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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Louis A. Willis entitled "Potpourri." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Allen Dunn, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Charles G. Maland, Allen Wier

Accepted for the Council:
Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Charles J. Maland

Allen Wier

Acceptance for the Council:

Vice Chancellor and Dean of
Graduate Studies

Thesis
2004
.W555

POTPOURRI

A Thesis Presented for the Master of Arts Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Louis A. Willis
August 2004

DEDICATION

To the memory of my grandfathers who bequeathed to me longevity, and to the memory of my mother and grandmother who always encouraged me to follow my dreams.

ABSTRACT

The American Heritage Dictionary defines potpourri as "a combination of various incongruous elements; a miscellaneous anthology or collection." This collection of nine essays and a short story includes seven autobiographical essays in which, through memory, I try to make sense of the potpourri of some of my life experiences. Of the last two essays, one is my thoughts on the stylistic technique two 20th century writers used to give the former slaves a voice. The last essay is my search for a technique for telling stories. The short story is an attempt to put into practice the storytelling technique I prefer.

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1

INTRODUCTION

Like Montaigne "...it is myself I portray" in these essays. At one time in my youth I was told to write about what I knew. This was poor advice because I didn't know anything, especially about myself. I have spent most of my life trying to discover what it was I didn't know. Since I am retired, I have the leisure to reflect on the meanings of my experiences. I have discovered that life is not one long adventure. It is a potpourri of episodes with sometimes seemingly no connections. Maybe these essays will reveal connections that will explain how my experiences shaped my philosophy. Then maybe they will not. It does not matter. What matters is that I analyze the experiences so that I may use them as a guide on how to avoid making the same mistakes in my old age that I made in my youth. Since I contemplate living a long time, I shall heed Socrates's suggestion that the unexamined life is not worth living and examine a few incidents in my life that have been buried in my memory for many years.

You will find in these essays no formulas for living a long and happy life, no solutions to the race problem, and no nuggets of wisdom. Wisdom does not necessarily come with age, and we senior citizens are no wiser because of our many years of experience. The experiences must be digested and the few kernels of wisdom they may contain must be extracted, more for the pleasure in helping us continue to live long lives than as guides for the young. We can give the young information, but they must chart their own course and become students of life. No matter what advice we who made some of the same mistakes give them, our children inevitably will ignore it. I am reminded of

what my cousin said to my grandmother when my grandmother tried to give her some advice to help her avoid making mistakes when she was still a teenager. My cousin said, "Let me make my own mistakes." It is human nature to repeat the errors of our ancestors.

I am still a student searching for wisdom on how to live a happy life despite all the problems involved in being a black man in America. However, these essays are not about race as such. But, no matter what I write, it is clear that it will involve my place as a black man in America. This I cannot escape because from my childhood on, all my activities have been defined by my reaction to how white folks see me. I don't know when I first became aware that I am colored. It seems that I have always known it from the time I could speak. In my hometown of Knoxville, Tennessee, we were taught that we had to be better than the best because we were Negroes. To me this meant that success was my only option. The idea of having only one option did not allow for experimenting with life, such as maybe trying several jobs or bumming around the country before you decided what you wanted to do. Experimenting with life when you are young means failing at some things before finding your niche. I sometimes felt that being groomed not to fail harmed me psychologically by eliminating failure as an option. Despite this feeling, however, over the years I came to realize that the idea that failure was not an option open to me was a good thing because it forced me and, I suspect, many of my childhood friends, to strive for success. We were groomed not to embarrass the race through failure. I don't regret being taught that I had to be better than the best because it was a lesson in survival in a society that segregated me from the mainstream.

I don't know when the concept of me, a black man, an African American, as "the other" and as being "marginalized" entered the language, but since I first encountered the

term in the year 2000, I have wondered if I am truly "the other," if I am truly "marginalized"? I find the two terms insulting because they imply that I am not and never have been a part of American society. Yes, I have often been on the outside of the mainstream, and I also have been a part of that stream at the same time. The two terms prompted me to write the memory or autobiographical essays to dispel the idea of myself as "the other" or as "marginalized."

As I said, these essays are not about race as such. I mention the fact of my being a black man in America and how I was taught to deal with this fact to put myself and these essays in context. The five memory, or autobiographical, essays are about a black boy facing such normal situations as the death of a favorite great grandmother, the trauma of being left-handed, the fourth grade teacher who taught him that lying may sometimes be profitable, learning to dance as a teenager, and his encounter with the word "nigger," which of course is not normal for a white boy.

Growing old is a normal fact of life we all must face regardless of our ethnic or racial background. Since I am now a part of that growing minority group known as senior citizens, I have thought about how I can use my life experiences to shape my continued hopes and my continued dreams (yes, even we old folks still have hopes and dreams for ourselves as well as our children and grandchildren). So, two of the essays deal with the subject of growing old and what to do with the time I have left before death summons me.

The subject of chapter nine is the narrative method two American writers in the early twentieth century used to give the former slaves a voice. In chapter ten, I set forth my ideas on fiction, or as I prefer to call it, storytelling. It was written in one of the

fiction writing workshops I attended, and thus the audience at the time was my fellow class members. My audience in the restructured essay is the public. Chapter eleven is a kind of summing up with some comments on how memory and imagination affect my story.

Life is full of both tragedy and comedy, of failures and successes. We are always searching for ways to avoid the failures and to create or take advantage of situations that increase the successes. Tragedy may prompt an individual to search for a way to create a situation in which she can continue enjoying life through a change of attitude. My aunt, a very religious lady, became depressed when her husband of 40 years died. Little things that reminded her of him, such as feeding the dogs, which he had always done, would make her cry, and she cried often. She loved talking on the phone, but after his death, talking on the phone to us and church members no longer gave her pleasure. We, her nephews and nieces, and her friends and members of her church tried in vain to cheer her up.

Two years after her husband's death, she had a heart attack. It wasn't a sudden attack where she felt pain in her chest. When she complained of constant shortness of breath, I took her the doctor, and he immediately admitted her to the hospital because the examination revealed severely blocked arteries near the heart that required bypass surgery. While she was in the hospital, friends and church members visited her often, and I or one of my cousins, of course, was always there. She told me afterwards that the heart attack made her think about her behavior over the past two years, and she said to herself that Sam, her husband, wouldn't have approved. The tragedy of losing him and the near tragedy of her own death prompted her to examine her life. She realized that, although

she was in her 70s, she had never been outside of Knoxville. When she recovered, she surprised us by going places with a childhood friend. She went on an ocean cruise. She conquered her fear of flying and got on an airplane to Las Vegas. She even visited the gambling casinos in Mississippi. Since her recovery from the surgery, she has remained active and on the go. She likes the new self she has created.

The search for meaning never ends. Senior citizens, if they are active, should continue the search until they are on their deathbeds. May we all continue to pursue our hopes and our dreams until death wraps us in her arms (Yes, I believe death is feminine because, after a certain age, and depending on our health, for us men, death is as welcome as a beautiful woman). For me, the search for meaning lies in doing what I love, reading and writing.

2

FIRST MEMORIES AND A SENSE OF PLACE

During the 42 years that I lived in other cities before returning home to Knoxville, Tennessee to retire, three memories of childhood before age five haunted me: the day my great grandmother died, the day my father first gave me money, and the day my uncle gave me my first spanking.

The closer I got to retirement in 1995, the more I thought that maybe the memories were trying to tell me that not only could I return home, but I must because only in Knoxville would I be able to deal with the three memories that had lingered in my mind like seeds in a pod waiting to burst forth to be analyzed. When I returned home in 1996, the city had changed beyond recognition from when I grew up in the 1940s and 1950s. Yet, I still felt a sense of place, a sense of belonging. Maybe an analysis of the memories would reveal why, despite the changes in the city, I still felt Knoxville was home.

A sense of place is not solely dependent on the physical place because the city or town in which you grew up will change. The neighborhoods and the comfortable environments they provided when I was growing up in Knoxville in the 1940s and 1950s exist now only in memory. They became victims of urban renewal in the. The memories of the people, family and friends, who lived in those neighborhoods and gave me a sense of community are the source of my sense of place. A sense of place means that you belong to a community and that no matter where you live, in memory, you are still a member of that community.

It is probably futile to try to determine if the incidents I remember as a child of three or four really happened as I remember them, including the incidents involving my great grandmother, my father, and my uncle. I have been able to verify my memory of some incidents by talking to my aunt, but she couldn't clarify which memories were mine and which were those of relatives. It really doesn't matter whose memories they are. All that matters is that what I believe I remember is added to my memory storehouse and sits there until I either tell the family stories to my children and grandchildren or write them down. Family stories become memories we see as though looking through gauze, and mixed with our direct memories, are the source of the feeling that we belong to a particular community. For what is the analysis of memories but an attempt to answer the questions who am I and whence came I?

In Gemini, her collection of autobiographical essays, Nikki Giovanni describes how when she came home to Knoxville in the late 1960s to give a speech and saw the young brothers and sisters who had come to say "Welcome Home," she felt that her "son, must know about this. He must know we come from somewhere. That we belong." I know how Giovanni felt when she also realized that she and her son still belonged to the city she had known as a child even though it had changed considerably. During the years I lived in other cities, I always felt that I belonged in none of them. When I left home in 1954 to join the navy, eager to see the world, I always had a sense of place. Deep inside me lingered a feeling of being not just a southerner, but a colored boy from Knoxville, Tennessee. When I came home in late 1958 for a visit before going on to Chicago to go to school, my grandmother had moved from our house on Vine Avenue (unofficially referred to as Vine Street) to a house in what we then called the country out on

Washington Pike. My neighborhood on East Vine Avenue and the other neighborhoods around it were gone. So were the neighborhoods around Cooper Street, where I spent the first five and half years of my life. Gone, too, were the library where I had checked out books and the playground where I had learned to play softball and football. I couldn't find the creek where my aunt once had seen me and my cousin trying to swim and had whipped us all the way home. Knoxville was still there but the neighborhoods were gone, wiped out as if they had never existed. Yet, I still felt that the city was home.

My daughter and her son have or are acquiring a sense of place in Knoxville. She grew up in California but since she has lived in Knoxville, she has come to feel it is the place in which she should sink roots as she learns more about its history and the history of the southeast, especially Atlanta, where she saw more African Americans in positions of power than she had ever seen in Richmond, California. She is fast acquiring a sense of place in Knoxville that differs from mine because the black businesses that once lined Vine Avenue no longer exist, and she has more contact with white people than I ever had. My grandson was born in California but has lived in Knoxville since he was four years old. He has experienced some of my childhood experiences, such as hunting for crawdads and tadpoles in the creek and being able to take a two minute drive to the country to see cows or horses grazing in a farm yard. His sense of place, however, will differ from mine, which is as it should be because he experiences will be different. The important thing is that in determining his sense of place, he acquires knowledge of the history of the city and region in which I grew up and how, though it was segregated, it molded my sense of place, and that he understands why I still love Knoxville.

I want to remember what it was like growing up in the neighborhoods around Cooper Street and Vine Avenue so I can pass the experience on to my daughter and grandson, who never experienced living in a segregated society and who think it was all bad. They believe that a little colored boy growing up in the south and exposed to the humiliations of segregation should have some terrible memories. I have tried to disabuse them of that belief, to show them through telling about my childhood that despite the evils of segregation some of us were indeed happy. My first memories of the years before the age of five are of growing up happy in the neighborhood around Cooper Street surrounded by relatives, friends, and neighbors who loved me. When I look along the lane of memory, I see only sunny days. In those early years, I learned to spell the words "colored" and "white" before I learned to read. Whenever my mother, or mostly my young aunt, took me uptown to have my picture taken, she would instruct me to drink from the water fountain marked "Colored" and not from the one beside it marked "White." I did not fully understand the laws, written and unwritten, of segregation, but I was aware, even at that early age, that we were colored, and that we were different from the white folks. The real evils of segregation simply did not intrude on the world of a small colored boy in those endless summer days. Of course, I have no concrete details of those days, and much of what I remember may be my imagination, or what I want to remember, or taken from family stories I have heard over the years, for memory can also be selective. But I am almost certain that the memories before age five of my great grandmother, my father, and my uncle that have lingered in my mind through the years are not imaginary, though they may be colored somewhat by what my mother and my

aunt told me. The three incidents are described not in the chronological order in which they may have occurred but in the order in which I remember them.

The first memory that has remained with me from the time I began to remember my life before age five is the death of my great grandmother, Rachel. She was born at the end of slavery and came from Selma, Alabama to Knoxville with her daughter, my maternal grandmother, sometime before 1917. In memory I see my great grandmother sitting in front of the fireplace in her bedroom. My mother worked, my grandmother was busy around the house, my young aunt was in school, and my two uncles occasionally walked through the house. My great grandmother, a small, very old, very dark woman, was always there in her bedroom sitting in her rocking chair in front of the grate where a fire always seemed to be burning in the cold of winter and the heat of summer. From the soot-blackened pot that always rested on the bricks near the grate, she poured herself a cup of strong black coffee. She drank the steaming hot coffee from an old, heavy ceramic cup while her three year old first great grandchild sat next to her on the floor blowing on the coffee, laced heavily with milk and sugar, in his tin cup and trying to drink like his grandma. I called great grandmother Rachel grandma because my mother, my two uncles, and my aunt called her grandma. Since they called their mother, my grandmother, mama, I also called her mama. I called my mother by her nickname, Duder, a name given to her by her two brothers when they were small children because they couldn't say sister.

Sometime before my fourth birthday, great grandmother Rachel died quietly in her rocking chair. I was not allowed to enter her room while her body was being prepared to be taken from our house to the funeral. She was brought back from the funeral home a few days later and lay in the casket in our front room for two days so neighbors and

friends could view the body and pay their respects. While she lay in the casket in the front room, I tiptoed about the house as though any noise I might make would awaken her.

I have never been told why the funeral service was held in the front room of our house on Cooper Street. It was the first and last time I ever saw a funeral service performed in the home of the deceased. The room was filled with friends and neighbors sitting in metal folding chairs. In the front row sat my grandmother and her two sisters, who were crying loudly, while my grandmother sat stoically staring into space. She would relieve her grief later. Although she was the middle sister, she was the one who got things done. The image that has lingered in my mind is of me sitting in the second row on my mother's lap. I am dressed in a brown little boy's suit, short pants with button holes in the waist and a shirt with buttons around the waist to hold up my pants. Everything is quiet and solemn, except for the preacher. My mother whispers for me to stop kicking my feet. I imagine I wondered why my grand aunts were crying while my grandmother just sat and stared at the preacher.

I knew my great grandmother was dead and would never come back. I was not told, as most children are, that she was just sleeping or that she was in heaven. To this day, I do not understand why the memory of my great grandmother lingers, or why it is associated with her death, but I shall continue to savor it because I cannot erase from my mind the image of her sitting in her bedroom in front of the fireplace. Perhaps I remember my great grandmother's death because of the story that was told often in my family of how, on the night she died, she rose up from the bed and waved her hands as if she were telling her three daughters, my grandmother and her two sisters who were

standing by her bed crying, to stop crying because the noise disturbed her. Perhaps it is because it was my first experience with death. I like to think that I will forever remember her because I was so happy sitting next to her drinking coffee by that ever burning fire.

The story of great grandmother Rachel waving is mixed with my direct memory of the funeral service, and the two incidents are seen through the gauze of memory so that I sometimes cannot separate my direct memory from my as-told-to memory. I think my brief time with her is the true memory, and her death is merely the trigger that brings it forth. It seems strange that my great grandmother's death is associated in memory with my sense of place. If it is possible for a three year old to be influenced about his attitude toward death, my great grandmother Rachel's death I think influenced mine. Whenever I think of death, it is not sadness that I feel but joy because I think of my great grandmother who seems to have died peacefully at a very old age. But I also think about what it must have been like for her growing up shortly after the Civil War. If she told me stories, I don't remember them. She was born and lived in Selma, Alabama before coming to Knoxville. The story of her family would have given me a historical connection to Selma, the site of one of the greatest marches during the Civil Rights era in the 1960s, and perhaps provided me with material for a post-Civil War novel. Not knowing her story is, I feel, a missed opportunity for adding to my own story and, thus, to the knowledge of myself.

