day when i was mad at you an say them nasty thing bout her cause she so pretty

an smil so pretty when she look at peple an you can see she aint putin on airs an its jus kwaly in her an she talk so nice to peple an all the time i want look at her but scare to cause she so pretty an im so ugly an she got on a pretty dress with pretty flowers an my close dont smell good and i aint took a baf sens sady but i still want look at her an she say she think im lookin good an strong an when she put her han on my sholder i start tremblin an she lean close an kiss me and i feel hot an i coud smell her poder cent an i feel good an scare an hot cause thats the firs lady that pretty ever tech me an nobody that pretty never kiss me an when yall left i come to the door an i look at her long long is i coud and coud smell her poder cent and still feel her mof on my face

im sory i cry mr wigin im sory i cry when you say you aint comin back tomoro im strong an reven ambros gon be yer wit me an mr harry comin to an reson i cry cause you been so good to me mr wigin an nobody aint never been that good to me an make me think im sombody

shef guiry ax me what i want for my super an i tol him i want nanan to cook me som okra an rice an som pok chop an a conbred an som claba an he say he gon see what he can do an say what i want for desert an i tol him jus a little ice crme in a cup an a moon pie

they took me an let me stan under the shoer wit a new bar a sope an they giv me a big wite clen tower an brot me back an i put on some clen close an set down cause my food was yer an i et it ever bit an it was the bes meal i kno my nanan ever cook

sun goin down an i kno this the las one im gon ever see but im gon see one mo sunrise cause i aint gon sleep tonite

* * *

im gon sleep a long time after tomoro

shef guiry come by after i et an ax me how im doin an i say im doin all right an he ax me he say i aint never pik up yo tablet an look in it an he ax me what all i been ritin an i tol him jus things an he say aint he done tret me rite an i tol him yesir an he say aint his deptis done tret me fair an i tol him yesir an he say aint he done let peple vist me anytime an i say yesir an he say didn he let the chiren an all the peple from the quarter com an visit me jus two days ago an i say yesir an he say is you gon put that in yo tablet an i say yesir an he say good put that down in yo tablet i tret you good all the time you been yer an he say he had to go hom cause he hadn et his super yet but for me to call a depty if i need somthin an he ax me if i want the lite to stay on all nite in case i want rite som mo an i tol him yesir an he say all rite i coud have all the lite i want

my lite on but they aint no mo lite on in the place an the place is quite quite but nobody sleepin

they got a moon out ther an i can see the leves on the tree but i aint gon see no mo leves after tomoro

i dont know if they got a heven cause samson say they cant be an boo say they aint non fo no niger but reven ambros say they is one for all men an bok dont kno

i been shakin an shakin but im gon stay strong

i aint had no bisnes goin ther wit brother an bear cause they aint no good an im gon be meetin them soon

its quite quite an i can yer my teefs hitin an i can yer my hart

* * *

when i was a litle boy i was a waterboy an rode the cart but now i got to be a man an set in a cher

dont kno if you can red this mr wigin my han shakin and i can yer my hart

i can yer randy but i aint listnin no mo cause he for the livin an not for me

its late an i dont know what time it is but i kno its late an i jus went to the tolet an i jus wash my face

day breakin

sun comin up

the bird in the tre soun like a blu bird

sky blu blu mr wigin

good by mr wigin tell them im strong tell them im a man good by mr wigin im gon ax paul if he can bring you this

sincely jefferson

Chapter 30

Sidney deRogers was on his way to George Jarreau's house to mow the lawn when the truck went by him. He didn't pay any close attention to the black truck with the gray tarpaulin cover, but he would tell the people later at the Rainbow Club that he did feel a cold chill when the truck went by. The truck turned left on the main street two blocks up ahead of Sidney, but he thought it was just another truck delivering something at one of the department stores. Around eleven o'clock, George Jarreau's wife, Lucy, came out into the yard where Sidney was raking up the grass and leaves and told him that she wanted him to go uptown to Edwin's department store and get her a large spool of white thread. Sidney drove the six blocks in Lucy's car, and as he was approaching the store he saw a crowd of people standing on the sidewalk, facing the courthouse. Parked beside the courthouse was the same truck that Sidney had seen at eight o'clock that morning. The tarpaulin had been rolled back, and two men sat at the tail end of the truck, talking and smoking cigarettes. Sidney parked a little distance beyond the department store and walked back. He saw many people he knew, both white and colored, but no one paid him any attention; they were too concerned with the truck parked beside the courthouse. When Sidney came into the store, he found all the clerks up at the front, trying to see what was going on in the truck. He stood back waiting, but no one paid him any attention. Finally, he told one of the women that Miss Lucy had sent him up there for a spool of coarse white thread. Without looking around, the woman told him to go and find it himself. When he came back to pay her, she told him to have Lucy send the money some other time.

My aunt did not sleep at the house the night before. Like many of the other older people in the quarter, she spent the night with Miss Emma. Some of the others took shifts, but my aunt stayed there the whole night. Reverend Ambrose was there until midnight, then he went home to get some sleep because the sheriff had told him he wanted all witnesses at the courthouse no later, absolutely no later, than eleven-thirty the next morning.

Vivian and I sat in a corner of the Rainbow Club that night. There were more than a dozen people in the place, but it was quieter than I had ever seen it. Vivian held on to her one drink all the time she was there, and when she left, she still had not finished it. She had gone to church after her class that afternoon, and she told me she would go again the next morning. She told me that from noon until she "heard," she would have her students on their knees beside their desks. She left the Rainbow Club at nine. After walking her to the car and kissing her good night, I went back inside and stood at the bar. Claiborne wiped glasses and did not talk to anybody. He served you when you raised your glass for another drink or your bottle for another beer, then he went back to wiping glasses. Thelma had closed up the café just after nine and gone home. Claiborne said he was going to close up at eleven tonight. I told him I wanted a half pint to take with me. Claiborne wrapped it in a brown paper bag and I paid him, but we didn't look directly at each other. At ten-thirty I left, but I still didn't want to go home, and I drove to a bar in Port Allen. I ran into a guy there who knew me and wanted to talk about it, but I didn't want to talk about it, and after I had a drink I started back for the quarter. I got back there about midnight. The place was pitch black, except for the light on Miss Emma's porch. A couple of cars I didn't recognize were parked in front of the house. I supposed they were family or friends who had come to be with her tonight. I didn't stop. There was nothing more to say. I went on home. I took the bottle out of the paper bag and drank about half of it. I had bought the liquor to make me sleep, but God knows now I didn't want to sleep. I didn't want to dream – not tonight.

The minister did not sleep at all that night, and at daybreak he got up and knelt beside his bed to say his prayers, then he went to the kitchen to warm water for his bath. His wife, Mrs. Becky, came into the kitchen to fix him a bowl of cush-cush for his breakfast. When the minister finished his bath, he sat down at the table to eat. He had a cup of coffee before he ate his food. He ate very slowly as he sat at the table thinking about what he had to do today. After he finished his breakfast, he went into the bedroom to get his Bible, then he came back into the kitchen and sat down at the table again. He had chosen the Twenty-third Psalm to read at the jail; he made that choice soon after the sheriff had given him permission to be one of the witnesses. Now he was reading his Bible and praying that God would give him the strength that he knew he needed. He had never witnessed anything like this before, and he knew he needed God every moment that he would be there. He knew that Harry Williams was going to be there too, and he told himself he would

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stand or sit as close to Harry as he could. He also reminded himself that he would meet LaCox soon after it was over. LaCox was the colored mortician of Bayonne, and he would have the coffin ready.

At six-thirty, the sheriff sat down at the table in his dining room to eat his breakfast. His breakfast was two homemade biscuit sandwiches. The biscuits had been split open; one contained a pork sausage patty and the other contained figs. Lillian, their colored maid, had preserved figs the past summer. The sheriff also drank a glass of milk and a cup of strong coffee. Usually the sheriff ate his breakfast at eight o'clock and arrived at the jail at nine, but he wanted to get there no later than seven-thirty today because that chair was supposed to arrive by eight. The sheriff's wife sat across the table from him, drinking coffee; it was too early in the morning for her to eat anything. As the sheriff ate, he talked to his wife, but he avoided looking her directly in the face most of the time. He told her that he wished this day had never gotten here, but now that it had, he had to do what he had to do. This was the first time he was in charge of an execution, and he was praying that everything would go well. He told his wife that he had asked the teacher if he wanted to be there, but the teacher had shaken his head. He understood, he had said to the teacher. The reverend had asked to be there, and he had asked the reverend if one other person from the quarter would like to be there too. The reverend said he would ask, and the next day the reverend came in and told him that Harry Williams had said yes. The sheriff knew Harry Williams and knew he was no troublemaker. The sheriff ate his food and looked beyond his wife as he mentioned the names of other witnesses. He had also hired two more deputies to be there today, just in case he needed them. Two people from Mr. Gropé's family were going to be there – and he thanked God that the family had let him handle this in a civilized way. He told his wife without looking directly at her that it would take place in the storeroom on the bottom floor in the back of the courthouse. He said everything had been cleared out of the room so there would be space for the chair and the witnesses.

