Toni Morrison

THE BLUEST EYE

With a new Afterword by the author

1970 (1993)

A PLUME BOOK
Spring
The first twigs are thin, green, and supple. They break into a complete circle, but will not break. Their delicate, snowy hopelessness shooting from forsythia and like bushes meant only a change in whipping style. They beat us differently in the spring. Instead of the dull pain of a winter strap, there were these new green swishes that lost their sting long after the whipping was over. There was a nervous tension in these long twigs that made us long for the steady strokes of a strap or the firm but honest slap of a hairbrush. Even now spring for me is shut through with the remembered ache of swifthings, and forsythia holds no cheer.

Sunk in the grass of an empty lot on a spring Saturday, I split the stems of milkweed and thought about ants and peach pits and death and where the world went when I closed my eyes. I must have lain long in the grass, for the shadow that was in front of me when I left the house had disappeared when I went back. I entered the house, as the
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house was bustling with an uneasy quiet. Then I heard my mother singing something about trains and Arkansas. She came in the back door with some folded yellow curtains which she piled on the kitchen table. I sat down on the floor to listen to the song's story, and noticed how strangely she was behaving. She still had her hat on, and her shoes were dusty, as though she had been walking in deep dirt. She put on some water to roll and then swept the porch; then she hoisted out the curtain stretchers, but instead of putting the dump curtains on it, she swept the porch again. All the time singing about trains and Arkansas.

When she finished, I went to look for Frieda. I found her upstairs lying on our bed, crying she tired, whispering cry that follows the first wailings—mostly gasps and shudderings. I lay on the bed and looked at the tiny bunches of wild roses sprinkled over her dress. Many washings had faded their colors and dimmed their outlines.

"What happened, Frieda?"
She lifted a swollen face from the crook of her arm. Shuddering still, she sat up, letting her thin legs dangle over the bedside. I knelt on the bed and picked up the hem of my dress to wipe her running nose. She never liked wiping noses on clothes, but this time she let me. It was the way Mama did with her apron.

"Did you get a whipping?"
She shook her head no.

"Then why you crying?"
"Because."

"Because what?"
"Mr. Henry."

"What'd he do?"
"Daddy beat him up."

"What for? The Maginot Line? Did he find out about the Maginot Line?"
"No."

"Well, what, then? Come on, Frieda. How come I can't know?"
"He . . . picked at me."

"Picked at you? You mean like Soaphead Church?"
"Sort of."

"He showed his privates at you?"
"No, no. He touched me."

"Where?"
"Here and here. She pointed to the tiny breasts that, like two fallen acorns, scattered a few faded rose traves on her chest.

"Really? How did it feel?"
"Oh, Claudia. She sounded put-out. I wasn't asking the right questions.

"It didn't feel like anything."
"But wasn't it supposed to? Feel good, I mean?" Frieda sucked her teeth. "What'd he do? Just walk up and pinch them?"

She sighed. "First he said how pretty I was. Then he grabbed my arm and touched me."

"Where was Mama and Daddy?"
"Over at the garden wedding."

"What'd you say when he did it?"
"Nothing. I just ran out the kitchen and went to the garden."

"Mama said we was never to cross the tracks by ourselves."
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"Well, what would you do? Set there and let him pinch you?"
I looked at my chest. "I don't have nothing to pinch. I'm never going to have nothing."
"Oh, Claudia, you're jealous of everything. You want him to?"
"No, I just get tired of having everything last."
"You do not. What about scarlet fever? You had that first."
"Yes, but it didn't last. Anyway, what happened at the garden?"
"I told Mama, and she told Daddy, and we all went home, and he was gone, so we waited for him, and when Daddy saw him come up on the porch, he threw our old tricycle at his head and knocked him off the porch."
"Did he die?"
"Now. He got up and started singing 'Nearer My God to Thee.' Then Mama hit him with a broom and told him to keep the Lord's name out of his mouth, but he wouldn't stop, and Daddy was cursing, and everybody was screaming."
"Oh, shoot, I always mis stuff."
"And Mr. Ruford came running out with his gun, and Mama told him to go somewhere and sit down, and Daddy said no, give him the gun, and Mr. Ruford did, and Mama screamed, and Mr. Henry shut up and started running, and Daddy shot at him and Mr. Henry jumped out of his shoes and kept on running in his socks. Then Rosemary came out and said that Daddy was going to jail, and l hit her."
"Real hard?"
"Real hard."

