



## The Bluest Eye Draft Pages 134-[199]

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He talked with her about her foot and asked when they walked through the town or in the fields if she were tired. Instead of ignoring her infirmity, pretending it was not there, he made it seem like something special and endearing. For the first time Pauline felt that her bad foot was an asset.

And he did touch her, firmly but gently, just as she had dreamed. But minus the gloom of setting suns and lonely river banks. She was secure and grateful; he was kind and lively. She had not known there was so much laughter in the world.

They agreed to marry and go way up north where Cholly said steel mills were begging for workers. Young, loving, and full of energy they came to Lorain, Ohio. Cholly found work in the steel mills right away and Pauline started keeping house.

And then she lost her front tooth. But there must have been a speck, a brown speck easily mistaken for food but which did not leave, which sat on the enamel for months and grew until it cut into the surface and then to the brown putty underneath, finally eating away to the root but avoiding the nerves so its presence was not noticeable or uncomfortable. Then the weakened roots, having grown accustomed to the poison, responded one day to severe pressure and the tooth fell free leaving a ragged stump behind. But even before the little brown speck, there must have been the conditions, the setting that would allow it to exist in the first place.

In that young and growing Ohio town whose side streets were even paved with concrete, which sat on the edge of a calm blue lake, which boasted an affinity with Oberlin the Underground Railroad station just thirteen miles away, this melting pot on the lip of America facing the cold but receptive Canada--What could go wrong?

["Me and Cholly was getting along good then. We come up North; supposed to be more jobs and all. We moved into two rooms up over a furniture store and I set about housekeeping. Cholly was working at the steel plant and everything was looking good. I don't know what all happened. Everything changed. It was hard to get to know folks up here and I missed my people. I werent<sup>✓</sup> used to so much white folks. The ones I seed before was something hateful but they didn't come around too much. I mean we didn't have too much truck with them. Just now and then in the fields or at the commissary. But they want all over us. Up north they was everywhere-next door, down stairs, all over the streets and colored folks few and far between. Northern colored folk was different too. Dicty-like. No better then whites for meanness. They could make you feel just as no-count 'cept I didnt expect it from them. That was the lonest time of my life. I member looking out them front windows just waiting for Cholly to come home at three o'clock. I didn't even have a cat to talk to." ]

In her loneliness she turned to her husband for reassurance, entertainment, for things to fill the vacant places. Housework was not enough, there were only two rooms and no yard to keep or move about in. The women in the town wore high heeled shoes and when Pauline tried to wear them they aggravated her shuffle into a pronounced limp. Cholly was kindness still, but began to resist her total dependence on him. They were beginning to have less and less to say to each other. He had no problem finding other people and other things to occupy him--men were always climbing the stairs asking for him and he was happy to accompany them, leaving her alone.

r/ Pauline felt uncomfotable with the few black women she met. They were amused by her because she did not straighten her hair. When she tried to make

up her face as they did, it came off rather badly. Their goading glances and private snickers at her way of talking (saying children), and dressing developed in her a desire for new clothes. When Cholly began to quarrel about the money she wanted, she decided to go to work. Taking jobs as a day worker helped with the clothes and even a few things for the apartment, but it did not help with Cholly. He was not pleased with her purchases and began to tell her so. ~~THEIR MARRIAGE WAS SHAKED BY QUARRELS~~ These quarrels left them both frustrated and Cholly released his frustration in drink, further alienating Pauline whose family were fundamentalist-tee-totalers. She was still no more than a girl and still waiting for that plateau of happiness, that hand of a Precious Lord who, when her way grew drear would always linger near. Only now she had a clearer idea of what drear meant. Money became the focus of all their discussions, hers for clothes, his for drink. The sad thing was that Pauline did not really care for clothes and makeup. She merely wanted other women to cast favorable glances her way.

After several months of doing day work, she took a steady job in the home of a family of slender means and nervous pretentious ways.

"Cholly commenced to getting meaner and meaner and wanted to fight me all of the time. I give him as good as I got. Had to. Look like working for that woman and fighting Cholly was all I did. Tiresome. But I holt on to my jobs even though working for that woman was more than a notion. It wasn't so much her meanness as just simpleminded. Her whole family was. Couldn't get along with one another worth nothing. You'd think with a pretty house like that and all the money they could holt on to they would enjoy one another. She haul off and cry over the leastest thing. If one of her friends cut her short on the telephone she'd go to crying. She should of been glad

she had a telephone. I aint got one yet. I recollect oncet how her baby  
 brother who she put through dentistry school didn't invite them to some big  
 party he throwed. They was a big todo about that. Everybody stayed on the  
 telephone for days. Fussing and carrying on. She asked me, Pauline what  
 would you do if your own brother had a party and didn't invite you. I said  
 ifn I really wanted to go to that party I reckoned I'd go anyhow. Never mind  
 what he want. She just sucked her teeth a little and made out like what I said  
 was dumb. All the while I was thinking how dumb she was. Whoever told her, her  
 brother was her friend? Folds caint like folks just cause they has the same  
 mama. I tried to like that woman myself. She was good about giving me stuuf  
 but I just couldn't like her. Soon as I worked up a good feeling on her  
 account she'd do something igorant and start in to telling me how to clean and  
 do. If I left her on her own she drown in dirt. I didnt have to pick up after  
 Chicken and Pie they way I had to pick up after them. None of them knew so  
 much as how to wipe their behinds. I know cause I did the washing. And  
 couldn't pee proper to save their lives. Her husband aint hit the bowl  
 yet. Nasty white folks is about the nastiest things they is. But I would have  
 stayed on cepting for Cholly come over by where I was working and cut up so.  
 He come there drunk wanting some money. When that white woman see him she  
 turned red. She tried to act strong like, but she was scared bad. Anyway  
 she told Cholly to get out or she would call the police. He cussed her and  
 started pulling on me. I would of gone upside his head but I dont want no  
 dealings with the police. So I taken my things and left. I tried to get  
 back buta she didn't want me no more if I was going to stay with Cholly. She  
 said she would let me stay if I left him. I thought about that. But later on  
 it didnt seem none too bright for a black woman to leave a black man for a

white woman. She didn't never give me the eleven dollars she owed me neither. That hurt bad. The gas man had cut the gas off and I couldn't cook none. I really begged that woman for my money. I went to see her. She was mad as a wet hen. Kept on telling me I owed her for uniforms and some old broken down bed she give me. I didn't know if I owed her or not but I needed my money. She wouldn't let up none neither, even when I give her my word that Cholly wouldn't come back there no more. Then I got so desperate I asked her if she would loan it to me. She was quiet for a spell and then she told me I shouldn't let a man take advantage over me. That I should have more respect and it was my husband's duty to pay the bills and if he couldn't I should leave and get child support. All such simple stuff. What was he gone give me child support on? I seen she didn't understand that all I needed from her was my eleven dollars to pay the gas man so I could cook. She couldn't get that one thing through her thick head. Are you going to leave him Pauline she kept on saying. I thought she'd give me my money if I said I would so I said yes mam. All right she said. You leave him and then come back to work and we'll let bygones be bygones. Can I have my money today I said. No she said. Only when you leave him. I'm only thinking of you and your children. What good is he Pauline, what good is he to you? How you going to answer a woman like that who don't know what good a man is, and say out of one side of her mouth she's thinking of your children but won't give you your own money so you can give them something besides baloney to eat? So I said, no good mam. He aint no good to me. But just the same I think I'd best stay on. She got up and I left. When I got outside I felt pains in my crotch I had held my legs together so tight trying to make that woman understand. But I reckon now she couldn't understand. She married a man with a slash in his face instead of a mouth. So

how could she understand?" ]

One winter Pauline discovered she was pregnant. When she told Cholly he surprised her by being pleased. He began to drink less and come home more often. They eased back into a relationship more like the early days of their marriage when he asked if she were tired or wanted him to bring her something from the store. In this state of ease, Pauline stopped doing day's work and returned to her own housekeeping. But the loneliness in those two rooms had not gone away. When the winter sun hit the peeling green paint of the kitchen chairs; when the smoked hocks were boiling in the pot; when all she could hear was the truck delivering furniture downstairs, she thought about back home; about how she had been all alone most of the time then too, but that this lonesomeness was different. Then she stopped staring at the green chairs, at the delivery truck; she went to the movies instead. There in the dark her memory was refreshed and she succumbed to her earlier dreams. Along with the concept of romantic love, she was introduced to another--the concept of physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, <sup>THRU OUT IN</sup> ~~were perpetuated by~~ grave insecurities, and ended in disillusion. She could not know how the development of such perceptions, <sup>IN</sup> ~~how~~ equating physical beauty with virtue, <sup>SHE STRIPPED HER MIND, BOON</sup> ~~how assigning it to~~ some and denying it to others would strip and bind her mind. What thoughts she would forever be incapable of having, what delight she would never apprehend, <sup>AND COLLECTED</sup> ~~what~~ heaps of self-contempt <sup>she must amass and carry to the grave</sup> ~~she must amass and carry to the grave~~. She would never again know <sup>lust</sup> ~~lust~~ of simple caring for. She would regard love as the <sup>COL</sup> ~~pure~~ idea of possessive mating though it stem from vengeance, fear, and boredom. She would regard <sup>and</sup> ~~romance~~ as the goal of the spirit, though it dwell on the inaccessible and hide its masochism in fraudulent sweetness; and its envy in

~~identification with the beloved.~~ It would be for her a well-spring from which she would draw the most destructive emotions, deceiving the lover and seeking to imprison the beloved, curtailing freedom in every way. ~~That its usefulness was purely economic would escape her family loyalty, sexual fidelity being not the natural consequence of caring, but means by which property was kept intact and transferred.~~

*A SHE WAS NEVER*  
~~Nor~~ was she ever able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and to assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen. There at last were the darkened woods, the lonely roads, the river banks, the gentle knowing eyes. There the flawed became whole, the blind sighted, and the lame and halt threw away their crutches. There death was dead and people traveled with their own music, made every gesture in a cloud of music. There the black and white images came together making a magnificent whole-- all projected through the ray of light from above and behind.

It was really a simple pleasure, but she learned all there was to ~~learn~~ *learn* ~~for there~~ and all there was to hate.

*for this*  
 ["The onliest time I be happy seem like was when I was in the picture show. Everytime I got I went. I'd go early before the show started. They'd cut off the lights and everything be black. Then the screen would light up and I'd move right on in them pictures. White men taking such good care of they women and they all dressed up in big clean houses with the bath tubs right

in the same room with the toilet. Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure

but it made coming home hard and looking at Cholly hard. I dont know. I

member one time I went to see Clark Gable and Jean Harlow. I fixed my <sup>h</sup>hair

up like I'd seen hers on a magazine. A part on the side with one little curl

on my forehead. It looked just like her. Well almost just like. Anyway, I

say<sup>t</sup> in that show with my hair done up that way and had a good time. I thought

I'd see it through to the end again and I got up to get me some candy. I was

sitting back in my seat and I taken a big bite of that candy and it pulled

a tooth right out of my mouth. I could of cried. I had good teeth, not a

rotten one in my head. I dont believe I ever did get over that. There I was

five months pregnant trying to look like Jean Harlow and a front tooth gone.

Everything went then. Look like I just didn't care no more after that. I,

let my hair go back, plat<sup>ed</sup> it up and settled down to just being ugly. I still

went to the pictures though, but the meanness got worse. I wanted my tooth

back. Cholly poked fun at me and we started fighting again. I tried to

kill him. He didnt hit me too hard, cause I were pregnant I guess, but the

fights, once<sup>2</sup> they got started up again kept up. He begin to make me madder

then anything I knowed and I couldn<sup>2</sup>t keep my hands off him. Well I had that

baby<sup>2</sup>-a boy--and after that got pregnant again with another one. But it werent<sup>2</sup> like I thought it was gone be. I loved them and all I guess but

maybe it was having no money or maybe it was Cholly but they sure worried the

life out of me. Sometimes I'd catch myself hollering at them and beating them

and I'd feel sorry for them but I couldn't seem to stop. When I had the

second one, a girl, I member I said I'd love it no matter what it looked like.

She looked like a black ball of hair. I dont recollect trying to get pregnant

that first time. But that second time I actually tried to get pregnant. Maybe

cause I'd had one already and wasn'ta scairt to do it. Anyway I felt good and

wasn't thinking on the carrying, just the baby itself. I used to talk to it

whilest it be still in the womb. Like good friends we was. You know. I be

hanging wash and I knowed lifting weren't good for it. I'd say to it holt on now

I gone hang up these few rags, dont get froggy, it be over soon. It wouldnt

lep or nothing. Or I be mixing something in a bowl for the other child and

I'd talk to it then too. You know, just friendly talk. On up till the end I

felt good about that baby. I went to the hospital when my time come. So I

could be easeful, I didnt want to have it at home like I done with the boy.

They put me in a big room with a whole mess of women. The pains was coming

but not too bad. A little old doctor came to examine me. He had all sorts of

stuff. He gloved his hand and put some kind of jelly on it and rammed it up

between my legs. When he left off, some more doctors come. One old one and

some young ones. The old one was learning' the young ones about babies. Showing

them how to do. When he got to me he said, "Now these here women you dont have

any trouble with. They deliver right away and with no pain.. Just like horses."

The young ones smiled a little. They looked at my stomach and between my legs.

They never said nothing to me. Only one looked at me. Looked at my face,

I mean. I looked right back at him. He dropped his eyes and turned red. He

knowed I reckon that maybe I <sup>weren't</sup> ~~want~~ no horse foaling. But them others. They

didn't know. They went on. I seed them talking to them white women: How

you feel? Gonna have twins? Just shucking them of course, but nice talk.

Nice friendly talk. I got edgy and when them pains got harder I was glad.

Glad to have something else to think about. I moaned something awful. The pains weren't as bad as I let on, but I had to let them people know having a

baby was more than a bowel movement. I hurt just like them white women. Just

cause I wasn't hooping and hollering before did not mean I wasn't feeling pain.

What'd they think? That just cause I knowed how to have a baby with no fuss

that my behind wasn't pulling and aching like theirs? Besides, that doctor don't

know what he talking about. He must never seed no mare foal. Who say they

dont have no pain. Just cause she dont cry? Cause she can't say it they think it aint there? If they looks in her eyes and see them eyeballs lolling back, see the sorrowful look, they'd know. Anyways the baby come. Big old healthy thing. She looked different from what I thought. Reckon I talked to it so much before I conjured up a mind's eye view of it. So when I seed it, it was like looking at a picture of your mama when she was a girl. You knows who she is but she dont look the same. They give her to me for a nursing and she liked to pull my nipple off right away. She caught on fast. Not like Sammy, he was the hardest child to feed. But Pecola look like she knowed right off what to do. A right smart baby she was. I used to like to watch her. You know they makes them greedy sounds. Eyes all soft and wet. A cross between a puppy and a dying man. But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly."]