Melvina Jack was sweeping off the sidewalk at Edwin's department store when the truck went by her. She had finished and was knocking the dust out of the broom when she saw the truck turn down the alley beside the courthouse. Juanita deJean, one of the white clerks in the store, came outside and asked Melvina if she had any idea what was inside that truck. Melvina did not, and Juanita told her that she would know before this day was over. An automobile drove up and parked in front of the courthouse in a space marked OFFICIAL. The sheriff's car was already parked in his personal parking space. Two men got out of the official car and went inside the courthouse. The older, heavier man wore a cowboy hat, and both men wore suits. Melvina and Juanita continued to watch the truck parked beside the courthouse. Then suddenly Melvina's heart started pumping extra fast, and Juanita heard her say, "No, no." "Yes, yes," she heard Juanita say. While they stood there watching the truck, Sheriff Guidry came out of the courthouse with the two men, and the three of them went around the side to the truck. Sheriff Guidry said something to the driver, and the truck moved toward the rear of the courthouse, up against a window. Two men got out of the cab of the truck and climbed up onto the bed and began rolling back the tarpaulin cover. Then Melvina saw it, a high-backed wooden chair with leather straps, and it took all her strength, she said later, to remain on her feet. The two men, one on either side, moved the chair to the tailgate of the truck, and two other men, who had come out the back door of the courthouse, stood on the ground with their arms extended as the chair was eased down to them. When the men on the ground had the chair secured in their hands, the two men in the truck jumped down to the ground, and the four of them took the chair through the door into the courthouse. There was something else in the truck – a machine-looking thing, Melvina said. Juanita told her that nothing would happen until twelve o'clock, and that she could go home at eleven-thirty if she wanted to. Melvina thanked her, but still she could not take her eyes off the truck. She heard Juanita saying that she wished something like this could be done somewhere else. What about those poor children up at the school? She just hoped they would not hear that thing. Melvina knew she was speaking of the white children at the white school, but she had no idea what it was that could be heard as far away as the school was from the courthouse.

During the month that he was in jail, Fee Jenkins's duty was to clean the sheriff's office and the white men's and white ladies' rest rooms. He started every morning between six and six-thirty and finished around eight or a little after. He was just getting ready to put away the mop and bucket when he saw them bringing that chair in through the back door. Four people were carrying it, two strangers and the two special deputies, Oscar and Claude Guerin. The sheriff walked in front, and a man wearing a cowboy hat followed the chair. The man with the cowboy hat kept saying be careful, be careful; he didn't want that chair bumping into anything. The sheriff opened the door to the old storeroom, and the two strangers took it inside, then everyone followed. They did not shut the door, and Fee could hear them talking in there, though from where he was in the hall he could not see them. He could hear the sheriff asking where the chair should be set, and the man in the cowboy hat was saying he wanted it against the wall not far from the window, because those wires from the generator on the truck had to come through the window. Other people who had come to work were also in the corridor. A woman was saying that she had seen it, and it looked just gruesome. A man said it did look gruesome, and that's why they called it Gruesome Gerty. The man told the woman that whoever sat in Gruesome Gerty's lap when she was hot never sat down again. The woman replied, "That is gruesome." Fee heard the man with the cowboy hat tell someone to go out to the truck and bring in the instruments. A white man standing behind Fee asked him if he had seen it. Fee said he surely had, and it looked mean. The white man told Fee he had better watch himself, or maybe they would have to bring Gerty back for him to sit in her lap. Another man laughed nervously. A woman in the hall told the man shame on him, he ought to stop that, just shame on him. Fee could hear the man with the cowboy hat talking to another man through the window. He was asking the man did everything reach okay, and the man out on the truck said yes, everything did. Out in the corridor, more people were coming in for work. They all wanted to know if the first ones there had seen it. Some of them who had not seen it said they had. Someone said if you had not seen it, you would most definitely hear it. And a woman said she wished she had played sick and stayed home today. A man told her that anyone who wanted to leave was free to stay away between twelve and three. The woman said she was not going to be anywhere around here. Someone asked was it always between twelve and three, and another man said yes, it always was. And someone else said the Lord died between twelve and three on a Friday. A woman said yes, and so did two thieves, one on either side of Him. Fee heard the woman saying that she definitely was not going to be here during that time. She said she felt sick already.

Clay Lemon, who worked at Weber's Café and Bar and Bait Shop and who ran errands for Felix Weber, had just gotten out of the car to go into the bank when he first heard the noise. The sound was coming from the direction of the courthouse, a block and a half away. Clay said later that he did not know what it was, nor did he know exactly where it was coming from. A white man and a white woman walking ahead of him were just about to go into the bank when the woman stopped suddenly and looked back. She said, "Oh, God, don't tell me that they have started –" and the man said, "Come on, dear, come on; don't listen to that." The man held the door open for the woman, but she would not go inside, and Clay would not dare go through the door until the white people did. The man told the woman that nothing was going to happen until after twelve o'clock, and they would be long gone by then. He said that they were just warming up the thing, testing those instruments to make sure everything was in working order. The woman said, "But my God, the whole town can hear that thing." The man said, "Come on, come on, dear," and put his arm around her. They went inside, and Clay followed. The woman asked the clerk behind the counter if she had heard it. The clerk asked, "Heard what?" The woman told about the noise that was coming from the courthouse. The clerk said that being inside, they heard very little from that far away. The woman shook her head and said, "It was just horrible. Just too horrible." The clerk told the woman that her little boy had asked her last night what was going to happen at the jail today, and she said that the sheriff just had to put an old bad nigger away, and she didn't want him to worry about anything. The clerk said that she checked on her little boy just before she went to bed last night, and he was sound asleep. And today when he left for school with his little book sack, there was not a solitary word; he had forgotten all about it. The clerk said all this while serving the white man and white woman. Then Clay stepped up to the counter – but he had forgotten why he was there. The clerk, who was very thin, with blond hair and gray-blue eyes, looked at him and said, "Well, well, I don't have all day – didn't you bring it?" But Clay didn't know what she was talking about. "Didn't Felix send you here to get the money, you dumbbell?" she asked him. He must have given her the sack with the note and the check, because the next thing he knew, he had the weight of quarters, nickels, dimes, and pennies in the sack and he was outside again in the bright sunlight, and he could still hear the noise from the generator a block and a half away.

Paul was in the office when the sheriff and the executioner came in, followed by the two special deputies, Claude and Oscar Guerin. The sheriff sat behind his desk and motioned for the executioner, whose name was Henry Vincent, to have a seat. Vincent took off his cowboy hat and hung it on the rack beside the sheriff's cowboy hat. Paul noticed that the hair on top of Vincent's head was not as gray as the sideburns were. The sheriff asked Vincent if he wanted some coffee, and Vincent said yes. The sheriff told Oscar to go down the hall and get that pot of coffee and bring back some cups. Vincent asked the sheriff if the prisoner had been shaved. The sheriff said no. Vincent asked the sheriff if he didn't think it was about time. The sheriff looked at Paul standing by the window. He told Paul where the things were; he should get Murphy out of the cell and have him do it. Vincent instructed Paul to make sure Murphy did it right, shaved him close. He pointed to areas on the leg and wrist. He said electrodes had to be attached there as well as to the head, and all that had to be shaved very clean. The sheriff told the executioner that the prisoner had hardly any hair on his body other than on his head. Vincent told Paul that Murphy must shave the prisoner everywhere he told him to; electricity sometimes found hair that the naked eye would never see. He said that this was an execution, not torture, that he had seen enough of that for a lifetime. Paul asked the sheriff if someone else couldn't do this. The sheriff told him that Clark would not be there until later, and that he had to do it. Paul nodded for Claude Guerin to come with him, and they went into the next room. He could hear Vincent asking the sheriff if he thought Paul was all right, and the sheriff saying that he was, but this was his first time. Vincent told the sheriff that all they needed was for one of their own men to come apart. The sheriff assured him that Paul was okay, but that this was his first time, that's all. Vincent told the sheriff he hoped he knew his men. Paul and Claude left through another door, Claude carrying a washbasin, clippers, scissors, and a safety razor. People came out of their offices to ask Paul if it was time yet. The special deputy told them that it was only hair-cutting time. A man standing at one of the office doors said oh, yes, he had heard that they got a haircut first. Someone else said what an experience, what an experience, you didn't get to witness this every day. Paul and Claude went up to the cellblock, and unlocked Murphy's cell and told him he had a job for him to do. Murphy looked at the things in Claude's hands and asked why him. Because the sheriff said so, Paul told him. Murphy came out, and the three of them went down to the last cell. Jefferson had been lying on his back, but he sat up and looked at them when they came in. He didn't seem frightened; he appeared tired. Paul could see how red his eyes were and knew that he had not slept at all. Paul asked him how he felt, and he said he was all right. He wore a blue denim shirt and denim trousers. His laceless shoes were halfway under the bunk. The radio and the notebook were on the floor beside the wall. The radio was silent. A bird sang in the sycamore tree outside the window. Paul told Jefferson that he had to have his hair shaved. He sent Murphy to get warm water and a piece of soap from the shower room. While Murphy was gone, Paul and the other deputy stood near the unlocked cell door. Jefferson sat on the bunk, leaning forward and staring down at the floor. The two deputies watched him, but no one said anything. The bird continued its chirping in the tree outside the window. Jefferson turned to look at the deputy standing beside Paul and asked him how was Miss Bernice. Claude didn't know whether he should answer, until Paul nodded, and Claude told him that his wife was okay. And little Roy? Jefferson wanted to know. Claude looked at Paul, and Paul nodded again. Little Roy was all right, too; he was at school. Jefferson looked down at the floor. Murphy came back with a washbasin of warm water and a piece of white soap. He set the basin of water on the floor at the foot of the bunk and took the clippers from Claude Guerin. Claude tried not to meet Jefferson's eyes when Jefferson looked up at him. The two deputies stood back by the door and watched as the layers of hair fell to the floor. When Murphy had finished with the clippers, he dipped his hand into the basin of warm water and started rubbing Jefferson's head with the piece of white soap. Claude handed him the safety razor. When the head was shaved, black and shining, Paul instructed Murphy to take the scissors and cut Jefferson's trouser legs and shirt sleeves. He stood over Murphy and pointed out the areas around the ankles and wrists where he wanted him to shave. All this time, Jefferson obeyed as if he were in a trance, as if he felt nothing. When Murphy was finished, he stood back and examined his work, but Jefferson was looking down at the floor. Paul asked him if he needed anything, and when he did not answer, the deputy motioned for Claude and Murphy to leave. He followed and locked the cell door. As he was about to walk away, Jefferson raised his head and looked at him. He told Paul that he wanted him to bring me the notebook and that he wanted Paul to have the radio. Paul told him he couldn't take the radio, but he would give it to the other inmates, for use in the dayroom, if Jefferson didn't mind. Jefferson asked Paul if he wanted the marble that Bok had given him, and Paul told him he would accept the marble. He told Paul to be sure that Mr. Henri got the pocket knife and the little gold chain. Paul said he would see to that. Jefferson continued to look at Paul, a long, deep look, and the deputy felt that there was something else he wanted to say. Murphy and the other deputy were still waiting. "Well," Paul said, and started to walk away. "Paul?" Jefferson said quietly. And his eyes were speaking, even