The sadness I feel when I remember my great grandmother is not due to her death but to the fact that I know very little about her life. This lack of knowledge is a failure on my part to quiz my grandmother about her family and her life in Selma. I feel that

something is missing in my sense of place because some part of my family history is unknown to me.

Despite the feeling of something missing, my great grandmother's death connects me to a sense of where I came from, even though I never knew her story. She was one of the women in my life who was there and who I, in my young mind, probably imagined would always be there. In a way, she is always with me in my memory, as others in my family who are no longer living are.

I knew my father but had little contact with him because at the time he was in prison. I think, but I am not sure and I have never tried to verify it, that he left Knoxville to live in Chicago before I entered the first grade. The only direct memory I have of my father is a one-time visit to the hotel where he worked when I was about three or four. The neighbor's son, who took me to see my father, and I went around to the alley behind the hotel. My father came out of the kitchen, stooped down, talked to me, and gave me some money, but I don't remember how much. I imagine I used the money to buy a Nehi grape pop and crackers or cookies at Mr. Sharp's store on the corner of Cooper Street and Beaman Alley. My father spent many years in prison for, I was told, stealing a big radio and a little radio for a chaser. I never found out what "a little radio for a chaser" meant. My uncle Cal, my mother's older brother, also spent time in prison. So, whenever we went to visit him, I would also see my father and talk to him through the screen, but this was not often. The memory of these visits does not seem to be mine but to be based on stories my mother told me. What I see in my mind's eye is a vague outline rather than details of the visits. And yet, I am sure they happened.

I learned that my father was living in Chicago when I got out of the navy in 1958 and went there to go to school. My mother also was living in Chicago at the time, but they weren't together. She explained to me that it was she, not him, who hadn't wanted to get married when she was pregnant with me. I wasn't sure how I would feel about him, but when we met, I felt no anger because I never felt he had abandoned me since I never knew him well enough to feel close to him. Although I lived with him while attending college, we didn't talk about what we had been doing in the years since he left Knoxville. In the six years I lived in Chicago, I never once asked him about his mother and father and where they came from. This failure has left a large blank in my memory and thus a missing piece of myself floating around in limbo.

The most important man in my life was my uncle, my mother's younger brother. I don't remember who told me how my uncle, whose real name was L. A., got his nickname "Belly," but my imagination suggests it was my mother. When they were children, his stomach stuck out so prominently that she, her older brother, Cal, and other kids started calling him Big Belly, which was shortened to Belly as they got older. The police, who admired him for his ability to evade capture when other bootleggers were often taken into custody, gave my uncle the nickname of "Whiskers" because he wore a large beard. He was a tall, lean, handsome, medium brown skin man who spoke in a low voice, even when angry. I think the fact that, at six feet, two inches, he was the tallest member in our family made him standout in my memory, and the fact that he gave me my first spanking. The memory of my first spanking is a mixture of my direct memory and what, I suspect, my mother and aunt told me.

Our house on Cooper Street was in the middle of the block. Across the street was the freight yard where trains clacked by day and night and stopped sometimes to unload cargo. On the far side of the freight yard was a creek and next to it was a platform where the trains unloaded fruit. I remember, after I turned five, picking bananas off the platform and being told not to eat them because they were soaked in dirty oil from the train engines. In the fall, when the circus came to town, the animals would be unloaded onto the platform nearest our house. For me this was a thrilling time because I got to watch close up the unloading of the animals. My grandmother often cooked for the black roustabouts, one of whom was named Luther. He would put me on his shoulder and carry me across the street to the platform where the animals were being unloaded so I could watch the elephants being lined up for the march to Chilhowee Park. The arrival of the circus was the one time I got to cross the street to the freight yard. At other times, I stood on the curb and watched the big boys playing between the sets of tracks in the freight yard.

Can you imagine what a three or four year old standing on the curb with nothing to do and watching the big boys playing in the freight yard would be thinking? What three or four year old wouldn't be tempted to cross the street despite being told not to because he might get hit by a car? In my imagination, I see cars driving up and down the busy street on a regular basis. But three and four year olds know nothing about danger. I see myself standing there and looking about to see if my mother or my aunt or my grandmother or my uncle, especially my uncle because he sometimes stood in the freight yard talking with the other men, are watching. The other side of the street is very tempting. I have nobody to play with me. Across the street, I can run and jump and catch

the ball. Nobody is looking, so I take off, my fat little legs pumping to hurry across the street before I am caught. Suddenly my feet are off the ground and I am swinging in the air by one arm. My little butt is burning from the slaps it is receiving. I am crying probably more from the suddenness of the situation than the slaps. My uncle puts me back on the sidewalk and tells me to go in the house. Wiping my nose and crying loudly, I run to my grandmother as she comes out of the house in a panic, and I find safety in her bosom.

I think this memory lingers in my mind because my uncle is the only man I ever idolized. No other man in my life while I was growing up influenced me more, not even the male teachers, than he did. He didn't smoke or drink whiskey or coffee, and forbad me to do so. He wasn't religious, but was a moral man who kept his word and expected others to do so. From him I attained my sense of morality, which, simply stated, is to be honest in dealing with people and always help those in need. He insisted that I finish high school and refused to marry his second wife until I did. However, he was against college education because, he once told me, it didn't do any good. A high school friend of his who was very intelligent had gone to college and ended up an alcoholic when he returned to Knoxville. Years later before my uncle died, he told my aunt that he was proud of me when I joined the navy and even prouder when I graduated from college.

My uncle had the mind of a businessman, and, I think, had he not been black, he would have operated a legitimate business. He went into the only business he could at the time. He became a bootlegger. I have always believed that my uncle had no choice but to engage in illegal activities because legal activities were closed to them. However, as I look back, I realize that this isn't entirely true, but maybe what I choose to believe to ease

my mind about the fact that he didn't operate a legitimate business as several other black men in Knoxville did. To me, my uncle was a folk legend, and my image of him must fit the legend. There is no romance in being an ordinary businessman. Anyway, in the days when my uncle sold moonshine whiskey, there wasn't the violence that surrounds the selling of drugs today. He never sold to kids, and he never kept the whiskey in the house. I was not permitted to touch the whiskey or to be around the place where he might be selling it. When I learned to drive, I helped him sell kindling wood from the back of a jeep, a perfectly legitimate business but not as profitable or exciting as bootlegging.

I loved my uncle, although he and I were not alike. He loved to hunt and fish and believed in making a living through the operation of a small business. When Knox County was no longer a dry county, he opened a small store, from which he sold drinks, candy, and other stuff. I, on the other hand, loved books and read as often as I could. I certainly didn't want to be a businessman. Since he didn't believe in a college education, we never talked about my going to college. After I graduated from high school, he offered to provide money for me to open any business I wanted. I turned him down and had to tell him, sadly, that I was thinking of going to college to be an engineer.

Like most of the family, my uncle was generous to a fault. He would give money or a meal to anyone in need who asked. When he died in 1988, I learned how well-liked he was in the community. I couldn't attend the funeral because my grandmother was ill and was not expected to live, and I would have to attend her funeral. I didn't have enough money to come home twice and couldn't afford to stay more than a few days. She died two months after my uncle. When I came home for my grandmother's funeral, my mother told me my uncle's funeral was a huge event. The day his body was to be viewed, the line

of people who came to pay their respects extended around the block. During the service, many had to stand outside.

I only wish I had talked to him about his childhood, for he hunted and fished all over Knox County and East Tennessee. He helped me, a colored boy growing up in the time of segregation, to realize my sense of place and, thus, a sense of self. Being colored didn't prevent him from succeeding at what he did so well that the police, who admired him, never caught him. As I grew older, I knew that I wanted to be like him for his confidence in himself and for his accepting the responsibility for his family, including his nephew. In a sense my uncle was my father.

It is only when most of the family members who know the stories are dead that we regret not having talked to them about themselves, for in their stories are our identities, our personal histories, and from them we get the sense of place, the sense that we belong somewhere, which gives us a sense of self. These early memories have made me regret not having listened to the stories of members from both sides of my when I was old enough to understand and question them before they died. After carrying the three memories in my mind for so long, the only thing I am sure of is that no matter where I live, I belong spiritually to the African American community of Knoxville, Tennessee. However, even though I have a sense of place, my sense of self is incomplete because my father's side of my history is missing entirely, and also because I can't fill-in the missing parts of my mother's history beginning with great grandmother Rachel.

3

FROM LEFT-HANDER BORN TO CONVERTED AMBIDEXTROUS MANIAC

I was cursed from the day I was born. I am a minority within a minority within a minority. I don't know if some hoodoo woman sprinkled goober dust on my mother when she was pregnant with me, but I am certainly cursed. In the first grade, I met the witch woman who sealed my fate and sent me into the world a functionally brain damaged individual, making me, sadly, a minority among minorities. I maintain to this day that I failed the first grade because my first grade teacher, Mrs. Dennis (not her real name of course, even if she might be dead), made me write with my right hand. Me, a left-hander born, writing with the right hand, a terrible thing because I was still thinking with the right side of my brain like a left-hander. I spent two years in the first grade while my brain tried to make the adjustment. My brain never quite made the adjustment my hands were forced to make.

While I believe that most of the information posted on websites is crap, some of it does make you stop and think. I began to think about my existence as a former left-hander when I learned from a website devoted to left-handers that one out of ten people on this earth is left-handed. I should be one of those ten but I am not. I am not because in the 1940s when I entered the first grade, there was a conspiracy among the educators in the United States, especially the south, to make everybody right-handed. On the bright fall morning when I entered the first grade, I had no idea that my life would change forever, and I am not talking about learning to read, write, and do arithmetic. Of course,

being only six years old, I had no idea about anything, but I was excited to be going to school like the big boys. Maybe my mother or my aunt took me to school that first day, I don't remember. My first day was uneventful. Mrs. Dennis introduced herself, told us eager learners what we would be doing, and in general made us feel at ease. I was happy because Mary France, my friend from the neighborhood, was also in the class. Even though I didn't know any of the other kids, I was comfortable and ready to take on what ever came my way. Hell, I had the confidence of a six year old who went around his neighborhood by himself and knew most of the people in the area around Cooper Street in Knoxville.

Reality set in about a day or two later when we began learning to write. The new world of school had a lot of things to keep a six year old busy, though it had its drawbacks. The main drawback, as in any situation involving six year olds, was having to sit still for long periods of time, but then there was recess to look forward to. Anyway, as I was about to explain, a day or two later, we began learning how to make our letters. I was bent over my paper, my left arm and elbow twisted around so I could write when suddenly, CRACK! The ruler came down on the knuckles of my left hand. I dropped the pencil and my eyes filled quickly with tears. For a moment, I was confused. I shook my hand and looked around, prepared to fight whoever had hit me.

I looked up and staring down at me was a real mean looking face with scary eyes. Above the face the hand with the ruler prepared to whack me again if I put the pencil in my left hand. Through the tears, the face of Mrs. Dennis gradually became clear. In a soothing voice she comforted me, picked up the pencil from the desk, gently put it in my right hand, and guided it across the paper. I don't remember what she said. All I

remember is my world had been upset. Nobody had ever said anything about which hand I used, not even my grandmother, who didn't approve of people using the "wrong hand," as she called the left hand. My six year old mind told me that what was happening wasn't a good thing. I had, though I didn't know it then, become one of the victims of the conspiracy to make everybody right-handed. Nor did I know that the experience would throw me into that little known category of individuals called even-handed, as ambidextrous people were called in my childhood days.

I didn't really think about being a former left-hander until I discovered on the Left-handers Day website the existence of the "Left-handers Club." Now hold on before you say "what is that fool thinking, don't he know you can't believe nothing you read on the internet." Think about this: August 13, 2003 was Left-handers Day. But I no longer belong to the secret club of the left-handers. And I haven't found anything on the internet about a day for those of us who are converted right-handers or ambidextrous-handed.

Anyway, back to my battle with Mrs. Dennis. The whacking of my knuckles went on for about a month until I didn't even use my left hand to write when she wasn't looking. But I was determined to get one up on her, so I would use my left hand to erase, which she didn't seem to mind. All was going against me until one day the good witch smiled on me, or so I thought.

You can't see the good witch but she affects your destiny. Okay, as a six year old I probably knew nothing about witches good or bad, but as I look into imaginative memory, I see those witches because somebody had to be controlling what was happening to me. As I started to explain, one day I was playing on a pile of crossties in the railroad freight yard across the street from our house on Cooper Street, when one

rolled off the top of the pile and mashed the two middle fingers of my right hand. Though in a lot of pain, I was perhaps the happiest six year old in Knoxville that day. I ran home, and my grandmother bandaged the fingers. When my mother came home, she took me to the clinic, where the fingers were treated with medication and a new bandage applied. The accident happened on a Saturday, and I couldn't wait to return to school on Monday to show Mrs. Dennis my greatest new possession: the two mashed fingers on my right hand. At last, I had outwitted her.

Or so I thought. The pain from crossties hitting my fingers was nothing to the pain I was to experience the first day I returned school and all the days thereafter until my fingers healed. I walked in class Monday morning, showed Mrs. Dennis my right hand and explained what had happened. She merely nodded and told me to go to my seat. When I went to my seat, I was smiling, thinking about the comfort of using my left hand again to write. After recess, when the writing time came, I put my pencil in my left hand, adjusted my arm and started to make my letters. CRACK! She had sneaked up on me. The witch was back. Mrs. Dennis took the pencil out of my left hand, put it in my right, adjusted my two bandaged fingers to hold it, and held my hand while she instructed me in how to make whatever letter it was. This was abuse, but I had no recourse in those days. An appeal to my mother was futile because she believed if the teacher said I must write with my right hand, then it was a good thing. Well, the old witch won. Mrs. Dennis, wherever you are, may you be cursed.

Let me lay on you a few facts gleaned from several websites. If you think being left-handed isn't a curse, consider what the term means in other languages. The Latin for left-handed is sinister, which in English it means wicked. In Greek, left-handed is

translated as skaios, which means ill-omened or awkward. In Italian left-handed is mancini and means maimed. Gauche, the French word for left-handed, means clumsy. No words in these and probably other languages make a left-handed person feel good. But left-handers can take heart because many creative geniuses were left-handed. My favorite left-handed genius was the epitome of the self-taught, self-made man, old Ben Franklin. When I was left-handed, I was in good company. I sometimes wonder if Mrs. Dennis destroyed my creative side.

I joined the Left-handers Club, even though I am, strictly speaking, no longer a lefty, because it wants to change things. Its aims are to raise awareness of the discrimination lefties face, educate designers and manufacturers to the dangers lefties encounter in using their products, and, most important, celebrate the strengths of lefties. I applaud the club for wanting to eliminate the prejudices against left-handers that are still prevalent today. But they say nothing about those of us who were forced to become ambidextrous, an unforeseen consequence of being forced to use our left hand. Maybe I should set up a website for left-handers who have been forced to be ambidextrous through conversion to right-handedness. But that is a project for another time.

If you think being left-handed is a bad thing, then read on and see what I found on the Internet about ambidexterity. Being able to use both hands ain't no blessing. Just listen to the word "ambidextrous." A harsh sounding word that fails to roll off the tongue smoothly as "left-handed" or roll with confidence as "right-handed." Moreover, ambidextrous people have some real mental problems, or at least that is what it says in two articles I found on the internet. A researcher named Amar Klar from the National Cancer Institute in Maryland secretly studied people's hair, except for the long-haired and

the bald, by spying on them in airports and shopping malls. He concluded: "The genes underlying handedness might also explain why our brains are asymmetrical. And left-handed or ambidextrous people are more likely to store language in the right side of the brain, are more prone to schizophrenia and, anecdotally, are more often creative or even geniuses."