When Sammy and Pecola were still young Pauline had to go back to

She was older now with no time for dreams and movies. It was time to put all of the pieces together, make coherence where before there had been none. The children gave her this need, she herself was no longer a child. So she became, and her process of becoming was like most of ours: she developed hatred for things that mystified or obstructed her; acquired virtues that were easy to maintain; assigned herself a role in the scheme of things; and harked back to simpler times for gratification.

She took on the full responsibility and recognition of bread winner and returned to church. First, however, she moved out of the two rooms into a spacious first floor of a building that had been built as a store. She came into her own with the women who had despised her by being more moral than they; she avenged herself on Cholly by forcing him to indulge in the weaknesses she despised. She joined a church where shouting was frowned upon, served on Stewardess Board No. 3 and became a member of Ladies Circle No. 1. At prayer meeting she moaned and sighed over Cholly's ways, and hoped God would help her keep the children from the sins of the father. She stopped saying children and said childring instead. She let another tooth fall and was outraged by painted ladies who thought only of clothes and men. Holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she bore him like a crown of thorns and her children like a cross.

It was her good fortune to find a permanent job in the home of a well-to-do family whose members were affectionate, appreciative, and generous. She looked at their house, smelled their linen, touched their silk draperies and loved all of it. The child's pink nightie, the stacks of white pillow slips edged with embroidery, the sheets with top hems picked out with blue cornflowers. She became what is known as an ideal servant, for such a role filled practically

all of her needs. When she bathed the little Fisher girl, it was in a porcelain tub with silvery taps running infinite quantities of hot, clear water. She dried her in fluffy white towels and put her in cuddly night clothes. Then she brushed the yellow hair enjoying the roll and slip of it between her fingers. No zinc tub, no buckets of stove heated water, no flaky, stiff, greyish towels washed in a kitchen sink dried in a dusty backyard, no tangled black puffs of rough wool to comb. Soon she stopped trying to keep her own house. The things she could afford to buy did not last, had no beauty, or style and were absorbed by the dingy storefront. More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man--they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the early morning and late evening edges of her day, the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely. Here she could arrange things, clean things, line things up in neat rows. Here her foot flopped around on deep pile carpets and there was no uneven sound. Here she found beauth<sup>y</sup>, order, cleanliness and praise. Mr. Fisher said, "I would rather sell her blueberry cobbler than real estate." She reigned over cupboards stacked high with food that would not be eaten for weeks, even months; she was queen of canned vegetables bought by the case, special fondants and ribbon candy curled up in tiny silver dishes. The creditors and service people who humiliated her when she went to them on her own behalf respected her, were even intimidated by her, when she spoke for the Fishers. She refused beef slightly dark or with edges not properly trimmed. The slightly reeking fish that she accepted for her own family she would all but throw in the fish man's face if he sent it to the Fisher house. Power, praise and luxury were hers in this household. They even gave her what she had never had -- a nickname--Polly. It was her pleasure to stand in her kitchen at the end of a day and survey her handiwork. Knowing there were soap bars by the dozen, bacon by the rasher,

and reveling in her shiny pots and pans and polished floors. Hearing "We'll never let her go. We could never find anybody like Polly. She will not leave the kitchen, until everything is in order. Really she is the ideal servant."

Pauline kept this order, this beauty for herself, a private world, and never introduced it into her storefront, or to her children. Then she bent toward respectability and in so doing taught them fear: fear of being clumsy, fear of being like their father, fear of not being loved by God, fear of madness like Cholly's mother. Into her son she beat a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life.

All the meaningfulness of her life was in her work. ~~She never questioned this transfer of affections and would have denied its existence if accused of it.~~ For her virtues were intact. She was an active churchwoman, did not drink, smoke or carouse, defended herself mightily against Cholly, rose above him in every way, and felt she was fulfilling a mother's role conscientiously when she pointed out their father's fault to keep them from having them, or punished them when they showed any slovenliness no matter how slight, when she worked twelve to sixteen hours a day to support them. And the world itself agreed with her.

It was only sometimes, sometimes, and then rarely, that she thought about the old days or what her life had turned to. They were musings, idle thoughts, full sometimes of the old dreaminess but not the kind of thing she cared to dwell on.

["I started to leave him once, but something came up. Once, after he tried to set the house on fire I was all set in my mind to go. I can't even member now what held me. He sure aint give me much of a life. But it wasn't a

bad. Sometimes things wasnt all bad. He used to come easing into bed

sometimes, not too drunk. I made out like I'm sleep cause its late and he

taken three dollars out of my pocketbook that morning or something. I hear

him breathing but I don't look around. I can see in my mind's eye his black arms

thrown back behind his head, the muscles like great big peach stones sanded

down with veins running like little swollen rivers down his arms. Without

touching him I be feeling those ridges on the tips of my fingers. I sees the

palms of his hands calloused to granite and the long fingers curled up and

still. I think about the thick, knotty hair on his chest and the two big

swells his breast muscles make. I want to rub my face hard in his chest and

feel the hair cut my skin. I know just where the hair growth slacks out--

just above his navel and how it picks up again and spreads out. Maybe he'll

shift a little and his leg will touch me or I feel his flank just graze my

behind. I don't move even yet. Then he lift his head, turn over and put his

hand on my waist. If I don't move he'll move his hand over to pull and knead

my stomach. Soft and slow like. I still don't move because I don't want him to

stop. I want to pretend sleep and have him keep on rubbing my stomach. Then

e/ he will lean his head down and bit my tit. Then I don't want him to rub my

stomach anymore. I want him to put his hand between my legs. I pretend to

wake up and turn to him but not opening my legs. I want him to open them for

me. He does and I be soft and wet where his fingers are strong and hard. I

be softer than I ever been before. All my strength in his hand. My brain

curls up like wilted leaves. A funny empty feeling is in my hands. I want

to grab holt of something so I hold his head. His mouth is under my chin.

Then I don't want his hand between my legs no more because I think I am

softening away. I stretch my legs open and he is on top of me. Too heavy to

hold and too light not to. He puts his thing in me. In me. In me. I wrap my

feet around his back so he can't get away. His face is next to mine. The bed

d/ springs sounds like them crickets used to back home. He puts his fingers in

mine and we stretches our arms out wise like Jesus on the cross. I hold on

tight. My fingers and my feet hold on tight because everything else is going

going. I know he wants me to come first. But I can't. Not until he does.

Not until I feel him loving me. Just me. Sinking into me. Not until I know

f thata my flesh is all that be on his mind. That he couldn't stop if he had to.

That he would die rather than take his thing out of me. Of me. Not until he has

let go of all he has and give it to me. To me. To me. When he does I feel a

power. I be strong, I be pretty, I be young. And then I wait. He shivers

and tosses his head. Now I be strong enough, pretty enough and young enough

to let him make me come. I take my fingers out of his and put my hands on

his behind. My legs drop back onto the bed. I dont make no noise because

the children might hear. I begin to feel those little bits of color floating

up into me--deep in me. That streak of green from the June bug light, the

purple from the berries trickling along my thighs, mam's lemonade yellow

runs sweet in me. Then I feel like I'm laughing between my legs and the

laughing gets all mixed up with the colors and I'm afraid I'll come and afraid

I wont. But I know I will. And I do. And it be rainbow all inside. And it

lasts and lasts and lasts. I want to thank him but dont know how so I pat

him like you do a baby. He asks me if I all right. I say yes. He gets

off me and lies down to sleep. I want to say something but I dont. I dont want

to take my mind ofen the rainbow. I should get up and go to the bathroom,

but I dont. Besides, Cholly is asleep with his leg throwed over me. I cant

move and dont want to.

"But it aint like that anymore. Most times he's thrashing away inside

me before I'm woke and through when I am. The rest of the time I cant even

be next to his stinking drunk self. But I dont care bout it no more. My Maker

will take care of me. I know He will. I know He will. Besides it dont make

no difference about this old earth. There is sure to be a Glory. Only thing

I miss sometimes is that rainbow. But like I say, I don't recollect it much

anymore.]

SEE FATHER HE IS BIG AND STRONG FATHER WILL YOU PLAY WITH JANE FATHER  
IS SMILING SMILE FATHER SMILE.

When Cholly was four days old his mother wrapped him in two blankets and one newspaper and placed him on a junk heap by the railroad. His Great  
tr/ Aunt Jimmy, who had seen her niece carrying a bundle out of the back door, rescued him. She beat his mother with a razor strap and wouldn't let her near the baby after that. Aunt Jimmy raised Cholly herself but took delight sometimes in telling him of how she had saved him. He gathered from her that his mother wasn't right in the head. But he never had a chance to find out because she ran away shortly after the razor strap and no one had heard of her since.

Cholly was grateful for having been saved. Except sometimes. Sometimes when he watched Aunt Jimmy eating collards with her fingers, sucking her four gold teeth, or smelled her when she wore the ~~asphodite~~ <sup>asphodite</sup> bag around her neck, or when she made him sleep with her for warmth in winter and he could see her old, wrinkled breasts sagging in her nightgown--then he wondered whether it would have been just as well to have died there. Down in the rim of a tire under a soft black Georgia sky.

He had four years of school before he got courage enough to ask his aunt who and where his father was.

"That Fuller boy, I believe it was," his aunt said. "He was hanging around then, but he taken off pretty quick before you was born. I think he gone to Macon. Him or his brother. Maybe both. I hear old man Fuller say something bout it once."

"What name he have?" asked Cholly.

"Fuller, Foolish."

"I mean what his given name?"

"Oh." She closed her eyes to think and sighed, "Can't recollect nothing no more. Sam, was it? Yeh. Samuel. No. No it wasn't. It was Samson. Samson Fuller."

"How come you all didn't name me Samson?" Cholly's voice was low.

2/ "What for? He wasn't no where around when you was born. You mama didn't name you nothing. The nine days wasn't up before she throwed you on the junk heap. When I got you I named you myself on the ninth day. You named after my dead brother. Charles Breedlove. A good man. Ain't no Samson never come to no good end."

Cholly didn't ask anything else.

1/ m/ the/ Two years later he quit school to take a job at Tyson's Feed and Grain Store. He swept up, ran errands, weighed bags and lifted them onto the drays. Sometimes they let him ride with the drayman. A nice old man called Blue Jack. Blue used to tell him old-timey stories about how it was when Emancipation Proclamation came. How the black people hollered, cried, and sang. And ghost stories about how a white man cut off his wife's head and buried her in the swamp and the headless body came out at night and went stumbling around the yard knocking over stuff because it couldn't see and crying all the time for a comb. They talked about the women Blue had had, and the fights he'd been in when he was younger, about how he talked his way out of getting lynched once, and how otherd hadn't.

Cholly loved Blue. Long after he was a man, he remembered the good times they had had. How on a July 4 at a church picnic a family was about

A to break open a watermelon. Several children were standing around watching. Blue~~d~~ was hovering about on the periphery of the circle--a faint smile of anticipation softening his face. The father of the family lifted the melon high over his head--his big arms looked taller than the trees to Cholly, and the melon blotted out the sun. Tall, head forward, eyes fastened on a rock, his arms higher than the pines, his hands holding a melon bigger than the sun, he paused an instant to get his bearing and secure his aim. Watching the figure etched against the bright blue sky, Cholly felt goose pimples popping along his arms and neck. He wondered if God looked like that. No. God was a nice old white man, with long white hair, flowing white beard, and little blue eyes that looked sad when people died and mean when they were bad. It must be the devil who looks like that--holding the world in his hands ready to dash it to the ground and spill the red guts so niggers could eat the sweet, warm insides. If the devil did look like that, Cholly preferred him. He never felt anything thinking about God, but just the idea of the devil excited him. And now the strong, black devil was blotting out the sun and getting ready to split open the world.

Far away somebody was playing a mouth organ. the music slithered over the cane fields and into the pine grove; it spiraled around the tree trunks and mixed itself with the pine scent so Cholly couldn't tell the difference between the sound and the odor that hung about the heads of the people.

The man swung the melon down to the edge of a rock. A soft cry of disappointment accompanied the sound of smashed rind. The break was a bad one. The melon was jagged and hunks of rind and red meat scattered on the grass.

Blue jumped. "Aw--awww," he moaned, "there go the heart." His voice was both sad and pleased. Everybody looked to see the big red chunk from

the very center of the melon, free of rind and sparse of seed/<sup>which had</sup> rolled a little distance from Blue's feet. He stooped to pick it up. Blood red; its planes dull and blunted with sweetness; its edges rigid with juice. Too obvious, almost obscene, in the joy it promised.

"Go 'head, Blue," the father laughed. "You can have it."

Blue smiled and walked away. Little children scrambled for the pieces on the ground. Women picked out the seeds for the smallest ones and broke off little bits of the meat for themselves. Blue's eye caught Cholly's. He motioned to him. "Come on, boy. <sup>Let's</sup> you and me eat the heart."

Together the old man and the boy sat on the grass and shared the heart of the watermelon. The nasty-sweet guts of the earth.

It was in the spring, a very chilly spring, that Aunt Jimmy died of peach cobbler. She went to a camp meeting that took place after a rainstorm, and the damp wood of the benches was bad for her. For four or five days afterwards, she felt poorly. Friends came to see about her. Some made camomile tea; others rubbed her with liniment. Miss Alice, her closest friend, read the Bible to her. Still she was declining. Advice was prolific, if contradictory.

"Don't eat no whites of eggs."

"Drink new mild."

"Chew on this root."

Aunt Jimmy ignored all but Miss Alice's Bible reading. She nodded in drowsy appreciation as the words from First Corinthians droned over her. Sweet amens fell from her lips as she was chastised for all her sins. But her body would not respond.

Finally it was decided to fetch M'Dear. M'Dear was a quiet woman  
 e/ who lived in a shack near the woods. She was a competent midwife and  
 decisive diagnostician. Few could remember when M'Dear was not around.  
 In any illness that could not be handled by ordinary means, known cures,  
 intuition, or endurance, the word was always "Fetch M'Dear."