more than his mouth. The deputy looked back at him. Murphy and Claude did too. “You go’n be there, Paul?” Jefferson asked, his eyes asked. Paul nodded. “Yes, Jefferson. I’ll be there.”

Chapter 31

After the students had recited their Bible verses, and before classes began, I told them that there would be no recess period for them today, and that I would let them go home for dinner at eleven o’clock, because I wanted them all back at school no later than a quarter to twelve. I told them that at exactly twelve o’clock they would all get down on their knees and remain on their knees until I heard from the courthouse, whether that took an hour, an hour and a half, or three hours.

Louis Washington, Jr., stuck up a grimy little hand.

“S’pose somebody got to be excused?”

“Then he’ll make up that time on his knees after three o’clock,” I told him. “For every minute that you don’t spend on your knees between twelve o’clock and until I hear from that courthouse, you will spend twice that time on your knees after three. Any other questions?”

“Nawsir.”

“Does anyone else have a question?”

No one did.

“All right, open those books, and I want silence, and I mean silence.”

I assigned Odessa Freeman primer and first grades; Irene Cole would teach second and third. Fourth graders opened their books to English grammar; fifth graders, geography; sixth, history. I told them I would test them later, if not this afternoon, then definitely tomorrow morning. I knew I would not be able to concentrate on teaching this morning, so I got my Westcott ruler and went outside.

It was a nice day. Blue sky. Not a cloud. Across the road in the Freemans’ yard, I could see a patch of white lilies on either side of the walk that led up to the porch. An old automobile tire surrounded each flower. Behind the house was the sugarcane field. The new cane was about waist-high to the average man walking between the rows. Somewhere across the field I could hear the sound of a tractor. A white sharecropper must have been plowing the ground, since no colored people were working today. Even those who worked up at the big house for Henri Pichot or for other white people along the river had taken the day off. This had been discussed and agreed at church last Sunday. Those who were not at church were told what the others had decided, that he, Jefferson, should have all their respect this one day. Now, except for the sound of the tractor back in the field, the rest of the plantation was quiet. No one sat out on the porch, no one worked in the garden, no one walked across the yard or in the road.

I looked toward Miss Emma’s house, farther down the quarter. My aunt was there, others were there, but they were all inside. The front door was shut, though the window was open to let in fresh air. I could see the white gauze curtain hanging limp in the window.

I went around to the back of the church. Like so many country churches, it was wood-framed, long and narrow, with a corrugated tin roof and a bell tower. Years ago, I was told, the church sat flat on the ground. Later, it was set up on wooden blocks. During the thirties, when I was a student here, the wooden blocks, which had rotted over the years, were replaced by bricks. A year or two before I started teaching, Farrell Jarreau and a couple of other men removed the bricks and put in cement blocks. But now even the cement blocks had sunk so low in the ground that a child losing a marble or a ball under the church had a hard time crawling under there to retrieve it.

I remembered playing ragball back here, the other children and I, using our fists as bats. We all tried to hit the ball out of the yard for a home run. I supposed I had done so as many times as anyone else, but the number of times was nothing to brag about.

Where were all the others now? Most had gone. To southern cities, to northern cities, others to the grave. Had Jefferson ever hit a home run? He was as big as anyone else, stronger than most, but to hit a home run off a ragball was a feat. Brute strength was not enough. Timing and luck were needed. You had to hit it just right, and that took timing and luck. Lily Green hit as many as anyone else, I supposed. But her luck ran out before she was twenty. Killed accidentally in a barroom in Baton Rouge. What a waste. Such a beautiful girl. All the boys loved Lily Green.

I started back toward the front. What about tomorrow? What happens after today? Nothing will ever be the same after today.

At five minutes to eleven, I was standing at my desk, facing the opened front door, when I saw the minister’s car go up the quarter, with Harry Williams sitting in the passenger seat beside him. They were on their way into Bayonne. I told my students to put away their things quietly. Before letting them go, I reminded them that I didn’t want any running or loud talking and that I wanted them all back at school no later than a quarter to twelve. When they had all gone, I sat down at my desk, facing the door.

I did not want to think. I wanted to sit there until I heard, but not to think before then. No, I wanted to go to my car and drive away. To go somewhere and lose all memory of where I had come from. I wanted to go, I wanted to – God, what does a person do who knows there is only one more hour to live?

I felt like crying, but I refused to cry. No, I would not cry. There were too many more who would end up as he did. I could not cry for all of them, could I?

I wished I could telephone Vivian, but there was not one telephone, public or otherwise, between here and Bayonne that I could use. I would see her tonight, though. I would definitely see her tonight. I need to see you tonight, my love.

But who was with him? Who is with you, Jefferson? Is He with you, Jefferson? He is with Reverend Ambrose, because Reverend Ambrose believes. Do you believe, Jefferson? Have I done anything to make you not believe? If I have, please forgive me for being a fool. For at this moment, what else is there?

I know now that that old man is much braver than I. I am not with you at this moment because – because I would not have been able to stand. I would not have been able to walk with you those last few steps. I would have embarrassed you. But the old man will not. He will be strong. He is going to use *their* God to give him strength. You just watch, Jefferson. You just watch. He is brave, braver than I, braver than any of them – except you, I hope. My faith is in you, Jefferson.

The children returned from dinner as I had asked them to do, and at ten minutes to twelve, I lined them up before the door. When the last one had marched into the church, I went to my desk to face them.

“In a couple of minutes it will be twelve o’clock. I will ask you to get down on your knees and remain on your knees until I ask you to get up. Are there any questions?”

Louis Washington, Jr., raised that grimy little hand again.

“Is you go’n bow down too, Mr. Wiggins?”

“The proper way to ask that question is, ‘Are you going to bow down too, Mr. Wiggins?’”

“You go’n bow down too?”

“I’ll be outside,” I told the class. “Irene, you, Odessa, and Clarence are in charge. All right, please, on your knees. I’ll tell you when to get up.”

“We need to pray?” Louis Washington, Jr., wanted to know.

“Yes,” I told him. “But quietly, to yourself.”

Several of the larger girls knelt on scarves or handkerchiefs. I took up my Westcott and went out through the front door. I had no idea what I would do while I waited to hear from Bayonne, but I found myself out in the road and walking up the quarter. It was a couple of minutes after twelve, and I was trying not to think. But how could I not think about something that had dominated my thoughts for nearly six months? It seemed that I had spent more time with him in that jail cell than I had with the children in the church school.

Where was he at this very moment? At the window, looking out at the sky? Lying on the bunk, staring up at the gray ceiling? Standing at the cell door, waiting? How did he feel? Was he afraid? Was he crying? Were they coming to get him now, this moment? Was he on his knees, begging for one more minute of life? Was he standing?

Why wasn’t I there? Why wasn’t I standing beside him? Why wasn’t my arm around him? Why?

Why wasn’t I back there with the children? Why wasn’t I down on my knees? Why?