That fellow Klar is kind compared to what Dr. Johanna Barbara Sattler, a German lady, concluded in her article "'Ambidextrous People' are Brain-Damaged,'" which was based on her research and published in Münchener Medizinische Wochenschrift:

On the basis of extensive diagnostic testing, the overwhelming majority of people may be clearly categorized as either right- or left-handers. The hypothesis presented and supported here is that ambidexterity which is frequently viewed as a positive attribute, is in fact either (1) the result of the converting of a left-hander (a functional brain damage); or (2) the result of perinatal cerebral damage in the dominant cerebral hemisphere.

I figure since I wasn't born with "perinatal cerebral damage," what ever the hell that is, I am functionally brain damaged because I am ambidextrous as a result of being converted from left-handness. I haven't seen a doctor yet about this possible brain damage, but I might before death comes for me. Meanwhile, I figure one of God's angels screwed up while God was taking a nap. This angel was in charge of wiring the brains of humans, but he had taken a nip of the sacramental wine and couldn't see straight. What he did was instead of putting the nerves that control the left side of the body on the left side, he put them on the right side and vice versa for the nerves that control the right side. Now, this angel did all this hard work with his left hand. Since his right hand was well

rested, it became the dominant hand for all humans. The way I see it, and without scientific evidence to contradict my conclusion, left-handers are looked down upon because of the mistake of a drunken angel. As usual, we humans further messed things up by trying to make right-handers out of left-handers. We believe no matter who made something, we can improve it. Why else do we go on investigating God's handiwork, such as the stars, the oceans, and cows? Hell, we're even trying to improve on God's greatest creation--human life itself. We ain't learned a damn thing from our creation of mentally defective ambidextrous individuals.

Am I messing with your mind? Good. I want you to feel how I feel with having to cope with being ambidextrous. Whenever I begin a new task requiring me to use my hands, I have to decide which hand to use, and I try both to see which is more comfortable. I have the triple whammy: I am a former left-handed, now brain damaged, ambidextrous black man. And the witch of the first grade is to blame.

Just how messed up am I? Well, the Sattler report concluded that converting from the left hand to the right hand, especially when learning to write, causes functional brain damage that negatively affects memory, concentration, reading, spelling, and spatial orientation. When functional brain damage is added to the prejudices of the right-handed cultural environment, a left-handed child can become one mixed up kid, and a converted right-hander might become a raving maniac. We might as well lock up the ambidextrous people, who, according to Sattler, aren't really ambidextrous, because they might become total idiots. Consider her conclusion about ambidexterity: "Ambidexterity is therefore neither a goal to aspire to nor is it a gift from God. Instead, it is first and foremost the mark of brain damage."

Wherever you are, I'll get you, Mrs. Dennis.

In these United States, you can get redress through litigation, so I have seriously thought about suing somebody. I can't sue my mother or father because they are dead. I can't sue the doctor who delivered me because he is dead. I can't sue the segregated hospital where I was born because it has been destroyed; possibly it was destroyed because the owner or owners knew I and those like me might one day sue. I even thought of suing God but couldn't find his true representative here on this earth. After corresponding with leaders of the major religions, who told me I was truly cursed and should blame Satan, I tried to find old Beelzebub but he was no where to be found. Maybe I can get help from one of those old-time black preachers who can summon the devil from hell and wrestle with him until he submits to the preacher's wishes.

I decided I can sue the City of Knoxville because it operated the school system when I was in the first grade. I shall sue them for the physical and mental pain I suffered during my first month or so in first grade and the mental pain I have suffered since. I should have had a constitutional right to use my left hand. I will sue as soon as I can find a lawyer willing to take the case.

4

LYING WILL MAKE YOU FREE

"Lying is an indispensable part of making life tolerable."
Evans (from Evans's Online Quotations)

I am not sure but I imagine it was about the time that I stole the apple from Mr. Sharp's grocery store that my grandmother laid down her rule on lying: I would not be punished if I told the truth, but if I lied, then I would be severely punished, which meant a whipping with whatever she could get her hands on. Her rule was simply a restatement of Jesus' counsel to the disciples that the truth shall make you free. However, my childhood experiences with the truth taught me that not only will it not free you but it may well get you into deeper trouble. I learned that maybe, just maybe, a lie will make life a little more tolerable.

My first experience with what happens when you tell a lie occurred when I was about four or five years old. My grandmother had a bill at Mr. Sharp's grocery store on the corner of Cooper Street and Beaman Alley, a block from our house. Whenever I wanted anything from the store, a pop, crackers, or cookies, all I had to do was tell Mr. Sharp, and he would give it to me and put it on my grandmother's bill. I don't know why, as I look back, I stole a big, shiny red, apple from the store one summer day. Perhaps I couldn't find anyone to play with and was bored. I remember going behind the store and quickly eating the apple before anyone saw me and then going home satisfied that no one had seen me steal it. To this day, I don't know how my mother found out that I had stolen the apple. The first thing she did when she came home from work was ask me if I had taken an apple from the store without paying for it or telling Mr. Sharp so he could mark

it on my grandmother's grocery bill. My natural reaction was to deny everything, and when my mother asked me if I were lying to her, I said no. Two lies in about a minute was just too much for her, I guess, because she got a switch, and before I knew what was happening, she had me by one arm and was whipping my legs. No matter how fast I danced, moving my little legs up and down, trying to jump over the switch each time she swung, she managed to hit my legs in just the right places. I imagine this went on until I admitted I had taken the apple. The whipping wasn't the worst thing that happened that day. The worst thing was her making me return to the store, pay Mr. Sharp for the apple, and tell him I was sorry. My lie didn't fulfill its purpose of getting me out of the scrape.

Imagination is a wonderful thing, and I imagine that when my grandmother laid down her rule, my four or five year old mind reflected on my apple stealing experience, thus imprinting the meaning of her rule in my mind forever. However, the rule was put to the test when I was about seven or eight years old, and it didn't measure up. In the neighborhood we lived in on East Vine Avenue, most of the neighbors knew each other. On the street behind our house was a row of four flats. Bobby, a boy about my age who lived in the first flat, and I often played together. I often went into his house, a thing I never should have done since my mother had told me not to go into other people's houses because sometimes they may accuse you of stealing. One Saturday, we had just finished playing in Bobby's house when his mother followed us to the porch and asked me if I had taken the dime lying on her dresser. I said no. Since I told the truth, I thought that ended the matter. I was wrong.

My mother worked on Saturdays, and when she came home, she asked me if I had stolen a dime from Mrs. Lynch? I explained that Bobby and I were playing in the house

but that I hadn't taken the dime. Mrs. Lynch insisted I had because the dime came up missing soon after I left. My mother paid her a dime and took me home, where for the second time in my life she whipped me for disobeying her and going into Mrs. Lynch's house, and for lying. I had told the truth and was still punished. Things got really confusing for me on Monday when Mrs. Lynch returned the dime my mother had given her and told her that she had found the missing dime on the floor. My mother had to be restrained from hitting her. She shouted at Mrs. Lynch that she had forced her to whip her baby for something he hadn't done. All Mrs. Lynch said was she was sorry. From that day on, anyone who told my mother or any of my relatives that I or one of my cousins had done something had to present irrefutable evidence of our guilt. The word of persons who were not relatives was no longer sufficient as a reason for punishing us. But I was confused, and I imagine I asked myself why Mrs. Lynch had accused me of stealing the dime. Had she even thought it might have been her son, Bobby?

I was even more confused and surprised that my mother didn't believe me. Since the incident of the apple, I had tried to follow my grandmother's rule. I had told the truth, but I was still punished. Something was wrong. Grownups were not to be trusted. The thing to do was to watch their faces to figure what it was they wanted to hear, and then give it to them. Even at the age of eight, however, I knew such a course was wrong because, though my experience with telling the truth had been painful, I still believed in my grandmother's rule because it was reinforced by the Sunday School lesson that taught us lying was a sin and that telling the truth was the right thing in the sight of God. Lying would send me to hell, or so I thought before I entered the fourth grade.

By the time I was eight, I had learned that Charles Edward Montcague's assertion that "A lie will easily get you out of a scrape, and yet, strangely and beautifully, rapture possesses you when you have taken the scrape and left out the lie" was, like my grandmother's rule, not entirely true. The lie about the apple didn't get me out of the scrape, and the truth about the dime hadn't prevented punishment as my grandmother had taught. Most of all, I had felt no rapture during either of the incidents.

One day in the middle of the school year, Mrs. Slack, my fourth grade teacher, passed out geography books on Africa, told us they were new, and warned us to be very careful with them. I suppose she thought it necessary to tell us the books were new because we sometimes got books that had been used by the white students. Since there weren't enough books to go around, some of us had to double up. I chose to sit with D, who sat in the seat in front of me. We didn't get the same book each day because Mrs. Slack collected them after each lesson, stored them on a table in back of the room, and passed them out again the next day.

D and I, leafing through our book on the first day that we used them, spotted the picture of a naked African boy about our age on whom someone had drawn in pencil a penis. I suggested we show it to Mrs. Slack, but D thought we would get in trouble. D, who barely passed from one grade to the next, seemed to attract trouble no matter what he did. I, on the other hand, was what today is called a nerd. I wanted to tell Mrs. Slack to maintain my reputation as one of the good students. The obscene drawing suggested to me that maybe the books were not new, and I thought Mrs. Slack should be told since she had said they were new. However, I acceded to D's wish because I didn't want him to get in trouble. We kept quiet, which, as it turned out, got us in trouble anyway.

On the second day, another student in class who got the book D and I had had the day before showed the picture to Mrs. Slack. She immediately suspected somebody in the class had done it, and announced that if the culprit would confess, he or she wouldn't be punished. The class was silent. Believing that I was in her good graces, I thought that if I told her D and I had seen the picture the day before, it would prove no one in the class had drawn it since we had only received the books on that day. I didn't expect her reaction. First, she wanted to know why we hadn't told her about it. I started to tell her because we were afraid of being accused of having drawn the picture. But I didn't because I sensed in her voice she already had made up her mind that one or both of us had spoiled the picture of the little black boy. Instead, I said I didn't know why we hadn't told her and that D had shown it to me.

Next, she jumped all over poor D. He denied having drawn the picture. Mrs. Slack kept insisting that he was lying and that he had drawn the picture until poor D broke down and, crying as though he had been whipped unmercifully and didn't have a friend in that class room, confessed and was punished with a paddling.

Because I felt guilty, I didn't tell Mrs. Slack I had wanted to show the picture to her the first day, and that at D's insistence, I had not. If I hadn't said anything, D wouldn't have gotten in trouble was my way of thinking. Even at nine, I did some reasoning, or at least tried to reconcile some seeming contradictory rules. By my grandmother's rule, D shouldn't have been punished because he told the truth. This was the second time I experienced a grownup not believing a kid. If my mother hadn't believed me about the dime, why would Mrs. Slack, who, I believe on looking back, had to protect her statement to us that the books were new, believe poor D, who was a bad

boy anyway? I believe to this day that the books had been used before we got them, despite their new appearance, by some white students who possibly used them only once. The picture certainly hadn't been drawn by any of us in that fourth-grade class. I imagine I thought at the time that defending D against a grownup, a teacher no less, would only get me in trouble and make my stay in the fourth grade miserable.

After the incident, I felt Mrs. Slack and I would sooner or later clash and dreaded the day the confrontation would come, but come it did. It came one bright spring day while we were having a test. I had finished my test and was looking around for something to do while waiting for the other students to finish when I noticed that the ink bottle, which rested in a hole in the upper right hand corner of my desk, was crooked. I tried to straighten the bottle in the hole, but I couldn't dislodge it. Settling back in my seat, I considered the problem. Then a foolhardy solution hit me. I reached inside my desk and hit the bottom of the bottle with the heel of my hand. I watched the bottle, like a movie in slow motion, shoot about ten feet into the air, overturn, and, splashing ink on my test paper, my desk, and me, come down and hit my desk with a loud bang. Mrs. Slack stopped reading the papers on her desk and fixed her truth-pressuring eyes on me.

The question this time centered not on whether I had done the deed but on how I had done it. I told her what had happened. She insisted that it had not happened as I told it and said I had deliberately thrown the ink bottle in the air. I retorted that it was my fault the ink had spilled all over me and my desk, that I had not thrown the bottle in the air on purpose, but had knocked into it into the air by trying to get it out of the hole in order to straighten it. I knew at that moment what D had gone through and why he had confessed. I determinately denied I had done the dastardly deed the way she said I had, and she just

as determinately insisted that she saw me do it. How, in God's name, she could have seen it when she was deep in her work reading papers I don't know. But I am certain, well almost certain, she saw nothing and only reacted when she heard the bottle hit the desk. She said I was lying and threatened to call my aunt to the room if I didn't tell the truth. My aunt worked in the school cafeteria, and when I got into trouble in the third grade, she told the teacher not to paddle me but to come and get her if I caused anymore trouble. I suppose that this information went into my permanent record, if such a thing really existed, because as I advanced to each grade, the teachers made me aware that they knew my aunt.

With the threat of her telling my aunt and the embarrassment she was causing me before the class, I tearfully confessed, adding that it was the way she said it was if that was the way she wanted it to be. I had to let her know that I was not admitting that I had spilled the ink the way she insisted I had. Saying I had because it was what she wanted me to say stopped the relentless questioning. After the incident, I vowed to myself that if I ever got in trouble in her class again, I would lie like hell and say anything she wanted me to. I made it through the remainder of the year without incident.

I felt like I was imprisoned in my grandmother's rule, especially when it came to girls, as I stumbled confusedly into my teen years. My uncle, my mother's older brother, taught me, or rather, tried to teach me the skill of lying to get girls. Of course, no male role model would teach a boy to engage in such conduct today, would he? Back then, we were taught that the way to get girls was to lie about how we really felt. My uncle said I must lie like hell and tell the girl that I liked her or loved her, or whatever she wanted to hear. He said I should even cry if necessary. Even though no punishment was involved

and the reward for lying was certainly what a teenage boy dreamed of the minute he realized the strange feelings in his groin can be relieved by girls, my grandmother's rule prevented me from lying. I would drop my head and say nothing. Silence, however, is a way of lying. By keeping silent when D and I first saw the picture in the geography book, I, in effect, lied. As I look back, I realize it would have been better to have told Mrs. Slack on that first day what we had found. There would have been no way then that she could have logically concluded that any of us had drawn the picture.

"I think a lie with a purpose is wan iv th' worst kind an' th' most profitable" says the Finely Peter Dunne character, Mr. Dooley. My imaginative memory has revealed to me that in at least one situation I deliberately lied with the purpose of gaining an advantage. When we kids reached age 12, we had to pay adult fare to get into the movies. Since I was small for my age, I continued to pay the child 10 cents fare instead of the adult 25 cents until I was 15. Each time I stood at the ticket window, the man or woman would ask me my age, and I'd say eleven. Sometimes they would try to trick a kid and ask him when he was born, but I caught on quick to the trick and learned to quickly compute in my head the year of birth to support my lie. I probably wouldn't have been caught if I hadn't had to reveal my real age to get a job selling popcorn in the theater. I felt no guilt because I thought no one got hurt.

The truth may well make life intolerable. Yet, my grandmother's rule is certainly the morally correct lesson to be taught to children and one that adults, too, should follow, even without the element of punishment. I taught my children that the truth should be told for its own sake and not for what a person might gain or loose. However, in my old age, I am still not above telling a particular type of lie with a purpose that will gain me an

advantage. Writing fictional stories is my way of legitimately telling lies, and I hope one day to make a little money doing so.