When she arrived at Aunt Jimmy's house, Cholly was amazed at the  
 sight of her. He had always pictured her as shriveled and hunched over, for  
 he knew she was verxy very old. But M'Dear loomed taller than the preacher  
 who accompanied her. She must have been over six feet tall. Four big white  
 knots of hair gave power and authority to her soft black face. Standing  
 straight as a poker, she seemed to need her hickory stick not for support  
 but for communication. She tapped it lightly on the floor as she looked  
 down at Aunt Jimmy's wrinkled face. She stroked the knob with the thumb  
 of her right hand while she ran her left one over Aunt Jimmy's body. The  
 backs of her long fingers she placed on the patient's cheek, then placed  
 her palm on the forehead. She ran her fingers through the sick woman's hair,  
 lightly scratching the scalp, and then looking at what the fingernails re-  
 vealed. She lifted Aunt Jimmy's hand and looked closely at it--fingernails,  
 back skin, the flesh of the palm she pressed with three fingertips. Later  
 she put her ear on Aunt Jimmy's chest and stomach to listen. At M'Dear's  
 request the women pulled the slop jar from under the bed to show the  
 stools. M'Dear tapped her stick while looking at them.

"Bury the slop har and everything in it," she said to the women. To  
 Aunt Jimmy she said, "You done caught cold in your womb. Drink pot liquor  
 and nothing else."

"Will it pass?" asked Aunt Jimmy. "Is I'm gone be all right?"

"I reckon."

M'Dear turned and left the room. The preacher put her in his buggy to take her home.

That evening the women brought bowls of pot liquor from black eyed peas, from mustards, from cabbage, from kale, from collards, from turnips, A from beets, from green beans. Even the juice from a boiling hog jowl.

Two evenings later, Aunt Jimmy had gained much strength. When Miss Alice and Mrs. Gaines stopped in to check on her they remarked on her improvement. The three women sat talking about various miseries they had had, their cure or abatement, what had helped. Over and over again they returned to Aunt Jimmy's conditions. Repeating its cause, what could a/ have been done to prevent the misery from taking hold, and M'Dear's infallibility. Their voices blended into a threnody of nostalgia about pain. Rising and falling, complex in harmony, uncertain in pitch, but constant we/? in the recitation of pain. They hugged the memories of illnesses to their bosoms. They licked their lips and clucked their tongues in fond remembrance of pains they had endured; childbirth, rheumatism, croup, sprains, backaches, piles. All of the bruises they had collected from moving about the earth-- harvesting, cleaning, hoisting, pitching, stooping, kneeling, picking--always with young ones underfoot.

But they had been young once. The odor of their armpits and haunches had mingled into a lovely musk; their eyes had been furtive, their lips relaxed, and the delicate turn of their heads on those slim black necks had been like nothing other than a doe's. Their laughter had been more touch than sound.

Then they had grown. Edging into life from the back door. Becoming. Everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders. White women said "Do this." White children said "Give me that." White men said "Come

here." Black men said "Lay down." The only people they need not take orders from were black children and each other. But they took all of that and recreated it in their own image. They ran the houses of white people, and knew it. <sup>When</sup> ~~They~~ white men beat their men ~~the blood of the victim~~ <sup>they clean up</sup> ~~the blood of the victim~~ <sup>and</sup> home to receive abuse from the victim. They beat their children with one hand and stole for them with the other. The hands that felled trees also cut umbilical cords; the hands that wrung the necks of chickens and butchered hogs also nudged African violets into bloom; the arms that loaded sheaves, bales, and sacks rocked babies into sleep. They patted biscuits into flakey ovals of innocence--and shrouded the dead. They plowed all day and came home to nestle like plums under the limbs of their men. The legs that straddled a mule's back were the same ones that straddled their men's hips. And the difference was all the difference there was.

They were old. Their bodies honed, their odor sour. Squatting in a cane field, stooping in a cotton field, kneeling by a river bank they had carried a world on their heads. They had given over the lives of their own children and tendered their grandchildren. With relief they wrapped their heads in rags, and their breasts in flannel; eased their feet into felt. They were through with lust and lactation, beyond tears and terror. They alone could walk the roads of Mississippi, the lanes of Georgia, the fields of Alabama unmolested. They were old enough to be irritable when and where they chose, tired enough to look forward to death, disinterested enough to accept the idea of pain while ignoring the presence of pain. They were, in fact and at last, free. And the lives of these old black women were synthesized in their eyes--a purée of tragedy and humor, wickedness and serenity, truth and fantasy.

a/ They chattered for into the night. Cholly listened and grew sleepy. The lullaby of grief enveloped him, rocked him, and at last numbed him. In his sleep the foul odor of an old woman's stools turned into the healthy smell of horse shit, and the voices of the three women was muted into the pleasant notes of a mouth organ. He was aware, in his sleep, of being curled up in a chair, his hands tucked between his thighs. In a dream his penis changed into a long hickory stick and the hand caressing it were the hands of M'Dear.

3/ On a wet Saturday night, before Aunt Jimmy felt strong enough to get out of the bed, Essie Foster brought her a peach cobbler. The old lady ate a piece and, the next morning when Cholly went to empty the slop jar, she was dead. Her mouth was a slackened O and her hands, those long fingers with a man's hard nails, having done their laying by, could now be dainty on the sheet. One open eye looked at him as if to say "Mind how you take holt of that jar boy." Cholly stared back unable to move until a fly settled at the corner of her mouth. He fanned it away angrily. Looked back at the eye and did its bidding.

Aunt Jimmy's funeral was the first Cholly had ever attended. As a member of the family, one of the bereaved, he was the object of a great deal of attention. The ladies had cleaned the house, aired everything out, notified everybody, and stitched together what looked like a white wedding dress for Aunt Jimmy, a maiden lady, to wear when she met Jesus. They even produced a dark suit, white shirt, and tie for Cholly. The husband of one of them cut his hair. He was enclosed in fastidious tenderness. Nobody talked to him, that is, they treated him like the child he was, never engaging him in serious conversation, but they anticipated wishes he never had: meals appeared, hot water for the wooden tub, clothes

laid out. At the wake he was allowed to fall asleep and arms carried him to bed. Only on the third day after the death--the day of the funeral--did he have to share the spotlight. Aunt Jimmy's people came from nearby towns and farms. Her brother O.V. and his children and wife, and lots of cousins. But Cholly was still the major figure because he was "Jimmy's boy, the last thing she loved" and "the one who found her." The solicitude of the women, the head pats of the men pleased Cholly and the creamy conversations fascinated him.

"What'd she die from?"

"Essie's pie."

"Don't say?"

"Uh huh. She was doing fine, I saw her the very day before. Said she wanted me to bring her some black thread to patch some things for the boy. I should of know just from her wanting black thread that was a sign."

"Sure was."

"Just like Emma. Member? She kept asking for thread. Dropped dead that very evening."

"Yeh. Well she was determined to have it. Kept on reminding me. I told her I had some to home, but naw, she wanted it new. So I sent Li'l June to get some that very morning when she was laying dead. I was just fixing to bring it over long with a piece of sweet bread. You know how she craved my sweet bread."

"Sure did. Always bragged on it. She was a good friend to you."

"I believe it. Well I had no more got my clothes on when Sally bust in the door hollering about how Cholly here had been over to Miss Alice saying she was dead. You could have knocked me over I tell you."

"Guess Essie feels might bad."

"O Lord yes. But I told her the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Wasn't her fault none. Shem makes good peach pies. But she bound to believe it was the pie did it and I 'spect she right."

"Well she shouldn't worry herself none 'bout that. She was just doing what we all would of done."

"Yeh. Cause I was sure wrapping up that sweet bread and that could of done it too."

"I doubts that. Sweet bread is pure. But a pie is the worse thing to give anybody ailing. I'm surprised Jimmy didn't know better."

"If she did she wouldn't let on. She would have tried to please. You know how she was. So good."

"I'll say. Did she leave anything?"

"Not even a pocket handkerchief. The house belongs to some white folks in Clarksville."

"O yeah? I thought she owned it."

"May have at one time. But not no more. I hear the insurance folks been down talking to her brother."

"How much do it come to?"

"Eighty five dollars, I hear."

"That all?"

"Can she get in the ground on that?"

"Dont see how. When my daddy died, last year this April it costed one hundred and fifty dollars. Course we had to have everything just so. Now Jimmy's people may all have to chip in. That undertaker that lays out black folks ain't none too cheap."

"Seems a shame. She been paying on that insurance all her life."

"Don't I know?"

"Well what about the boy? What he gone do?"

J "Well caint nobody find that mama, so Jimmy's brother gone take him back to his place. They say he got a nice place. Inside toilet and everything."

"That's nice. He seems like a good Christian man. And the boy need a man's hand."

"What time's the funeral?"

"Two cbbck. She ought to be in the ground by four."

"Where's the banquet? I heard Essie wanted it at her house."

S/fr "Naw it at Jimmy's. Her boghter wanted it so."

"Well it will be a big one. Everybody liked old Jimmy. Sure will miss her in the pew."

The funeral banquet was a peal of joy after the thunderous beauty of the funeral. It was like a street tragedy with spontaneity tucked softly into the corners of a highly formal structure. The deceased was the tragic hero, the survivors the innocent victims, there was the omnipresence of the deity, strophe and antistrophe of the chorus of mourners led by the preacher. There was grief over the waste of life, the stunned wonder at the ways of God, and the restoration of order in Nature ~~xxxxxx~~ at the graveyard.

J Thus the banquet was the exultation, the harmony, the acceptance of physical frailty, joy in the termination of misery. Laughter, relief, a steep hunger for food. ~~With all of those emotions attending, the display and consumption of food was the only natural and logical activity to follow.~~

Cholly had not yet fully realized his aunt was dead. Everything was so interesting. Even at the graveyard he felt nothing but curiosity and when his turn had come to view the body at the church, he had put his hand out to touch the corpse to see if it were really ice cold like everybody said. But he drew his hand back quickly. Aunt Jimmy looked so

private and it seemed wrong somehow to disturb that privacy. He had trudged back to his ~~pep~~ dry-eyed amid tearful shrieks and shouts of others, wondering if he should try to cry.

B/ Back in his house he was free to join in the gaiety and enjoy what he really felt--a kind of carnival spirit. He ate greedily and felt good enough to try and get to know his cousins. There was some question, according to the adults, as to whether they were his real cousins or not since Jimmy's brother O.V. was only a half brother, and Cholly's mother had been the daughter of Jimmy's sister, but that sister was from the second marriage of Jimmy's father, and O.V. was from the first marriage.

One of these cousins interested Cholly in particular. He was about fifteen or sixteen years old. Cholly went outside and found the boy standing with some others near the tub where Aunt Jimmy used to boil her clothes.

S/ He ventured a tentative "Hey." They responded with another. The fifteen year old ~~xxx~~ named Jake offered Cholly a rolled-up cigarette. Cholly took it, but when he held the cigarette at arm's length and stuck the tip of it into the match flame, instead of putting it in his mouth and drawing on it, they laughed at him. Shamefaced, he threw the cigarette down. He felt it important to do something to re-instate himself with Jake. So when he asked Cholly if he knew any girls, Cholly said "Sure."

All ~~for~~ the girls Cholly knew were at the banquet and he pointed to a cluster of them standing, hanging, draping on the back porch. Darlene too. Cholly hoped Jake wouldn't pick her.

"Let's get some and walk around," said Jake.

The two boys sauntered over to the porch. Cholly didn't know how to begin. Jake wrapped his legs around the rickety porch rail and just sat

there staring off into space as though he had no interest in them at all. He was letting them look him over and guardedly evaluating them in return.

A The girls pretended they didn't see the boys and kept on chattering. Soon their talk got sharp; the gentle teasing they had been engaged in with each other changed to bitchiness, a serious kind of making-fun. That was Jake's clue; the girls were reacting to him. They had gotten a whiff of his manhood and were shivering for a place in his attention.

Jake left the porch rail, and walked right up to a girl named Suky, the one who had been most bitter in her making-fun.

"Want to show me round?" He didn't even smile.

af Cholly held his breath, waiting for Suky to shut Jake up. She was good at that, and well known for her sharp tongue. To his enormous surprise she readily agreed, and even lowered her lashes. Taking courage, Cholly turned to Darlene and said "Come on long. We just going down to the gully." He waited for her to screw up her face and say no or what for or some such thing. His feelings about her were mostly fear<sub>m</sub>—fear that she would not like him and fear that she would.

His second fear materialized. She smiled and jumped down the three leaning steps to join him. Her eyes were full of compassion, and Cholly remembered that he was the bereaved.

"If you want to," she said, "but not too far. Mama said we got to leave early and its getting dark."

The four of them moved away. Some of the other boys had come to the porch and were about to begin that partly hostile, partly indifferent, partly desperate mating dance. Suky, Jake, Darlene, and Cholly walked

through several back yards until they came to an open field. They ran across it and came to a dry/bed <sup>river</sup> lined with green. The object of the walk was a wild vineyard where the muscadine grew. Too new, too tight to have much sugar, they were eaten anyway. None of them wanted--not then-- the grape's easy relinquishing of all its dark juice. The restraint, the holding off, the promise of sweetness that had yet to unfold excited them more than full ripeness would have done. At last their teeth were on edge and the boys diverted themselves by pelting the girls with the graps. Their slim black boy wrists made G clefs in the air as they executed the tosses. The chase took Cholly and Darlene away from the lip of the gulley and when they paused for breath, Jake and Suky were nowhere in sight. Darlene's white cotton dress was stained with juice. Her big blue hair bow had come undone, and the sundown breeze was picking it up and fluttering it about her head. They were out of breath and sank down in the green and purple grass on the edge of the pine woods.

Cholly lay on his back panting. His mouth full of the taste of muscadine, listening to the pine needles rustling loudly in their anticipation of rain. The smell of promised rain, pine, and muscadine made him giddy. ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ The sun had gone and <sup>ed</sup> ~~was~~ pulling <sup>ed</sup> its shreds of light behind it. Turning his head to see if the moon were up, Cholly caught sight of Darlene <sup>in a crouching</sup> behind him. She was huddled into a D--arms encircling drawn-up knees on which she rested her head. Cholly could see her bloomers and the muscles of her young thighs.

"We bed' get on back," he said.

"Yeh." She stretched her legs flat on the ground and began to re-tie her hair ribbon. "Mama gone whup me."

"Naw she aint'."

"Uh huh. She told me she would if I get dirty."

"You ain't dirty."

"I am too. Looka that." She dropped her hands from the ribbon and smoothed out a place on her dress where the grape stains were heaviest.

Cholly felt sorry for her; it was just as much his fault. Suddenly her realized that Aunt Jimmy was dead, for he missed the fear of being whipped. There was nobody to do it except Uncle O.V. and he was the bereaved too.

"Let me," he said. He rose to his knees facing her and tried to tie her ribbon. Darlene put her hands under his open shirt and rubbed the damp tight skin. When he looked at her in surprise, she stopped and laughed. He smiled and continued knotting the bow. She put her hands back under his shirt.

"Hold still," he said, "how I gone get this?"