"Is that when Mama whipped you?"
"She didn't whip me, I told you."
"Then why you crying?"
"Miss Dunton came in after everybody was quiet, and Mama and Daddy was fussing about who let Mr. Henry in anyway, and she said that Mama should take me to the doctor, because I might be ruined, and Mama started screaming all over again."
"At you?"
"No, At Miss Dunton."
"But why were you crying?"
"I don't want to be ruined!"
"What's ruined?"
"You know. Like the Maginot Line. She's ruined. Mama said so. The tears came back.
An image of Frieda, big and fat, came to mind. Her thin legs swollen, her face surrounded by layers of rough skin. I too begin to feel tears.
"But, Frieda, you could exercise and not eat."
She shrugged.
"Besides, what about China and Poland? They're ruined too, aren't they? And they ain't fat."
"That's because they drink whiskey. Mama says whiskey ate them up."
"You could drink whiskey."
"Where would I get whiskey?"
We thought about this. Nobody would sell it to us; we had no money, anyway. There was never any in our house. Who would have some?
"Pecola," I said. "Her father's always drunk. She can get us some."
"You think so?"
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"Sure, Cholly's always drunk. Let's go ask her. We don't have to tell her what we did.
"Now?"
"Sure, now."
"What'll we tell Mama?"
"Nothing. Let's just go out the back. One at a time. So she won't notice."
"O.K. You go first, Claudia."
We opened the fence gate at the bottom of the backyard and ran down the alley.
Pecola lived on the other side of Broadway. We had never been in her house, but we knew where it was. A two-story gray building that had been a store downstairs and had an apartment upstairs.
Nobody answered our knock on the front door, so we walked around to the side door. As we approached, we heard radio music and looked to see where it came from. Above us was the second-story porch, lined with slanting, rotting rails, and sitting on the porch was the Maginot Line herself. We stared up and automatically reached for the other's hand. A mountain of flesh, she lay rather than sat in a rocking chair. She had no shoes on, and each foot was poked between a railing: tiny baby toes at the tip of puffy feet; swollen ankles smoothed and tightened the skin; massive legs like tree stumps parted wide at the knees, over which spread two roads of soft flabby inner thigh that kissed each other deep in the shade of her dress and closed. A dark-brown root-beer bottle, like a burned limb, grew out of her dimpled hand. She looked at us down through the porch railings and emitted a low, long belch. Her eyes were as clean as rain, and again I remembered the waterfall.

Neither of us could speak. Both of us imagined we were seeing what was to become of Pecola. The Maginot Line smiled at us.
"You all looking for somebody?"
I had to pull my tongue from the roof of my mouth to say, "Pecola—she live here?"
"Uh-huh, but she ain't here now. She gone to her mama's work place to git the wash."
"Yes, ma'am. Shit coming back?"
"Uh-huh. She got to hang up the clothes before the sun goes down."
"Oh."
"You can wait for her. Wanna come up here and wait?"
We exchanged glances. I looked back up at the broad cinnamon roads that met in the shadow of her dress. Frieda said, "No, ma'am."
"Well," the Maginot Line seemed interested in our problem. "You can go to her mama's work place, but it's way over by the lake."
"Where by the lake?"
"That big white house with the wheelbarrow full of flowers."
It was a house that we knew, having admired the large white wheelbarrow tilted down on spiked wheels and planted with seasonal flowers.
"Ain't that too far for you all to go walking?"
Frieda scratched her knee.
"Why don't you wait for her? You can come up here. Want some pop?" Those rain-soaked eyes lit up, and her smile was full, not like the pinched and holding-back smile of other grownups.
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I moved to go up the stairs, but Frieda said, "No, ma'am, we ain't allowed." I was amazed at her courage and frightened of her sadness. The smile of the Maginot Line slipped. "Ain't flowed?"

"No'm."

"Ain't flowed to what?"

"Go in your house."

"Is that right? The waterfalls were still. "How come?"

"My mama said so. My mama said you raised."

The waterfalls began to run again. She put the root beer bottle to her lips and drank it empty. With a graceful movement of the wrist, a gesture so quick and small we never really saw it, only remembered it afterward, she tossed the bottle over the rail at us. It split at our feet, and slush of brown glass dappled our legs before we could jump back. The Maginot Line put a fist hand on one of the folds of her mouth and laughed. As her just a deep humming with her mouth closed, then a sharper, warmer sound. Laughter at once beautiful and frightening. She let her head tilt sideways, closed her eyes, and shook her massive trunk, letting the laughter fall like a wash of red leaves all around us. Scraps and curls of the laughter followed us as we ran. One breath gave out at the same time our legs did. After we voted against a tree, our heads on crossed forearms, I said,

"Let's go home."

Frieda was still angry—fighting, she believed, for her life. "No, we got to get it now."

"We can't go all the way to the lake."

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"Yes we can. Come on."

"Mama gone get us."

"No she ain't. Besides, she can't do nothing but whip us."

That was true. She wouldn't kill us, or 'cause a terrible laugh at us, or throw a bottle at us.

We walked down one-lined streets of soft gray houses leaning like tired ladies... The streets changed; houses looked more sturdy, their paint was newer, porch posts straighter, yards deeper. Then came brick houses set well back from the street, fronted by yards edged in shrubbery clipped into smooth cones and balls of velvet green.

The lakefront houses were the loveliest. Garden furniture, ornaments, windows like shiny eyeglasses, and no sign of life. The backyards of those houses felt away in green slopes down to a strip of sand, and then the blue Lake Erie, lapsing all the way to Canada. The orange-patched sky of the steel-plant section never reached this part of town. This sky was almost blue.

We reached Lake Shore Park, a city park laid out with rosebuds, fountains, bowling greens, picnic tables. It was empty now, but sweetly expectant of crowd, white, well-behaved children and parents who would play there above the lake in summers before half-running, half-stumbling down the slope to the welcoming water. Black people were not allowed in the park, and so it filled our dreams.