5

SLOW DANCING WITH A BROOM

Although I grew up listening to the blues, boogie-woogie, and the sweet sounds of the vocal groups of the forties and fifties, when I entered the confusing, traumatizing years of my teens, I discovered that I couldn't boogie-woogie, jitterbug, or do any of the popular dances requiring fast movement and all kinds of gyrations of the head, arms, and especially the legs and feet to keep time with the music. On the baseball and football fields, my body and feet obeyed my brain. On the dance floor, however, while my mind thrilled to the music, my body seemed to be disconnected from my brain and refused to move to the beat. My feet seemed to be afraid of moving and wouldn't carry me over to where the girls sat waiting for the boys to ask them to dance. Sometimes, however, my feet got the courage to move to where the girls sat, and my hand extended itself to ask one of them to dance. The girl would accept the hand, and we would move to the dance floor without stumbling. I watched my feet just in case they decided to do something on their own before we reached the middle of the floor. Once on the dance floor, my feet would to take over and embarrass me by flying in several directions at once without keeping time to the music. A third of the way through the dance, the girl would return to her seat, leaving me alone on the dance floor grinning and feeling foolish. The girls discovered before I did that I was weird: a Negro kid who had no rhythm.

About six months into the year that I entered the ninth grade and started watching girls, they stopped accepting the hand I extended. I knew I was in trouble and had to do something when my friends threatened to drum me out of the colored folks' race for

embarrassing them at the dances. They advised me to stop trying to dance and reminded me that since I was one of the smart kids in school, I was not expected to be able to dance, or at least not to be very good at it. However, none of them told me how, if I couldn't dance, I was to get next to the young ladies so I could lay my rap on them. Of course, I didn't have a rap either.

Strangely enough, I was good a square dancer. However, we square danced only during gym class in school and not at the house parties and recreation center dances on the weekends. Anyway, square dancing was for white folks. Shucks, if the disc jockey had played square dance music, we probably would have rioted.

I had to learn to dance because being able to dance was a way to get girls, and even we smart kids wanted to have girl friends. Moreover, I figured if I learned to dance, I would develop a rap out of necessity because I couldn't dance with a girl without talking to her. I didn't ask any of my friends to teach me. I went to the library and checked out a book on dancing. In it, I discovered instructions for all kinds of dances, including the jitterbug and the two-step, which, in teen parlance, was the slow-drag or slow dancing. At first, I tried to follow the instructions on jitterbugging without music, moving across my living room floor very slowly, step by step, and listening to the music in my head. That didn't work, so I put a record on the record player and tried it with music, which also failed to get my body moving in time to the music and my feet moving in the right directions. While the book illustrated the movements of the feet, it didn't illustrate the movements of the arms, head, and the entire body. In fact, I felt that the authors of the book had never seen the way my friends and the black dancers in the movie shorts and on the stage at the Gem Theater, the black theater on the corner of Vine

Avenue and Central Street in Knoxville, moved their arms, head, and bodies doing the jitterbug or boogie-woogie.

I gave up trying to learn to jitterbug because my head, arms, legs, and feet simply wouldn't obey my brain. The two-step, on the other hand, appeared very easy, just two steps, one, two, turn, one-two, turn. Unlike the fast paced beat that vibrated and bounced off the walls, hit the ceiling and rebounded from the floor, in a slow dance, the music hung in the air, and waited for you to step to it. Surely I could learn to dance to the slow, sensual, mellow music with the lights down low. The great thing about the slow-drag for a teenage boy was you could hold the girl close and do the grind, rolling your hips to match the rolling of her hips, keeping time to the slow beat of the music. I had tried the slow-drag before turning to the book to learn to dance. My attempts at slow-dragging were as disastrous as my attempts at jitterbugging.

Since I didn't have a friend or relative who could help me learn to slow-drag, I tried to do it by imagining holding a girl in my arms and moving her around an imaginary dance floor. I had to concentrate on moving my feet correctly while holding the girl in the proper manner. But I needed to actually hold something material, and the idea of using a broom hit me. If I mis-stepped, my feet would brush the straws of the broom, and if my body did not move correctly, the handle would jab me under the chin. Thus, I could tell when I wasn't moving correctly. I learned that in slow-dragging body movement could be minimal. I could stand on the floor in one spot, hold the girl close to my body, and sway to the rhythm of the music, moving my feet occasionally to turn in a tight circle. I also could hold the girl at arms length and two-step around the dance floor. Of course, being a teenager just beginning to notice the changes in his body, and those in the bodies of the

girls, especially their chests, I chose the stand-in-one-place-and-sway-and-turn-in-a-tight-circle movement. The slow-drag would be my dance. Using the broom, I became a good dancer. I could slow-drag and grind with the best of them. No longer did I stand against the wall afraid to ask a girl to dance. Although I wasn't the best dancer, I was good enough for my friends to cheer me, the smart kid, who had learned to dance. I didn't tell them about the broom.

In school and in our homes, we black kids were taught that we had to be the best at whatever we wanted to do, and that sometimes we might even have to be better than the best. I learned from my dancing experience that being the best at whatever you do is not always necessary. Sometimes just being average is sufficient if it accomplishes even a little of what you want to do and makes you happy. Happiness lies not in being the best but in being satisfied with what you are capable of doing.

Writing this short essay has allowed me to view those days of teenage angst and to realize, at my advanced age, that learning to enjoy life is like learning to slow-drag: it is easy but still takes patience and concentration.

6

DON'T DO IT STEVE, YOU'LL BE A NIGGER

Some words will always be controversial no matter how many euphemisms are used in an attempt to either replace the words or soften the painful sting they inflict on the racial or ethnic group at which they are aimed. In America, one of the most hated and most controversial words is "nigger." In 1997, the NAACP attempted to pressure the dictionary publisher, Merriam-Webster, Inc. into redefining the word "nigger" to emphasize its insulting meaning for African Americans. At the same time, a group in Michigan demanded that the publisher remove the word from the dictionary. In 2002, the Baltimore City Council got into the act by passing a resolution urging its citizens to stop using the word "nigger" and asked lawmakers across the country to join in a similar nationwide effort. Randall Kennedy in his book nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word, observes,

> Some people—I call them eradicationists—seek to drive nigger out of rap, comedy, and all other categories of entertainment even when (perhaps especially when) blacks themselves are the ones using the N-word. They see this usage as bestowing legitimacy on nigger and mis-leading those whites who have little direct interaction with African Americans. Eradicationists also maintain that blacks' use of nigger is symptomatic of racial self-hatred or the internalization of white racism, thus the rhetorical equivalent of black-on-black crime.

Randall's book and the attempts to either prevent the use of the word "nigger" or ban it from the dictionary altogether made me think about how I heard the word almost every day in my neighborhood when I was growing up and never thought of it as a bad, unless, of course, it was used by a white person. "You my nigger, if you don't get no

bigger," one of my uncles used to say to me because I was small for my age. "Nigger," as he used the word, was a term of endearment. The word was not banned from my home or the home of my friends. When we wanted to insult one another, "nigger" was simply not strong enough. If you wanted to insult someone, you called him "black," "black son-of-bitch," black bastard" or "black nigger." In my family, we have both dark and light-skinned men and women, so the word "black" was especially demeaning because it implied that the darker-skinned members were inferior. If my grandmother or any other adult heard me or one of my cousins call another person "black," the offender would be beaten with an ironing cord, stick, tree limb, or whatever else was handy.

Ironically, my aunt even disapproves of "Negro" and especially "nigra," which some white folks used to use, as though they couldn't wrap their tongue around "Negro" and decided to compromise between "Negro" and "nigger." For her the sounds of the words are too close to "nigger." She prefers "colored." Even more ironic was the reaction in my house when "black" became beautiful in the sixties. My mother, my aunt, and the younger members accepted the word as a sign of approval. It took my grandmother a little longer, but in the seventies, even she accepted "black" as a word of pride rather than disapproval.

African Americans use "nigger" among themselves to express various feelings or states of mind, as Geneva Smitherman points out in her book Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner. The phrase "nigga, please," she writes, is an "expression of exasperation, impatience, social critique, or used to dismiss the relevance or significance of what someone has said." Some African Americans still do not accept the word coming from the mouth of white folks under almost any circumstances. They

prefer to believe that "nigger" coming from the mouth of a white person can only mean that that person is a racist. African Americans have, I believe, grown accustomed to white folks using the word "black" because it conveys pride in themselves as a people.

I first heard the word "nigger" used by a white person when I was nine years old. Shortly after my eighth birthday, my mother married a man she met in Tennessee and moved with him to his home in Arkansas. I stayed behind and continued to live with my grandmother because I didn't want to leave her and my friends and have to make new friends. During the summer of my ninth year, I visited them and played with two white boys for whose parents my mother worked as a maid and babysitter. The older boy, Steve, was my age, and his younger brother, Mikey, was six. One day as I bent down to tie my shoe, Steve felt my hair and said he wished he had hair like mine. Mikey immediately shouted, "Don't do it Steve, you'll be a nigger."

As Randall points out, "What should matter is the context in which the word is spoken—the speaker's aims, effects, alternatives" (sic). Under different circumstances, even at nine years old, I might have busted Mikey in the nose. I didn't because, although I was only nine, I had learned that my reaction to the word "nigger" directed at me depended on the context. I realized first that Mikey really didn't understand what the word meant or its effect on me, and second that he could have learned the word only from his parents. Looking back, I believe that if he had fully understood what the word meant, he would not have wanted to play with me. To him, having wooly, curly hair meant being something bad or unwanted—a "nigger." Yet, he and his brother were allowed to and enjoyed playing with me. Their being allowed to play with me meant that somewhere

deep within their souls the parents maybe felt I wasn't all bad, even though I was a "nigger." Or at least that is what I like to believe some 50 years later.

In a different context, when I was in the navy in 1955, a white Chief Petty Officer on the ship on which I served told me a joke about a black pig and used the word "nigger." When I didn't laugh and walked away, he wanted to know why. I told him I didn't appreciate the joke. He never told me a joke of any kind again, and we never became friends. Under the circumstances I also might have gotten into a fight with him, even if he did outweigh me by about 30-40 pounds and was six inches taller. I didn't because I would have ended up in the brig for hitting a superior officer. My nonviolent reaction effectively expressed my disapproval.

I didn't disapprove of all white folks using "nigger" in my presence. When I worked in the Las Vegas Social Security Office in the late sixties, the white Field Representative and I became close friends, and I often visited his home. His friendship with me almost caused a problem when his neighbors asked him if he planned to sell the house to me. He informed them that if he were, it was none of their business. The neighbors also suggested that if he were not selling the house, maybe I shouldn't visit so often. He again told them that it was none of their business and that if they didn't like who came to his house, they could move. I appreciated what he did, so when he told me a joke that involved use of "nigger," I didn't correct him. In fact, we discussed the word and who should be allowed to use it. I felt he had earned the privilege to do so.

I disapprove of the word "nigger," and don't allow my children to use it in my presence unless we are engaged in an intellectual discussion. Yet, it still has a place in the language, and it must not be allowed to lose its sting, nor be banned from the language. I

want no resolutions passed to stop the use of the word, no changes in the dictionary to sooth hurt feelings, and no books banned from high school curricula because the word is in them. Furthermore, I hope overuse of the word will not soften its painful sting.

Randal believes that the word should be retained under the idea of free speech because "Protecting foul, disgusting, hateful, unpopular speech against government censorship is a great achievement of American political culture." Words also may disappear from the language without government censorship simply through overuse or nonuse, the method the Baltimore City Council advocates in its attempt to make the word disappear from the language. Banning any words from the language would be a serious loss. Anyway, people will invent euphemisms, as they did in the 1990s when the term "the n-word," was substituted for "nigger." For a few months after I heard the term "the n-word," I didn't know what it referred to until one of my kids told me. Once I learned what "the n-word" stood for, I wasn't pleased with the euphemism because it made me no less a "nigger" in a derogatory context. Would I have felt any better if the Chief Petty Officer had used the term "the n-word" in telling his joke instead of "nigger?" I don't think so.

Once again I refer to Randall for a good reason for retaining "nigger." "Nigger," writes Randall, "is fascinating precisely because it has been put to a variety of uses and can radiate a wide array meanings." Ban "nigger" from the language and the greatest loss is to literature. Remove "nigger" from Huckleberry Finn, the novel some groups want to ban from high school libraries because of its use of the word, and the character of Huck would be much less complex. Certainly Huck would not use the term "the n-word" since it had not yet come into fashion, but imagine him using "Negro," or "colored" so as not

to hurt Jim's feelings and to make certain that generations of black children in the twentieth century would not be emotionally injured by the word "nigger." "Nigger" in the context of the novel serves to depict the complexity of Huck's dilemma between the morality of the society in which he lives and his innate morality. Jim may be just a "nigger," but Huck realizes without knowing how or why, that he is more than that. He is a human being.

In his autobiography nigger, comedian Dick Gregory felt in 1964 that "now we're ready to change a system, a system where a white man can destroy a black man with a single word. Nigger. When we're through…there won't be any niggers any more." Some people, black and white, claim the system has not changed, but it has. It is dangerous these days for any white person to publicly use the word "nigger" or even to use the euphemism the "the n-word." Those who still harbor prejudices in their hearts, however, still will resort to all kinds of subterfuges to express their prejudices. Whatever words they use will still sting. I would rather know the sting of the word "nigger" because, I feel, the person using it is honest about his hatred of me. Using an euphemism is no less offensive and no less hurtful. And it is sometimes more so because the person using it may be trying to hide his prejudice.

Like any left or right-thinking American, I want no group, organization, or government entity messing with my right to freedom of speech. I want to retain the freedom to use the "wide array of meanings" nigger is capable of conveying. I want to be free to have a character in one of my stories express his or her exasperation or impatience using the phrase "nigga, please."

7

LIVING ON BORROWED TIME: I BEAT THE LIFE EXPECTANCY ODDS

> "The whole of life of man is but a point of time; let us enjoy it, therefore, while it lasts, and not spend it to no purpose."
>
> Plutarch

> "In old age, one becomes more aware of what has, and what has not, been achieved."
>
> Bertrand Russell, Essays In Skepticism

> "Don't look back. Something might be gaining on you."
>
> Satchel Paige, Bartlett's Familiar Quotations

When I reached the age of 40, the lyrics of a popular song kept circulating in my mind: "They say that life begins at forty." I thought, as the song haunted me, that 40 was the age when I would experience my life-changing mid-life crisis. Halfway through my 40th year nothing much had changed. I hadn't suffered from andropausal syndrome, which is a $50 term for male menopause. I still had a kid in school, a mortgage, and an eight to four job that required me to rise at six every morning to be on time for work. Although I didn't know at what age one becomes middle-aged and has a mid-life crisis, I still waited for mine since I had reached what I considered to be middle-age. When I thought a little more about a mid-life crisis, however, I realized that I had never read any novels or seen any movies or television or stage plays about a black person having a mid-life crisis. Consequently, I assumed that we don't have such crises and that, therefore, mid-life crisis is a white thing. If we black folks do have mid-life crises, I regret missing mine because I feel like I have missed something—a depressing experience or an exhilarating experience, I'm not sure which. On the other hand, maybe I didn't miss a

thing because as a black man, I sometimes feel like I'm in a permanent life crisis. A feeling that, thank God, is only fleeting, for if it were not, I probably would not have made it to my 50th birthday.

I was extremely happy to reach 50 because I had read somewhere that the life expectancy of a black man born in the 1930s was 50 something. If he made it past 50, he was likely to live another 10 years or so. I was confident I would reach 55, when I would meet the age and time in service requirements for retirement, because my father and both my grandfathers had lived past 65. In fact, I figured since my paternal grandfather had lived into his 90s, I had a very good chance of doing the same. Like him, I would beat the odds of life expectancy for black men.

Shortly after my 55th birthday, my wife died, leaving me with two teenagers to raise (my oldest daughter was grown and no longer my responsibility). So, my retirement had to be put off, and I continued for another five years to rise at six in the morning to be at a job that I liked but still wanted to put behind me and start a new life free of familial responsibilities. During the five more years of work, I eagerly looked forward to reaching 60 and retiring.

In 1995, at age 60, my confidence that I would beat the odds on the life expectancy for black males born in the 1930s, just as my grandfathers had done for those born at the end of the 19th century, soared. I was living on borrowed time, and I would make the most of what time I had left. My youngest daughter graduated from high school in 1995, and, although my son wouldn't graduate until 1996, I retired at the end of 1995 to begin my new life as a retired senior citizen.