She tickled his ribs with her fingertips. He giggled and grabbed his ribcage. They were on top of each in a moment. She corkscrewing her hands into his clothes. He returning the play, digging into the neck of her dress and then under her dress. When he got his hand in her bloomers, she suddenly stopped laughing and looked serious. Cholly, frightened,

was about to take his hand away, but she held his wrist so he couldn't move it. He examined her then with his fingers, and she kissed his face

and mouth. Cholly found her muscadine-lipped mouth distracting. Darlene released his head, shifted her body, and pulled down her pants. After some trouble with the bottoms, Cholly dropped his pants down to his knees. Their bodies began to make sense to him, and it was not as difficult as he had thought it would be. She moaned a little, but

the excitement collecting inside him made him close his eyes and regard her moans as no more than pine sighs over his head. Just as he felt an explosion threaten, Darlene froze and cried out. He thought he had hurt her, but when he looked at her face, she was staring wildly at something over his shoulder. He jerked around.

There stood two white men. One with a spirit lamp, the other with a flashlight. There was no mistake about their being white; he could smell it. Cholly jumped, trying to kneel, stand, and get his pants up all in one motion. The men had long guns.

"Hee hee hee heeeee." The snicker was a long asthmatic cough.

The other raced the flashlight all over Cholly and Darlene.

"Get on wid it nigger," said the flashlight one.

"Sir?" said Cholly, trying to find a buttonhole.

"I said, get on wid it. An make it good, nigger, make it good."

There was no place for Cholly's eyes to go. They slid about furtively searching for shelter, while his body remained paralyzed. The flashlight man lifted his gun down from his shoulder and Cholly heard the cllop of metal. He dropped back to his knees. Darlene had her head averted, her eyes staring out of the lamplight into the surrounding darkness, looked almost unconcerned as though they had no part in the drama taking place around them. With a violence born of total helplessness, he pulled her dress up, lowered his trousers and underwear.

"Hee hee hee hee heeeee."

Darlene put her hands over her face as Cholly began to simulate what had gone on before. He could do no more than make-believe. The flashlight made a moon on his behind.

"Hee hee hee hee heeee."

"Come on, coon. Faster. You aint doing nothing for her."

"Hee hee hee hee heeee."

Cholly, moving faster, looked at Darlene. He hated her. He almost wished he could do it--hard, long and painfully, he hated her so much. The flashlight wormed its way into his guts and turned the sweet taste of muscadine into rotten fetid bile. He stared at Darlene's hands covering her face in the moon and lamplight. They looked like baby claws.

"Hee hee hee hee heeee."

s/ Some dogs howled. "Thas them. Tha/ them. I know thas Old Honey."  
"Yep." said the spirit lamp.

"Come on,." The flashlight turned away and one of them whistled to Honey.

"Wait, said the spirit lamp, "the coon aint comed yet."

"Well he have to come on his own time. Good luck coon baby!"

er/ 3 They crushed the pine needles underfoot. Cholly could hear them whistling for a long time, and then the dogs' answer no longer a howl, but a warm excited yelps of recognition.

Cholly raised himself and in silence buttoned his trousers. Darlene did not move. Cholly wanted to strangle her, but instead he touched her leg with his foot. "We got to get girl. Come on!"

3 She reached for her underwear with her eyes closed, and could not find them. The two of the patted about in the moonlight for the panties. When she found them she put them on with the movements of an old woman. They walked away from the pine woods toward the road. He in front she plopping along behind. It started to rain. "That's good," Cholly thought. "It will explain away our clothes."

3 When they got back to the house some ten or twelve guests were still there. Jake was gone/ Suky too. Some people had gone back for more helpings

$\frac{1}{n}$  of food ~~potato~~, pie, ribs. All were engrossed in early night reminiscences about dreams, figures premonitions. Their stuffed comfort was narcotic and had produced recollections and fabrications of hallucinations.

Cholly and Darlene's entrance produced only a mild stir.

"Ya'll soaked, aint you?"

Darlene's mother was only vaguely fussy. She had eaten and drunk too much. Her shoes were under her chair and the side snaps of her dress were opened. "Girl. Come on in here. Thought I told you..."

$\frac{1}{n}$  C Some of the guests thought they would wait for the rain to slacken. Others, who had come in wagons, thought they'd best leave now. Cholly went into the little storeroom which had been made into a bedroom for him. Three infants were sleeping on his cot. He took off his rain and

$\frac{1}{n}$  pine-soaked clothes and put on his coveralls. He didn't know where to go. Aunt Jimmy's room was out of the question and Uncle O.V. and his

wife would be using it later anyway. He took a quilt from a trunk,

spread it on the floor, and lay down. ~~He thought he would fall asleep~~

~~immediately, he was so tired. But somebody was brewing coffee and he~~

had a sharp craving for it. ~~Just before falling asleep,~~ *just before falling asleep,* and an unaccountable urge to

~~soothe himself fought for ascendancy until exhaustion won.~~

The next day was cleaning out day, settling accounts, distributing Aunt Jimmy's goods. Mouths were set in downward crescents, eyes veiled, feet tentative.

Cholly floated about aimlessly doing chores as he was told. All the glamour and warmth the adults had given him on the previous day was replaced by a sharpness that agreed with his mood. He could think only

$\frac{1}{n}$  S/ of the flashlight, the muscadines, and Darlene's hands  $\wedge$  and when he was not thinking of them, the vacancy in his head was like the space left by a newly pulled tooth still conscious of the rottenness that had once

d/ filled it. Afraid of running into Darlene, he would not go far from the house, but neither could he endure the atmosphere of his dead Aunt's house. The picking through her things, the comments on the "condition" of her goods. Sullen, irritable, he cultivated his hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless. His subconscious knew what his conscious mind did not guess--that hating them would have consumed him, burnt him up like a piece of soft coal leaving only flakes of ash and a question mark of smoke. He was, in time, to discover that hatred of white men <sup>but</sup> but not <sup>later</sup> but/2.c/now. Not in impotence <sup>later</sup> when the hatred could find sweet expression. For now, he hated the one who had created the situation, the one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence. The one whom he had not been able to protect, to spare, to cover from the round moon glow of the flashlight. Then hee hee hee's. He recalled Darlene's dripping hair ribbon, flapping against her face as they walked back in silence in the rain. The loathing that galloped through him made him tremble. There was no one to talk to. Old Blue was too drunk too often these days to make sense. Besides Cholly doubted if he could reveal his shame to Blue. He would <sup>have</sup> to lie a little to tell Blue, Blue the woman-killer. It seemed to him that Lonely was much better than alone.

The day Cholly's uncle was ready to leave, when everything was packed, when the quarrels about who gets what had seethed down to a sticking grávy on everybody's tongue, Cholly sat on the back porch waiting. It had occurred to him that Darlene might be pregnant. It was wildly irrational, completely uninformed idea, but the fear it produced was complete enough.

He had to get away. Never mind the fact that he was leaving that very day. A town or two away was not far enough especially since he did not like or trust his uncle and Darlene's mother could surely find him and Uncle O.V. would turn him over to her. Cholly knew it was wrong to run out on a pregnant girl, and recalled, with sympathy, that his father had done just that. Now he understood. He knew then what he must do--find his father. His father would understand. Aunt Jimmy said he had gone to Macon.

ed/ With no more thought than a chick leaving its shell, he stepped off  
n/ of the porch. He had gotten a little way when he remembered the treasure;  
b/ Aunt Jimmy had left something and he had forgotten all about it. In a stove  
c/ flue no longer used, she had hidden a little meal bag which she called  
her treasure. He slipped into the house and found the room empty. Digging  
into the flue, he encountered waxes and soot, and then the soft bag. He  
sorted the money; fourteen one dollar bills, two two-dollar bills, and lost  
of silver change...twenty three dollars in all. Surely that would be enough  
to get to Macon. What a good strong-sounding word, MACON.

a/ Running away from home for a Georgia black boy was not a great  
problem. You just sneaked away and started walking. When night came you  
slept in a barn, if there were no dogs, a cane field or an empty sawmill.  
You ate from the ground and bought root beer and licorice in little country  
stores. There was always an easy tale of woe to tell inquiring black adults,  
and whites didn't care, unless they were looking for sport.

c/ When he was several days away, he could go the the back door of nice  
houses and tell the black cook or white mistress that he wanted a job  
weeding, plowing, picking, cleaning, and that he lived nearby. A week  
or more there and he could take off. He lived this way through the turn  
of summer and only the following October did he reach a town big enough

8/ to have a regular bus station. Dry-mouthed with excitement and apprehension, he went to the colored side of the counter to buy his ticket.

"How much to Macon Sir?"

"Eleven dollars." Five-fifty for children under twelve."

Cholly had twelve dollars and four cents.

"How old you be?"

"Just on twelve, sir, but my mama only give me ten dollars."

8/ "You jest about the biggest twelve I ever seed."

"Please sir, I got to get to Macon. My mama's sick."

"Thought you said you mama give you ten dollars."

"That's my play mama. My real mama is in Macon, sir."

"I reckon I knows a lying nigger when I sees one, but jest in case you aint jest in case one of them Quimmies is really dyin and wants to see her litt e old smoke before she meets her maker, I gone do it."

Cholly heard nothing. The insults were part of the nuisances of life, like lice. He was happier than he had ever remembered being, except that time with Blue and the watermelon. The bus was<sup>2</sup>nt leaving for four hours, and the minutes of those hours struggled like gnats on fly paper--dying slow, exhausted with the fight to stay alive. Cholly was afraid to stir, even to relieve himself. The bus might leave while he was gone. Finally, rigid with constipation, he boarded the bus to Macon.

He found a window seat in the back all to himself and ~~the green plush of the cushion welcomed him.~~ All of Georgia slid before ~~his eyes~~ until the sun shrugged out of sight. Even in the dark he hungered to see, and only after the fiercest fight to keep his eyes open did he fall asleep. When he awoke it was very well into day and a

fat black lady was nudging him with a biscuit gashed with cold bacon. With the taste of bacon still in his teeth, they sidled into Macon.

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e/?

At the end of the alley he could see men clustered like grapes. One large whooping voice spiraled over the heads of the banded forms. The kneeling forms the leaning forms. all intent on one ground-spot. As he came closer he inhaled a rife and stimulating man-smell. The men were gathered, just as the man in the pool hall had said, for and about dice and money. Each figure was decorated some way with the slight pieces of green. Some of them had separated their money, folded the bills around their fingers, clenched the fingers into fists so the neat ends of the money stuck out in a blend of dauntiness and violence. Others had stacked their bills, creased them down the middle and held the wad as though they were about to deal cards. Still others had left their money in loosely crumpled balls. One man had money sticking out from under his cap. Another stroked his bills with a thumb and forefinger. There was more money in those black hands than Cholly had ever seen before. He shared their excitement and the dry-mouthed apprehension on meeting his father gave way to the saliva flow of excitement. He glanced at the faces looking for the one who might be his father. How would he know him? Would he look like a larger version of himself? At that moment Cholly could not remember what his own self looked like. He only knew he was 14 years old, black and already six feet tall. He searched the faces and saw only eyes, pleading eyes, cold eyes, eyes gone flat with malice, others laced with fear--all focused on the movement of a pair of dice that one man was throwing, snatching

# up , and throwing again. Chanting a kind of litany to which the others responded, rubbing the dice as though they were two hot coals, he whispered to them. Then with a whoop the cubes flew from his hand to a chorus of amazements and disappointments. Then the thrower scooped up money and some one shouted; ✓ Take it and crawl you water dog you, the best I know. ✓ There was some laughter, and a noticeable release of tension during which some men exchanged money.

Cholly tapped an old white haired man on the back.

"Can you tell me is Samson Fuller round here somewhere?"

✓ "Fuller?" The name was familiar to the man's tongue. "I don't know ✓ he here somewhere. They he is. In the brown jacket." The man pointed.

e/ A man in a light brown jacket stood at the far end of the group. He was gesturing in a quarrelsome, agitated manner with another man. Both of them had folded their faces in anger. Cholly edged around to where they stood. ✓ Hardly believing he was at the end of his journey. There was his father, a man like any other man, but there indeed were his eyes, his mouth, his whole head. His shoulders lurked beneath that jacket, his voice, his hands, --al real. They existed, really existed, somewhere. Right here. Cholly had always thought of his father as a giant of a man, so when he was very close it was with a shock that he discovered that he was taller than his father. In fact he was staring at a balding spot on his father's head, which he suddenly wanted to stroke. While thus fascinated by the pitiable clean space hedged round by neglected tufts of wool, the man turned a hard, belligerent face to him.

"What you want boy?"

"Uh. I mean...Is you Samson Fuller?"

"Who sent you?"

"Huh?"

You Melba's boy?"

"No sir, I'm ..." Cholly blinked. He could not remember his mother's name. Had he ever known it. What could he say? Whose boy was he? He couldn't say "I'm your boy." That sounded disrespectful.

2/ The man was impatient. "Something wrong with your head? Who told you to come after me?"

"Nobody." Cholly's hands were sweating. The man's eyes frightened him.

3/4/ "I just thought...I mean I was just wandering around and uh my name is Cholly...."

But Fuller had turned back to the game that was about to begin anew. He bent down to toss a bill on the ground, and waited for a throw. When it was gone, he stood up and in a vexed and whiney voice shouted at Cholly, 1/ 0/ "Tell that bitch she get her money. Now get the fuck outta my face!"

Cholly was a long time picking his foot up from the ground. He was 0/2/ 8/ trying to back up and walk away. Only with extreme effort could he get the first muscle to cooperate. When it did, he walked back up the alley out of its shade toward the blazing light of the street. As he emerged into the sun he felt something in his legs give way. An orange crate with a picture of clasping hands pasted on its side was up-ended on the sidewalk. Cholly sat down on it. The sunshine dropped like honey on his head. A horse drawn fruit wagon went by, its driver singing ;

1/ 1/ "Fresh from the vine sweet as sugar, red as wine."

Noises seemed to increase in volume. The clic cloc of the women's heels, the laughter of idling men in doorways. There was a street car somewhere. Cholly sat. He knew if he was very still he would be all right. But then the trace of pain edged his eyes and he had to use

was/ everything to send it away. If he ~~were~~<sup>was</sup> very still, he thought, and kept his eyes on one thing, the tears would not come. So he sat in the dripping honey sun, pulling every nerve and muscle into service to stop the fall of water from his eyes. While straining in this way, focusing every erg of energy on his eyes, he bowels suddenly opened up and before he could realize what he knew, liquid stools were running down his leg. At the mouth of the alley where his father was, on an orange crate in the sun, on a street full of grown men and women, he had soiled himself like a baby.

8/p.c. In panic/ he wondered should he wait there, ~~Not~~ moving until nighttime? No. His father would surely emerge and see him and laugh. Oh, Lord. He would laugh. Everybody would laugh. There was only one thing to do.