Right before the entrance to the park was the large white house with the wheelbarrow full of flowers. Short crocus blades sheathed the purple-and-white hearts that so wished to be first they endured the chill and rain of
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early spring. The walkway was flagged in calculated disorder, hiding the cunning symmetry. Only fear of
discovery and the knowledge that we did not belong kept
us from loitering. We circled the proud house and went
to the back.

There on the tiny rusted stoop sat Pecola in a light red
sweater and blue cotton dress. A little wagon was parked
near her. She seemed glad to see us.

"Hi."

"Hi."

"What you all doing here?" She was smiling, and since
it was a rare thing to see on her, I was surprised at the
pleasure it gave me.

"We're looking for you."

"Who told you I was here?"

"The Maginot Line."

"Who is that?"

"That big fat lady. She lives over you."

"Oh, you mean Miss Marie. Her name is Miss Marie."

"Well, everybody calls her Miss Maginot Line. Ain't
you scared?"

"Scared of what?"

"The Maginot Line."

Pecola looked genuinely puzzled. "What for?"

"Your mama let you go in her house? And eat out of
her plate?"

"She don't know I go. Miss Marie is nice. They all
niece."

"Oh, yeah," I said, "she tried to kill us."

"Who? Miss Marie? She don't bother nobody."

"Then how come your mama don't let you go in her
house if she so nice?"
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and brilliant copperware. Odors of must, vegetables, and something freshly baked mixed with a scent of Fels Naptha.

"I'm gone get the wash. You all stand stock still right there and don't mess up nothing." She disappeared behind a white swinging door, and we could hear the unwoven rag of her footsteps as she descended into the basement.

Another door opened, and in walked a little girl, smaller and younger than all of us. She wore a pink sunbonnet dress and pink fluffy bedroom slippers with two bunny ears pointed up from the tips. Her hair was corn yellow and bound in a thick ribbon. When she saw us, she darted across her face for a second. She looked anxiously around the kitchen.

"Where's Polly?" she asked.

The familiar violence rose in me. Her calling Mrs. Breedlove Polly, whose even Pecola called her mother Mrs. Breedlove, seemed reason enough to scratch her.

"She's downstairs," I said.

"Polly?" she called.

"Look," Frieda whispered, "look at that.‖ On the counter near the stove in a silver pan was a deep-dish berry cobbler. The purple juice bursting here and there through crust. We moved closer. It's still hot," Frieda said.

Pecola stretched her hand to touch the pan, lightly, to see if it was hot.

"Polly, come here," the little girl called again. It may have been nervousness, wkwiness, but the pan tilted under Pecola's fingers and fell to the floor, splattering blackish-blueberries everywhere. Most of the juice splashed on Pecola's legs, and the burn must have been painful, for

she cried out and began hopping about just as Mrs. Breedlove entered with a tightly packed laundry bag. In one gallon she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pot juice, one leg folding under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and me by implication.

"Crazy fool . . . my floor, mess . . . look what you . . . work . . . get out . . . now that . . . crazy . . . my floor, my floor, . . . my floor." Her words were hotter and darker than the smoking berries, and we backed away in dread.

The little girl in pink started to cry. Mrs. Breedlove turned to her. "Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don't cry no more. Polly will change it." She went to the sink and turned on water on a fresh towel. Over her shoulder she spit out words to us like rotten pieces of apple. "Pick up that wash and get on out of here, so I can get this mess cleaned up."

Pecola picked up the laundry bag, heavy with wet clothes, and we stepped hurriedly out the door. As Pecola put the laundry bag in the wagon, we could hear Mrs. Breedlove hushing and soothing the tears of the little pink-and-yellow girl.

"Who were they, Polly?"

"Don't worry none, baby."

"You gonna make another pie?"

"Course I will."

"Who were they, Polly?"

"Hush. Don't worry none," she whispered, and the honey in her words complemented the sundown spilling on the lake.
alone of all the children had no nickname; why there were no funny jokes and anecdotes about funny things she had done; why no one ever remarked on her food preferences—no saving of the wing or neck for her—no cooking of the peas in a separate pot without rice because she did not like rice, why nobody teased her, why she never felt at home anywhere, or that she belonged anywhere. Her general feeling of separateness and unworthiness she blamed on her foot. Restricted, as a child, to this cocoon of her family’s spinning, she cultivated quiet and private pleasures. She liked, most of all, to arrange things. To line things up in rows—jars on shelves at canning, peach pits on the step, sticks, stones, leaves—and the members of her family let these arrangements be. When by some accident somebody scattered her rows, they always stopped to retrieve them for her, and she was never angry, for it gave her a chance to rearrange them again. Whatever portable plurality she found, she organized into neat lines, according to their size, shape, or gradations of color. Just as she would never align a pine needle with the leaf of a cottonwood tree, she would never put the jars of tomatoes next to the green beans. During all of her four years of going to school, she was enchanted by numbers and deplored by words. She missed—without knowing what she missed—paints and crayons.

