

Straight Outta Pittsburgh

Origins of a gifted son

Lamont B. Steptoe

I always felt that I'd need two lifetimes to be who I wanted to be. The first life I would spend reading books and traveling the world meeting and talking to all kinds of people. In my second lifetime I'd be writing about the lessons of the first. But since this is not possible, I decided that I better begin before this present life runs out. Not that I don't believe in reincarnation. I'm a firm believer in it. I've been here many, many times and have met people in this life that I knew before. Some of them are friends, another is my daughter. However, I haven't learned how to retain the knowledge of all those lives and bring it up like data on a computer screen. So, like everyone else, death somewhat unnerves me. I'm not sure what karmic debts I owe, what divine vengeance has yet to be exacted.

The poet Dylan Thomas said that poems are "statements made on the way to the grave." This is my long blues riff, my solo song en route to the void. It begins in the city that births the Ohio. It begins with a boy who came too early and wasn't supposed to live. A boy who would grow up among omens and signs and spirits. I am that boy.

"She pregnant again?"

"Well, it's been ten years!"

"Ump, ump, ump . . . another mouth to feed and no husband!"

"Who's the father this time?"

"Must be that jet-black niggah I seen her with a couple of months back."

"What his name?"

"Don't know."

"He got a job?"

"Don't know."

"You heard about all them robberies at the street car line?"

"You mean the 88 Frankstown line?"

“Yeah, got so folks scared to get off there!”

“I hope they catch ‘em soon!”

“Most of them take place after dark.”

“Whoever it is, the Penn Township police gonna get ‘em.”

“You know Pistol Pete don’t fool around with no bad niggers. He just soon as shoot ‘em as look at ‘em.”

“Girl, you know that’s right!”

“Pregnant again, huh! Ump, ump, ump...”

Pittsburgh is a city that sits on hills. A whole lotta hills. A city divided by two rivers that come together to make a third. Folks useta be walkin’ up and down all them hills. Kids usta be going to school up and down them hills. They make a game of it, especially when the last bell rings. They come pouring out of them schools like bats exiting a cave at dusk, whooping and hollering, running like herds of wild horses back to their parents, if they got parents, back to whoever is their legal guardian.

Growing up in a certain place shapes you forever. So that wherever you go, you are always of that time and place. I carry those three rivers with me and all those hills like some kinda money that never gets spent and is always in my pocket. Time is another kinda money that is always with you. In my case, it’s the 1950s and the 1960s. Each year, a hundred dollar bill. Twenty years of hundred dollar bills in the pocket of my soul.

Them hills was lessons. Taught you that life was a steep climb before you reached the top. Taught you patience and endurance. The climb was always worth it ‘cuz when you got to the top, you got to look down on the whole world like you was some kinda god.

Growing up in Pittsburgh, you didn’t know nothin’ ‘bout no oceans, except in books. The waters that defined you and yours was rivers. Folks fished in those rivers, drowned in those rivers, stood mesmerized on bridges and stared at those rivers, worked in steel mills along those rivers and traveled to amusement parks in street cars high above those rivers. Three rivers, color of catfish skin, movin’ barges

of coal and iron and steel all over the world. The entire time, your Momma ruled your life in the tribes of the family.

Childhood is a season and within that season are hundreds of other seasons and each carries its mark that baptizes and blesses or curses and damns. The weather from 1949 through 1968 was normal. Winter was winter, Spring was spring, Summer was summer and Autumn was autumn. The world had not yet been broken, although we all trembled in the shadow of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Coming of age in the middle of the twentieth century, we were blessed with the wisdom of elders knowledgeable of values that made the nation great, perhaps the last generation to be so before darkness began to overtake the light.

“Momma, where’s my Daddy?”

“Your Daddy’s dead!”

“How’d he die, Momma?”

“What I say, boy?”

“But how’d he die, Momma?”

“Boy, don’t ask me no more questions, I said, he’s dead!”

“But what am I suppose to write on the forms at school?”

“Write deceased! D-e-c-e-a-s-e-d!”

“But Momma...!” (slap)

“I told you don’t ask me no more questions!”

Momma tucked her children into bed every night. It was a ritual she loved. It was a ritual that her younger children waited for, lived for, needed to make the vanishing back into the void while their bodies simmered and yawned, while they whispered stories to themselves and dreamed of things to come and saw ancestors in timeless time. O to be tucked in by Momma! The sheets tucked beneath the mattress, under the blankets and the chenille spread, a warm pouch in the envelope of time. Then the turning out of the light, the room plunged into darkness, the rich blackness that breathed. Sometimes, Lonnie and Rusty would laugh and giggle or cower under the covers

because one of them would claim to have seen a ghost, heard a noise, detected footsteps, then lie there in fright too scared to look into the jungle-dark room. Then Rusty would fall asleep, his breathing become regular, and Lonnie would be left to contend with the dark.