Cholly ran down the street aware only of silence. People's mouths moved, their feet moved, a car jugged by--but with no sound. A door slammed in perfect soundlessness. His own feet made no sound. The air seemed to strangle him, hold him back. He was pushing through a world of invisible pine sap that threatened to smother him. Still he ran seeing only silent moving things, until he came to the end of buildings, the beginning of open space, and saw the Ocmulgee River winding ahead. He scooted down a gravelly slope to a pier jutting out over the shallow water. Finding the deepest shadow under the pier, he crouched in it, behind one of the posts. He remained knotted there in fetal position, paralyzed, his fists covering his eyes, for a long time. No sound, no sight, only darkness and heat and the press of his knuckles on his eyelids. He even forgot his messed up trousers.

Evening came, without a gust, bringing a ~~last that called attention~~

~~to itself~~ The dark, the warmth, the quiet enclosed Cholly like the skin and flesh of an elderberry protecting its own seed.

Cholly stirred. The ache in his head was all he felt. Soon like bright bits of glass the events of that afternoon cut into him. At first he only saw money in black fingers then he thought he was sitting on an uncomfortable chair but when he looked it turned out to be the head of a man, a head with a bald spot the size of an orange. When finally these bits merged into full memory, Cholly began to smell himself. He stood up and found himself weak, trembling and dizzy. He leaned for a moment on the pier post then took off his pants, underwear, socks and shoes. He rubbed handfuls of dirt on his shoes, then he crawled to the river edge. He had to find the water's beginning with his hands for he could not see it clearly. Slowly he swirled his clothes in the water and rubbed them until he thought they were clean. Back near his post, he took off his shirt and wrapped it around his waist, then spread his trousers and underwear on the ground. He squatted down and picked at the rotted wood of the pier. Suddenly he thought of his Aunt Jimmy, her <sup>ASSA Fc41da</sup> ~~asshole~~ bag, her four gold teeth, and the purple rag she wore around her head. With a longing that almost split him open, he thought of her handing him a bit of smoked hock out of her dish. He remembered just how she held it-- clumsy like, in three fingers, but with so much affection. No words, just picking up a bit of meat and holding it out to him. And then the tears rushed down his cheeks to make a bouquet under his chin.

Three women are leaning out of two windows. They see the long clean neck of a new young boy and call to him. He goes to where they are. Inside it is dark and warm. They give him lemonade in a mason jar. ~~the~~

As he drinks, their eyes float up to him through the bottom of the jar, through the slick sweet water. They give him back his manhood, which he takes aimlessly.

~~No artist working with canvas, no sculpture, no poet, no novelist could put all of the pieces together; the pieces of Cholly's life could become coherent only in the head of a musician. Only those who talk their talk through the gold of curved metal, or in the touch of black and white rectangles and taut skins and strings echoing from wooden corridors could give true form to his life. Only they would know how to connect the heart of a red watermelon to the <sup>assa fetida</sup> ~~lemonade~~ bag, to the muscadine to the flashlight~~  
 #/o/ his behind to the fists of money to the lemonade in a mason jar to a man called Blue and come up with what all of that meant in joy in pain in anger in love and give it its final and pervading ache of freedom. Only a musician would sense, know, without even knowing that he knew, that Cholly was free. Dangerously free. Free to ~~xxxxxxx~~ feel whatever he felt; fear, guilt, shame, love, grief, pity. Free to be tender or violent, to whistle or weep. Free to sleep in doorways or between the white sheets of a singing woman. Free to take a job, free to leave it. He could go to jail and not feel imprisoned for he had already seen the furtiveness in the eyes of his jailer, free to say <sup>v</sup>No suh<sup>v</sup>, and smile for he had already killed three whitemen. Free to take a woman's insults for his body had already conquered her/s. Free even to knock her in the head, for he had already cradled that head in his arms. Free to be gentle when she was sick, or e/ mop her floor for <sup>she</sup> ~~her~~ knew what and where his maleness was. He was free to drink himself into a silly helplessness for he had already been a gandy dancer, done thirty days on a chain gang, and picked a woman's bullet out of the calf of his leg. He was free to live his fantasies and free even to

# die, the how and the when of which held no interest for him. In those days, Cholly was truly free. Abandoned in a junk heap, by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites and they alone interested him.

It was in this godlike state that he met Pauline Williams. And it was Pauline, or rather marrying her, that did for him what the flashlight did not do. The constantness, varietylessness, the sheer weight of sameness drove him to despair and froze his imagination. To be required to sleep with the same woman forever was a curious and unnatural idea to him; to be expected to dredge up enthusiasms for old acts, and routine ploys...he wondered at the arrogance of the female. When he had met Polly in Kentucky she was hanging over a fence scratching herself with a broken foot. The neatness, the charm, the joy he awakened in her made him want to nest with her. He had yet to discover what destroyed that desire. But he did not dwell on it. He thought rather of whatever had happened to the curiosity he used to feel. Nothing, nothing interested him now. Not himself; not other people. Only in drink was there some break, some floodlight, and when that closed there was oblivion.

e/ But the aspect of married life that dumbfounded him and rendered him totally dysfunctional was the appearance of children. Having no idea of how to raise children, and having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be. Had he been interested in the accumulation of things, he could have thought of them as his material heirs; had he needed to prove himself to some nameless "others" he could have wanted them to excel in his own image and for his own sake. He had not been ~~an unattached man of perceptions~~ alone in the world

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since he was 13, knowing only a dying old woman who felt responsible for him, but whose age, sex, and interests were so remote from his own, he might have felt a stable connection between himself and the children. As it was, he reacted to them, and his reactions were based on what he felt at the moment.

So it was on a Saturday afternoon, in the thin light of spring, he staggered home reeling drunk and saw his daughter in the kitchen.

She was washing dishes. Her small back hunched over the sink. Cholly saw her dimly and could not tell ~~what~~ <sup>what</sup> he saw nor what he felt. Then he became aware that ~~she~~ <sup>she</sup> was uncomfortable; next he felt the discomfort dissolve into pleasure. ~~He could not understand his emotions from their inception~~ <sup>then</sup> in revulsion, ~~to~~ <sup>to</sup> guilt, ~~to~~ <sup>to</sup> pity, ~~to~~ <sup>to</sup> love. His revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence. Her back hunched that way; her head to one side as though crouching from a permanent and unrelieved blow. Why did she have to look so whipped? She was a child—unburdened—why wasn't she happy? The clear statement of her misery was an accusation. He wanted to break her neck—but tenderly. Guilt and impotence rose in <sup>Could he</sup> a bilious duet. What could he do for her—ever? What, give her? What say to her? What could a burnt out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven year old daughter? If he looked into her face he would see those haunted, loving eyes. The hauntedness would irritate him—the love would move him to fury. How dare she love him? Hadn't she any sense at all? What was he supposed to do about that? Return it? How? What could his calloused hands produce to make her smile? What of his knowledge of the world and of life could be useful to her? What could his heavy arms and befuddled brain

accomplish that would ~~give~~ him his own respect that would in turn allow him to accept her love? His hatred of her slimed in his stomach and threatend to become vomit. But just before the puke moved from anticipation to sensation, she shifted her weight and stood on one foot scratching the back of her calf with her toe. It was a quiet and pitiful, gesture. Her hands were going round and round a frying pan, scraping flecks of black into cold, greasy dish water. The timid, tucked-in look of the scratching toe--that was what Pauline was doing the first time he saw her in Kentucky. Leaning over a fence ~~into the sun~~ staring at nothing in particular. The creamy toe of her bare foot scratching a velvet leg. It was such a small and simple gesture, but it filled him then with a wondering softness. Not the usual lust to part tight legs with his own, but a tenderness, a protectiveness. A desire to cover her foot with his hand and gently nibble away the itch from the calf with his teeth. He did it then, and started Pauline into laughter. He did it now.

*s/* The tenderness welled up in him and he sank to his knees, his eyes on the foot of his daughter, crawling on all fours toward her. ~~he~~ ~~xxx~~ raised his hand and caught the foot in an upward stroke. Pecola lost her balance and was about to careen to the floor. Cholly raised his other hand to her hips to save her from falling. He put his head down and nibbled at the back of her leg. His mouth trembled at the firm sweetness of the flesh. He closed his eyes, letting his fingers dig into her waist. The rigidity of her shocked body, the silence of her stunned throat was better than Pauline's easy laughter had been. The confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the doing of a wild and forbidden thing excited him and a bolt of desire ran down his genitals giving it length, and softening the lips of his anus. <sup>Surrounding</sup> ~~xxxxxxx~~ all of this lust was a border of politeness. He wanted to fuck her...tenderly. But the tenderness would not hold.

The tightness of her vagina was more than he could bear. His soul seemed to slip down to his guts and fly out into her and the gigantic thrust he made into her then provoked the only sound she made--a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat. Like the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon.

Following the disintegration--the falling away--of sexual relief, he was conscious of her wet soapy hands on his wrists, the fingers clenching, but whether her grip was from a hopeless but stubborn struggle to be free, or from some other emotion, he could not tell.

Removing himself from her was so painful to him he cut it short and snatched his genitals out of the dry harbor of her vagina. She appeared to have fainted. Cholly stood up and could only see her greyish panties so sad and limp around her ankles. Again the hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up; the tenderness forced him to cover her.

So when the child regained consciousness, she was lying on the kitchen floor under a heavy quilt, trying to connect the pain between her legs with ~~the look on~~ the face of her mother looming over her.

SEETHEDOGBOWBOWGOESTHEDOGDOYOUWANTTOPLAYDOYOUWANTOTPLAYWITHHANESEETHE  
DOGRUNRUNDOGRUN

Once there was an old man who loved things, for the slightest contact with people produced in him a faint but persistent nausea. He could not remember when this distaste began, nor could he remember ever being free of it. As a young boy he had been greatly disturbed by this revulsion which others did not seem to share, but, having got a fine education, he learned, among other things, the word misanthrope. Knowing his label provided him with both comfort and courage (for he believed that to name an evil was to neutralize if not annihilate it. Then too he had read several books and made the acquaintance of several great misanthropes of the ages whose spiritual company soothed him and provided him with yardsticks for measuring his whims, his yearnings and his antipathies. Moreover, he found misanthropy an excellent means of developing character: when he subdues his revulsion and occasionally touched, helped, counseled, or befriended somebody he was able to think of his behavior as generous and his intentions as noble. When he was enraged by some human effort or flaw, he was able to regard himself as discriminating, fastidious, and full of nice scruples.

As in the case of many misanthropes, his disdain for people led him into a profession designed to serve them. He was engaged in a line of work that was dependent solely on his ability to win the trust of others, and on in which the most intimate relationships were necessary. Having dallied with the priesthood in the Episcopal Church, he abandoned it to become a case worker. Time and misfortunate, however,

conspired against him and he settled finally on a profession that brought him both freedom and satisfaction. He became a "Reader, Advisor and Interpreter of Dreams." It was a profession that suited him well. His hours were his own, the competition was slight, the clientele was already persuaded and therefore manageable, and he had numerous opportunities to witness human stupidity without sharing it or being compromised by it, and to nurture his fastidiousness by viewing physical decay. Although his income was small, he had no taste for luxury -- his experience in the monastery had solidified his natural ascetisism while it developed his preference for solitude. Celibacy was a haven; silence a shield.

All his life he had had a fondness for things -- not the acquisition of wealth or beautiful objects -- but a genuine love of worn objects: a coffee pot that had been his mother's, a welcome mat from the door of a rooming-house he once lived in, a quilt from a Salvation Army Store counter. It was as though his disdain of human contact had converted itself into a craving for things humans had touched. The residue of the human spirit smeared on inanimate objects was all he could withstand of humanity. To contemplate, for example evidence of human footsteps on the mat...absorb the smell of the quilt and wallow in the sweet certainty that many bodies had sweated, slept, dreamt, made love, been ill and even died under it. Wherever he went he took along his things and was always searching for others. This thirst for worn things led him to casual but habitual examinations of trash barrels in alleys and waste baskets in public places...

All in all his personality was an arabesque: intricate, symmetrical, balanced and tightly constructed -- except for one flaw. The careful

design was marred occasionally by rare but keen sexual cravings.

8/ He could have been an active homosexual, but lacked the courage. Bestiality did not occur to him and sodomy was quite out of the question for he did not experience sustained erections and could not endure the thought of somebody else's. And besides, the one thing that disgusted him more than entering and caressing a woman was caressing and being carassed by a man. In any case, his cravings, although intense, never relished physical contact. He abhorred flesh on flesh. Body odor, breath and odor overwhelmed him. The sight of dried matter in the corner of the eye, decayed or missing teeth, ear wax, blackheads, moles, blisters, skin crusts -- all the natural excretions and protections the body was capable of -- disquieted him. His attentions therefore gradually settled on those humans whose bodies were least offensive; <sup>1</sup>/<sub>n</sub> children. And since he was too diffident to confront homosexuality and since little boys were insulting, scarey, and stubborn, he further limited his interests to little girls. They were usually manageable and frequently seductive. His sexuality was anything but lewd; his patronage of little girls smacked of innocence and was associated in his mind with cleanliness. He was what one might call a very clean old man.

A cinnamon eyed West Indian with lightly browned skin.

Although his given name was printed on the sign in his kitchen window, and on the business cards he circulated, he was called by the townspeople Soaphead Church. No one knew where the Church part came from -- perhaps somebody's recollection of his days as a guest preacher -- those reverends who had been called but who had no flock or coop, and were constantly visiting other churches sitting on the alter with the host preacher.

t/; But everybody knew what soaphead meant; the tight, curly hair that took on and held a sheen and wave when pomaded with soap lather. A sort of primitive process.

He had been reared in a family proud of its academic accomplishments and its mixed blood -- in fact, they believed the former was based on the latter. Some decaying British nobleman, Sir Whitecomb, who chose to disintegrate under a sun more easeful than England's, had introduced the white strain into the family in the early 1800's. Being a gentleman by order of the King, he had done the civilized thing for his mulatto bastard -- provided it with three hundred pounds sterling, to the great satisfaction of the bastard's mother who felt that fortune had smiled up/ on her. The bastard too was grateful and regarded as his life's goal the hoarding of this white strain. He bestowed his favors on a fifteen year old girl of similar parentage. She, like a good Victorian parody, learned from her husband all that was worth learning -- to separate herself in body, mind and spirit from all that suggested Africa; to cultivate the habits, tastes, preferences that her absent father-in-law and foolish mother-in-law would have approved.