Near the beginning of World War I, the Williamses discovered, from returning neighbors and kin, the possibility of living better in another place. In shifts, lots, batches, mixed in with other families, they migrated, in six months and four journeys, to Kentucky, where there were mines and millwork.
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"When all us left from down home and was waiting down by the depot for the train, it was night time. June bugs was chewing everywhere. They lighted up a tree leaf, and I seen a streak of green every now and again. That was the last time I seen real June bugs. These things up here ain't no June bugs. They's something else. Folks here call 'em fireflies. Down home they was different. But I recollect that streak of green. I recollect it well."

In Kentucky they lived in a real town, ten to fifteen houses on a single street, with water piped right into the kitchen. Ada and Fowler Williams found a five-room frame house for their family. The yard was bounded by a once-white fence against which Pauline's mother planted flowers and within which they kept a few chickens. Some of her brothers joined the Army, one sister died, and two got married, increasing the living space and giving the entire Kentucky venture a feel of luxury. The relaxation was especially comforting to Pauline, who was old enough to leave school.

Mrs. Williams got a job cleaning and cooking for a white minister on the other side of town, and Pauline, now the oldest girl at home, took over the care of the house. She kept the house in repair, pulling the pointed pricker, securing them with bits of wire, collected eggs, swept, cooked, washed, and minded the two younger children—a pair of twins called Chicken and Pe, who were still in school. She was not only good at housekeeping, she enjoyed it. After her parents left for work and the other children were at school or in mines, the house was quiet. The stillness and isolation both suited and enraged her. She could arrange and clean without interruption until two o'clock, when Chicken and Pe came home.

What the war ended and the twins were ten years old, they too left school or work. Pauline was fifteen, still keeping house, but with less enthusiasm. Fantasia about sex and love and touching were drawing her mind and hands away from her work. Changes in weather began to affect her, as did certain sights and sounds. These feelings translated themselves to her in extreme melancholy. She thought of the death of nearly, things, lonely roads, and strangers who appear out of nowhere simply to hold one's hand, woods in which the sun was always setting, in church especially did these dreams grow. The songs mattered her, and while she tried to hold her mind on the wages of sin, her body trembled for redemption, salvation, a mysterious rebirth that would simply happen, with no effort on her part. In none of her fantasies was she ever aggressive; she was usually idling by the river bank, or gathering berries in a field when a someone appeared, with gentle and penetrating eyes, who—with no exchange of words—understood, and before whose glance her foot straightened and her eyes dropped. The someone had no face, no form, no voice, no odor. He was a simple Presence, an all embracing tenderness with strength and a promise of rest. It did not matter that she had no idea of what to do or say to the Presence—after the wordless knowing and the soundless touching, her dreams disintegrated. But the Presence would know what to do. She had only to lay her head on his chest and he would lead her away to the sea, to the sky, to the woods . . . forever.

There was a woman named by who seemed to hold in her mouth all of the words of Pauline's soul, standing a little apart from the choir, 'by sang the dark sweetness that Pauline could not name; she sang the death-defying death
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that Pauline yearned for: she sang of the Stranger who knew...

Precious Lord take my hand
Lead me on, let one stand
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.
Through the storm, through the night
Lead me on to the light
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me on.

When my way grows drear
Precious Lord linger near,
When my life is almost gone
Hear my cry hear my still
Hold my hand lest I fall
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me on.

Thus it was that when the Stranger, the someone, did not appear out of nowhere, Pauline was grateful but not surprised.

He came, scuttling right out of a Kentucky sun on the hottest day of the year. He came big, he came strong, he came with yellow eyes, flaring nostrils, and he came with his own music.

Pauline was leaning idly on the fence, her arms resting on the crossrail between the pickets. She had just put down some biscuit dough and was cleaning the flour from under her nails. Behind her at some distance she heard whistling. One of these rapid, high-note riffs that black boys make up as they go while sweeping, shoveling, or just walking along. A bird of city-street music where laughter belies anxiety, and joy is as short and straight as the blade of a pokeesknife. She listened carefully to the music and let it pull her lips into a smile. The whistling got louder, and still she did not turn around, for she wanted it to last. While smiling to herself and holding fast to the break in summer thoughts, she felt something tickling her foot. She laughed aloud and turned to see. The whistler was bending down tickling her brocker foot and kissing her leg. She could not stop her laughter—no until he looked up at her and she saw the Kentucky sun beneath the yellow, heavy-lidded eyes of Cholly Breedlove.

"When I first said Cholly, I want you to know it was like all the bits of color from that same down home when all us children went berry picking after a funeral and I put some in the pocket of my Sunday dress, and they mashed up and stained my hips. My whole dress was mazed with purple, and it never did wash out. Not the dress nor me. I could feel that purple deep inside me. And that lemonade Mama used to make when Papa came in our tin fields. It be cool and yellowish, with seeds floating near the bottom. And that streak of green them pine bugs made on the trees the night we left from down home. All of them colors was in me. Just sitting there. So when Cholly come up and tickled my feet, it was like them berries, that lemonade, them streaks of green the pine bugs made, all come together. Cholly was then then, with real light eyes. He used to whistle, and when I heard him, chills come on my skin."