At the mouth of the quarter, there was shade from a pecan tree in the corner of the fence surrounding Henri Pichot’s yard. A shallow ditch ran between the fence and the road. The people from the quarter had sat under that tree as far back as I could remember. Men had gambled there with cards and dice. Others had stood or sat there to get out of the hot sun or the rain. Before I had a car, I had stood there many times waiting for the bus. The bus driver always blew the horn about a mile before he got there, and I would have time to cross the highway to wave it down. There would always be someone there, but today I sat alone.

Behind me was Henri Pichot’s gray and white antebellum house, sitting on its foundation high above the ground. His car was parked on the grass in the front yard. I figured that he would be the first to hear, and maybe he would come into the quarter. I looked back over my shoulder when I sat down, and I looked back every minute or two afterward.

It must have been twelve-fifteen by now. I didn’t want to look at my watch anymore. Had it already happened? Or was he still waiting, sitting on the bunk, hands clasped together, waiting? Was he standing at the cell door, listening for that first sound of footsteps coming toward him? Or was it finally, finally over?

Don’t tell me to believe. Don’t tell me to believe in the same God or laws that men believe in who commit these murders. Don’t tell me to believe that God can bless this country and that men are judged by their peers. Who among his peers judged him? Was I there? Was the minister there? Was Harry Williams there? Was Farrell Jarreau? Was my aunt? Was Vivian? No, his peers did not judge him – and I will not believe.

Yet they must believe. They must believe, if only to free the mind, if not the body. Only when the mind is free has the body a chance to be free. Yes, they must believe, they must believe. Because I know what it means to be a slave. I am a slave.

I looked back. But there was no movement at Henri Pichot’s house. It must have been close to twelve-thirty, but I refused to look at my watch.

Several feet away from where I sat under the tree was a hill of bull grass. I doubted that I had looked at it once in all the time that I had been sitting there. I probably would not have noticed it at all had a butterfly, a yellow butterfly with dark specks like ink dots on its wings, not lit there. What had brought it there? There was no odor that I could detect to have attracted it. There were other places where it could have rested – there was the wire fence on either side of the road, there were weeds along both ditches with strong fragrances, there were flowers just a short distance away in Pichot’s yard – so why did it light on a hill of bull grass that offered it nothing? I watched it closely, the way it opened its wings and closed them, the way it opened its wings again, fluttered, closed its wings for a second or two, then opened them again and flew away. I watched it fly over the ditch and down into the quarter, I watched it until I could not see it anymore.

Yes, I told myself. It is finally over.

I waited another few minutes for Henri Pichot to come out, but he did not. I stood up and stretched and looked across the highway at the river, so tranquil, its water as blue as the sky. The willows near the edge of the water were just as still, and no breeze stirred the Spanish moss that hung from the cypresses. I could hear the horn as the bus came around the big bend a mile away on its way into Bayonne. I looked toward Pichot’s house again, and I started back down the quarter. I knew it was over, but I would wait until I heard from the courthouse. I looked back several times, but no Henri Pichot. I was the only person in the road. Just me, and my gray car parked farther down the quarter, in front

of my aunt's house.

I took my time walking, and occasionally slapped my leg with the Westcott. When I came up even with the church, I stopped out in the road to look at Miss Emma's house again. The door was still shut, the curtain hung limp in the window. I wondered if she knew it was finally over.

Just before going into the churchyard, I looked back up the quarter. And now I did see a car coming toward me. The driver drove slowly to keep down the dust. It didn't look like Pichot's car, and I knew it was not Reverend Ambrose's. I moved into the ditch as Paul came up even with me and stopped. We looked at each other, and I knew he had come to bring me the news. I didn't go up to the car, as I was supposed to do; I waited for him to make his move. I saw him reach for something on the seat beside him, then he opened the door and got out. He had a notebook, just like the one I had given Jefferson. I waited for him to come to me.

"He wanted me to bring you this."

Paul looked directly at me, his gray-blue eyes more intense than I had ever seen them before. I took the notebook from him, and he continued to stare at me, like someone in shock.

"Do you have a minute?" he asked me.

"Yes. But I'll have to go inside first. I left the children on their knees. I'll be right back."

The children all looked at me as I walked up the aisle to the table. I told them to rise from their knees. When they had all sat down, some of them rubbing their knees before sitting, I told them I had to speak to someone, and I wanted them to remain quiet until I got back. I told them that Jefferson had sent a notebook to me, and I was going to leave it on the table, and later we would talk. I left Irene Cole in charge and went back outside.

Paul and I started walking down the quarter. We were both quiet. I waited for him to begin.

"It went as well as it could have gone." He spoke slowly as we walked abreast, he looking up ahead, I down at the ground. "There was no trouble. He was a little shaky – but no trouble."

Paul was quiet a moment, then suddenly he stopped walking. After going another step, I stopped, too, and looked back at him.

"He was the strongest man in that crowded room, Grant Wiggins," Paul said, staring at me and speaking louder than was necessary. "He was, he was. I'm not saying this to make you feel good, I'm not saying this to ease your pain. Ask that preacher, ask Harry Williams. He was the strongest man there. We all stood jammed together, no more than six, eight feet away from that chair. We all had each other to lean on. When Vincent asked him if he had any last words, he looked at the preacher and said, 'Tell Nannan I walked.' And straight he walked, Grant Wiggins. Straight he walked. I'm a witness. Straight he walked."

Paul stopped talking. He was breathing heavily. He was looking at me but seeing Jefferson in that chair. We started walking again. We were passing by Miss Emma's house, but Paul didn't know this. He had never been in the quarter before.

"After they put the death cloth over his face, I couldn't watch anymore. I looked down at the floor," Paul was saying. His voice was quieter, less intense now. "I heard the two jolts, but I wouldn't look up. I'll never forget the sound of that generator as long as I live on this earth."

We came to the end of the quarter and stood on the railroad tracks while gazing across the field at the rows of early cane. Paul got in front of me to look in my face.

"You're one great teacher, Grant Wiggins," he said.

"I'm not great. I'm not even a teacher."

"Why do you say that?"

"You have to believe to be a teacher," I said, looking at the rows of new cane. To the right of where we were standing were the tall pecan trees in the cemetery. There would be another grave there within a day or two.

"I saw the transformation, Grant Wiggins," Paul said.

"I didn't do it."

"Who, then?"

"Maybe he did it himself."

"He never could have done that. I saw the transformation. I'm a witness to that."

"Then maybe it was God," I said.

Paul continued to look at me. He did not like the way I had used the name of God. He came from good stock. He believed. But he didn't say anything.

"You're ready to start back?" I asked him.

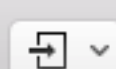
"I didn't open his notebook," Paul said. We had turned and were walking up the quarter now. "I didn't think it was my place to open the notebook. He asked me to bring it to you, and I brought it to you. But I would like to know his thoughts sometime – if you don't mind."

"After I read it," I said.

"I suppose this has been very hard on everybody."

"Hard on the people here," I said.

"School is just about ready to end, huh?" Paul asked, after a while.



"Yes," I said. "We start a month later and get out two months earlier than the whites do."

"What are you going to do when school is over? Go on a vacation?"

"I don't know. It depends on Vivian. Whatever she wants."

"She's beautiful," Paul said. "You're a lucky fellow there, Grant Wiggins."

"Yes, I'm lucky," I said. "Some of us are."

"I'm sorry," Paul said. "I am very, very sorry."

We had stopped for a moment. Now we started walking again.

"If I could ever be of any help, I would like you to call on me. I mean that with all my heart."

We were passing by Miss Emma's house. Reverend Ambrose's car was parked before the door.

"Isn't that the preacher's car?" Paul asked.

"That's where Jefferson lived. That's his nannan's house."

Paul looked at the house as we went by. He looked at it again over his shoulder. We came up to the church and stopped at his car.

"Well, I better go in to the children," I said.

Paul stuck out his hand.

"Allow me to be your friend, Grant Wiggins. I don't ever want to forget this day. I don't ever want to forget him."

I took his hand. He held mine with both of his.

"I don't know what you're going to say when you go back in there. But tell them he was the bravest man in that room today. I'm a witness, Grant Wiggins. Tell them so."

"Maybe one day you will come back and tell them so."

"It would be an honor."

I turned from him and went into the church. Irene Cole told the class to rise, with their shoulders back. I went up to the desk and turned to face them. I was crying.

1993

From Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*. pp. 211–256. New York: Vintage, 1993. Copyright © 1993 by Ernest J. Gaines. Used by permission of Profile Books Limited and Alfred A. Knopf an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

Notes

¹ By this moment in *A Lesson Before Dying*, Grant Wiggins, the protagonist, narrator, and Louisiana elementary school teacher in his mid-twenties, succumbs to the pressure from his church-going aunt, Tante Lou, to fulfill the request of Miss Emma to teach her godson, Jefferson, a young man convicted of murders he said he did not commit and sentenced to death by execution, to "die with some dignity." Several times Grant visits Jefferson as he languishes in jail until his execution, but is unable to crack the prisoner's sullen and moody exterior. Over time, Jefferson begins to open up by saying what is on his mind and accepting a notebook Grant provides for him to jot down his thoughts and feelings. Beginning in Chapter 27, Grant has a conversation with Reverend Ambrose. With devout religiosity, Reverend Ambrose alleges that Grant's atheism will lead Jefferson astray. Thus he sidesteps the teacher and visits Jefferson alone, contributing his own kind of instruction. Amid his challenges with Jefferson and Reverend Ambrose, Grant also struggles in his personal affair with Vivian, a schoolteacher currently divorcing her husband. Vivian is reluctant to make her relationship with Grant public or to go away with him, mindful of how such controversy would impact her two children. Chapters 27–31 conclude the novel.