They transferred this Anglophilia to their six children and sixteen grandchildren. Except for an occasional and unaccountable insurgent who chose a restive black, they married "up", lightening the family complexion and thinning out the family features.

e/ With the confidence born of a conviction of superiority, they performed well at schools. They were industrious, orderly, and energetic, hoping to prove beyond a doubt de Gobineau's hypothesis that "all civilizations derive from the white race, that none can exist without its help

#/m and that a society is great and brilliant only so far as it preserves the blood of the noble group that created it." Thus, they were seldom overlooked by school masters who recommended promising students for study abroad. The men studied medicine, law, theology and emerged repeatedly in the powerless government offices available to the native population. That they were corrupt in public and private practice, both lecherous and lascivious was considered their noble rights and thoroughly enjoyed by most of the less gifted population.

As the years passed, due to the carelessness of some of the Whitecomb brothers, it became difficult to maintain their whiteness, and some distant and some not so distant relatives married each other. No obviously bad effects were noticed from these ill-advised unions, but one or two old maids or gardener boys marked a weakening of faculties and a disposition toward eccentricity in some of the children. Some flaw outside the usual alcoholism and lechery. They blamed the flaw on inter-marriage with the family, however, not on the original genes of the decaying lord. In any case, there were flukes. No more than in any other family to be sure, but more dangerous because more powerful. One of them was a religious fanatic who founded his own secret sect and fathered four sons, one of whom became a school master known for his precision of his justice and the control in his violence. This school master married a sweet indolent half Chinese girl for whom the fatigue of bearing a son was too much. She died soon after child birth. Her son, named Elihue Micah Whitcomb, provided the school master with ample opportunity to work out his theories of education, discipline, and the good life. Little Elihue learned everything he needed to know well, particularly the fine art of self-deception. He read greedily but understood selectively, choosing the bits and pieces

stood selectively, choosing the bits and pieces of other men's ideas that supported whatever predilections he had at the moment. Thus he chose to remember Hamlet's abuse of Ophelia but not Christ's love of Mary Magdalene; Hamlet's frivolous politics but not Christ's serious anarchy. He noticed Gibbons acidity, but not his tolerance, Otello's love for the fair Desdemona, but not Iago's perverted love of Otello. The work he admired most was Dante's; those he despised most were Dostojevsky's. For all his exposure to the best minds of the Western world he allowed only the narrowest interpretation to touch him. He responded to his father's controlled violence by developing hard habits and a soft imagination. A hatred of, and fascination with, any hint of disorder or decay.

At seventeen, however, he met his Beatrice, who was three years his senior. A lovely, laughing big-legged girl who worked as a clerk in a Chinese department store. Wilma. So strong was her affection and zest for life, she did not eliminate the frail, sickly Elihue from it. She found his fastidiousness and complete lack of humor touching and longed to introduce him to the idea of delight. He resisted the introduction but she married him anyway, only to discover that he was suffering from and enjoying an invincible melancholy. When she learned two months into the marriage how important his melancholy was to him, that he was very interested in altering her joy to a more academic gloom, that he equated love-making with communion and the Holy grail, she simply left. She had not lived by the sea all those years, listened to the wharfman's songs all that time, to spend her life in the soundless cave of Elihue's mind.

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#/ He never got over her desertion. She was to have been the answer to his unstated unacknowledged question -- where was the life to counter the encroaching non-life? Velma was to rescue him from the non-life he had learned on the flat side of his father's belt. But he resisted her with such skill she was finally driven out to escape the inevitable boredom produced by such a dainty life.

Young Elihue was saved from visible shattering by the steady hand of his father who reminded him of the family's reputation and Velma's questionable one. He then pursued his studies with more vigor than before and decided at last to enter the ministry. When he was advised that he had no avocation, he left the island, came to America to study the then budding field of psychiatry. But the subject required too much truth, too many confrontations, and offered too little support to a failing ego. He drifted into sociology, then physical therapy. This diverse education continued for six years when his father refused to support him any longer, until he "found" himself. Elihue, not knowing where to look, was thrown back on his own devices and "found" himself quite unable to earn money. He began to sink into a rapidly fraying gentility, punctuated with a few of the white collar occupations available to black people, regardless of their noble bloodlines, in America: desk clerk at a colored hotel in Chicago, insurance agent; traveling salesman for a cosmetic firm catering to blacks. He finally settled in Lorain, Ohio in 1936 palming himself off as a minister, and inspiring awe with the way he spoke English. The women of the town early discovered his celibacy and, not being able to comprehend his rejection of them, they decided that he was supernatural rather than unnatural.

Once he understood their decision, he quickly followed through accepting the name (Soaphead Church) and the role they had given him. He rented a kind of back-room apartment from a deeply religious old lady named Bertha Reese. She was clean, quiet and very close to total deafness. The lodgings were ideal in every way but one. Bertha Reese had an old dog, Bob, who, although as deaf and quiet as she, was not as clean. He slept most of his days away on the back porch which was Elihue's entrance. The dog was too old to be of any use and Bertha Reese had not the strength or presence of mind to care for him properly. She fed him, and watered him, left him alone. The dog, mangy, exhausted eyes ran with a sea green matter around which gnats and flies clustered. Soaphead was revolted by Bob and wished he would hurry up and die. He regarded this wish for the dog's death as humane for he could not bear, he told himself, to see anything suffer. It did not occur to him that he was really concerned about his own suffering, since the dog had adjusted himself to frailty and old age. Soaphead finally determined to put an end to the animal's misery and bought some poison with which to do it. Only the horror of having to go near him had prevented Soaphead from completing his mission. He waited for rage or blinding revulsion to spur him.

Living there among his worn things, rising early every morning from dreamless sleeps, he counseled those who sought his advice.

His business was dread. People came to him in dread, whispered in dread, wept and pleaded in dread. And dread was what he counseled. Singly they found their way to his door, wrapped each in a shroud stitched with anger, yearning, pride, vengeance, loneliness, misery, defeat, and hunger. They asked for the simplest of things: love, health,

and money. Make him love me. Tell me what this dream means. Help me get rid of this woman. Make my mother given me back my clothes. Stop my left hand from shaking. Keep my baby's ghost off the stove. Break so and so's fix. To all of the se requests he addressed himself. His practice was to do what he was bid -- not to suggest to party that perhaps the request was unfair, mean, or hopeless.

With only occasional, and increasingly rare, encounters with the little girls he could persuade to be entertained by him, he lived rather peaceably among his things admitting to no regrets. He was aware, of course, that something was awry in his life, and all lives, bur put the problem where it belonged, at the foot of the Originator of Life. He believed that since decay, vice, filth, and disorder were pervasive, they must be in the Nature of Things. Evil existed because God had created it. He, God, had made a sloven and unforgiveable error in judgment: designing an imperfect universe. Theologians justified the presence of corruption as a means by which men strove, were tested, and triumphed. A triumph of cosmic neatness. But this neatness, the neatness of Dante, was in the orderly sectioning and segregating of all levels of evil and decay. In the world it was not so. The most exquisite looking ladies sat on toilets, and the most dreadful looking had pure and holy yearnings. God had done a poor job and Soaphead suspected that he himself could have done better. It was in fact a pity that The Maker had not sought his counsel.

Soaphead was reflecting once again on these thoughts one late hot afternoon when he heard a tip on his door. Opening it, he saw a little girl, quite unknown to him. She was about twelve or so he thought, and seemed to him pitifully unattractive. When he asked her what she wanted she did not answer but held out to him one of his cards advertising his

gifts and services. "If you are overcome with trouble and conditions that are not natural, I can remove them; Overcome Spells, Bad Luck and Evil Influences. Remember, I am a true Spiritualist and Psychic Reader\*\*\*\* Born with power and I will help you. Satisfaction in one visit. During many years of practice I have brought together many in marriage and reunited many who were separated. If you are unhappy, discouraged, or in distress, I can help you. Does bad luck seem to follow you? Has the one you love changed? I can tell you why. I will tell you who your enemies and friends are and if the one you love is true or false. If you are sick I can show you the way to health. I locate lost and stolen articles. Satisfaction guaranteed."

Soaphead Church told her to come in.

"What can I do for you, my child?"

She stood there, her hands folded across her stomach, a little protruding pot of tummy. "Maybe. Maybe you can do it for me."

"Do whay for you?"

"I can't go to school no more. And I thought maybe you could help me."

"Help you how? Tell me. Don't be frightened."

"My eyes."

"What about your eyes?"

"I want them blue."

Soaphead pursed his lips, and let his tongue stroke a gold inlay. He thought it was at once the most fantastic and the most logical petition he had ever received. Here was an ugly little girl asking for

her. Of all the wishes people had brought him, money, love, revenge, this seemed to him the most poignant and the one most deserving of fulfillment. A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes. His outrage grew and felt like power. For the first time he honestly wished he could work miracles. Never before had he really wanted the true and holy power -- only the power to make others believe he had it. It seemed so sad, so frivolous that mere mortality, not judgment, kept him from it. Or did it?

With a trembling hand he made the sign of the cross over her. His flesh crawled; in that hot dim little room of worn things, he was chilled.

"I can do nothing for you, my child. I am not a magician. I work only through the Lord. He sometimes uses me to help people. All I can do is offer myself to Him as the instrument through which he works. If He wants your wish granted He will do it."

Soaphead walked to the window, his back to the girl. His mind raced, stumbled, and raced again. How to frame the next sentence? How to hang on to the feeling of power. His eye fell on Old Bob sleeping on the porch.

"We must make ah, some offering, that is, some contact with Nature. Perhaps some simple creature might be the vehicle through which He will speak. Let us see."

He knelt down at the window, and moved his lips. After what seemed a suitable length of time, he rose and went to the icebox and that stood near the other window. From it he removed a small packet wrapped in pinkish butcher paper. From a shelf he took a small brown bottle and sprinkled some of its contents on the substance inside the paper. He

put the packet, partly opened, on the table.

"Take this food and give it to the creature sleeping on the porch. Make sure he eats it. And mark well how he behaves. If nothing happens you will know that God has refused you. If the animal behaves strangely your wish will be granted on the day following this one."

The girl picks up the packet; the odor of the dark, sticky meat made her want to vomit. She put a hand on her stomach.

"Courage. Courage, my child. These things are not granted to faint hearts."

She nods and swallows visibly holding down the vomit. Soaphead opens the door and she steps over the threshold.

"Good bye, God Bless." he said quickly shut the door. At the window he stood watching her, his eyebrows pulled together into waves of compassion, his tongue fondling the worn gold in his upper jaw. He sees the girl bending down to the sleeping dog, who, at her touch, opens one liquid eye, matted in the corners with what looked like green glue. She reaches out and touches the dog's head, stroking him gently. She places the meat on the floor of the porch, near his nose. The odor rouses him; he lifts his head, and gets up to smell it better. He eats it in three or four gulps. The girl strokes his head again and the dog looks up at her with soft triangle eyes. Suddenly he coughs, the cough of a phlegmy old man -- and gets to his feet. The girl jumps. The dog is gagging; his mouth chomping the air and promptly falls down. He tries to raise himself, cannot, tries again and half falls down the steps. Choking, stumbling he moves like a broken toy around the yard. The girl's mouth is open, a little petal of tongue showing. She makes a wild pointless gesture with one hand and then covers her mouth with both hands. She is trying not to vomit. The dog falls again.

Then he is quiet. The girl's hands are covering her mouth, backs away a few feet, then turns, runs out of the yard and down the walk.

Soaphead Church goes to the table. He sits down with folded hands balancing his forehead on the balls of his thumbs. Then he rises and goes to a tiny night table with a drawer from which he takes paper and a fountain pen. A bottle of ink is on the same shelf that held the poison. With these things he sits again at the table. Slowly, carefully, relishing his penmanship, he writes the following letter.

Att: TO HE WHO GREATLY ENNOBLED HUMAN NATURE BY CREATING IT

Dear God, (n.b. The use of the halfstop after the greeting. This is a Friendly Letter.)

(On the contrary. This is a Business Letter!)

Dear God:

The Purpose of this letter is to familiarize you with facts which either have escaped your notice, or which you have chosen to ignore.

Doubtless there will be repetitions (for you are not altogether oblivious of this case--I understand there is something fairly accurate about "He chasteneth whom He loveth"--) but, equally doubtless, there will be new insights, new evidence and, most relevant, new developments, which, providing you are willing to suspend prejudice and rely on unequivocal, indisputable data, ought to lead you to a judgement that is both fair and just.

In the interests of scholarship--and for the efficiency of the record-keeper (no less than my love for logic) I begin where you did: at the beginning.

Once upon a time I lived greenly, and youngish on one of your islands. An island of the archipelago in the South Atlantic between North and South America, enclosing the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico: divided into the Greater Antilles, the Lesser Antilles, and the

Bahama Islands. Not the Windward or Leeward Island Colonies, mark you, but within, of course, the Greater of the two Antilles (while the precision of my prose may be, at times, laborious, it is necessary that I identify myself to you clearly.)

In this once upon a greater time, I was nonetheless a lad from these Greater Antilles. Perhaps if I'd been from the Lesser of the two Antilles, or been even a lesser lad from the Greater Antilles, I would have been to you the least of little men.

Now.

We, in this colony, took as our own, the most dramatic, and the most obvious of our white master's characteristics, which were, of course, their worst. In retaining the identity of our race, we held fast to those characteristics most gratifying to sustain and least troublesome to maintain. Consequently we were not royal but snobbish; not aristocratic but class conscious; we believed authority was cruelty to our inferiors, and education was being at school. We mistook violence for passion, indolence for leisure, and thought recklessness was freedom. We raised our children and reared our crops; we let infants grow and property develop. Our manhood was defined by acquisitions. Our womanhood by acquiescence. And the smell of your fruit and the labour of your days we abhorred.

Shall I tell you how little she loved me? You suspect. You could hardly know.

This morning, before the little black girl came, I cried--for Velma. Oh, not aloud. There is no wind to carry, bear, or even refuse to bear, a sound so heavy with regret. But in my silent own lone way, I cried--for Velma. Did I ever tell you how little she loved me? What an

to  
 I to do with these uncried tears? Uncry? Uncry? You needs' must know about Velma to understand what I did today.

She (Velma) left me the way people leave a hotel room. A hotel room is a place to be when you are doing something else. Of itself it is of no consequence to one's major scheme. A hotel room is convenient. But its convenience is limited to the time you need it while you are in that particular town on that particular business: you hope it is comfortable, but prefer, rather, that it be anonymous. It is not, after all where you live.