A year before I retired, I attended classes on how to plan for retirement. We learned about finances, about deciding where to live, about keeping healthy, and about keeping busy. The most important aspect of retiring was to have a plan. My plan was to return home to Knoxville, Tennessee, earn a master's degree in literature and write one or two books on something. Before I could set my plan in motion, however, responsibility took hold of me once more. Familial responsibilities at the time seemed to stick to me like crazy glue and refused to let go. My responsibility for my children had not in fact ended for, after my son graduated from high school, he decided to attend college. In addition, another expected responsibility hit me sooner than I thought it would. I had to return to Knoxville after my son graduated from high school to care for my 80 year old mother, who died a year after I returned. It was her wish to see all of us before she died, especially her one great grandchild, a wish her God, for she was a believer even if she did not go to church, granted. Even with these responsibilities on my shoulders, I felt freer than I had felt in years because I no longer was required to rise in the early morning hours and go to work. My finances were sufficient for me to meet all my responsibilities and live comfortably in the house we owned in Knoxville.

I welcomed senior citizen status without fear but with some anxiety about the changes that supposedly occur with the onset of old age. Uppermost in my mind was my physical and mental health, which was the second most important aspect of retirement I learned about in the class. The yearly physical examinations I had been undergoing since age 40 revealed that I was remarkably healthy. Not even the attack of Bell's Palsy, which is paralysis of the left side of the face, could dampen my outlook for living a very long life. I was still strong enough to mow my lawn and to do other kinds of light work around

my house in California and my house in Knoxville when I moved back home. While I couldn't run a mile, I could walk a mile.

I was anxious about a possible decline in my mental health, for if it went bad, I couldn't carry out my retirement plan to return to college. The main thing was to keep my mind alert, or as Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot would say, "to keep the little grey cells busy." Before my retirement, I continued to read fiction, history, philosophy, and anything of interest I could get my hands on that would force me to exercise "the little grey cells." My greatest anxiety was that I might suffer a loss of memory. I expected to have some memory loss, so I developed the habit of writing myself notes. However, I felt if I suffered a major loss of memory, it might lead to a loss of imagination. The remainder of my life depends, I believe, on my imagination. One depressing aspect of old age is that life no longer holds any surprises. The imagination makes up for the lack of surprise, for the mind, examining the past, living in the present, and contemplating the future, will always find surprises through the imagination.

In my younger days, I never saw life as Paul Laurence Dunbar describes it in his poem "Life":

> A crust of bread and a corner to sleep in,
> A minute to smile and an hour to weep in,
> A pint of joy to a peck of trouble,
> And never a laugh but the moans come double.
> And that is life.

In those days, I had a whole loaf of bread, a king sized bed to sleep in, a whole day to smile with little weeping, and a gallon of joy, and I met my troubles head on. Life was good but still restricted since I couldn't do as I wanted because of familial responsibilities. For me 60 was the age of freedom, the age at which life began because

there were even fewer troubles, whole days not just of smiling but loud laughter, two gallons of joy, and more bread than I, one person, could eat, and familial responsibilities that were easily handled and not expected to last very long. The beginning of each day was a source of renewal. I thought of myself not as being older but as having another opportunity to taste life's variety. If I were a religious man, I would thank God for my good mental and physical health, and the freedom that old age provides me.

Many of us old folks are not yet ready to be put on the trash heap of a society that glorifies youth. Once you become a senior citizen, the mainstream culture in America shoves you out of sight and out of mind. Television doesn't devote a program to you. Advertisers, except for advertising medications, ignore you, despite the fact that you have more disposable income that any other group in the population. And those who should look out for your welfare, the leaders in Congress who are also senior citizens, also forget you. Such attitudes toward the old could be depressing. For me, they aren't. I find being a senior citizen, an old man, or whatever, liberating for it frees the mind to move in new directions. As Betty Friedan suggests in her book The Fountain of Age:

> Just as in their "late style" artists and scientists, creators and great thinkers seem to move beyond tumult and discord... to unifying principles that give new meaning to what has gone before and presage the agenda for the next generation, so... age can free us all... to a new wholeness, previewing in the serious or the seemingly irrelevant efforts of our late years new dimensions of life for the next generation.

Maybe I can take on the responsibility of leaving behind "new dimensions of life for the next generation" by writing about my experiences and what those experiences have meant to me.

I reject Dylan Thomas's advice to

> ...not go gentle into that good night." It would be futile to "burn and rave at close of day:/Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

I have never had a fear of death, for I believe that we begin the long, inevitable journey toward death from the moment we are born. I hope to die of old age, for, as Montaigue says, "To die of old age is a death rare, extraordinary, and singular, and therefore, so much less natural than the others 'tis the last and extremest sort of dying: and the more remote, the less to be hoped for." And I hope to do it quietly. Of course there is no guarantee that I will avoid the disease of mind and body that afflict senior citizens. My two uncles died of heart attacks in their 70s and another died of prostate cancer. However, based on the life of my grandfathers, both of whom died of natural causes in their old age, the odds are on my side. Shucks, I have already beaten the odds of a black man born in the 1930s by living past 60.

As I write this essay, I am in my 68th year. According to a report issued in 2003 by the Centers for Disease Control, the life expectancy for African American males in 2000 was 68.3 years. When I read the report, like an eagle rising high in the sky to reach the top of the mountain peak from which he looks down at the variety of life in the green beauty of the valley, my confidence that I'll live to be 90 soared.

The older I get, the more aware I am of what I have not achieved. This has led me to understand what Satchel Paige means about not looking back. What may be gaining on me is knowledge not of what I have accomplished but of what I haven't. Thinking about what I haven't accomplished is depressing. To compensate, I think about my accomplishments. I raised three children, and none is a drug addict or criminal. All have

gotten jobs and are attempting to live happy lives. I realize that, though I once thought of being a published writer of some renown, I am just an ordinary man who will, late in life, never do anything extraordinary. My goal, however, during the remainder of my days still is to become a published writer before my borrowed time runs out. I have taken the advice of the Roman philosopher, Seneca, toward old age:

> As for old age, embrace it and love it. It abounds with pleasure, if you know how to use it. The gradually declining years are amongst the sweetest...and I maintain, that even where they have reached the extreme limit, they have their pleasure still.

I look forward to becoming a member of the fastest growing group in America: the old, old, which are those senior citizens in their 80s and 90s.

8

RELEARNING HOW TO READ

"A mind is a terrible thing to waste."
United Negro College Fund Motto

"What can be studied, learned, and taught is the craft of reading"
Robert Scholes, The Crafty Reader

A mind is certainly a terrible thing to waste even for old folks. When I was two years away from retirement, I began thinking about what I would do when I did retire. During my working years, the clock controlled my daily activities. I rose at six in the morning, skipped breakfast so I could catch the bus and be at my desk by eight. In the evening, after supper, I talked with my wife and kids if they were home until about nine, and then went to bed. Each day was the same because no deviation from the control of the clock was permitted, except during my two weeks vacation each year. My wife died in 1990, leaving me with two teenagers to get through high school, but the routine didn't change. I took on the added chores of cooking supper, washing clothes, cleaning house, and talking to school officials when necessary about my kids' behavior. I went to bed about 10 or 11 at night instead of nine. I was so busy that I didn't think seriously about retirement until 1995, when my daughter graduated from high school and I turned 60.

On the morning of 2 January 1996, my daily routine changed when I woke up and discovered I didn't know what to do with myself. My son had left for school, and I was alone in a big old house with nothing to do. In the year before I retired, I drew up my plan to go back to college, but I hadn't planned to put it into operation until after my son graduated from high school. So, I decided to enjoy not having to go to work everyday.

And I did enjoy that first day for about two hours before the restlessness set in. Once the euphoria of not having to go to work wore off, I found myself walking from room to room looking for something to do. One day about noon, I sat down and watched a soap opera on television.

As I watched the soap opera, I found myself analyzing the situation and the characters and realized what I missed the most was reading. I think the boredom from watching the soap opera made me think about how, when I read a story, I could use my imagination to realize the characters and situations based on the author's descriptions. For me, such use of the imagination was more pleasurable than watching images on a screen that often times didn't leave anything to imagination. From the first day I learned to read in elementary school, I have loved the sight of words on paper. Of course, I knew nothing at the time about "reading" television programs, movies, malls, and other nonverbal material. But since I have discovered that we can supposedly "read" things other than words, I still prefer words because sometimes it is difficult for an old dog to learn new tricks.

I first discovered my love of reading in the seventh grade when the school librarian, after asking me what I was interest in, recommended several books on sports, especially baseball, my main interest at the time. The fact that the characters in the stories were white made no difference because in my imagination, where all things are possible, skin color was nonexistent. Watching a baseball game, especially during the periods of almost inactivity, was as boring as watching a soap opera. But in the stories, there were no periods of inactivity. A good written description of the double play starting with the second baseman was, for me, better than watching the real thing because I could replay it

over and over in my mind, and even put myself, a left-hander, in the picture as the shortstop using his right hand.

In high school the teachers, with the help of the school librarian, directed my reading, which meant reading poems and novels that contained no sex and little violence. The regular curriculum of the segregated school I attended included very few African American writers. We read African American writers mostly during Negro History Week, along with reading about Negroes in other fields, such as science, law, medicine, etc. It was only during Negro History that the librarian would recommend books by Negro writers, and the writers I remember reading the most were Paul Laurence Dunbar and Langston Hughes. Although the book shelves at the bookstores and the drugstores were full of popular paperback novels, we were not encouraged to read such "trash."

I was in the ninth grade when, while shopping for a pulp magazine featuring cowboy stories, I spotted the paperback novel I, The Jury by Mickey Spillane. Instead of buying the pulp magazine of cowboy stories, I decided to spend my quarter on the Spillane novel because on the cover was the picture of a woman with her blouse partly open revealing a suggestion of breast and a man in front of her pointing a gun at her. The cover suggested some juicy stuff inside, stuff I, a ninth grader, would be forbidden to read if my English teacher knew. I didn't read another popular novel during my high school years because I couldn't afford to spend the few dimes and quarters I earned on popular novels, pulp magazines, and comic books. I had to choose one of the three, and I chose the pulp magazines that featured cowboy stories because I loved western movies more than popular novels or comic books.

I began reading popular novels again when I joined the navy and read everything I could get my hands on without discrimination. Aboard ship at sea I often had a great deal of time in which I had nothing to do. So, when I wasn't reading technical manuals to keep up with my job, I read the mostly science fiction and adventure novels in the ship's small library. During the ship's visit to France, I bought French pornographic novels. Back in the United States, once I had read the small number of books in the ship's library, I bought more science fiction and adventure novels, but no pornographic novels because I couldn't find any in the ship's homeport of Norfolk, Virginia. My nonfiction reading consisted of some American history but mostly science and engineering because I planned to attend college and study electric engineering when I left the navy.

In my sophomore year in college, in an introduction to literature class, I read Hemingway's short story, "The Killers," and decided to change my major to English Literature. I had not enjoyed college while majoring in electric engineering because studying science and mathematics was not only dull but also required no use of the imagination. Only in fiction could I exercise my imagination and live in other times and other worlds, and see people I had never known and never would know. As an English major, I could satisfy my passion for reading. My reading, of course, was directed, and I learned to read with some discrimination. I enjoyed reading so much that I tried to figure out a way to become a perpetual student, which would allow me to spend the rest of my life reading. I rejected the idea of becoming a teacher because I didn't relish having to grade student papers and having maybe to fail a student. I thought about becoming a literary critic and the possible fame and recognition I could gain if I became one of the few African Americans then practicing the art of literary criticism. I could also spend the

rest of my life reading for fun. But fear that my judgments about literary works would be wrong drove me away from the profession of literary criticism. I also discovered that critics, unless they are famous, didn't make much money. I chose, instead, to go to work for the Federal Government to ensure myself of a steady job and a pension that would provided me the financial security to do whatever I wished in my retirement.

The experts tell us old folks that to live a long life we must engage in physical and mental activities when we retire, and they seem to concentrate on the physical more than the mental activities. I am not against physical activity, but some of us might be unable or just plain don't want to engage in strenuous physical exercise. I belong to the latter category. To exercise the mind is a different matter, for when the mind goes, so does the body and all the physical activity in the world will not help. Since I was in good physical health, what I needed most was something to stimulate my mind to keep it active because "a mind is a terrible thing to waste." I decided to solve the problem of my restlessness by going back to college.

During my 34 years as a career bureaucrat, I continued to read as I rode the bus to and from work. I read novels, short stories, and critical essays, but, though I read extensively, I did not read deeply. Once I made the decision to go back to college, I realized that reading government gobbledygook and reading for mere pleasure, I had forgotten how to read literature. Thus, my first challenge in college would be to unlearn the habits acquired as an expert reader of government gobbledygook and a reader for pleasure and relearn the craft of reading literature.

To find out what was happening in the area of literary criticism, and thus in literature, I bought America's Modernisms: Revaluing the Canon: Essays in Honor of

Joseph N. Riddel, which was edited by Kathryne V. Lindberg and Joseph G. Kronick. I didn't know who Joseph N. Riddel was, but suspected he must be a distinguished modern critic. I opened the book hoping to discover who he was and to learn something about modern literature and the canon. I knew I was in trouble when I read the first sentence of the "Introduction" by Lindberg: "The following essays comprise part of a lengthy, wider, and ongoing dialogue about American literature and/or modernism—the latter names the time or condition of self-canceling desires for perpetual novelty and totalization that haunt 'American' culture from its shady beginnings to its still uncertain spatio-temporal borders."

My head began to go round and round and my eyes blinked several times as my mind tried to decipher the meanings of "self-canceling," "totalization," and "spatio-temporal borders." I didn't know anything at the time about modernism or postmodernism, so the words terrified me. How on earth, I asked myself, would I, at my age, be able to remember and absorb the incomprehensible new terminology? I felt no easier when I read the first sentence of Joseph N. Riddel's essay "To Perform—A Transitive Verb?" The essay opens with a Yogi Berra epigraph: "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." Riddel's first sentence comments upon the epigraph: "It very possibly never occurred to that consummate speech actor, Yogi Berra, that his words of instruction might locate or site the condition of certain modernity or postmodernity, the chiasm and aporia of a discourse that performs the future rather than predicting it." I thought that if this was the way the critics these days were writing, I was going to have a tough time enjoying my favorite pastime, reading.

The place to relearn how to read literature was the University of Tennessee in my hometown of Knoxville. Therefore, in June of 1998, after 35 years, I returned to the exciting environment of the college campus. While waiting for my transcripts from the Illinois Institute of Technology to support my application for enrollment in the graduate program, I enrolled as a nondegree student. Once I was accepted, I set about selecting a course that would acclimate me to the college classroom and help me become Goethe's "sagacious reader who is capable of reading between these lines what does not stand written in them, but is nevertheless implied, will be able to form some conception." I didn't want to overburden my 62-year-old brain with too much, so I decided to take only one course, one that would help me begin the process of relearning how to read literature and how to read between the lines and "form some conception" of what I read. I felt very lucky when I discovered that the only open course was "Introduction to Fiction," which satisfied my immediate need to begin reading literature at the fundamental level. I would begin reading the kind of literature I liked best, fiction.

When I entered class the first day, I became a little nervous as I gazed around the room at the bright faces of all those young students, some young enough to be my sons or daughters. I felt that, despite my age and experience of life, they would probably have more insight into the fictional works we were scheduled to read, and my ignorance would embarrass me. Of course, that some of them also appeared scared and perplexed didn't ease my nervousness.

In How to Read and Why, Harold Bloom says, "Ultimately we read [...] in order to strengthen the self, and to learn its authentic interests." In my job as a Decision Writer and Analyst for the Administrative Law Judges in the Social Security Administration, I

had to read medical and legal documents. For relaxation, I read Faulkner, Hemingway, Wright, Woolf, Dickens, Conrad, Ellison and others, including detective fiction writers. I did not, however, fully enter into the world the authors created in their fictions because I had no interest in whether what I read had any significance beyond my pleasure. I certainly wasn't interested in strengthening myself, and I already knew, or thought I did, my interest.