Suzan-Lori Parks (b. 1963)

In November 2002, Suzan-Lori Parks embarked on an ambitious goal as a playwright – to write a short play each day for a year. The result was *365 Days/365 Plays*, whose staging involved the collaboration of 700 theaters in 30 cities, and represented as much an exploration of the creative process as a testament to the ambition and innovation of a gifted young dramatist. Of all the young African Americans hailed as the next great playwright, Parks is unique in her ability to produce work time and again that examines race and myth-making in groundbreaking ways.

Suzan-Lori Parks was born in Fort Knox, Kentucky, to a military family, the middle of three children. Her father, Donald Parks, was a Lieutenant Colonel, and much of her childhood was spent in Germany. This background meant that, as a student at a German high school (rather than the English-speaking school for military children), her outsider consciousness was informed more by her status as a foreigner than by being an African American. After graduating from the John Carroll School in Bel Air, Maryland, in 1981, Parks attended Mount Holyoke College, where her English professor, Mary McHenry, introduced her to Five Colleges faculty member James Baldwin. Parks had stopped writing after a high school teacher told her she could not be a writer since she could not spell. But Baldwin encouraged her creative efforts, and suggested that she write plays rather than short stories. After graduating Phi Beta Kappa in 1985 with a BA in English and German, she enrolled at Drama Studio London to continue learning the world of theater.

Living in New York City and working as a temp, Parks's breakthrough came when the Brooklyn Arts and Cultural Association Downtown produced *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1989). Favorable reviews compared Parks to Adrienne Kennedy and Ntozake Shange, and the play soon won an Obie Award in 1990 for Best New American Play. The following year Parks became an associate artist at the Yale School of Drama. Parks's subsequent dramas explore issues of race and gender construction. Although these issues appear in *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990), *The America Play* (1994), and *Venus* (1996), she is adamant that oppression is not the dramatic focal point of her work. "The Klan does not always have to be outside the door for Black people to have lives worthy of dramatic literature," she wrote in "An Equation for Black People Onstage" (1995). Indeed, two of her plays, *In the Blood* (1999) and *Fucking A* (2000), are reinterpretations of Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter*. *In the Blood* was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in Drama in 2000. Although she did not win, she did two years later for *Topdog/Underdog*. Like *The America Play*, *Topdog/Underdog* sets two brothers in tension with each other in roles recalling Abraham Lincoln and his assassin, John Wilkes Booth.

Accolades and accomplishments have only snowballed for Parks in the twenty-first century. In 2000, Parks received a Guggenheim Fellowship, and in 2001 a MacArthur "Genius" Grant. Two years later she published her first novel, *Getting Mother's Body*, "a novel in voices," as she puts it, whose creativity owes a large debt to William Faulkner's 1930 novel *As I Lay Dying*. Parks's playwriting has also led to work on various screenplays: Spike Lee's *Girl 6* (1996); a 2007 adaptation of Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; and *The Great Debaters* (2007), starring Denzel Washington in the role of poet Melvin B. Tolson. Parks teaches playwriting at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, tours extensively giving dramatic lectures, and has received an honorary doctorate from Brown University. With Diane Paulus and Diedre Murray she adapted, in 2011, *Porgy and Bess*, which won a Tony Award a year later for Best Musical Revival. Her Ray Charles musical, *Unchain My Heart*, premiered on Broadway in 2012.

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Extract from The America Play and Other Works

An Equation for Black People Onstage

Simply this:

The bulk of relationships Black people are engaged in onstage is the relationship between the Black and the White other. This is the stuff of high drama. I wonder if a drama involving Black people can exist without the presence of the White – no, not the *presence* – the presence is not the problem. As Toni Morrison writes in her essay "Black Matters," the presence of the White often signifies the presence of the Black. Within the subject is its other. So the mere *presence* of the other is not the problem. The interest in the other is. The use of the White in the dramatic equation is, I think, too often seen as the only way of exploring our Blackness; this equation reduces Blackness to merely a state of "non-Whiteness." Blackness in this equation is a people whose lives consist of a series of reactions and responses to the White ruling class. We have for so long been an "oppressed" people, but are Black people only blue? As African-Americans we have a history, a future and a daily reality in which a confrontation with a White ruling class is a central feature. This reality makes life difficult. This reality often traps us in a singular mode of expression. There are many ways of defining Blackness and there are many ways of presenting Blackness onstage. The Klan does not always have to be outside the door for Black people to have lives worthy of dramatic literature. Saying that "Whitey" has to be present in Black drama because Whitey is an inextricable aspect of Black reality is like saying that every play has to have a murder in it, is like saying that every drama involving Jews must reference Treblinka. And what happens when we choose a concern other than the race problem to focus on? What kind of drama do we get?

Let's look at the math:

BLACK PEOPLE + "WHITEY" =
STANDARD DRAMATIC CONFLICT
(STANDARD TERRITORY)

i.e.

"BLACK DRAMA" = the presentation of the Black as oppressed

so that

WHATEVER the dramatic dynamics, they are most often READ to EQUAL
an explanation or relation of Black oppression. This is not only a false equation,
this is bullshit.

so that

BLACK PEOPLE + x = NEW DRAMATIC CONFLICT
(NEW TERRITORY)

*where x is the realm of situations showing African-Americans in states other than
the Oppressed by/Obsessed with "Whitey" state; where the White when present
is not the oppressor, and where audiences are encouraged to see and understand and
discuss these dramas in terms other than that same old shit.*

Charles R. Johnson (b. 1948)

In *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970* (1988), Charles R. Johnson calls for African American literature to embody “a fiction of increasing artistic and intellectual growth, one that enables us as a people – as a culture – to move from narrow complaint to broad celebration.” African American authors, he argues, have limited themselves to a narrow segment of African American life, and thus have sometimes been complicit in their own racial stereotyping. As a novelist and short-story writer who draws on Buddhism, phenomenology, and a strongly revisionist impulse, Johnson has done much to move African American literature toward this “broad celebration.” Like his idol Ralph Ellison, Johnson’s work is concerned not just with race and racism but also with deeper questions of individuality, justice, and human relationships. His innovative fiction uses humor and irony to impart postmodern concepts of time, history, and language.

Charles Richard Johnson was born in Evanston, Illinois. Interested in a career as a visual artist as a teenager, he completed a mail-order cartooning course and began to publish cartoons in the *Chicago Tribune* and elsewhere. An early influence was Lawrence Lariar, a Disney studios “idea” man with whom Johnson corresponded while still in high school. As a student at Southern Illinois University, he released two collections of his cartoons – *Black Humor* (1970) and *Half-Past Nation Time* (1972). In 1971 he hosted a drawing program on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) channel called *Charley’s Pad*, a popular children’s show that aired on the station well into the 1980s.

Literature, however, was never far from Johnson’s artistic sensibilities. He has often cited Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and John A. Williams as early influences on his style. He completed his undergraduate work in 1971, and stayed at Southern Illinois to study philosophy. During these years of graduate study he drafted seven novels. Six apprentice novels remain unpublished, yet the seventh, *Faith and the Good Thing* (1974), was Johnson’s first published novel. A major influence on his writing was his mentor at Southern Illinois, the literary theorist and novelist John Gardner, whose paradigm of “moral fiction” called upon the writer to commit to technique, imagination, and ethics. Gardner pushed Johnson to move beyond the protest fiction of his forebears and find a new voice that connected African American historical experience and folktales to such philosophical traditions as Buddhism and phenomenology. Johnson completed his doctorate in phenomenology and literary aesthetics at the State University of New York at Stony Brook in 1988.

In 1976, Johnson was hired to teach English at the University of Washington, Seattle, where his writing brought him again to the attention of PBS producers. Johnson wrote a number of screenplays for the network. *Charlie Smith and the Fritter Tree* (1978) chronicled American history through stories told by a 134-year-old nursing home resident who was a train robber, bounty hunter, and saloon keeper. *Booker* (1984), a biography of the educator Booker T. Washington, received in 1985 the international Prix Jeunesse, as well as the Writers Guild Award for outstanding script in the television category for children’s shows. Johnson’s second novel, *Oxherding Tale*, was finally published in 1982 after having been rejected by numerous publishers. Johnson had started working on it while still in graduate school, inspired, he said, to “take the slave narrative and do something philosophical with it.” Though oftentimes humorous and highly innovative, this melding of nineteenth-century history and tropes with contemporary epistemological concerns ranged far beyond the accepted norms of the slave narrative genre.