When you no longer need it, you pay a little something for its use; say thank you, sir, and when your business in that town is over, you go away from that room. Does anybody regret leaving a hotel room? Does anybody, who has a home, a real home somewhere, want to stay there? Does anybody look back with affection or even disgust, at a hotel room when they leave it? You can only love or despise whatever living was done in that room. But the room itself?--But you take a souvenir. Not, oh not, to remember the room. To remember rather the time and the place of your business, your adventure. What can anyone feel for a hotel room? One doesn't any more feel for a hotel room than one expects a hotel room to feel for its occupant.

That, Heavenly heavenly Father, was how she left me: or rather she never left me because she was never ever there.

Someday, perhaps I shall tell you how I loved her. About how anxious I was that she keep her good opinion of herself. About the kindness that radiated from the gentle protrusion of her belly. About the tenderness I felt for her whenever she was publicly stupid. For the moment, suffice

~~it to say how little, lesser, least, she lovelittled me.~~

You remember, do you, how and of what we are made? Let me tell you now about the breasts of little girls. Consider, dear Love, Velma and the Greater Antilles—how could I not have loved them? How they beckoned. But I apologize, formally, for whatever it is necessary to apologize for in that area. (What is the area anyway—Sodomy?) I apologize for the inappropriateness (is that it?), the imbalance of loving them at awkward times of day, and in awkward places, and the tastelessness of loving those which belonged to members of my family. Do I have to apologize for loving strangers?

But you too are amiss here, Lord. How, why, did you allow it to happen? How is it I could left my eyes from the contemplation of Your Body and fall deeply into the contemplation of theirs? The buds. The buds on some of these saplings. They were mean, you know, mean and tender. Mean little buds resisting the touch, springing like rubber. But aggressive. Daring me to touch. Commanding me to touch. Not a bit shy, as you'd suppose. They stuck out at me, oh yes, at me. Slender chested finger chested lassies. Have you ever seen them, Lord? I mean really seen them? One could not see them, and not love them. You who made them must have considered them lovely even as an idea—how much more lovely is the manifestation of that idea. I couldn't, as you must recall, keep my hands, my mouth off of them. Nor would I. Nor should I. Salt sweet. Like not quite ripe strawberries covered with the light salt sweat of running days and hopping skipping jumping hours.

I say, I'd have been a rotten, not say curious, rector. Can you see me at Sunday-school? Papa never looked. He would smile, pat their heads, and give them cough drops when they knew their lesson well. Just

for the record, MY PAPA WAS A VERY FINE, VERY FINE SCHOOL MASTER!

still, but they--the love of them--the touch, taste and feel of them--  
 were not just an easy luxurious human vice; they were, for me, A Thing To  
 Do Instead. Instead of Papa, instead of the Cloth, instead of Velma, and  
 I chose not to do without them. Did you know that? Papa didn't. Papa  
 cried. Papa died. But I didn't go into the church. At least I didn't  
 do that. As to what I did do? I told people I knew all about You. That  
 I had received Your Powers. It was not a complete lie; but it was a  
complete lie. I should never have, I admit, I should never have taken their  
 money in exchange for well-phrased, well-placed, well-faced lies. But,  
 mark you, I hated it. Not for a moment did I love the lies or the money.

But consider: the woman who left the hotel room.

Consider: the greentime, the noontime of the Archipelago.

Consider: Their hopeful eyes that were outdone only by their  
 hoping breasts.

Consider: how I needed a comfortable evil to prevent my knowing  
 what I could not bear to know.

Consider: how I hated and despised the money.

And now, Consider: not according to my just deserts, but according  
 to my mercy, the little black girl that came a looning at me today. Tell  
 me, Lord, how could you leave a lass so' long so lone that she could find  
 her way to me? How could you? I weep for you, Lord. I weep for you. And  
 it is because I weep for You, that I had to do your work for You.

Do you know what she came for? Blue eyes. New, blue eyes, she said.

Like she was buying shoes. "I'd like a pair of new blue eyes,"  
 She must have asked you for them for a very long time, and you hadn't replied.  
 (A habit, I could have told her, a long ago habit broken for Job--but no  
 more.) She came to me for them. She had one of my cards. (Card enclosed.)  
 By the way, I added the Micah--Micah Elihue Whitcomb. But I am called  
 Soaphead Church. I cannot remember how or why I got the name. What makes  
 one name more a person than another? Is the name the real thing then? And  
 the person only what his name says? Is that why to the simplest and  
 friendliest of questions: "What is your name?" put to you by Moses, You  
 would not say and said instead "I am <sup>with</sup> that I am." Like Popeye? I Yam What  
 I Yam? Afraid you were, weren't you, to give out your name. Afraid they  
 would know the name and then know you? Then they wouldn't fear you? It's  
 quite all right. Don't be vexed. I mean no offense. I understand. I  
 have been a bad man too, and an unhappy man too. But someday I will die.  
 I was always so kind. Why do I have to die? The little girls. The  
 little girls are the only things I'll miss. Do you know that when I  
 touched their sturdy little tits and bit them--just a little--I felt-- I  
 was being--friendly? I didn't want to kiss their mouths or sleep in the  
 bed with them or take a child bride for my own. Playful, I felt, and  
 friendly. Not like the newspapers said. Not like the people whispered.  
 And they didn't mind at all. Not at all. Remember how so many of  
 them came back? No one would even try to understand that. If I'd been  
 hurting them, would they have come back? Two of them, Doreen and Sugar  
 Babe, they'd come together. I gave them mints, money, and they'd eat  
 ice cream with their legs open while I played with them. It was like a  
 party. And there wasn't nastiness and there wasn't any filth and there

wasn't any odour and there wasn't any groaning--just the light white laughter of little girls and me. And there wasn't any look--any long funny look--any long funny Velma look afterward. No look that makes you feel dirty afterward. That makes you want to die. With little girls it is all clean and good and friendly.

You have to understand that, Lord. You said suffer little children to come unto me and harm them not. Did you forget? Did you forget about the children? Yes. You forgot. You let them go wanting, sit on road shoulders, crying next to their dead mothers. I've seen them charred, lame, halt. You forgot, Lord. You forgot how and when to be God.

That's why I changed the little black girl's eyes for her, and I didn't touch her; not a finger did I lay on her. But I gave her those blue eyes she wanted. Not for pleasure and not for money. I did what You did not, could not, would not do: I looked at that ugly little black girl and I loved her. I played You. And it was a very good show!

I said the Magic Words. Right straight through this time.

Our (who is "our"? Everybody, I suppose. Not just the Queen's. Not just Papa's. Everybody's.) Father (are You a man? Some people say You are a woman. Lifegiver, life destroyer. Are you sexless? Why of course You are a man. Maleness is superior. Only men can convince males that they are men. Only men can convince females that they are women. Therefore manness is needed, worshipped, by everybody.) Who art (present tense. You are still.) in Heaven (where is heaven? Why are You there and not here? Or is this Heaven? What a nice sound that word has H e a v e n) Hallowed (precious. Holy. Not to be trifled with) be Thy name (What on

earth is your name? Yaweh. Ywh. No consonants. No name. That is why it  
 is hallowed. Nobody knows it.) Thy kingdom come (going to come? Here? Thy  
 kingdom has already come?) Thy will be done (only thine. Are there any other  
 wills to be done? Is God's will preferable to man's will.) on earth as  
 it is in heaven (is this a plea? A statement of fact? You mean all this  
 sorrow is Your will? I cannot do Your will because I do not know it. And  
 what I know of it I do not like.) Give us this day (one at a time, one at a  
 time) our daily bread (sustenance. Do you know what hunger is like? It  
 is not lack of food. It is having only enough for one day, that one day  
 and nothing left for tomorrow. Can I trust You? Will You give me sustenance  
 for a whole week together? Or must I ask You every day, every day one day  
 at a time. Is it good to thee that thou shouldst oppress? Or just lest we  
 forget? What is Man that thou art mindful of him? Hast thou eyes of  
 flesh? Are thy days as the days of Man? No. You do not know what hunger  
 can do. What is Man that thou art mindful of him? Indeed. Indeed.) And  
 forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass (only as? If we  
 do not forgive, we are not forgiven. All right. I agree to that part.)  
 against us. (What about those who trespass against others? I can readily  
 forgive those who hurt me, but I cannot forgive those who harm strangers  
 I have not known.) But lead us not (would You lead us, lead Your children?)  
 into temptation (into temptation? What are You testing us for? Having  
 survived the womb, have we further testing to undergo? Isn't that enough?  
 We have been born, man! You have given us life. Hast thou not

\* fill in

days few? Cease, then, and let me alone, that I may take comfort a little,  
 before I go whence I shall not return!) and deliver us from evil (Oh You who

created Evil, deliver us from It and You.) Amen. (I should have been carried from the womb to the grave.)

ATTENTION: YOU WHO ENNOBLED HUMAN NATURE BY CREATING IT:

I, I have caused a miracle. I gave her the eyes. I gave her the blue, blue two blue eyes. Cobalt blue. A streak of it right out of your own blue heaven. ~~Silence! Silence!~~ No one else will see her blue eyes. But she will. And she will live happily ever after. I, I have found it meet and right so to do.

Now you are jealous. You are jealous of me. ~~But I'm going to die anyway, and be damned anyway (because of the little girls? because of Papa?) But now I can die good because now I can die God.~~

You see? I, too, have created. Not aboriginally, like you, but Creation is a heady wine, more for the Taster than the Brewer.

Having therefore, imbibed, as it were, of the nectar, I am not afraid of You, of Death, not even of Life, and it's all right about Velma; and it's all right about Papa; and it's all right about the Greater and the Lesser Antilles. Quite all right. Quite.

With kindest regards, I remain,

Your

Micah Elihue Whitcomb

Soaphead Church folded the sheets of paper into three equal parts and slipped them into an envelope. Although he had no seal he longed for

sealing wax. He removed a cigar box from under the bed and rumaged about in it. There were some of his most precious things: a sliver of jade, that had dislodged from a cuff link at the Chicago hotel, a gold pendant shaped like a Y with a piece of coral attached to it that had belonged to the mother he never knew; four large hairpins that Velma had left on the rim of the bathroom sink, a powder blue grograin ribbon from the head of a little girl named Precious Jewel, a blackened faucet head from the sink in a jail cell in Cincinnati, two marbles he had found under a bench in Morningside Park on a very fine Spring Day; an old Lucky Hart catalogue that smelled still of nut brown and mocha face powder, and lemon vanishing cream. Distracted by his things, he forgot what he had been looking for. The effort to recall was too great; there was a buzzing in his head and a wash of fatigue overcame him. He closed his box, eased himself out on the bed and slipped into an ivory sleep from which he could not hear the tiny yelps of an old lady who had come out of her candy store and found the still carcass of an old dog named Bob.

## SUMMER

I have only to break into the tightness of a strawberry, and I see summer--its dust and lowering skies. It remains for me a season of storms. The parched days and sticky nights are undistinguished in my mind, but the storms, the violent sudden storms both frightened and <sup>quenched</sup> ~~shook~~ me. But my memory is uncertain; I recall a summer storm in the town where we lived and imagine a summer my mother knew in 1929. There was a tornado that year, she said, that blew away half of South Lorain. I mix up her summer with my own. Biting the strawberry, thinking of storms, I see her. A slim young girl in a pink crepe dress. One hand is on her hip; the other ~~xxx~~ lolls about her thigh--waiting. The wind swoops her up, high above the houses, but she is still standing, hand on hip. Smiling. The anticipation and promise in her lolling hand are not altered by the havoc. In the summer tornado of 1929, my mother's hand is unextinguished. She is strong, smiling, and relaxed while the world falls down about her. So much for memory. Public fact becomes private reality, and the seasons of a midwestern town become the Moirai of our small lives.

The summer was already thick when Frieda and I received our seeds. We had waited since April for the magic package containing the packets and packets of seeds we were to sell for five cents each, ~~xxxxxx~~ which would entitle us to a new bicycle. We believed it and.

and spent a major part of every day trooping about the town selling them. Although mama had restricted us to the homes of people she knew or the neighborhoods familiar to us, we knocked on all doors, and floated in and out of every houses that opened to us. twelve room houses that sheltered half as many families, smelling of grease and urine; tiny wooden four room houses tucked into bushes near the railroad tracks; the up-over places--apartments over fish markets, butcher shops, furniture stores, saloons, restaurants; tidy brick houses with flowered carpets and glass bowls with fluted edges.

During that summer of the seed-selling we thought about the money, thought about the seeds, and listened with only half an ear to what people were saying. In the houses of people who knew us we were asked to come in and sit, given cold water or lemonade; and while we sat there being refreshed the people continued there conversations or went about thier chores. Little by little we began to piece a story together, a secret, terrible, awful story. And it was only after two or three such vaguely overheard conversations that we realized that the story was about Pecola. Properly placed the fragments of talk ran like this:

"Did yo hear about that girl?

What? Pregnant?

Yas. But guess who?

Who? I dont know all these little old boys.

That's just it. Aint no little old boy. They say its Cholly.

Cholly? Her Daddy?

Uh Huh.

Lord. Have mercy. That dirty nigger.

Member that time he tried to burn them up? I knew he was crazy for sure then.

What's she gone do? The mama?

Keep on like she been I reckon. He taken off.

County aing gone let her keep that baby is they?

Dont know.

None of them Breedlove's seem right anyhow. That boy is off somewhere every minute and the girl was always foolish.

Dont nobody know nothing about them anyway. Where they come from or nothing. Dont seem to have no people.

What you reckon make him do a thing like that?

Beats me. Just nasty.

Welll they out her out of school

Ought to. She carry some of the blame.

Oh come on. She aint but twelve or so.

Yeah. But you knever know. How come she didn't fight him?

Mabe she did.

Yeah? You never know?

Well it probably wont live. They say the way her mama beat her she lucky to be alive herself.

She be lucky if it dont live. Bound to be the ugliest thing walking.

Cant help but be. Ought to be a law: two ugly people doubling up like that to make more ugly. Be better off in the ground.

Well I wouldnt worry none. It be a miracle if it live.

Our astonishmentwas short lived for it gave way to a curious kind of defensive shame; we were embarrassed for Pecola, hurt for her, and finally we just felt sorry for her. Our sorrow drove out of

all thoughts of the new bycycle. And I believe our sorrow was the more intense because nobody else seemed to share it. They were disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited by the story. But we ~~waited~~<sup>listened</sup> for the one who would say Poor little girl, or poor baby, but there was only head wagging where those words should have been. We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils.