My memory may be faulty but my imagination suggests to me that our first class assignment was Poe's short story "The Tale-tell Heart." I may feel that it was the first assignment because I am a Poe fan. Anyway, after reading the story at home, I realized that I would have to connect what I read to the social environment in which I lived, as well as the time in which the story was written, and pay closer attention to how the work interpreted the mores and values of the society at the time it was written, and how its theme applied, if it did, to current mores and values. To put it simply, I would have to think.

During the discussion on the second day of class, I discovered that my memory and analytic skills weren't as good as they were when I was an undergraduate. The notes I had written down while reading the story seemed incomplete, and it was difficult for me respond, based on my notes, to the questions the instructor was asking. What worried me as I sat silently listening to the young students answering the questions and discussing the story was not my analytic skills, for I was taking the fiction course to improve them, but my memory. At my age I didn't always remember small things and feared trying to keep in my mind characters, plots, scene, settings, and all the other aspects of a fictional story. I couldn't answer some of the questions from memory because I didn't remember some

the details of the story. It had been a long time since I had taken notes, but I knew based on the experience of the second day that I would have to take voluminous notes as I read and during class, more notes than I had taken in my undergraduate days. I was fortunate in that I had established already the habit of writing notes to myself as I got older.

Another problem was familiarizing myself with literary terms, some old and some new, in order to improve my analytic skills and to understand the stories on a level beyond mere enjoyment. Therefore, I dug through my old text books and found the dog-eared A Glossary of Literary Terms which I had used as an undergraduate. Since in my pleasure reading, I preferred plot-driven stories, I looked up "plot" in the old glossary and compared it with the definition in the "Glossary of Literary Terms" in the back of our textbook. In the old glossary, plot was defined along with character in one sentence as "the system of actions represented in a dramatic or narrative work, and the characters are the people, endowed with specific moral and dispositional qualities, who carry on the action." The textbook defined plot as "the series of events in a narrative that form the action, in which a character or characters face an internal or external conflict that propels the story to a climax and an ultimate resolution." Since the definition of plot hadn't changed, I felt confident that with improved note taking and an improvement in my analytic skills, I could handle the reading of fiction on the deeper level required to find my "authentic interest."

My confidence dropped when I encountered the word "anti-story" in the textbook. "Anti-story" seemed a contradiction, and it certainly went against anything I had learned as an undergraduate. What in the world was an "anti-story"? My confidence dropped another inch or so when I saw the term "deconstruction," which, according to the

textbook glossary was a critical approach. The word was as puzzling as the sentence by Lindberg that, I suppose, was meant to define it: "In the words of one critic, deconstruction is 'not a dismantling of the structure of a text, but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself." The words presented a new challenge: I would have to learn a bunch of new words and terms that had entered the critical lexicon of fiction.

New words and terms frighten old men such as myself because our minds, though they remain sharp, are not as quick as when we were younger. Will we, we ask ourselves, be able to understand the new terms in their literary context? And how long will it take us to understand them? On the other hand, they present a challenge that helps us keep out minds sharp because "old dogs" can learn new tricks. I need not have worried, however, because the young instructor never used any word term I wasn't familiar with. Instead of the new literary terms, he used such terms as plot, point of view, rising action, falling action, climax, and dénouement. Of course, in some cases I had to resort to the glossary and my notes to refresh my memory of some of the terms but my confidence rose tremendously. When I wrote my paper on Poe's story "The Tell-Tale Heart," I felt comfortable using the familiar terms in both my old glossary and the textbook glossary. Writing the paper was the test that showed me I could relearn to read fiction and by extension other literary narratives. However, I figured I might have a problem with poetry, but that would come later in other courses, and I also would eventually master the new literary and critical vocabulary in later courses. At the moment, fiction was my guide to relearning how to read.

I reread some books that I had read while riding the bus to work to see what I might have missed. I was beginning to discover my self, and my "authentic interests." I

reread Richard Wright's Native Son, a novel that I angrily rejected the first time I read it in the early 1960s because of the violence it depicts, and also because of what I considered to be at the time a negative portrayal of African Americans, especially African American men. Upon rereading the book once I had relearned to read literature, I saw the value of Bigger Thomas and his plight as a symbol of what was wrong with America, and that for Wright violence was the one way of exposing the cruelty and brutality he saw America's treatment of African Americans. Most of all, upon first reading the novel I felt something was wrong with the speech by Max, the lawyer, in which he pleads for Bigger's life. In the second reading, I saw that the speech is a huge flaw and adds nothing to the point Wright wishes to make. The point is brilliantly made when Bigger explains to Max that

> What I killed for must've been good! It must have been good! When a man kills, it's for something... .I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for'em....

Bigger can only feel alive as a human being through an act of violence.

I also reread Huckleberry Finn, a novel which I admire and have never thought of as racist. However, on my first reading, I refused to see it as more than an adventure story of a 14 year old boy and old black slave traveling down the Mississippi River. My reaction upon reading it after reacquiring the skills to read literature was that it says a great deal about slavery and the treatment of African Americans from a white author's point of view. The portrayal of Jim is positive not negative as some critics suggest merely because of the use of the word "nigger." Jim is uneducated but has the wisdom of mother wit. In the end Huck's mother wit allows him to recognize Jim as more than a "nigger"

and he consequently shows the old black slave a great deal of respect. Huckleberry Finn is Twain's protest against the cruel treatment of African Americans.

I first read Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God while riding the El to work in Chicago in the early 1960s, and it left me puzzled. Here was a black writer writing about black folks and she wasn't raging about their treatment by white folks. When I reread the novel, I realized Hurston did something that I had longed to see while attending college: she wrote about black folks who faced ordinary problems for which they didn't blame the white folks. Of course, I also felt, in the new critical vocabulary I had learned, that it is a feminist novel, or at least the feminist rightfully claim it as such. The fact that the men aren't very likeable doesn't detract from the fact that the novel in a way honors all those black mothers and grandmothers who have shouldered the burden of racial survival when the men were often too beaten down to do so.

I read many more novels and short stories but the three novels discussed above made me think more about my place as a black man in American society. In them I began to find myself and my "authentic interest." I am an eclectic reader, but as I reread many literary works I had read in the past and new works I encountered in other courses, I began to look for an interesting area of literature in which I could become a sort of expert. I found that area in detective/mystery fiction. An African American critic is needed to assess the quality of the large number of detective/mystery novels young African Americans are writing. I wish to spend my remaining days reading and assessing their works.

Reading is challenging because once you discover you probably will not be able to read all the books you wish to read, you tend to hurry through what you are reading

and worry about those books you haven't read. This difficulty is offset by the pleasant experience of reading the books you manage to get to. In the past I took Montaigne's suggestion and sought in "books only to give myself pleasure by honest amusement," and I didn't even consider the second part of his statement that if I studied books it would be for "the learning that treats of the knowledge of myself and instructs me in how to die well and live well." Since I have relearned how to read, I try to follow Bloom's recommendation that we read novels "as they were read in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: for aesthetic pleasure and for spiritual insight." I read not only novels but other narratives as well for "aesthetic pleasure and for spiritual insight" And yet, I also want to read as Virginia Woolf suggests: "A reader must check the desire for learning at the outset; if knowledge sticks to him well and good, but to go in pursuit of it, to read on a system, to become a specialist or authority, is very apt to kill… the more humane passion for pure and disinterested reading". "Pure and disinterested reading" that will give me aesthetic pleasure is what I seek. At my age, learning about myself and how to live and die well will be a byproduct.

9

LORD, LET ME BEAR WITNESS: GIVING THE FORMER SLAVES A VOICE

Which narrative technique best allowed the former slaves to tell their own stories is the question I examine in this essay through an analysis of short stories by Mark Twain and Charles W. Chesnutt.

During the times of slavery, the slaves were not without a voice, especially the voice of fact rather than fiction, and that voice often read like fiction. In her autobiography, Harriet A. Jacobs felt she should assure her readers that her narrative was "...no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true."[1] "What finally dominates" in Jacobs's narrative "is a new voice," the voice of the slave woman.[2] The most prominent slave narrative written by a male was, of course, Douglass's Narrative of the life of Fredrick Douglass. He "Sincerely and earnestly," hoped "that this little book may do something toward throwing light on the American slave system, and hastening the glad day of deliverance to the millions of my brethren in bonds...."[3] In his autobiography, Douglass omitted some details of his escape for fear they would expose those who helped him. Both authors revealed the horrors of slavery, not through the "as-told-to" method, but in their own words. While "as-told-to" narratives might have been suspect because the white amanuenses might

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[1] Harriet A. Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987) 1.

[2] Jacobs, ed. Yellin xiv.

[3] Frederick Douglas, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. (New York: The Library of America, 1994) 102.

have added their own feelings and ideas in an attempt to aid the fight against slavery, the narratives written by the slaves themselves gave them authenticity.

Some times, however, fiction may be more effective at getting through to the public on social issues that are tearing at the fabric of the society. If the story that Lincoln referred to Harriet Beecher Stowe as the little lady who started the Civil War is to be believed, Uncle Tom's Cabin, that canonical novel about slavery written by the indignant white lady, had more effect on the public than did the autobiographies written by the slaves themselves.

The slaves spoke with an authentic voice because they described actual experience. In the novel, Stowe speaks of what she and her friends have observed about slavery. Stowe claims that the incidents in the story are "to a very great extent, authentic" and based on her own observations and those of her friends.[4] She speaks not for the slaves but on their behalf and therefore attempts to speak with a verisimilar voice. Thus, the character of Uncle Tom is unconvincing, for Stowe the ventriloquist, puts in his mouth noble words, making him a symbol for the loyal, devoted servant who at the same time is Christ to Legree's Satan. That Uncle Tom fought his personal battle with slavery through passive resistance is believable. What is not believable because the totality of his character is unconvincing is his speech to Legree:

> "Mas'r, if you was sick, or in trouble, or dying, and I could save ye, I'd give ye my heart's blood; and if taking every drop of blood in this poor old body would save your precious soul, I'd give'em freely, as the Lord gave his for me. O, Mas'r! don't bring this great sin on your soul! It will hurt you more than 'twill me! Do the worst you can, my

[4] Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin (New York: Washington Sq. P, 1962) 449

> troubles'll be over soon; but, if ye don't repent, yours won't never end!"[5]

This is an eloquent speech by a Christ-like character who also has the patience of Job in the face of Legree's brutality. But the speech doesn't ring with authenticity because it doesn't have the sound and rhythm of the uneducated slave, which Uncle Tom apparently is. The speech, however, achieves it purpose in ennobling Uncle Tom, making him a better person than Legree and one who doesn't deserve the cruel treatment. Like many a noble fictional character, Uncle Tom is too good to be believable. Missing in his speech is the cry of pain heard in the slave narratives. This missing element at times takes away even the verisimilitude.

The problem of the authenticity or at least verisimilitude in giving the former slaves a voice would become even more important after the Civil War. Before the war, the masters tried to justified slavery. After the war, they the attempted to maintain the false picture of the former slave who missed those happy times on the plantation where he or she was always smiling and grinning and dancing and loved old Mas'r and Missus. Many white writers who wrote during the post-war period spoke in the voice of the former masters to present a romantic image of slavery times.

Writers were needed to counter this romantic image in a way that would strip away the propaganda and romanticism of the southern writers and deal with the ethos of slavery from the slaves' point of view. These writers would have to use a narrative technique that would make readers feel the horrors of slavery and realize the immorality,

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[5] Cabin Stowe 422-23

the inhumanity, and the injustice of the system and its aftermath. They would have to let the former slaves bear witness to their experiences in their own words.

The most effective narrative technique for allowing the former slaves to communicate their experiences in their own voices is the framed narrative along with the use of dialect, which helps create the authenticity or verisimilitude so necessary to make the stories believable. Authenticity tries to convince the reader that the story is "true in substance and in accordance with the facts" (OED) and therefore not just representative. The open frame narrative achieves authenticity because the inside storyteller closes the story, just as s/he would in reality. Authenticity attempts to directly convey experience.

Verisimilitude is a form of representation which suggests that what is being represented has "the appearance or semblance of truth" (Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary). The closed frame narrative achieves verisimilitude because the outside narrator is present first and last, and the inside storyteller may often attempt to hide what s/he really means or the actual facts. In a word, the inside storyteller may wear the mask, as many slaves did and many African Americans continued to do during the years of legal segregation. Verisimilitude attempts to indirectly convey experience.

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In "A True Story Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It," Twain, who "appreciated the creative vitality of African-American voices and exploited their potential in art,"[6] speaks not for but on behalf of the former slaves and tries, therefore, for authenticity rather than verisimilitude. He employs slave dialect in an opened framed narrative to make the reader believe that the story corresponds to the known facts of a

[6] Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Was Huck Black?: Mark Twain and African-American Voices (New York: Oxford UP, 1993) 5.

story told to him by the former slave, Mary Ann Cord who told him the "story of how she was forcibly separated from her husband and children on the auction block and eventually reunited with her youngest child, Henry Washington, after the war."[7] Twain found her story to be "'a shameful tale of wrong & hardship,'" but also "'a curiously strong piece of literary work to come unpremeditated from lips untrained in literary art.'"[8]

Twain uses "literary art" to convince the reader that slavery was a horrible experience but that some slaves survived it with their dignity intact. We aren't meant to simply like Aunt Rachel; we are to admire her for her capacity to survive the horrors of slavery and for her unwavering faith that she again would see her youngest son Henry. The name Rachel is important in establishing the dignity Twain wants us to see in Aunt Rachel. In choosing the name, he compares Aunt Rachel's situation involving her children to that of the biblical Rachel in JEREMIAH 31:15 (King James version): "Thus saith the Lord; A voice was heard in Ra'mah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Ra'hel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not." The comparison raises Aunt Rachel to the stature of a biblical heroine, further eliciting the reader's sympathy.

In the opening paragraph, Twain presents Aunt Rachel as occupying a status below the others in the household. As they sit on the porch, she "was sitting respectively below our level," but in his physical description, he immediately makes her larger than life: "She was a mighty frame and stature" and "her eye was undimmed and strength

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[7] Fishkin, Lighting Out for the Territory (New York: Oxford UP, 1997) 85.

[8] Fishkin, Lighting 85

unabated." If there is any doubt of her heroic stature, Twain reminds us of it a third of the way into the story when he, the outside narrator, pauses the telling of the story to describe her movements during the telling: "Aunt Rachel had gradually risen, while she warmed to her subject, and now she towered above us, black against the stars." The opening words placing her below them on the steps is now clearly seen as foreshadowing for emphasizing the idea of her heroic stature.

Aunt Rachel enters the story in an angry mood when "Misto C" wonders how she has "lived sixty years and never had any trouble?" He explains that he thinks this because she smiles and seems happy all the time (the typical picture of former slaves perpetrated by former slave owners). Her reaction is one of surprise and anger because she can't believe that he would think so: "She paused, and there was a moment of silence. She turned her face over her shoulder toward me, and said, without even a smile in her voice: 'Misto C--, is you in 'arnest?'" Thus, begins the voice of the inside storyteller, the former slave. Hers is the voice of one who speaks from direct experience because she "was bawn down 'mongst de slaves" and "knows all 'bout slavery, 'case I been one of'em my own se'f." With Twain's help, the authentic voice of the former slave is heard.

Aunt Rachel has a strong sense of family. She let's "Misto C" know that her familial relationships were no different from his, and, thus, other whites, when she tells him about her husband and their feelings toward their children. Her husband "was lovin' an' kind to me, jist as kind as you is to yo' own wife." They loved their seven children the same as her employer loves his. At this point in the story, she makes the thematic statement about a mother's love for her children: "Dey was black, but de Lord can't make

no chil'en so black but what dey mother loves'em an' wouldn't give'em up, no, not for anything dat's in dis whole world."