Pauline and Cholly loved each other. He seemed to relish her company and even to enjoy her country ways and lack of knowledge about city things. He talked with her about
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er her foot and asked, when they walked through the town or
in the fields, if she were tired. Instead of ignoring her infor-
nity, 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 avoid-
ing the nerves, so its presence was not noticeable or uncom-
fortable. Then the weakened roots, having grown
acustomed 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,
even, were 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 tip of America facing the cold but recep-
tive Canada—What could go wrong?

"Me and Cholly was getting along good then. We
come up north, supposed to be more folks 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
weren't 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, downstairs, all over the
streets—and colored folks few and far between. Northern
colored folk was different too. Diety-like. No better than
white for meanness. They could make you feel just as
no-count, 'cops I didn't expect it from them. That was
the lonesomest 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 reasse-
urance, 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
lump. 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.

Pauline felt uncomfortable 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 going glances and private snickers at her way of talking (saying "chil'ern") and dressing developed in her a desire to try new clothes. When Cholly began to quarrel about the money she wanted, she decided to go to work. Taking a job 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 purchase and began to tell her so. Their marriage was shredded with quarrels. 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 went down, would always linger near. Only now she had a clearer idea of what that man 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, peremptory ways.

"Cholly commenced to getting meaner and meaner and wanted to fight me all of the time, I gave him as good as I got. Had to, look like working for that woman and fighting Cholly was all I did. Terrible. But I bolt on to my job, 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 another worth nothing. You'd think with a pretty house like that and all the money they could hold on to, they would enjoy one another. She hand off and cry over the tiniest 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 ain't got one yet. I recollect once how her baby brother who she put through dentistry school didn't invite them to some big party he threw. They was a big to-do about that. Everybody stayed out 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 lemme really wanted to go to that party, I reckon I'd go anyhow. Never mind what he want. She just pulled 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 that her brother was her friend? Folks can't like folks just 'cause they has the same name. I tried to like that woman myself. She was good about giving me stuff, but I just couldn't like her. Soon as I worked up a good feeling on her account, she'd do something ignorant and start in to telling me how to clean and do. If I left her on her own, she'd drown in dirt. I didn't have to pick up after Chicken and Pie like the 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 be proper to save their lives.
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Her husband ain't hit the boul 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 cursed her and started pulling on me. I would of gone upside his head, but I don't want no dealings with the police. So I taken my things and left. I tried to get back, but 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 didn't 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 gave 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 alimony. All such simple stuff. What was be gone give me alimony out? 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, ma'am.' '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 future. 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 future but won't give you your own money so you can buy you something besides baloney to eat? So I said, 'No good, ma'am. He ain't 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 work and returned to her own housekeeping. But the loneliness in these 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 downtown, she thought about 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 the dark in her memory was refreshed, and she succumbed to her earlier dreams. Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another—physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap. She forgot lust and simple caring for. She regarded love as possessive mating, and romance as the goal of the spirit. It would be for her a well-spring from which she would draw the most destructive emotions, deceiving the lovers and seeking to impress the beloved, curtailing freedom in every way.

She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not 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 flaw became whole, the blind sighted, and the lame and halt threw away their couches. There death was dead, and people 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 love and all there was to hate.
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 knewed, I reckon, that maybe I wasn't as horrid feeling. But them others. They didn't know. They went on. I told them talking to them white women: 'How you feel? Yonna have twist?' Just shockin' 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 meant something awful. The pains wasn't as bad as I let on, but I had to let them people know having a baby was more than a boul' movement. I hurst just like them white women. Just 'cause I wasn't boppin' and rollickin' before didn't 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 pullin' and achin' like theirs? Besides, that doctor don't know what he talking about. He must never seed no more fool. Who say they don't have no pain? Just 'cause she don't cry? 'Cause she can't say it, they think it ain't street? If they looks in her eyes and see them eyeballs rolling back, see the sorrowful look, they'll 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 saw it, it was like looking at a picture of your mama when she was a girl. You know who she is, but she don't look the same. They give her to me for a washing, and she liked to pull my nipple off right away. She caught on fast. Not like Sammy, he was
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 houses, 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 fluffly 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, grayish 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 she 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 she set floated around on deep pile carpets, and there was no uneven sound. Here she found beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise. Mr. Fisher said, "I would rather sell her blueberry cobblers than real estate." She reigned over cupboards stacked high with food that would not be eaten for weeks,
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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 beer slightly dark or with edges not properly trimmed. The slightly seeking fish that she accepted in her own family she would all but throw in the fish man's face if he went 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 dozens, bacon by the rashers, and reveling in her story 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, thin beauty, for herself, a private world, and never introduced it into her aunts, 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's. Into her son she beat a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat a feel of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life.