He would peep out, his face sweating to feel the cool air, longing for sleep that would erase this fright of being alone in the darkened room. And sometimes, just before the “sandman” arrived to blind him to the expired history of his fleeting childhood, he would feel something, someone sit on the bed and, ever so gently, the bed would shake as if in a breeze, as if it were a hammock swaying. Back under the covers his head would go, wishing Rusty were still awake, wishing Momma would return to the room, wishing sleep would take him now. Eventually, it did but not before something quieter than a whisper taught him he was not alone, would never be alone, even when his Mother left him. There was something else, something that could pass through walls, move through time, something that watched him, followed him, guarded him. Something more real than real.

On the corner of Harvard and Euclid avenues stood St. James A.M.E. Church, a red brick structure with blood-red doors. This house of worship was a temple of pure black spirit. Led by the Rev. Augustus C. Sumpter formerly of South Carolina, a fire and brimstone preacher who wore thick spectacles that made him look bug-eyed. Bald and of a light-brown-skinned complexion, this man on Sunday mornings could make you think you was in a Baptist church rather than a Methodist one. Clad in white vestments, this black pope of a preacher could drive out the devils and demons who had taken up residence in souls over the past week. A sufferer of diabetes with two prostheses for legs, he roared out the holy word of God, pounding and stomping to emphasize his points. Elders and deacons dressed up for God would “amen” and moan-sing out Jesus’s good name to back up this thunderer, walking and pacing on the altar against a backdrop of a larger-than-life white Jesus, the

outspreed arms blurred and eroded by rain water that had found its way through the roof to seep over his image.

Folks who delivered mail, worked in the post office, took care of white folks' homes, worked in the steel mills, picked up garbage, worked in bars or buried the dead, moved and moaned, cried out, got up and danced, collapsed in the aisles on blood-red carpets, praising God, overcome by the power of the word, overcome by poverty, overcome by oppression, overcome by disease, overcome by depression, overcome by the rushing moments of time that drowned them day by day. Folks whooped and hollered, cried out to Jesus, began speaking in tongues, imbued with a power that gave them an awesome strength, overcome by a fire that burned them up, made them mad with holiness, electrified them into a dance of righteousness.

Old Rev. Sumpter hurled the words of God at his congregation like Moses hurled the Ten Commandments from the summit down on his sinful tribes. Sweating and pacing, pounding his fist on the pulpit, stomping to the rhythms of his possession, he flung fire into the black, sanctified faces of his flock, made them weep, made them cry out, sing out, pass out, faint and wake up to faint again. This was what they had come for, this weekly ritual of righteousness and redemption. He whipped them with his down-home religion, begged them, pleaded with them, cajoled them, threatened them to leave off from the ways of the world and get right with God. Called them sinners! Called them adulterers! Called them lost!

If it were summer, the brilliant light illuminated the stained-glass windows that illustrated biblical history in European flesh, long brown-haired Jesus and white cherubs with snow white sheep. It's a wonder that the powder keg of black emotion heating up those scenes didn't fragment the glass of those pictorials and send it shattering in the sin-slick streets outside. It's a wonder that all that grief, all that sorrow, all that pain, all that anguish didn't blast open those blood-red doors and amaze the neighbors who refused to come to church. It's a wonder that all those hymns lifted up to the heavens

week after week, month after month, year after year didn't lift that brick edifice up from its foundations and carry it off into the clouds with those fortunate enough to be in the church that day!

When Rev. Sumpter had burned them with the fire of holiness, lashed them with the whip of righteousness, poured salt and vinegar into the open wounds of their lives until they couldn't take it anymore, when he had threatened them enough, scared them enough, damned them enough, then and only then would he release them, cuddling them like those snow-white stained-glass lambs, gathering his scattered flock up, up into the balm of a collective hymn while folks dried their eyes, straightened their ties, replaced their eye glasses, gathered themselves once again in furry stoles returning to earth, thinking of Sunday dinners, the Sunday paper, Monday morning's agony and sweat. Then those collective voices would mount the air in a sweetness that only those who know life's bitter dregs can summon, a sweetness that only those who never had much, who don't have much now, who won't have much tomorrow can sing out, only those who have the diamonds and rubies of faith can know. Then, while Rev. Sumpter called for the lost to come forward, called for the sinners who wanted to sin no more, called for the sick who wanted to be well, called for the gamblers who wanted to quit gambling, for the wife beaters who wanted to change their ways, for the liars who wanted truth, the angry who wanted peace, the choir lifted soprano, alto, and bass voices up, up, up into the ether, and the velvet-lined brass plates passed among the poor and they gave what they could from Caesar for the salvation of their church and the fragile beauty of their lives.