Given these writerly commitments, Herman Melville’s presence in Johnson’s fiction is unsurprising. His collection of stories, *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice: Tales and Conjurings* (1986), draws its epigraph from Melville’s 1857 novel *The Confidence Man*: “It is with fiction as with religion: it should present another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie.” The stories deal with transformations, and explore the relationship between the intellectual and society. *The New York Times* praised Johnson’s “narrative finesse,” and the book was a finalist for the 1987 PEN/Faulkner Award. With *Middle Passage* (1990), however, Johnson finally earned the literary accolades that his work deserved. A Melvillean tale of stowaways, slave uprisings, and shipwreck aboard a nineteenth-century slaver called *The Republic*, *Middle Passage* won the National Book Award, and launched Johnson on a prolific period of reviews and cultural commentary for *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and other newspapers in the United States and England.

As a writer and philosopher concerned with exploring fundamental questions of individual existence through African American history, Johnson has influenced some of the most important public history projects of the past 20 years. He wrote *Africans in America: America’s Journey through Slavery* (1999), a companion book for the award-winning PBS series. The audio book, which Johnson co-produced with Patricia Smith, was selected as one of the best in the history category of the Listen Up Awards in *Publisher’s Weekly*. He received the MacArthur “Genius” Grant in 1998, the same year that he published *Dreamer*, a novel about Martin Luther King, Jr. Johnson has shifted away from the genre of the novel in recent writings: *Soulcatcher* (2001) is a series of historical vignettes concerning slavery; *Turning the Wheel* (2003) a collection of essays on Buddhism and writing; and *Dr King’s Refrigerator: And Other Bedtime Stories* (2005), a combination of his philosophic and fictional interests. In 2002, Johnson received an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award for Literature.

Johnson’s call, in *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970*, for African American literature to enable African American society and culture “to move from narrow complaint to broad celebration” finds its echo in his essay “The End of the Black American Narrative: A New Century Calls for New Stories Grounded in the Present, Leaving Behind the Painful History of Slavery and Its Consequences.” Published in the Summer 2008 issue of *American Scholar*, the essay seeks to put an end to that traditional story, told and retold

in the literary academy, about the interracial conflict between blacks and whites and the political struggle of African Americans for civil rights. Contemporary African Americans are now so complex, amorphous, and heterogeneous, Johnson insists, that their collective problems are more class-based and more applicable to the problems already plaguing other racially or ethnically defined groups. Just as Johnson has sought, in his 1988 book, to indict the polemical “narrowness” of African American literature, he seeks to expand the political circumstances of the literature’s own address from racial to class and broadly ethnic frames of analysis.

A year after publishing “The End of the Black American Narrative,” Johnson retired, after having taught in the Creative Writing Program (and at one time serving as the program’s director) at the University of Washington since 1976.

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The End of the Black American Narrative

A New Century Calls for New Stories Grounded in the Present, Leaving Behind the Painful History of Slavery and Its Consequences¹

It is ambition enough to be employed as an under-labourer in clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way of knowledge.

– John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

Back to the things themselves!

– Edmund Husserl

As a writer, philosopher, artist, and black American, I’ve devoted more than 40 years of my life to trying to understand and express intellectually and artistically different aspects of the black American narrative. At times during my life, especially when I was young, it was a story that engaged me emotionally and consumed my imagination. I’ve produced novels, short stories, essays, critical articles, drawings, and PBS dramas based on what we call the black American story. To a certain degree, teaching the literature of black America has been my bread and butter as a college professor. It is a very old narrative, one we all know quite well, and it is a tool we use, consciously or unconsciously, to interpret

or to make sense of everything that has happened to black people in this country since the arrival of the first 20 Africans at the Jamestown colony in 1619. A good story always has a meaning (and sometimes layers of meaning); it also has an epistemological mission: namely, to show us something. It is an effort to make the best sense we can of the human experience, and I believe that we base our lives, actions, and judgments as often on the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves (even when they are less than empirically sound or verifiable) as we do on the severe rigor of reason. This unique black American narrative, which emphasizes the experience of victimization, is quietly in the background of every conversation we have about black people, even when it is not fully articulated or expressed. It is our starting point, our agreed-upon premise, our most important presupposition for dialogues about black America. We teach it in our classes, and it is the foundation for both our scholarship and our popular entertainment as they relate to black Americans. Frequently it is the way we approach each other as individuals.

As a writer and a teacher of writing, I have to ask myself over and over again, just what is a story. How do we shape one? How many different forms can it take? What do stories tell us about our world? What details are necessary, and which ones are unimportant for telling it well? I constantly ask my creative writing students two questions: Does the story work, technically? And, if so, then, what does it *say*? I tell them that, like a work of philosophy (which is the sister discipline to storytelling among the interpretive arts), a narrative vision must have the qualities of coherence, consistency, and completeness. The plot of a modern story must be streamlined and efficient if it is to be easily understood. And, like Edgar Allan Poe in his 1842 essay "On the Aim and the Technique of the Short Story," I argue that a dramatic narrative should leave the listener with "a certain unique or single effect" that has emotional power. For the last 32 years, I've stressed to my students that a story must have a conflict that is clearly presented, one that we care about, a dilemma or disequilibrium for the protagonist that we, as readers, emotionally identify with. The black American story, as we tell it to ourselves, beautifully embodies all these narrative virtues.

The story begins with violence in the 17th-century slave forts sprinkled along the west coast of Africa, where debtors, thieves, war prisoners, and those who would not convert to Islam were separated from their families, branded, and sold to Europeans who packed them into the pestilential ships that cargoed 20 million human beings (a conservative estimate) to the New World. Only 20 percent of those slaves survived the harrowing voyage at sea (and only 20 percent of the sailors, too), and if they were among the lucky few to set foot on American soil, new horrors and heartbreak awaited them.

As has been documented time and again, the life of a slave – our not-so-distant ancestors – was one of thinghood. Former languages, religions, and cultures were erased, replaced by the Peculiar Institution, in which the person of African descent was property, and systematically – legally, physically, and culturally – denied all sense of self-worth. A slave owns nothing, least of all himself. He desires and dreams at the risk of his life, which is best described as relative to (white) others, a reaction to their deeds, judgements, and definitions of the world. And these definitions, applied in blacks, were not kind. For 244 years (from 1619 to 1863), America was a slave state with a guilty conscience: two and a half centuries scarred by slave revolts, heroic black (and abolitionist) resistance to oppression, and, more than anything else, physical, spiritual, and psychological suffering so staggering it silences the mind when we study the classic slave narratives of Equiano or Frederick Douglass. Legal bondage, the peculiar antebellum world, ended during the Civil War, but the Emancipation Proclamation did not bring liberation.

Legal freedom instead gradually brought segregation, America's version of apartheid. But "separate" clearly was not "equal." Black Americans were not simply segregated; they were methodically disenfranchised, stripped of their rights as citizens. From the 1890s through the 1950s, the law of black life was experienced as second-class citizenship. In the century after the Emancipation Proclamation, members of each generation of black Americans saw their lives disrupted by race riots, lynchings, and the destruction of towns and communities, such as the Greenwood district of black homes, businesses, and churches in Tulsa, Oklahoma, on May 31, 1921. The challenge for black America and the conflict for its story, then, was how to force a nation that excluded black people from its promise of "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" after the Revolutionary War, and failed to redress this grievance after Reconstruction, to honor these principles enshrined in its most sacred documents.

What I have described defines the general shape of the black American group narrative before the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, the most important and transformative domestic event in American history after the War Between the States. The conflict of this story is first slavery, then segregation and legal disenfranchisement. The meaning of the story is group victimization, and every black person is the story's protagonist. This specific story was not about ending racism, which would be a wonderful thing; but ending racism entirely is probably as impossible for human beings as ending crime, or as quixotic as President Bush's "war on terror." No, the black American story was not as vague as that. It had a clearly defined conflict. And our ancestors fought *daily* for generations, with courage and dignity, to change this narrative. That was the *point* of their lives, their sacrifices, each and every day they were on this earth. We cannot praise enough the miracle they achieved, the lifelong efforts of our leaders and the anonymous men and women who kept the faith, demonstrated, went to jail, registered black people to vote in the Deep South, changed unjust laws, and died in order that Americans of all backgrounds might be free. I have always seen their fight for us as noble.

Among those I pay special tribute to is W. E. B. Du Bois, one of the founders of the NAACP, who deeply understood the logic and structure of this narrative as it unfolded from Reconstruction through the 1950s. It was a sign of his prescience that he also could see *beyond* this ancient story while still in the midst of it and fighting mightily to change it.

In 1926, Du Bois delivered an address titled, "Criteria of Negro Art" at the Chicago Conference for the NAACP. His lecture, which was later published in *The Crisis*, the official publication of the NAACP, which Du Bois himself edited, took place during the most entrenched period of segregation, when the opportunities for black people were so painfully circumscribed. "What do we want?" he asked his audience. "What is the thing we are after?" Listen to Du Bois 82 years ago:

What do we want? What is the thing we are after? As it was phrased last night it had a certain truth: We want to be Americans, full-fledged Americans, with all the rights of

American citizens. But is that all? Do we want simply to be Americans? Once in a while through all of us there flashes some clairvoyance, some clear idea, of what America really is. We who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans cannot. And seeing our country thus, are we satisfied with its present goals and ideals? ...