Pride in herself and her family came from her own mother and is expressed in her mother's saying that she is "one o' de ole Blue Hen's Chickens" which is her way of saying that she comes from a proud people and thus of expressing self-pride despite her condition as a slave. Aunt Rachel's strong love for her family shows itself when she physically fights to prevent the slave traders from taking her last child Henry away to be sold. She certainly knew the danger when she threatened to "kill de man dat tetches him!" Only Henry's promise to run away to freedom and come back to buy her freedom saved her from a beating or, worse, death. The "one o' de ole Blue Hen's Chickens" saying also is one of the plot devices Twain uses in the recognition scene when Henry recognizes the words he had heard in his youth. The other device is the scar on Henry's wrist that Aunt Rachel recognizes. However, neither of these plot devices distracts from the authenticity of the story because of Aunt Rachel's strong character, her telling it in dialect, and the absence of the outside storyteller's voice at the end.

Aunt Rachel, the inside storyteller, has the last word in this happy ending story, and it is the word of a woman who has survived slavery with her dignity and her sense of self intact. Her ironic statement at the end, "I hain't had no trouble. An' no joy!" is her way of saying to the reader what African American writers during the Harlem Renaissance would have said: "she was laughing to keep from crying."

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As Charles Duncan notes, Chesnutt used dialect in his stories to counter "[...] 'Southern white propaganda' designed 'to establish a nostalgically sentimental picture of slave-master relations prior to the Civil War' [...]."[9]

I have said that Twain spoke on behalf of former slaves in attempting to give them a voice. Chesnutt, a descendent of those slaves, spoke for them. In a letter to Houghton, Mifflin & Co. on September 8, 1891 about publishing a collection of his stories, he indicated that it was his mission to give the former slaves a voice: "These people have never been treated from a closely sympathetic standpoint, they have not had their day in court. Their friends have written of them, and their enemies; but this is, so far as I know, the first instance where a writer with any of their own blood has attempted a literary portrayal of them"[10] The publisher rejected the collection.

Chesnutt also had the problem of hiding his own voice in order to allow at least three voices to speak in "The Goopherd Grapevine" because the publishers did not want it known that he was a Negro. Thus, the closed frame was an apt narrative technique for giving verisimilitude to the voices of the white narrator from the north, Uncle Julius, the former slave, and, very faintly, Annie, the narrator's wife, who interjects the voice of skepticism. The voice of Chesnutt is hidden behind the three voices. I believe Chesnutt speaks through Uncle Julius, but since he is a trickster and provides some humor, white readers more than likely accepted him as the creation of a white author. Beneath the sly trickster voice, of course, is the truth about slavery. But even the good white man and his wife Annie are a little skeptical of Uncle Julius's story.

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[9] Charles Duncan, The Absent Man: The Narrative Craft of Charles W. Chesnutt (Athens: Ohio UP, 1998) 79

[10] Charles W. Chesnutt, "To Be An Author": Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt: 1889-1905 (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997 (75).

The Northern Gentleman, the voice of the post-war present, is an observant man who realizes that Patesville is an ideal town for him to make a living growing grapes, but, most importantly, for his wife to recover her health. The latter reason for the move effectively removes from the story the idea that he is just another carpetbagger who has come to exploit the people of the defeated confederate states. Thus, the focus will be on the former slave culture, which is Chesnutt's primary concern. The former slave, Uncle Julius, will teach the Northerners (and the real audience: northern readers) about slavery if they will only hear what is beneath the story of conjuring. The Northern Gentleman sets up the situation that allows Uncle Julius to mask his true voice while at the same time signifying the voices of the slaves in his "narrative gamesmanship," which is the storytelling technique of the trickster in folk tales. The reader first hears what Henry B. Wonham, in his essay "'The Curious Psychological Spectacle of a Mind Enslaved': Charles W. Chesnutt and dialect fiction,"[11] calls Uncle Julius's "narrative gamesmanship" when he tries to convince the white Northern Gentleman not to buy the vineyard. However, before the reader hears the voice of the slave, s/he gets a picture of Uncle Julius as the Northern Gentleman first sees him. He is a "venerable-looking colored man." The fact that the Northern Gentleman did not use either the word "darky" or "nigger," and used the adjective "venerable" suggests that he has some respect for Negroes and establishes the tone of the relationship between him and Uncle Julius, which is one of friendship and mutual respect. The Northern Gentleman's further description of Uncle Julius suggests an image of him as the trickster of folklore. Uncle Julius has "a

[11] Henry B. Wonham, "'The Curious Psychological Spectacle of a Mind Enslaved:' Charles W. Chesnutt and dialect fiction." The Mississippi Quarterly (1998) 55-69.

shrewdness in his eyes" that the Northern Gentleman learns from experience "was indicative of a corresponding shrewdness in his character."

Sly old Uncle Julius sets about the problem of trying to trick the stranger into not buying the vineyard. Although his story is clearly a tall tale, it says much about the culture of the slaves and the economic motives of the masters. The voice of the slave speaks, and we see the plantation through his eyes instead of those of the master. After acknowledging that he knows all about the vineyard, Uncle Julius begins using his "narrative gamesmanship" when he talks about how he and the two white Northerners are strangers to each other and suggests that "...'if I 'uz in yo' place, I wouldn't buy dis vimya'd." He then goes on to suggest that maybe they won't believe his story about the vineyard being bewitched because they might not believe in "cunj'in" but regardless of whether they believe or not, the vineyard is "goophered." In sum, Uncle Julius wants to convince them that belief in the folk superstitions of the slaves is not necessary for the bewitchment of the vineyard to be true. This bit of gamesmanship also introduces the aspect of the slave culture addressed in his story—the belief in conjuring.

The conjure story, the story inside the frame, gives the reader a look at the folk beliefs or superstitions of the slaves. How the masters took advantage of those beliefs for economic reasons is illustrated in Mars Dugal's eliciting the help of Aunt Peggy, the conjure woman, in preventing the slaves from stealing the grapes. Henry's story, in addition to providing a look at the superstitions of the slaves, gets at the heart of the motive for slavery—profit. Mars Dugal's concern is not for Henry's welfare but for the profit he makes each time he sells him. In his greed, Mars Dugal seals Henry's fate when he acts on bad advice from the Yankee, who, apparently, actually knows nothing about

growing grapes. When the vines fail to produce, the conjure curse reasserts itself "en th'owed Henry dat time fer good en all."

Early in the narrative, just before Uncle Julius begins his story, the Northern Gentleman observes, "The current of his memory—or imagination—seemed somewhat sluggish." The words "imagination" and "sluggish" signals the Northerner's attitude toward the story; he has doubts. Maybe Julius's memory is not so good, or it might be his imagination at work. When the story ends, Annie, the third voice speaks, and confirms the interpretation that they are somewhat skeptical of the veracity of the story. "'Is that story true?' asked Annie doubtfully, but seriously [...]." This expression of doubt about the veracity of the story adds to the verisimilitude of the narrative, as does the Northern Gentleman's suggestion about Uncle Julius's imagination and sluggish memory. The doubt has to be suggested because if the outside narrator, the Northern Gentleman, believes what to the reader is obviously a tall tale, then the reader is not likely to be convinced of the narrator's veracity. Thus, doubt on the part of the outside narrator helps create the verisimilitude that Uncle Julius, an unreliable narrator if there ever was one, is real and that beneath his tall tale is the truth about slavery. The story of the Yankee further adds to the verisimilitude, for the reader certainly can accept it as true since many northerners went south during the postwar period for the sole purpose of making money.

In the end, of course, Uncle Julius's purpose for trying to convince the Northern Gentleman not to buy the vineyard is revealed to the reader. If the Northern Gentleman buys the vineyard, Julius loses the "respectable revenue" he had been deriving from the grapes. I think it is safe to say that the Northern Gentleman so admired and respected

Uncle Julius, that sly old trickster, that he gave him a comfortable living for the rest of his remaining years.

Twain's short story is an example of how at least one white writer tried to give the former slaves an authentic voice through use of the open frame narrative. They had no need to hide their authorship, but, to create the authenticity at which they aimed, they had to mute their own voices in order let the ex-slaves speak. In Uncle Tom's Cabin, written during the time of slavery, Beecher had no need to mute her voice because her purpose was not to give the slaves a voice but to reveal the immorality and brutality of slavery.

A black author, such as Chesnutt, however, because of the prejudice of the publishers, which reflected the prejudice of the society, had to hide his voice, to put on the mask and hide his identity, in order to tell the story of his slave ancestors. The best technique for this was the closed frame narrative. Twain, Chesnutt, and even Stowe managed, each in his or her own way, to tell the truth about slavery.

10

SOME PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS ON STORYTELLING

Aunt Sue has a head full of stories.
Aunt Sue has a whole heart full of stories.
Summer nights on the front porch
Aunt Sue cuddles a brown-faced child to her bosom
And tells him stories.
Langston Hughes "Aunt Sue's Stories"

The shelves of the libraries and bookstores are filled with books on writing fiction by practitioners and on philosophies and theories of fiction by critics and theorists. I do not intend to set down any philosophies, theories, or general rules on how to write fiction. This is not a scholarly essay on the subject of fiction. This essay is an inquiry to help me in my quest to learn the craft of telling stories. I use the term craft because the writer of fiction—like any artisan—using the elements of plot, character, setting, and time creates the artifacts that we call stories. I do not mean to imply that fiction is all craft. Stories that are read years after being written have an aesthetic effect that makes them endure. However, the writer cannot achieve an aesthetic effect until he has learned how to put together the various elements of fiction to create a story. I also set forth my definitions of story, and of plot and character and how they work to form story.

My interest in the craft of writing fiction stems from my reading and hearing in the 1960s about how black writers could not write. Moreover, some white critics praised works by black writers who really had not mastered the craft of writing and thus were not very good writers. A lot of black critics and reviewers praised everything written by black writers on the grounds that they were "telling like it is" and therefore it had to be good because it came from the soul of an oppressed people. I wish I had examples of bad

writing praised by both black and white critics during the sixties, but unfortunately, all I have is my memory of reading many magazines and watching many television programs about black literature in America.

In the 1960s, I read Ralph Ellison's essays in Shadow and Act in which he suggested that black writers lacked a mastery of craft. He advised the young, angry black militants to learn the craft of writing. Here was a respected writer telling young black writers they could not write. I knew when I read his opinion that I would have to master the craft of writing in general and not just fiction. In the essay "Hidden Name and Complex Fate: A Writer's Experience in the United States," written in 1964, he writes, "and perhaps the writer's greatest freedom, as artist, lies precisely in his possession of technique; for it is through technique that he comes to possess and express the meaning of his life."

In "The Art of Fiction: An Interview," which was conducted in 1955, Ellison makes the point that the writer must first be concerned with his craft and not sacrifice good writing for ideological purposes. He goes on to say, "One hears a lot of complaints about the so-called 'protest novel,' especially when written by Negroes; but it seems to me that the critics could more accurately complain about their lack of craftsmanship and their provincialism." The writer must, however, avoid the trap of becoming too preoccupied with technique. Ellison's failure to produce another novel while he was alive suggests that maybe he failed to avoid the trap. When he died in 1994, he was still working on his novel Juneteenth, which was edited by John F. Callahan and published in1999.

Before formulating my definitions of story, plot, and character, I shall discuss in general terms my concept of the purpose of fiction. The critic Bernard DeVoto in The World of Fiction (now out of print) writes, "Novels are about people, not things or problems: themes, problems, social ideals, a sense of moral urgency are not of themselves fiction." Substitute the word fiction for novel, and you have my philosophy about fiction. I hold to the philosophy that readers read fiction for entertainment. They enter what one writer/critic has called the "compensatory realm" to get away for a few hours from the stress of their daily problems. Therefore, stories should aim first to entertain, to engage the reader's emotions. They may, as a secondary function, appeal to the intellect and strive for an aesthetic effect. Fiction writers may put forth their moral values, their vision (positive or negative) of the human condition, but if they fail to grab the reader's attention, their stories are likely to fail, and thus, whatever secondary point they wish to make is likely to be lost. A mastery of the craft, of the technique, of telling stories is necessary if the fiction writer wishes to grab and hold the reader's attention. To achieve an aesthetic effect, which I discuss more fully below, requires a mastery of Forester's pattern and rhythm and the use of language in a way that goes beyond merely conveying information.

Using DeVoto's definition as a starting point, I shall formulate my definition of story and discuss my ideas about character and plot and their use in constructing a story. Stories are about people in action, their defeats and their triumphs, their sorrows and their joys. Stories are people in conflict with themselves, with their community, and with each other. My definition: A story is a fictional world in which the writer, god-like, creates people and invents situations in which the conflict of human emotions is acted out.

If fiction is about people in action, then the most important elements of a story are character and plot. In the past, I followed Aristotle in favoring plot over character. I have recently come to the conclusion that both are equally important, that the one cannot do without the other. The other elements of time, setting, theme, and point of view are necessary but become a part of a story only after the foundation has been laid by character and plot. To refine my definition: a story is a written prose narrative about imaginary people acting out their emotions in an imaginary world, which may or may not resemble the real world, created by the author.

DeVoto further refines his definition when he writes, "A novel is a dynamic system. As such it has an interior logic...of its own that must be satisfied." Whether in the form of novels, short stories, plays, films, or narrative poems, stories must have the interior logic that guides them without external references. In other words, the characters and actions, setting and time must conform to what is in the story and not to some external rule. Characters do not have to behave like people in real life because they are not real. They are the figments of the writer's imagination, and thus may act any way he pleases. For example, in The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Milan Kundera creates characters based on code words. The characters, he says, were "born of a stimulating phrase or two or a basic situation." The four characters, Tomas, Tereza, Sabina, and Franz act according to the code words from which they were born, and always in accordance with the logic of the novel's polyphonic structure.

Further modification of my definition: story is a written prose narrative about people in an imagined world which may or may not resemble the real world and which must satisfy its own interior logic. Although the world the storyteller creates is

imaginary, the characters nevertheless must deal with the kinds of problems found in the real world, with social relationships, and with their own behavior. The writer, in a sense, creates people the way he thinks they should act or would act in certain situations in the real world. In his fictional world, he invents a social, philosophical, or psychological system to explain his vision of the human condition.

The world depicted in a story, if it is convincing, pleases me because I can bring my own imagination to it, settle in it, and judge the people in it without fear of contradiction. I can return to it over and over, and each time find something different in it to admire, to judge, to condemn, and yet, I know that it will always be the same despite the many feelings I might take away from it. In the real world, people answer back when you disagree with them. In the fictional world they cannot. In the fictional world I can hate a person and yet enjoy watching that person make the same mistake or engage in the same bad behavior again and again as I reread the story. I welcome my association with such an imaginary character in spite of my dislike for him or her. Although I believe fiction should entertain, I realize from my own experience that readers can get more out of fiction than entertainment.

I have said that the writer should aim at an emotional effect. Let me digress and briefly discuss the intellectual and aesthetic effect, especially the latter. The intellectual effect is self-evident. It appeals to the mind and makes the reader think about not the characters but philosophical, social, political, economic, moral, ethical, and other problems. The aesthetic effect, on the other hand, appeals to both the mind and the emotions. The effect is akin to Pound's definition of an image as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time"

The aesthetic appears only after the writer has put together his material in a pattern or structure he feels will appeal to the reader. It is likely he will not be thinking of aesthetics as he is composing the story. When the story is complete, if it is a good story well-told that begs not to be analyzed but simply enjoyed, it is aesthetically effective, or, to put it another way, it communicates an aesthetic experience. Monroe C. Beardsley in his essay, "Aesthetic Experience," in the anthology Literary Aesthetics: A Reader, describes the aesthetic experience as "one in which attention is firmly fixed upon heterogeneous but interrelated components of a phenomenally objective field—visual or auditory patterns, or the characters and events in literature." (Italics added.)