Mr. Johnson's barbershop was on Margaretta street in East Liberty. Going to the barbershop was almost like going to the colored church. It was pure colored. Nothing from the world of white folks lived in this place. Johnson was of medium height and a brown-skinned man with straight, black hair. In those days, it was known as "good hair," that short, curly, kinky stuff that could only be managed

by being either totally clipped down to the skull or heavily pomaded with grease and fitted with a stocking cap overnight to insure “temporary” waves the next morning.

Johnson’s shop was the place to be on Saturday mornings. Momma would drop off the kids, old timers would wander in, young hipsters would drift in and the regulars—those that came to talk politics or collect the numbers—would be there as well. Most times, Mr. Johnson would do most of the cutting himself but if things got too busy, there’d be an older man—old enough to be Johnson’s dad—and a younger man working the other two barber chairs in the place.

Mr. Johnson always looked dapper. His white barber coat would be spotless, his fingernails clean and manicured, his dark trousers newly pressed and his shoes shined. Would anyone expect less of a lord in his manor? Seasons could come and go with snow, rain and scorching heat but the atmosphere of the shop never changed. In fact, Johnson always seemed ageless. Customers passed away or went to nursing homes, moved back down South or left for larger cities but the shop remained a fixture, adding and weaving the accounts of the missing to the folklore of the place.

Seems like the barber was part psychologist for those who knew nothing of psychology. It was a gathering place for taletellers, signifiers, liars, old soldiers, hip cats, handymen and errand boys. While rumors swirled around of the white folks comin’ to “urban renew” the neighborhood, Mr. Johnson’s place became a rock of a community goin’ under. Seems like the more folks heard of the neighborhood being broken up, the more firm their conviction to carve deep into their psyche the places that mattered, tell the tales and lies that kept them sane, memorize the faces, the places that gave them a sense of who they were and what they’d come from. Most adopted a state of denial, for to consider goin’ anywhere else was too frightening to contemplate.

Weren’t no radios or TVs in Mr. Johnson’s place. The barber-shop was a nexus of oral history. A place to talk, a place to laugh, a place to lie, a place to dream, a place of smoke signals, a tele-

graph office, a ritual of rites of passage between the young and the old. Somebody shoulda been writing it all down, copying it word for word, day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, second by second. Somebody shoulda been drawing it, painting it, turning it into music and opera, putting it up on the big screen. Because those moments in that shop were golden and holy and full of something beyond words and music. And it didn't last long enough. It got swept away like the piles of hair on the floor at the end of the day, like piles of hair at the end of the day.

In the upstairs bedroom was an old black radio for listening to favorite shows. The volume was controlled by someone holding a coil of copper wire attached to the radio. If the coil was not held, the radio was impossible to hear. Many hours were spent listening to *Gunsmoke*, *The Shadow*, and *Amos-n-Andy*. It was on this radio that the child first heard of the acquisition of the states of Alaska and Hawaii.

In this same bedroom, Anna would spend long hours gazing out the windows across the parking lot that served as a ballfield on the weekends. In the distance could be seen the gothic edifice of Mellon Church which regularly played familiar hymns from its bell tower. Anna would often paint the cityscape from her third-floor perch in watercolors. Gifted with talent in drawing and painting, these would serve as her youthful meditations along with long walks throughout East Liberty, also known as Frogtown.

In summer the third floors of East Liberty would become too hot to retire to bed and this fueled a culture of front-porch sitting. The adults would gather on swings and metal lawn chairs, on front-steps gossiping about the day's events, the next day's chores, the latest deaths, while keeping an eye on the paddy wagons that frequently rolled by sometimes loaded with familiar faces headed for the NUMBER SIX police station which sat on the corner a half block away. One could gaze into windows on the backs of the wagons and see the cuffed forms of mostly colored men being taken in for intoxication or

fighting up on Frankstown Avenue.