All the meaningfulness of her life was in her work. For her virtues were intact. She was an active church woman, 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 faults to keep them from having

them, or punished them what 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 ain't even 'member now what held me. He sure ain't give me much of a life. But it wasn't all bad. Sometimes things wasn't all bad. He used to come eating two bed sometimes, not too drunk. I make out like I'm asleep, 'cause it's late, and he taken three dollars out of my pokey bank 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 feel those ridges on the tips of my fingers. I see 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 hand grasp 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 sima-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 he will lean his head down and bite 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 hold 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. I wrap my feet around his back so he can't get away. His face is next to mine. The bed springs sounds like them crickets used to back home. He puts his fingers in mine, and we stretches our arms outwise 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 that 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 don't make no noise, because the chill'en might hear. I begin to feel those little bits of color floating up into me—sleep in me. That streak of green from the juny-bug light, the purple from the berries trickling along my thighs, Mama'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 won't. 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 don't know how, so I put him like you do a baby. He asks me if I'm all right. I say yes. He gets off me and lies down to sleep. I want to say something, but I don't. I don't want to take my mind off the rainbow. I should get up and go to the toilet, but I don't. Besides, Cholly is asleep with his leg throwed over me. I can't move and don't want to.

"But it ain't 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 can't even be next to his sinking drunk self. But I don't care 'bout it no more. My Maker will take care of me. I know He will. I know He will. Besides, it don't 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."
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 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 asafetida 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 Samsun. Samson Fuller."

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

"What for? He wasn’t nowhere around when you was born. Your mama didn’t name you nothing. The nine days wasn’t up before she threw 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.

Two years later he quit school to take a job at Tywon’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-slave stories about how it was when the 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
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the swamp, and the headless body came out at night and went scruffling 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 others 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 to break open a water-melon. Several children were standing around watching. Blue was boasting about on the periphery of the circle—a faint smile of anticipation solemnizing 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 blotched 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 pricking 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 men 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 suggers 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 scents, 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, "dew go da 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 spars of seed, which had 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.

"Got 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. L.e's 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 afterward, she felt poorly. Friends came to see about her. Some made camomile
tear; others rubbed her with liniment. Miss Alice, her closest friend, read the Bible to her. Still she was declining. Advice was profligate, if contradictory.

“Don’t eat any white of eggs.”

“Drink new milk.”

“Chew on this root.”

Aunt Jimmy ignored all but Miss Alice’s Bible reading. She nodded in drowsy appreciation at the words from First Corinthians droned over her. Sweet aperns 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 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. Is 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 slender and hunched over, for he knew she was very, 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 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 revealed. 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 jar 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’n 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, 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 condition. Repeating its cause, what could have been done to prevent the misery from taking hold, and M’Dear’s infallibility. Their voices blended into a thread of nostalgia about pain. Rising and falling, complex in harmony, uncertain in pitch, but constant in the recitative 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, hoeing, pitching, stooping, kneeling, picking—always with young ones underfoot.

But they had been young once. The odor of their armpits and haunches mingled into a lovely musk; their eyes had been fierce, 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 had to be afraid of were black children and each other. But they took all of that and re-created it in their own image. They ran the houses of white people, and knew it. When white men beat their men, they cleaned up the blood and went 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 b e t c o t o r d e s hogs also nudged African violets into bloom; the arabs that loaded sheaves, bales, and sacks rocked babies into sleep. They patted biscuits into flaky 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.

Then 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 rendered their grandchildren. With relief they wrapped their heads in rags, and their breasts in flannel, and raised their feet into felt. They were through with lust and larceny, beyond tears and terror. They alone could walk the roads of Mississippi, the lanes of Georgia, the fields of Alabama unmo- lent. They were old enough to be irritable when and where they chose, tired enough to look forward to death, disinter-ested 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 purity of tragedy and humor, wickedness and seren-ity, truth and fantasy. They chattered far 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 were 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 hands caressing it were the hands of M'Dear.

On a wet Saturday night, before Aunt Jimmey 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 morn- ing 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 hold 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., 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?"
"Eddie'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 known 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."
"Yeah. 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 went. 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 Eddie feels mighty bad."
"Oh, Lord, yes. But I told her the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Wasn't her fault none. She makes good peach pies. But she bound to believe it was the pie did it, and I speck she right."
"Well, she shouldn't worry herself none 'bout that. She was just doing what we all would of done."
"Yeah. '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."
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"I'll say. Did she leave anything?"

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

"Oh, 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?"

"Don't see how. When my daddy died last year this April it cost 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?"

"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 o'clock. She ought to be in the ground by four."

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

"Naw, it's at Jimmy's. Her brother 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 thunders-ous 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 at the graveyard.

Thus the banquet was the exaltation, the harmony, the acceptance of physical frailty, joy in the termination of misery, laughter, relief, a steep hunger for food.

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 pew dry-eyed amid tearful shrieks and shouts of others, wondering if he should try to cry.

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 to 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
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and found the boy standing with some others near the tub where Aunt Jimmy used to boil her clothes.

He ventured a tentative "Hey." They responded with another. The fifteen-year-old 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 flaker, instead of putting it in his mouth and drawing on it, they laughed at him. Shamefaced, he threw the ciga-
rette down. He felt it important to do something to reintegrate himself with Jake. So when he asked Cholly if he knew any girls, Cholly said, "Sure."

All 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.

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 bickiness, 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. Cholly held his breath, waiting for Suky to shut Jake up.