I thought about the baby that every ody wanted dead, and saw it very clearly. It was in a dark, wet place, its head covered with great O's of wool, the black face holding like nickels, two clean black eyes, the flared nose, kissing-thick lips, and the living breathing silk of black skin. No synthetic yellow <sup>b</sup>angs suspended over marble-blue eyes, no pinched nose and bowline mouth. More strongly than my fondness for Pecola, I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live...just to counter act the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen <sup>P</sup>als. And Freida must have felt the same thing. We did not think of the fact that Pecola was not married, lots of girls had <sup>b</sup>abies who were not married, and we did not dwell on the fact that the baby's father was Pecola's father too; the process of having a baby by any male was incomprehensible to us--at least she knew her father. We thought only of the overwhelming hatred for the unborn baby. We <sup>m</sup>remembered Mrs. Breedlove knocking Pecola down and soothing the pink tears of the frozen doll baby that so nded like the door of our ice box. We remembered the knuckled eyes of school children under the gaze of Meringue Pie and the eyes of these same children when they looked at Pecola. Or maybe we didn't remember; we just knew. We had defended ourselves since memory against everything and everybody, considered all speech to be broken by us, and all gestures subject to careful

analysis, we had become headstrong, devious, and arrogant. Nobody paid us any attention, so we paid very good attention to ourselves. Our limitations were not known to us--not then. Our only handicap was our size; people gave us orders because they were bigger and stronger. So it was with ~~every~~ confidence, ~~fixxxxxx~~ strengthened by pity and pride, that we decided to change the course of events and alter a human life.

What we gone do. Frieda?

What can we do? Miss Johnson said it would be a miracle if it lived.

~~Yeah~~ So let's make a miracle.

Yeah, but how?

We could pray.

That's not enough. Remember last time with the bird?

That was different; it was half dead when we found it.

I don't care, I still think we have to do something really strong this time.

Lets ask <sup>Him</sup> to let Pecola's baby live and promise to be good for a whole month.

OK. But we better give up something so He'll know we really mean it this time.

Give up what? We ain't got nothing. Nothing but the seed money, two dollars.

We could give that. Or, you know <sup>what</sup> we could give up the bicycle. Bury the money and ...plant the seeds.

All of the money?

Well, Claudia, do you want to do it or not?

OK. I just thought... OK.

We have to do it right, now. We'll bury the money over by her house so we cant go back and dig it up, and we'll plant the seeds out <sup>when</sup> back of our house so we can watch over them. And ~~if~~ they come up, we'll know everything is all right. All right?

All right. Only let me sing this time. You say the magic words.

~~LOOK LOOK HERE COMES A FRIEND THE FRIEND WILL PLAY WITH JANET THEY WILL PLAY A GOOD GAME PLAY JANE PLAY~~

How many times a minute are you going to look inside that old thing?

I didn't look in a long time.

You did too--

So what? I can look if I want to.

I didn't say you couldn't. I just don't know why you have to look every minute. They aren't going anywhere.

I know it. I just like to look.

You scared they might go away?

Of course not. How can they go away?

The others went away.

They didn't go away. They changed.

Go away. Change. What's the difference?

A lot. Mr. Soaphead said they would last forever.

Forever and ever Amen?

Yes, if you want to know.

You don't have to be so smarty when you talk to me.

I'm not being smarty. You started it.

I'd just like to do something else besides watch you stare in that mirror.

You're just jealous.

I am not.

You are. You wish you had them.

Ha. What would I look like with blue eyes?

Nothing much.

If you're going to keep this up, I may as well go on off by myself.

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No. Don't go. What you want to do?

We could go outside and play, I guess.

But it's too hot.

You can take your old mirror. Put it in your coat pocket and you can look at yourself up and down the street.

Boy! I never would have thought you'd be so jealous.

Oh, come on!

You are.

Are what?

Jealous.

Okay. So I'm jealous.

See. I told you.

No. I told you.

Are they really nice?

Yes. Very nice.

Just "very nice"?

Really, truly, very nice.

Really, truly, bluey nice?

Oh God. You are crazy.

A am not!

I didn't mean it that way.

Well, what did you mean?

Come on. It's too hot in here.

Wait a minute. I can't find my shoes.

Here they are.

Oh. Thank you.

Got your mirror?

Yes dearie...

Well let's go then... Ow!

What's the matter?

The sun is too bright. It hurts my eyes.

Not mine. I don't even blink. Look. I can look right at the sun.

Don't do that.

Why not? It doesn't hurt. I don't even have to blink.

Well, blink anyway. You make me feel funny, staring at the sun like that.

Feel funny how?

I don't know.

Yes you do. Feel funny how?

I told you I don't know.

Why don't you look at me when you say that? You're looking drop-eyed like Mrs. Breedlove.

Mrs. Breedlove look drop-eyed at you?

Yes. Now she does. Ever since I got my blue eyes, she look away from me all of the time. Do you suppose she's jealous too?

Could be. They are pretty, you know.

I know. He really did a good job. Everybody's jealous. Every time I look at somebody they look off.

Is that why nobody has told you how pretty they are?

Sure it is. Can you imagine? Something like that happening to a person,

and nobody but nobody saying anything about it? They all try to pretend they don't see them. Isn't that funny? I said isn't that funny?

Yes.

You are the only one who tells me how pretty they are.

Yes.

You are a real friend. I'm sorry about picking on you before. I mean saying you were jealous and all.

That's all right.

No. Really. You are my very best friend. Why didn't I know you before?

You didn't <sup>need</sup> want me before.

Didn't <sup>need</sup> want you?

I mean...you were so unhappy before. I guess you didn't notice me before.

I guess you're right. And I was so lonely for friends. And you were right here. Right before my eyes.

No, honey. Right after your eyes.

What?

What does Maureen think about your eyes?

She doesn't say anything about them. Has she said anything to you about them?

No. Nothing.

Do you like Maureen?

Oh. She's all right. For a half-white girl, that is.

I know what you mean. But would you like to be her friend? I mean would you like to go around with her or anything?

No.

Me neither. But she sure is popular.

Who wants to be popular?

Not me.

Me neither.

But you couldn't be popular any way. You don't even go to school.

You don't either.

I know. But I used to.

What did you stop for?

They made me.

Who made you?

I don't know. After that first day at school when I had my blue eyes?

Well, the next day they had Mrs. Winder come out. <sup>Breedlove</sup> Now I don't go any more. But I don't care.

You don't?

No, I don't. They're just prejudiced, that's all.

Yes, they sure are prejudiced.

Just because I got blue eyes, bluer than theirs, they're prejudiced.

That's right.

They are bluer, aren't they?

Oh yes. Much bluer.

Bluer than Joanna's?

Much bluer than Joanna's.

And bluer than Michelena's?

Much bluer than Michelena's.

I thought so. Did Michelena say anything to you about my eyes?

No. Nothing.

Did you say anything to her?

~~Yes~~ No.

How come?

How come what?

How come you don't talk to anybody?

I talk to you.

Besides me.

I don't like anybody besides you.

Where do you live?

I told you once.

What is your mother's name?

Why are you so busy meddling me?

I just wondered. You don't talk to anybody. You don't go to school. And nobody talks to you.

How do you know nobody talks to me?

They don't. When you're in the house with me, even Mrs. Winder doesn't say anything to you. Ever. Sometimes I wonder if she even sees you. *Brenda*

Why wouldn't she see me?

I don't know. She almost walks right over you.

Maybe she doesn't feel too good since Cholly's gone.

Oh yes. You must be right.

She probably misses him.

I don't know why <sup>he</sup> ~~se~~ would. All he did was get drunk and beat her up.

Well you know how grown-ups are.

Yes. No. How are they?

Well she probably loved him anyway.

HIM?

Sure. Why not? Anyway, if she didn't love him she sure let him do it to her a lot.

That's nothing.

How do you know?

I saw them all the time. She didn't like it.

Then why'd she let him do it to her?

Because he made her.

How could somebody make you do something like that?

Easy.

Oh yeah? How easy?

They just make you, that's all.

I guess you're right. And Cholly could make anybody do anything.

He could not.

He made you, didn't he?

Shut up!

I was only teasing.

Shut up!

Okay. Okay.

He just tried, see? He didn't do anything. You hear me?

I'm shutting up.

You'd better. I don't like that kind of talk.

I said I'm shutting up.

You always toak so dirty. Who told you about that anyway?

I forget.

Sammy?

No. You did.

I did not.

You did. You said he tried to do it to you when you were sleeping on the couch.

See there! You don't even know what you're talking about. It was when I was washing dishes.

Oh yes. Dishes.

By myself. In the kitchen.

Well, I'm glad you didn't let him.

Yes.

Did you?

Did I what?

Let him.

Now who's crazy.

I am I guess.

You sure are.

Still...

Well. Go ahead. Still what?

I wonder what it would be like.

Horrible.

Really?

Yes. Horrible.

Then why didn't you tell Mrs. Winder?

*Bredlow*

I did tell her!

I don't mean about the first time. I mean about the second time, when you were sleeping on the couch.

I wasn't sleeping. I was reading.

You don't have to shout.

You don't understand anything, do you? She didn't even believe me when I told her.

So that's why you didn't tell her about the second time?

She wouldn't have believed me then either.

You're right. No use telling her when she wouldn't believe you.

That's what I'm trying to get through your thick head.

Okay. I understand now. Just about.

What do you mean just about?

You sure are mean today.

You keep on saying mean and sneaky things. I thought you were my friend.

I am. I am.

Then leave me alone about Cholly.

Okay.

There's nothing more to say about him, anyway. He's gone anyway.

Yes. Good riddance.

Yes. Good riddance.

And Sammy's gone too.

And Sammy's gone too.

So there's no use talking about it. I mean them.

No. No use at all.

It's all over now.

Yes.

And you don't have to be afraid of Cholly coming at you any more.

No.

That was horrible, wasn't it?

Yes.

The second time too?

Yes.

Really? The second time too?

Leave me alone! You better leave me alone.

Can't you take a joke? I was only funning.

I don't like to talk about dirty things.

Me neither. Let's talk about something else.

What? What will we talk about?

Why, your eyes.

Oh yes. My eyes. My blue eyes. Let me look again.

See how pretty they are.

Yes. They get prettier each time I look at them.

They are the prettiest I've ever seen.

Really?

Oh yes.

Prettier than the sky?

Oh yes. Much prettier than the sky.

Prettier than AliceandJerry Storybook eyes?

Oh yes. Much prettier than AliceandJerry Storybook eyes.

And prettier than Joanna's?

Oh yes. And bluer too.

Bluer than Michelena's?

Yes.

Are you sure?

Of course I'm sure.

You don't sound sure...

Well I am sure. Unless...

Unless what?

Oh nothing. I was just thinking, about a lady I saw yesterday. Her eyes  
sure were blue. But no. Not bluer than yours.

Are you sure?

Yes. I remember them now. Yours are bluer.

I'm glad.

Me too. I'd hate to think that there was anybody around with bluer eyes than  
yours. I'm sure there isn't. Not around here anyway.

But you don't know, do you? You haven't seen everybody, have you?

No. I haven't.

So there could be, couldn't there?

Not hardly.

But maybe. Maybe. You said "around here." Nobody "around here" probably  
has bluer eyes. What about someplace else? Even if my eyes are bluer than  
Joanna's and bluer than Michelena's and bluer than that Lady's you saw, suppose  
there is somebody way off somewhere with bluer eyes than mine?

Don't be silly.

There could be. Couldn't there?

Not hardly.

But suppose. Suppose a long way off. In Cincinnati, say, there is somebody whose eyes are bluer than mine? Suppose there are two people with bluer eyes?

So what? You asked for blue eyes. You got blue eyes.

He should have made them bluer.

Who?

Mr. Soaphead.

Did you say what color blue you wanted them?

No. I forgot.

Oh. Well.

Look. Look over there. At that girl. Look at her eyes. Are they bluer than mine?

No. I don't think so.

Did you look real good?

Yes.

Here comes someone. Look at his. See if they're bluer.

You're being silly. I'm not going to look at everybody's eyes.

You have to.

No I don't.

Please. If there is somebody with bluer eyes than mine, then maybe there is somebody with the bluest eyes. The bluest eyes in the whole world.

That's just too bad, isn't it?

Please help me look.

No.

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But suppose my eyes aren't blue enough?

Blue enough for what?

Blue enough for... I don't know. Blue enough for something. Blue enough...

for you!

I'm not going to play with you any more.

Oh. Don't leave me.

Yes. I am.

Why? Are you mad at me?

Yes.

Because my eyes aren't blue enough? Because I don't have the bluest eyes?

No. Because you're acting silly.

Don't go. Don't leave me. Will you come back if I get them?

Get what?

The bluest eyes. Will you come back then?

Of course I will. I'm just going away for a little while.

You promise?

Sure. I'll be back. Right before your very eyes.

So it was.

A little black girl yearned for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment.

We saw her sometimes, Frieda and I, ...after the baby came too soon and died. After the gossip and the slow wagging of heads. Sam was so sad to see. Grown people looked away; children, those who were not frightened by her, laughed outright.

The damage done was total. She spent her days, her tendrils, sap-green days, walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach--could not even see--but which filled the valleys of ~~its~~ <sup>the</sup> mind.

We tried to see her without looking at her, and never, never went near. Not because she was absurd, or repulsive, or because we were frightened, but because we had failed her. Our flowers never grew. ~~If we had only been more careful.~~ I was convinced that Frieda was right; that I had planted them too deeply. How could I have been so sloven? So we avoided Pecola Breedlove...forever.

e/ And the years folded up like pocket handkerchiefs. Sammy left town long ago; Cholly died in the workhouse; Mrs. Breedlove still does house-

work. And Pecola is somewhere in that little brown house <sup>She</sup> ~~and~~ and her mother moved to on the edge of town where you can see her even now once in a while. The birdlike gestures are worn away to a mere poking and plucking her way between the tire rims and the sunflowers, between Coke bottles and milkweed, among all the waste and beauty of the world--which is what she herself was. All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us--all who knew her--felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us; her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used--to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and so ~~deserved~~ our contempt. We honed our egos on her; padded our characters with her frailty and yawned in the fantasy of our strength.

And fantasy it was for we were not strong, only aggressive; we were not free, merely licensed; <sup>we</sup> were not compassionate, we were polite; not good, but well behaved. We courted death in order to call ourselves brave and hid like thieves from life. We substituted good grammar for intellect; we switched habits to simulate maturity; we re-arranged lies and called it truth.

She, however, stepped over into madness, a madness which protected her from us simply because it bored us in the end .

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Oh, some of us "loved" her. The Maginot Line. And Cholly loved her. I'm sure he did. He, at any rate was the one who loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her. But his touch was fatal and the something he gave her filled the matrix of her agony with death. Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly but the love of a free man is never safe. There is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shown, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover's inward eye. Nothing is more destructive than the love of loveless people.

And now when I see her squandering the garbage for what? the thing we assassinated? I talk about her I did not plant the seeds too deeply; how it was instead the fault of the earth, the land, of our town. I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to meagolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, much, much, much too late.

and

John 7/20/1911