Many residents would be on call to provide the prisoners with meals throughout the week. Neighborhood children would be ordered to carry these meals to the front desk of the station, there to be dwarfed by the big wooden front desk with white faces floating above it, as if approaching a realm of gods dressed in sky blue shirts. It was always cool in the Graystone building that also housed the firehouse next door, with a sinister silence permeating everything.

As the paddy wagons appeared, the black folks would get up from their chairs, lean over porch railings, or sometimes venture as far as their sidewalks to get a better look at the prisoners, praying that no one they knew was being taken in that night. In their wake, the wagons would leave the old folks buzzing from porch to porch with the importance of having God in your life or the evils of being outside the church or being enslaved to drink.

Dusk would begin to settle over the block and mothers would walk to corners to call their children home. Names would be heard filling the evening air: Lonnie! Lonnie! Lonnie! Rusty! Rusty! Rusty! Norma! Norma! Norma! Jeannie! Jeannie! Jeannie! Jack! Jack! Jack! Peachy! Peachy! Peachy! And after a time, the dusky shapes of children could be seen returning to home turfs whining for more time to play and being refused, or compromised to being allowed to play in front of the house. Those children that violated the rules were ordered or dragged into the house and made to go to bed early as punishment in rooms that were sweat boxes.

Lightning bugs would begin to flicker on and off, grabbing the kids attention as they invented new games pursuing these mysterious creatures, capturing them in Mason jars or tearing their lights from their dark shapes to make macabre rings, their hands and fingers odiferous with the scent of these nocturnal creatures. The street would slide into night as their tiny voices made plans for tomorrow's play while the old folks lapsed into stories of their lives in the South or their parents' experiences in that other world down below the Mason-Dixon line.

“I knew that boy’s Momma since she was a little girl. Seed her grow up to become a woman and a mother. She was a pretty li’l thing! You know, one of those what we call ‘red bones.’ You didn’t mess with her ‘cuz if you did you had her seven older brothers to deal with and believe me you didn’t want none of the Lawson boys to be lookin’ for you. That chile loved her Momma and Poppa. She was the baby girl of a family of ten. She got anything she wanted just by smilin’. You could tell even then that she was gonna grow up to be a fine woman. She had so much energy! And smart as a whip. If you needed to know something all you had to do was find Maybelle. If she didn’t know the answer right then you gave her a day or two and she’d come back with the answer. Usta wear her hair in two long pig-tails and always seemed to know if someone was good or evil. She’d just give you this long look and you could see her mind workin’ like a high priced engine. Once she had made up her mind about ‘cha there was no changin’ it. She knew what she knew when she knew it! The Lawson family had what ‘cha call Indian blood in ‘em on the Momma’s side. Old man Lawson, he could pass for white if he wanted to but his wife, Ella, now she looked Indian, a kinda reddish brown with a real prominent nose. Always wore her hair long or bundled up on her head. She’d wear these ankle-length dresses. She made all of her own clothes and the clothes for the three girls. Folks would sometimes get her to make dresses for their girl children too. That woman had a gift with the needle and thread! Yea, those Lawsons was a tight knit family.

“They was Virginia folk. Held they heads high! But they’d give you the shirts off they backs if you needed it. All of ‘em had a gift with makin’ stuff with they hands. Plumbing, carpentry, brickwork, electrical work, workin’ on cars — all of ‘em could pretty much fix anything that need fixin’. Yea, I knew ‘em for years up there in what they call Penn Township. That was considered ‘out in the country,’ then. ‘Nother thing about ‘em, they was some real superstitious people. You go to they house, better not put your hat on the bed! No, sir. Better not, they’d ask you to get steppin’. Walk in they front door

and look up and damn if you wouldn't see a horse shoe up there over the door. Yes, sir. Old lady Ella would always be sittin' in a rockin' chair readin' the Bible. House be just as neat. I mean you coulda ate off the floors in dey house, it was that clean. They never had much but what they did have they was willin' to share! Many times folks in the neighborhood down on they luck would hear a knock at they door and when they opened it, sure 'nuff it'd be old Lady Ella with a pot of greens and some homemade cornbread! Yes, sir. They was some charitable folks. Did I say they was from Virginia? Okay, youse forgets when you get up to be my age. Sometimes, can't remember from one sentence to the next! Good Lord gonna call me soon!"

"I'm thirsty, Anna!"

"Well, you just gonna have to wait until we get up to Negley Avenue where the fountains are to get a drink of water!"

"But I'm thirsty now!"

"Lonnie, you heard what I said, now be patient! Rusty ain't complain' and he's three years younger than you!"