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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 Dar-
lene 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—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 it's 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 backyards until they came to an open field. They ran across it and came to a dry riverbed 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 fuli ripeness would have done. At last their teeth were on edge, and the boys diverted themselves by pelting the girls with the grapes. 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 gully, and when they paused for breath, Jake and Suky were nowhere in sight. Darlene's white cotton dress was stained with juice.
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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. The sun had gone and pulled away its shreds of light. Turning his head to see where the moon was. Cholly caught sight of Darlene in moonlight 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.

"Yeah." She stretched her legs flat on the ground and began to retie her hair ribbon. "Mama gone whup me."

"Naw she ain't."

"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 he 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 becheade 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 rib cage. They were on top of each other in a moment. She corkscrewed her hands into his clothes. He returned 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 buttons, 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 coiling inside him made him close his eyes and regard her means 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 hee. " 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 man.
"Sisit," 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 futilely searching for shelter, while his body remained paralyzed. The flashlight man lifted his gun down from his shoulder, and Cholly heard the clasp of metal. He dropped back to his knees. Darlene had her head averted, her eyes staring out of the lamplight into the surrounding darkness and looking almost unconsidered, as though they had no part in the drama taking place around them. With a violence born of vital helplessness, he pulled her dress up, lowered his trousers and underwear.

"Hee hee hee hee hee." 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 behoof.

"Hee hee hee hee hee." "Come on, coon. Faster. You ain't doing nothing for her."

"Hee hee hee hee hee." 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 hee." Some dogs howled. "Thas them. Thas them. I know thas Old Honey."
did not guess—that hating them would have consumed him, burned 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—but not now. Not in impotence but later, 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. The 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 have 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 settled down to a sticking gravy on everybody’s tongue, Cholly sat on the back porch waiting. It had occurred to him that Darlene might be pregnant. It was a 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.

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

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 scare field, or an empty sawmill. You are from the ground and bought root beer and licorice in little country stores. There was always an axle-tale of woe to tell inquiring black adults, and whites didn’t care, unless they were looking for sport.

When he was several days away, he could go to the back door of nice houses and sell 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 piled this way through the turn of summer, and only the following October did he reach a town big enough 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?"
At the end of the alley he could see men clustered like grapes. One large whooping voice spiraled over the heads of the hunched forms. The kneeling forms, the leaning forms, all intent on one ground spot. As he came closer, he inhaled a rite 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 daintiness 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-mouted 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 fourteen years old, black, and already six feet tall. He searched the faces and saw only eyes, peering eyes, cold eyes, eyes gone flat with malice, others lazed 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 someone 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.

A man in a light-brown jacket stood at the far end of the group. He was gesturing in a quarelsome, 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—all seal. 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 cren space hedged around 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 remem-
stop the fall of water from his eyes. While straining in this way, focusing every erg of energy on his eyes, his bowels suddenly opened up, and before he could realize what he knew, liquid stools were running down his legs. 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.

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 juggled 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 fatal position, paralysed, 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. 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 saw only 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 those 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 posts, 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 basket 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 hack 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.

These women are least of two windows. They get 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. As he drinks, their eyes float up to him through the bottom of the jar, through the slick sweat water. They give him back his manhood, which he takes aimlessly.

The piece of Cholly’s life could become coherent only in the head of a musician. Only those who talk their talk through the gold of warped 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 asafetida bag to the muscadine so the flashlight on his behind to the jar 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 feel whatever he fells—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, “No, sir,” and smile, for he had already killed three white men. Free to take a woman’s insults, for his body had already conquered her. 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 mop her floor, for the knew what and where his maleness was. He was free to drink himself into a silly helplessness, for he had already been a good 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. To
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 feeling 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 he saw or what he felt. Then he became aware that he was uncomfortably next he felt the discomfort dissolve into pleasure. The sequence of his emotions was revolution, guilt, pity, then love. His revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence. Her back hunched that way, her head to one side as though coughing from a permanent and unrelieved blow. Why did she have to look so whipped? She was a child—untutored—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 a bitter duit. What could he do for her—even? What give her? What say to her? What could a burned-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 earn him his own
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respect, that would in turn allow him to accept her love? His hatred of her slked in his stomach and threatened 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 around and around a frying pan, sweeping flecks of black into cold, greasy dishwater. The timid, tucked-in look of the scratching toe—that was what Pauline was doing for the first time he saw her in Kentucky. Leaning over a fence 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 protective-ness. 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.

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 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. Surrounding all of this 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 desire, 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 see only her grayish 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 fact of her mother looming over her.
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 one in which the most intimate relationships were necessary. Having dallied with the priesthood in the Anglican Church, he abandoned it to become a caseworker. Time and misfortunes, however, conspired against him, and he settled finally on a profession that brought him both freedom and satisfaction. He became a "Reader, Adviser, 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 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 asceticism while it developed his preference for solitude. Celibacy was a haven, silence a shield.

All his life he 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,
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 townpeople 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 altar with the host preacher. 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. A Sir Whitcomb, some decaying British nobleman, who chose to integrate 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 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 unaccountable insurgent who chose a restive black, they married "up," lightening the family complexion and thinning out the family features.