If you tonight suddenly should become full-fledged Americans; if your color faded, or the color line here in Chicago was miraculously forgotten; suppose, too, you became at the same time rich and powerful – what is it that you would want? What would you immediately seek? Would you buy the most powerful of motor cars and outrace Cook County? Would you buy the most elaborate estate on the North Shore? Would you be a Rotarian or a Lion or a What-not of the very last degree? Would you wear the most striking clothes, give the richest dinners and buy the longest press notices?

Even as you visualize such ideals you know in your hearts that these are not the things you really want. You realize this sooner than the average white American because, pushed aside as we have been in America, there has come to us not only a certain distaste for the tawdry and flamboyant but a vision of what the world could be if it were really a beautiful world; if we had the true spirit; if we had the Seeing Eye, the Cunning Hand, the Feeling Heart; if we had, to be sure, not perfect happiness, but plenty of good hard work, the inevitable suffering that always comes with life; sacrifice and waiting, all that – but, nevertheless, lived in a world where men know, where men create, where they realize themselves and where they enjoy life. It is that sort of a world we want to create for ourselves and for all America.

This provocative passage is, in part, the foundation for my questioning the truth and usefulness of the traditional black American narrative of victimization. When compared with black lives at the dawn of the 21st century, and 40 years after the watershed events of the Civil Rights Movement, many of Du Bois' remarks now sound ironic, for all the impossible things he spoke of in 1926 are realities today. We are "full-fledged Americans, with the rights of American citizens." We *do* have "plenty of good hard work" and live in a society where "men create, where they realize themselves and where they enjoy life." Even more ironic is the fact that some of our famous rappers and athletes who like "living large," as they say, seem obsessed with what Du Bois derisively called "the tawdry and flamboyant" (they call it "bling"). Furthermore, some of us *do* use the freedom paid for with the blood of our ancestors to pursue conspicuous consumption in the form of "powerful motor cars," "elaborate estates," "striking clothes," and "the richest dinners."

To put this another way, we can say that 40 years after the epic battles for specific civil rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma, after two monumental and historic legislative triumphs – the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 – and after three decades of affirmative action that led to the creation of a true black middle class (and not the false one E. Franklin Frazier described in his classic 1957 study, *Black Bourgeoisie*), a people oppressed for so long have finally become, as writer Reginald McKnight once put it, "as polymorphous as the dance of Shiva." Black Americans have been CEOs at AOL Time Warner, American Express, and Merrill Lynch; we have served as secretary of state and White House national security adviser. Well over 10,000 black Americans have been elected to offices around the country, and at this moment Senator Barack Obama holds us in suspense with the possibility that he may be selected as the Democratic Party's first biracial, black American candidate for president. We have been mayors, police chiefs, bestselling authors, MacArthur fellows, Nobel laureates, Ivy League professors, billionaires, scientists, stockbrokers, engineers, theoretical physicists, toy makers, inventors, astronauts, chess grandmasters, dot-com millionaires, actors, Hollywood film directors, and talk show hosts (the most prominent among them being Oprah Winfrey, who recently signed a deal to acquire her own network); we are Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists (as I am). And we are not culturally homogeneous. When I last looked, West Indians constituted 48 percent of the "black" population in Miami. In America's major cities, 15 percent of the black American population is foreign born – Haitian, Jamaican, Senegalese, Nigerian, Cape Verdean, Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Somali² – a rich tapestry of brown-skinned people as culturally complex in their differences, backgrounds, and outlooks as those people lumped together under the all too convenient labels of "Asian" or "European." Many of them are doing better – in school and business – than native-born black Americans. I think often of something said by Mary Andom, an Eritrean student at Western Washington University, and quoted in an article published in 2003 in *The Seattle Times*: "I don't know about 'chitlings' or 'grits.' I don't listen to soul music artists such as Marvin Gaye or Aretha Franklin. ... I grew up eating *injera*³ and listening to *Tigrinya* music. ... After school, I cook the traditional coffee, called boun, by hand for my mother. It is a tradition shared amongst mother and daughter."

No matter which angle we use to view black people in America today, we find them to be a complex and multifaceted people who defy easy categorization. We challenge, culturally and politically, an old group narrative that fails at the beginning of this new century to capture even a fraction of our rich diversity and heterogeneity. My point is not that black Americans don't have social and cultural problems in 2008. We have several nagging problems, among them poor schools and far too many black men in prison and too few in college. But these are problems based more on the inequities of class, and they appear in other groups as well. It simply is no longer the case that the essence of black American life is racial victimization and disenfranchisement, a curse and a condemnation, a destiny based on color in which the meaning of one's life is thinghood, created even before one is born. This is not something we can assume. The specific conflict of this narrative reached its dramatic climax in 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama, and at the breathtaking March on Washington; its resolution arrived in 1965, the year before I graduated from high school, with the Voting Rights Act. Everything since then has been a coda for almost half a century. We call this long-extended and still ongoing anticlimax the post-civil-rights period. If the NAACP is struggling these days to recruit members of the younger generation and to redefine its mission in the 21st century – and it is struggling to do that – I think it is a good sign that the organization Du Bois led for so long is now a casualty of its own successes in the 1960s.

Yet, despite being an antique, the old black American narrative of pervasive victimization persists, denying the overwhelming evidence of change since the time of my parents and grandparents, refusing to die as doggedly as the Ptolemaic vision before Copernicus⁴ or the notion of phlogiston⁵ in the 19th century, or the deductive reasoning of the medieval schoolmen. It has become ahistorical. For a time it served us well and powerfully, yes, reminding each generation of black Americans of the historic obligations and

duties and dangers they inherited and faced, but the problem with any story or idea or interpretation is that it can soon fail to fit the facts and becomes an ideology, even kitsch.

This point is expressed eloquently by Susan Griffin in her 1982 essay "The Way of all Ideology," where she says, "When a theory is transformed into an ideology, it begins to destroy the self and self-knowledge. ... No one can tell it anything new. It is annoyed by any detail which does not fit its worldview. ... Begun as a way to restore one's sense of reality, now it attempts to discipline real people, to remake natural beings after its own image."

In his superb book *In My Father's House*, philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah writes, "There is nothing in the world that can do all we ask race to do for us." We can easily amend or revise this insight and apply it to the pre-21st-century black American narrative, which can do very little of the things we need for it to do today.

But this is an enduring human problem, isn't it? As phenomenologist Edmund Husserl revealed a hundred years ago, we almost always perceive and understand the new in terms of the old – or, more precisely, we experience events through our ideas, and frequently those are ideas that bring us comfort, ideas *received* from our parents, teachers, the schools we attend, and the enveloping culture, rather than original ones of our own. While a story or model may disclose a particular meaning for an experience, it also forces into the background or conceals other possible meanings. Think of this in light of novelist Ralph Ellison's brilliant notion of "invisibility," where – in his classic *Invisible Man* – the characters encountered by his nameless protagonist all impose their ideologies (explanations and ideas) on the chaos of experience, on the mysterious, untamed life that forever churns beneath widely accepted interpretations and explanations of "history" and "culture," which in our social world, for Ellison, are the *seen*. I know, personally, there is value in this Ellisonian idea because in the historical fictions I've been privileged to publish, like "Martha's Dilemma" in my second collection, *Soulcatcher and Other Stories*, I discovered that the most intriguing, ambiguous, and revealing material for stories can often be found in the margins of the codified and often repeated narrative about slavery. In this case, I dramatized a delicious anecdote about what happened to Martha and her slaves right after the death of George.

What I am saying is that "official" stories and explanations and endlessly repeated interpretations of black American life over decades can short-circuit direct perception of the specific phenomenon before us. The idea of something – an intellectual construct – is often more appealing and perfect (in a Platonic sense) than the thing itself, which always remains mysterious and ambiguous and messy, by which I mean that its sense is open-ended, never fixed. It is always wise, I believe, to see all our propositions (and stories) as provisional, partial, incomplete, and subject to revision on the basis of new evidence, which we can be sure is just around the corner.

Nevertheless, we have heavily and often uncritically invested for most of our lives in the pre-21st-century black American narrative. In fact, some of us depend upon it for our livelihood, so it is *not* easy to let go, or to revise this story. Last October, Nation of Islam minister Louis Farrakhan spoke for two and a half hours at the Atlanta Civic Center. He and his mentor, black separatist Elijah Muhammad, provided black Americans with what is probably the most extreme, Manichean, and mythological version of the black American narrative, one that was anti-integrationist. In this incomplete and misleading rendition of the black American story, the races are locked in eternal struggle. As a story, this narrative fails because it is conceived as melodrama, a form of storytelling in which the characters are flat, lack complexity, are either all good or all bad, and the plot involves malicious villains and violent actions. Back in the 1930s when Elijah Muhammad shaped his myth of Yacub, which explained the origins of the white race as "devils," he sacrificed the credibility of both character and plot for the most simplistic kind of dramatic narrative. Farrakhan covered many subjects that day last October, but what I found most interesting is that he said successful black people like Oprah Winfrey, Senator Obama, Colin Powell, and Condoleezza Rice give black Americans a false impression of progress. In other words, their highly visible successes do not change the old narrative of group victimization. Minister Farrakhan seems unwilling to accept their success as evidence that the lives of black Americans have improved. He seems unwilling to accept the inevitability of change. He was quoted in the press as saying, "A life of ease sometimes makes you forget the struggle." And despite the battles for affirmative action that created a new middle class, he added, "It's becoming a plantation again, but you can't fight that because you want to keep your little job."