Virginia Woolf's "Kew Gardens" is a story that begs not to be analyzed but simply enjoyed for its aesthetic effect. The story takes the reader into the small world of the garden through the colorful descriptions of the flowers and the movements of the snail. Above this world is the world of human beings walking and talking. The sights and sounds and even the silence that is no silence mix "like a vast nest of Chinese boxes all wrought steel turning ceaselessly one within another the city murmured; on top of which the voices cried aloud and the petals of myriads of flowers flashed their colours into the air." Remove a flower, a character, a color, or the snail from the story and the pleasurable effect you experience in the beautiful way these elements come together disappears.

While I think writing an aesthetically pleasing story cannot be taught, the writer can, once he has fashioned his design, think about how the elements of the story come into balance and harmony, which is to say, he can think about the aesthetic effect that he can achieve through the pattern or arrangement of the story elements. A story is aesthetically pleasing when nothing can be subtracted from or added to it without the loss

of its ability to give pleasure, as I have tried to show in "Kew Garden." In such a story, the characters, plot, and setting linger in the mind long after the reader finishes reading it. The characters, often more so than the action, are especially memorable because we identify with one or more of them. Think of a story you enjoyed so much that you read it over and over, and you will find that what lingered in your mind was one or more of the characters.

Katherine Anne Porter's short story, "Noon Wine," about the mental agony a farmer suffers after he has been acquitted of killing a stranger whom he thought was about to kill his hired hand, has lingered in my mind over the years because the setting, characters, and plot come so vividly alive on the page that I see the family and the hired hand living in perfect harmony on the Texas dairy farm until a stranger brings trouble that in almost an instant upsets the harmonious relationship between the farmer and the community. Each incident leads to the next incident and none can be skipped to get on with the story. With few metaphors, the rough hewn rhythm of the prose style fits the characters and the setting, and does not get in the way of the story by calling attention to itself. The pattern is so arranged that the reader accepts the ending as inevitable.

Another example is Robert Louis Stevenson's short story "Markheim," a story of robbery and murder. The pattern and rhythm of the prose echo the ticking of the clocks, the beating of the rain, and the footsteps the murderer imagines he hears as he searches for money in the shop. After the murder, the rest of the story involves the murderer having a dialogue with his conscience. The story creeps into your mind as the tension builds, and you begin to admire the style, the beautiful way the story is constructed. The story invites you to enjoy it as an aesthetic experience. Beardsley aptly describes in his

essay the effect of the aesthetic experience when he says that it "does what whiskey does, only not by dulling sensitivity and clouding the awareness, but by marshalling the attention for a time into free and unobstructed channels of experience." "Markheim" is such a story.

Many stories, especially genre stories such as detective fiction, are well written, showing a mastery of craft, but may or may not be aesthetically effective. Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett wrote well-crafted but not what I would consider to be aesthetically effective detective stories because they do not marshal "the attention for a time into free and unobstructed channels of experience." To make his stories aesthetically effective, the writer must already have an innate feel for the artistic. He then must learn to use the patterns and rhythms of language in a way that pleases even when the reader may not upon first reading understand the story. When I first read Hemingway's short story "The Killers," I liked it before I understood what was happening because of the easy flow of sentences and paragraphs, which had a kind of hypnotic effect on me. The story is well-crafted and aesthetically effective.

I don't agree with Robert Scholes's assertion in his The Crafty Reader that good craft is better than bad art because I have never understood the term "bad art." If it is bad, how can it be art? However, I agree in part with his assertion "that writers of a crafty genre like the private-eye novel are more rewarding to read than many writers with greater pretensions to individual genius." (Italics added.) I end this digression with a statement by George Garrett in Going to Meet the Elephant that aptly sums up my idea on aesthetics in fiction: "Writing is an art as well as craft. What defines any art is that it is, first and foremost, a sensuous, affective experience."

John Gardner in The Art of Fiction divides writers into the realistic writer, the tale writer, and the yarn writer. For me, fiction writers are either storywriters or storytellers. Woolf, Ellison, and James are authors I consider storywriters. The storywriter constructs stories that are readable but cannot be spoken, that is, you cannot imagine any one of them (yes, not even Ellison) sitting down and orally telling you the story. For the most part, they are not the "cause and effect" type stories. The endings, to use E. M. Forester's term, "wind up," quietly, with a whisper. After reading a storywriter's story, you sit back, shake your head, and think "yes, that was a good story."

The stories of storytellers, the stories I favor, make you breathe a little faster, your heart race, and your nerves tingle. They are the "cause and effect," the "and then" type stories. Faulkner, Richard Wright, Zola Neale Hurston, and Katherine Anne Porter are storytellers. Storytellers are raconteurs who you imagine could regale you if they told their stories orally. The tension builds like a spring being wound tighter and tighter until it must be relieved. Then the lever is slowly turned in the opposite direction and the story winds down, relieving the tension. The way I tell I am reading a story by a storyteller is if I can imagine the writer talking to me. Take for instance Faulkner's "A Rose For Emily" in which the first person narrator is a communal "I. The story has the feel and sound of being spoken, and you can almost see Faulkner sitting with a drink in his hand telling the story about the time.... Or, consider another Faulkner story that I like, "Mule in the Yard." You can see yourself running along with the two old women, one black and one white, Old Het and Mrs. Hait, chasing that fool mule around and round the yard, and you wait to hear how they catch that mule and how Mrs. Hait outfoxes Snopes.

I consider Wright a storyteller, which he is for the most part, but when he uses fiction for something other than entertainment, his stories do not have the sound of the raconteur because ideology gets in the way. He ceases to be a storyteller and becomes a storywriter who preaches. The purpose of Native Son, his most famous novel, is to shock white America into acknowledging the plight of black Americans. I cannot imagine Wright talking about Bigger Thomas without engaging in a long sociological argument. Native Son is a sermon disguised as fiction. It winds down but ends too quietly when it should end with a loud boom. On the other hand, Wright's short stories, such as "Almost a Man," in which a teenager believes owning a gun will make him a man, are storyteller stories. The anger expressed in many of his short stories is present in "Long Black Song," the story of a black farmer who does not try to escape the lynching he knows is coming after he kills a white man who cuckolded him, but the anger is controlled and does not result in preaching. In both short stories, you can imagine Wright talking them. He is at his best as storyteller when he does not use technique for ideological purposes.

The categories of storywriters and storytellers are not inflexible. As I have tried to show with Wright, a storyteller may produce a storywriter's story and vice versa. Whether a story fits into either category may also be ambiguous. Hemingway's novel, The Old Man and the Sea, could be a storywriter's novel because he is a storywriter rather than a teller, but the Old Man's struggle with the swordfish and his losing fight with the sharks to protect his catch is a story that could be told by villagers, or even Hemingway, sitting around a table in a beach front cafe drinking, looking toward the sea, and reminiscing about the time the Old Man caught the biggest fish he had ever seen.

Let me get back on the main track with my definition of story. By story I mean a written prose narrative of imaginary people in imaginary situations invented by the writer. Story is the container for the elements of plot, character, setting, theme, time, pattern, rhythm, and point of view. It is the final form of the writer's imagination and invention, the two essential ingredients involved in creating stories.

The writer creates imaginary people in imaginary situations in imaginary settings to illustrate human motivations. Thus, character is important but needs something to do, for without action character is impotent in a fictional narrative. As Kundera notes in The Art of the Novel, "action is...seen as the self-portrait of the one who acts." Thus, action not only drives the plot but also reveals character. Action may be physical or nonphysical, as in dialogue. A good example of nonphysical action in the sense in which I mean is the action in Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants." There is little physical action in terms of plot. The real action that advances the plot and reveals the characters happens in the dialogue between the American and the girl. Action and character in good stories are almost inseparable.

Plot is the linchpin that connects the other elements, and it provides the logic for the actions of the characters. It is the guide that directs the attention of the reader. Once the writer has invented the plot, the other elements must be so arranged by what Paul Ricoeur has called the ordering process to insure that the story fulfills its own interior logic in achieving the writer's predetermined design to satisfy his and the reader's expectation and anticipation. By predetermined design, I do not mean the writer must follow Poe's advice about aiming at a single effect (though it is good advice). I mean s/he

should have in mind the structure or design s/he thinks will create suspense and inevitability in his story.

George Garrett's assertion that "The fuel of all good narrative is suspense" is especially true of fictional narrative, for, in fiction, suspense creates the expectation and anticipation that are necessary to hold the reader's attention. The Incidents, the series of situations, are the building blocks of the ordering process in developing plot. Plot development is a dynamic process that gives the reader a sense of movement toward something inevitable, of an unfolding of events that will profoundly affect the characters.

I agree with John Gardner that "plot not only changes but creates character." However, I would add that character also determines the direction the incidents of the plot will take. Without character, there is no story. It is only through character that the story provides entertainment; it is only through character that it provides suspense and surprise; and it is only through character that it provides meaning. True action occurs, in the sense of conflict, only when characters appear in the story. Whether characters are dynamic or static, they must be interesting enough to catch the reader's attention, even in plot-driven stories in which there is little or no development of character.

I have said that character and plot are of equal importance in stories. In some stories, however, one or the other may predominate. In most genre stories, such as mystery, adventure, and romance stories, the emphasis is on what happens and not so much to whom it happens. Nevertheless, in these plot driven-stories, the hero must be a character who the reader admires and can sympathize with. The villain, on the other hand, while he or she may have some good qualities, must be a character who, when she or he loses, no tears are shed over the loss.

In so-called literary fiction, the plot is likely to be subordinate to character development. In the character-driven story, the characters are dynamic and the reader expects them to change. Unlike in genre stories, characters in literary stories are more likely to resemble real people because of their responses to the situation in which they find themselves reflects the change. In other words, genre stories depend on the development of plot. Literary stories depend on the development of character. Of course, this is not a hard and fast rule. In either case, character cannot do without plot and vice versa. In the ideal story, neither plot nor character predominates.

When I entered college in the early 1960s, I had stopped reading stories by black writers about the race problem because it seemed that it was the only subject they wrote about, and I knew there was more to black culture than just surviving racism. In those years, African American literature was not taught in most colleges. Consequently, in my junior year, the professor in my American Literature class asked me to give a lecture on Negro literature. While researching the subject, I rediscovered Langston Hughes, whose poetry I had read in high school. He showed black audiences the richness of black culture and that there was more to black life than just surviving racism. His poem "My People" expresses what I saw and still see in black culture:

> The night is beautiful,
> So the faces of my people.
>
> The stars are beautiful,
> So the eyes of my people.
>
> Beautiful, also, is the sun.
> Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people.

It was from his poems rather than his fiction that I realized I wanted to write about black folks who wake up on a "Bad Morning":

> Here I sit
> With my shoes mismated.
> Lawdy-mercy!
> I's frustrated!

And about the folks who fight the daily battle of just living.

The second writer whom I discovered during my research and who influenced me was Zora Neale Hurston, an anthropologist turned fiction writer. In the introduction to her collection of folk tales in Mules and Men, she describes exactly how I see myself: "When I pitched headforemost into the world I landed in the crib of negroism." Hughes had shown me though his poetry that my subject was black folks who like me were born into "negroism," and who enjoyed life to the fullest in spite of the sea of troubles they faced living in a white world. Hurston showed me a style of writing I could use to tell their stories.

Hurston's stories show that black folks do not spend all their time thinking about how to cope with the race problem. I admire the folk characters and folk style of her stories. The first chapter of Jonah's Gourd Vine, her first published novel, opens with the sentence "God was grumbling his thunder and playing zig-zag lightning thru his fingers," which establishes the folk style of the novel. John Buddy Pearson is an uneducated mulatto preacher and womanizer who cannot resolve the conflict between the spiritual self he is on Sunday and the "natchel man" he is the rest of the week. For me, Hurston caught in her stories the sweet rhythm of black life and the cadence of black southerner speech. John Buddy Pearson sounds just like the preachers I heard my grandmother and

her friends talk about on Sunday after supper after the preacher had left our house. This folkloric style is most apparent in Hurston's best novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God, the story of Janie, a very beautiful mulatto who marries three men. What impresses me the most about both novels is the absence of the race problem. The two novels show that black folks face the same universal problems that all people face and that their stories may be told without the inclusion of the race problem as the predominant subject.

I try to begin my stories with a character doing something, even if it is only talking. I lean toward a folkloric style of telling stories and towards folk characters from the lower and middle classes of black culture, especially southern culture. The folk live not only in the rural areas of the south but also in the big cities of the north and south. Hughes, the Poet Laureate of Harlem, in his poetry and prose, wrote about black folks, many of them migrants from the south, living in Harlem. He showed me how to write about black folks before I discovered Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin. When I began studying Negro literature (black literature, Afro-American literature, African American literature, we cannot decide what we want to call it), I discovered that a good deal of it is a literature of survival (Native Son, Invisible Man, Go Tell It On the Mountain). I do not want to write about the "race problem" or about survival in the oppressive racist society of America. I must find a way to write about the sweet rhythm of life that I had known during my childhood growing up in Knoxville, Tennessee.

On Saturday night along East Vine Avenue near Central Street, the music drifted from the juke joints, which a small boy could not enter until he was eighteen, but he could stand outside patting his feet and moving his body to the rhythmic sounds of the

blues and boogie woogie. On Sunday morning along East Vine Avenue, you could walk down the street and hear the gospel music coming from the churches. If you happened to be near a store front church, you might even see the small building rocking to the stomping of feet and clapping of hands. In the summer my friends and I played ball in the parks, swam in the creeks and the Tennessee River, and played whist on the back porch of the house of the guy who had a complete deck of cards. We were, of course, aware of segregation but it did not prevent us from enjoying life as young children and teenagers should. We did not feel oppressed. In my mind linger those childhood memories or images of the sweet rhythm of life I wish to write about in my stories. And the folkloric style is the proper technique, I believe, for telling the stories of the lower and middle class black people I knew growing up.

There are, of course, no new plots, so I must find new ways of using traditional plots to depict new situations in the human condition. Least I forget that fiction is not about technique, John Gardner's statement in The Art of Fiction that "at heart all fiction treats, directly or indirectly, the same thing: our love for people and the world, our aspirations and fears. The particular characters, actions, and settings are merely instances, variations on the universal theme," reminds me that fiction is about people. We storytellers know, whether we admit it or not, that what we really do is try to pass off lies as profound truths. But we enjoy the excitement of the telling, and readers enjoy the pleasure of reading or listening, as the case may be.

11

MEMORY, IMAGINATION, AND MY STORY: A SUMMING UP

> "Like the dead-seeming, cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me.
>
> "So you will have to know something about the time and place where I came from, in order that you may interpret the incidents and directions of my life."
>
> Zora Neale Hurston, Dusk Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography.

These essays have been a monologue with myself in the search for my story, which lies in the past. It is through the sense of place, of knowing where I came from, that I will find the sense of self, which is, at bottom, the reason for searching for my story. The only way to find the sense of place is through memory and imagination, which requires an examination of the relation between memory, imagination, and my story.

"Memory," writes James Olney in his Memory & Narrative: The Weave of Life-writing, "is an adaptive function, with a self-adjusting and self-defining plasticity about it....It adapts continuously to changing circumstances, external and internal, to constitute the self as it is at any given instant."

Adaptability and plasticity make memory sometimes unreliable and elusive, leaving gaps that make a life seem incomplete. Each time memory attempts to reconstitute the self, I question the reliability of the memory facts because, whether I am aware of it or not, imagination, which is even more adaptable and plastic, intervenes and colors the facts. The accuracy of my memory, however, does not matter because imagination does what I wish it to do: it rushes in to fill the gaps in memory. It is in these imagination-filled gaps that I may find emotional material for getting at my story.

Each time I write an autobiographical story, it is in hopes that I will discover a little more "about the time and place where I came from, in order that" I may discover who I have become. As I dig into my memory for clues of who I am, I use imagination to reproduce the emotional effects that I may have felt at the time I was undergoing the experience I see in my memory.

The beginning of my story, and thus of my sense of self, lies somewhere in the memories of my great grandmother Rachel, my father Alvin, and my uncle Belly that still haunt me.

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VITA

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