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, 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 schoolmasters 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 licentious and licentious, was considered their noble right, and thoroughly enjoyed by most of the less gifted population.

As the years passed, due to the carelessness of some of the Whitcomb 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 intermarriage with the family, however, not on the original genes of the decaying lord. In any case, there were fakes. 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 schoolmaster known for the precision of his justice and the control in his violence. This schoolmaster married a sweet, indolent half-Chinese girl for whom the fatigue of bearing a son was too much. She died soon after childbirth. Her son, named Elh بص Whitcomb, proved the schoolmaster with ample opportunity to work out his theories of education, discipline, and the good life. Little Elh حص learned every-thing he needed to know well, particularly the fine art of self-deception. He read greedily but understood selectively, choosing the bits and pieces of other men's ideas that supported whatever predilection he had at the moment. Thus he chose to remember Hamlet's abase of Ophelia, but not Christ's love of Mary Magdalene; Hanzel's frivolous politics, but not Christ's serious anarchy. He noticed Gibbon's acidity, but not his tolerance, Othello's love for the fair Desdemona, but not Iago's prevaried love of Othello. The works he admired most were Dante's; those he despised most were Dostoyevsky'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-limbed girl who worked as a clerk in a Chinese department store, Yerona. So strong was her affection and zest for life, she did not eliminate the frail, sickly Elh حص from it. She found his fastidious-
nees 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 invisible 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 Elbue's mind.

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

Young Elbue 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 school, 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 faling 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 “founded” himself. Elbue, not knowing where to look, was thrown back on his own devices, and “founded” 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 cosmetics firm, laborer to blacks. He finally settled in Lorain, Ohio, in 1931, pausing himself off as a minister, and inquiring wise 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, decided that he was supernatural rather than unmarried.

Once he understood the decision, he quickly followed through, accepting the name (Soaphed 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 no old dog, Bob, who, although deaf and quiet as she, was not as clean. He slept most of his days away on the back porch, which was Elbue'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 was mangy; his exhausted eyes ran with a sea-green mucus around which quots and flies cluttered. Soaphed 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 being and old age. Soaphed 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 Soaphed from com-
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 tap 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 it 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 pea of tummy. "Maybe. Maybe you can do it for me."

"Do what for you?"
next sentence: How to hang on to the feeling of power. His eye fell on old Bob sleeping on the porch.

"We must make, oh, some offerings, 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 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 picked 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 nodded and swallowed visibly, holding down the vomit. Soaphead walked to the window, his back to the girl. His mind raced, stumbled, and raced again. How to frame 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).

Now.

We in this colony took as our own the most dramatic, and the most obvious, of our white masters' characteristics, which were, of course, their worst. In retaining the identity of our race, we held fast to these characteristics most glorifying to enslavement least troublesome to maintain. Consequently we were not royal but snobbish, not aristocratic but class-conscious; we believed authority to be cruelty to our inferior, and education was beng 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 labor of your days we abhorred.

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. You need to 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
The Rliest Eye

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 disguise, 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, uh, not, to remember the room.

To remember, rather, the time and the place of your business, your adventure. Who can anyone feel for a hotel room? One doesn't feel any more 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 even there.

You remember, do you, how and of what we are made? Let me tell you now about the breasts of little girls. I apologize for the impropriety (is that it?), the impropriety of leaving 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 mine here, Lord. How, why, did you allow it to happen? How is it I could lift 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 struck out at me, oh yes, at me. Slender-chested, sugar-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 them. Salt-sweet, like not quav tame strawberries covered with the light salt sweat of running days and hopping, skipping, jumping hours.

The love of them—the touch, taste, and feel of them—was not just an easy luxuriant human vice; they were, for me, A Thing To Do. Instead of Papa, instead of the Cloth, instead of Velma, and I chose not to do without them. But I didn't go into the church. At least I didn't do that. So to what did I 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 greenness, the moonlight of the archipelago.
The Bluest Eye

Consider; Their hopeful eyes that were undone 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-looking 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. And is it 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-time habit broken for job—but no more.) She came to me for them. She had none of my cards. (Card enclosed.) By the way, I added the Micah—Elisha Micah 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 who 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 toes 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 mine, 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 odor, 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 chased, lame, hale. 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; nor a finger did I lay on her. But I gave her those blue eyes she wanted. Not for
pleasures, and not for money. I did what you did not.

Yours,

Elbridge W. Mainwaring

Susannah Church folded the sheets of paper into three equal parts and slipped them into an envelope. Although he had no need, he looked for making wax. He removed a vinaig

sink, a powder-blue georgette ribbon from the head of a little girl named Precious Jewell, a blackened sawant bead from the sink in a bedroll at Cincinnati's ten dollars he had found under a bench in Mechanicside Park on a very fine spring day; an old Lucky Strike case containing a bottle still of

now-brown and much face powder, and lemon vapooring cream. Distracted by his things, he forgot what he had been looking for. The effort to recall was not great; there was a

bursting in his head, and a wash of fatigue overcame him. He closed his eyes, tossed himself out on the bed, and slipped into an easy sleep least which he could not hear the tiny

yelps of an old lady who had come out of her candy store and heard the still crescendo of an old fog horn Bob.

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