I beg to differ with Farrakhan, with his misuse of language, his loose, imprecise diction, because we obviously do *not* live on plantations. And wasn't job opportunity one of the explicit goals of the black American narrative? Farrakhan's entire life has been an investment in a story that changed as he was chasing it. So we can understand his fierce, personal, and even tragic attachment to dusty, antebellum concepts when looking at the uncharted phenomena in the early 21st century that outstrip his concepts and language.

However, it is precisely because Farrakhan cannot progress beyond an oversimplified caricature of a story line for racial phenomena that the suddenly notorious Rev. Jeremiah Wright praises him, saying "His depth of analysis ... when it comes to the racial ills of this nation is astounding and eye-opening," and, "He brings a perspective that is helpful and honest." Recently Wright called the Nation of Islam leader, "one of the most important voices in the 20th and 21st centur[ies]." I do not doubt that Wright and Farrakhan are men who have experienced the evil of racism and want to see the conditions of our people improve, or that both have records of community service. But it is the emotional attachment to a dated narrative, one leavened with the 1960s-era liberation theology of James Cone, that predictably leads Wright to proclaim that the U.S. government created the AIDS virus to destroy blacks (he invokes the old and proven, the ghastly Tuskegee syphilis experiment,⁶ in an effort to understand a new affliction devastating black people, and thus commits the logical fallacy, known as misuse of analogy); that Jesus was "a black man"; and that the brains of blacks and whites operate differently. The former pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago has made these paranoid and irresponsible statements publicly again and again without offering the slightest shred of evidence for these claims. "A bunch of rants that aren't grounded in truth" was how Barack Obama described his former minister's incendiary oratory, which is clearly antithetical not only to the postracial spirit of the Illinois senator's own speeches but also to his very racially and geographically mixed background. For in the realm of ideological thinking, especially from the pulpit, feeling and faith trump fact, and passion (as well as beliefs based on scripture) replaces fidelity to the empirical and painstaking logical demonstration.

Furthermore, such obsolete stories can also lead to serious mistakes in scholarship. I'm thinking now of Henry Louis Gates Jr., who in 1988 directed the publication of Oxford

University Press's 40-volume Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers. In his foreword, Gates praised the lost works of these black women writers as being the literary ancestors of Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker. Furthermore, he said it was the discovery of a particular lost black novel, called *Four Girls at Cottage City*, published in 1895 by Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins, that inspired him to direct this Schomburg series in the first place so, he said, "I can read them myself." Okay, so far so good. But in 2005, Holly Jackson, then a doctoral student of English at Brandeis University, was given the academically pedestrian, grunt-work assignment of writing an entry about Kelley-Hawkins for the African American National Biography. At the time very little was known about Kelley-Hawkins. After checking birth records in the Massachusetts Vital Records, and other documents, Jackson realized that Kelley-Hawkins was not black – as five decades of scholars had assumed – but white. Yet all the evidence to suggest her whiteness was clearly present in the books she wrote. Something that had always puzzled scholars, Jackson said, was "the apparent whiteness of her characters, who are repeatedly described with blue eyes and skin as white as 'pure' or 'driven' snow." Even more fantastic are the theories that literary scholars came up with to explain why Kelley-Hawkins, supposedly a black woman, made no references to race or blackness in her two novels written in the 1890s. Jackson says, "Scholars have explained this away by arguing that the abundance of white signifiers is actually politically radical, with some even going so far as to argue that this extremely white world depicts a kind of post-racial utopia," a modern world where, according to critic Carla L. Peterson, "racial difference no longer existed."

Obviously, all these explanations are hogwash. Fifty years of scholarship based on these mistakes – articles, dissertations, courses in African American women's writing that include the work of Kelley-Hawkins – turns out to be an illusion created by the blinding intentionality of those who wrote about this white author based on a tangled knot of beliefs and prejudices, their concept of her completely distorting the facts.

Once Gates learned of this research by Jackson and also investigations by Katherine Flynn, a genealogist, he immediately went into the mode of damage control. He told a reporter that the work of Kelley-Hawkins would at least be removed from future editions of the Schomburg series, and he downplayed the significance of these discoveries by Jackson and Flynn. But Jackson, being a true scholar, would not allow this intellectual scandal to be swept under the rug. Of this "enormous historical misconception," she said, "there is so much at stake here, because of all the writing that has been done based on a false assumption about race." She asks us to wonder, "How have her [Kelley-Hawkins's] overwhelmingly 'white' texts successfully passed as black for so long in the absence of any corroborating historical data? How does this discovery change our understanding of African American literary history?" Finally, she said, "We have stretched our understanding of how black women have written in America to incorporate texts that do not fit."

I've gone into great detail about the Kelley-Hawkins story because it is a cautionary tale for scholars and an example of how our theories, our explanatory models, and the stories we tell ourselves can blind us to the obvious, leading us to see in matters of race only what we want to see based on our desires and political agendas. When we confront phenomena of any kind, we are wise if we assume the position phenomenologist Herbert Spiegelberg called epistemological humility, which is a healthy skepticism about what we think we already know. When constructing our narratives, it would also help if we remember a famous and often-quoted statement by C. S. Lewis on the characteristics of the human mind: "Five senses; an incurably abstract intellect; a haphazardly selective memory; a set of preconceptions and assumptions so numerous that I can never examine more than a minority of them – never become conscious of them all. How much of total reality can such an apparatus let through?" How much, indeed.

But if the old black American narrative has outlived its usefulness as a tool of interpretation, then what should we do? The answer, I think, is obvious. In the 21st century, we need new and better stories, new concepts, and new vocabularies and grammar based not on the past but on the dangerous, exciting, and unexplored present, with the understanding that each is, at best, a provisional reading of reality, a single phenomenological profile that one day is likely to be revised, if not completely overturned. These will be narratives that do not claim to be absolute truth, but instead more humbly present themselves as a very tentative thesis that must be tested every day in the depths of our own experience and by all the reliable evidence we have available, as limited as that might be. For as Bertrand Russell told us, what we know is always "vanishingly small." These will be narratives of individuals, not groups. And is this not exactly what Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed of when he hoped a day would come when men and women were judged not by the color of their skin, but instead by their individual deeds and actions, and the content of their character?

I believe this *was* what King dreamed and, whether we like it or not, that moment is now.

2008

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(1473–1543), a Polish astronomer of the sixteenth century.

[5](#) *phlogiston* hypothetical substance formerly thought to be a volatile constituent of all combustible substances until the theory was disproved in the late eighteenth century.

[6](#) The Tuskegee syphilis experiment, a notorious clinical study done by the United States Public Health Service between 1932 and 1972 to monitor the natural growth of untreated syphilis in unwitting rural African American men.

Glossary

Abolitionism: A prospective movement or doctrine, overlapping with antislavery, that indicts the immorality of the slave trade and slavery while proposing arguments that slaves deserve equal rights upon emancipation.

African American literature: Literature written by authors who both identify themselves and are publicly identified as African Americans.

African American Press: Newspapers and periodicals, sometimes with transnational circulations, in which African-descended people played significant roles as publishers, editors, contributors, and/or readers.

African American Studies: An interdisciplinary field of scholarly or intellectual study, instituted at United States colleges and universities beginning in the 1970s, concentrating on the historical, current, or future experiences of African Americans.

Antebellum: The period of nineteenth-century American history before the Civil War.

Antislavery: An ethos, overlapping with abolitionism by the 1830s, opposing the trade and enslavement of Africans and their descendants.

Assimilation: The process by which one group adopts the customs and attitudes of a newfound society.

Authenticity: The empirical or symbolic quality by which a literary text or author is deemed to possess an incontrovertible origin.

Black: Used interchangeably across history with “Negro,” “Afro-American,” and “African American,” a term that entered mainstream usage especially during the rise of the Black Power, Black Aesthetic, and Black Studies Movements in the 1960s and 1970s to describe authentic African American identity.

Black Aesthetic: Established during the Black Arts Movement, a joint principle of racial politics and art rooted in both an authentic African American heritage and in opposition to myths of Eurocentric heritage.

Black Arts Movement: A connected series of events and activities in the 1960s and 1970s in which African American art and artists largely promoted the Black Aesthetic.

Black Atlantic: A trope referring to the voluntary or involuntary migration of Africans and their African American descendants across the Atlantic Ocean.

Black Church: A historic institution of African American denominational worship, education, community organization, racial uplift, and racial politics.

Black nationalism: A philosophy of group identity and political self-determination based in racial rather than traditionally “national” categories, seeking to unify people of African descent in a collective effort for social, political, and economic rights. Black nationalism has taken the form of “Back-to-Africa” movements and separatism, but also of emphasizing racial pride in a distinct black culture.

Blackness: See **Black**

Black Power Movement: A series of connected events and activities in the 1960s and 1970s in which African Americans promoted a doctrine of self-determination historically overlapping with, but fundamentally in contrast to, the Civil Rights Movement struggles of the 1950s.

Black Press: See **African American Press**