"He thirsty too! He just don't know he thirsty!"

"Well, you keep talkin' like that and he will!"

"It's nice here in the park, Anna! All these trees and the Highland Park lake back there with all those fisherman. Ain't that where Fritz go fishin'?"

"Yeah, sometime he go there with his fishin' buddies Early and Coleman."

"Where else they go?"

"They go down the river sometimes or way upstate to Lake Pamatoming."

"Why they never take me along?"

"Cuz you too little! You might fall in the lake and drown!"

"Fritz won't let me drown!"

"How he gonna watch his fishin' rods and watch you too? Besides, they be drinkin' on those trips and Momma don't want you around no alcohol."

“Why Momma don’t drink?”

“Cuz Momma knows how evil liquor can be. It makes people mean and crazy and stupid!”

“You drink alcohol?”

“No, Lonnie! I’m not old enough and even if I was I don’t want to be mean, crazy or stupid.

“Boy, these sure are some nice houses we walkin’ by. Who lives in these houses?”

“White people!”

“Why don’t Momma buy us a nice house like these? How come we always have to live in somebody else’s house in two or three rooms?”

“Lonnie, don’t you realize that we’re poor!?”

“POOR! We’re POOR!?”

The elder sister and two younger brothers were taking a long scenic walk through Highland Park in a middle to upper middle-class neighborhood. It was summer. Lonnie was seven years old. Rusty was four. Anna was seventeen. The weather was sunny with a pale blue sky littered with an odd assortment of cumulus clouds. But when Anna revealed to Lonnie that they were a poor family, the weather instantly changed. It was as if the sunlight, the blue sky, the warm breeze were an outward expression of the child’s soul. Anna’s words were a sudden downpour, a deafening clap of thunder, preceded by a blinding flash of lightning. POOR.

POOR. Yes, Lonnie knew what poor meant but in his child’s universe it had not really taken root. He noticed things, the small quarters they called home in somebody else’s house. The scanty meals. The shoebox lunches Momma packed when other kids’ families had real picnic baskets. The absence of a father when other kids had two parents. The lack of an automobile when other families had a father who drove a car and a full house all their own. Yet, somehow at seven, he hadn’t really connected the dots. He hadn’t really thought about these difficulties as being what it meant to be poor.

But now—on this sunny and shady street among nature’s grass and trees and rolling, wooded hills—the dots had connected themselves in an electric jolt of realization. Here at this hour on this day in the company of little brother and older sister, his childhood suffered a mortal wound. Nothing would ever be the same again.

POOR. MOMMA WAS POOR. She couldn’t afford a house, wouldn’t be able to afford a house. They would always eat lunch packed in shoeboxes. They would always live in someone else’s house. They would never have a car. They would never have enough to eat. They were poor and colored and there would never, never, be a person to call Daddy. The five of them: Fritz, Anna, Momma, Rusty, and himself were alone in the big wide world and time was not their friend because time would take Momma from them, increasing their loneliness. What had started out to be an adventure had suddenly turned into a horrible dream, only this dream wouldn’t go away. It was real and his little soul began to bleed like the wounds of Jesus and nothing, nothing could give him back his happiness.

“Momma, we got a lot of relatives?”

“Yes, son. You have a lot of cousins on your mother’s side”

“When am I going to meet ‘em, Momma?”

“You know all you gonna know. You got relatives that are color struck!”

“What do you mean by that, Momma?”

“I mean that you being so dark they wouldn’t like you! They’d just hurt your feelings!”

“O Momma, it hurts my feelings just to know that ‘bout ‘em. I ain’t never gonna forget what you just told me. I ain’t even done nothin’ to those people and they already hate me! I’m gonna go read now . . . and do my homework, Momma.”

Lonnie had no grandparents. None living on his mother’s side and, since his daddy played no role in his life, no grandparents on

that side either. Just empty spaces where people should have been. His Momma told him stories of her parents. These stories were precious to him. But stories don't make up for living flesh and blood. So he grew up among absences. His Momma named names but they were names on headstones and tombstones in graveyards that the living never even went to.

Even the stories his Momma told were incomplete. Most times, the bad times were filtered out. The people he learned about were shorn of their rage, their madness and their lust. Sorta like cardboard cutouts with nothing in the back. Their images passed before his eyes in old black and white photographs: uncles, aunts, and cousins flesh of his flesh but gone, vanished, absent. And, young as he was, his Momma would talk to him of her coming absence.

There was even his living kin who were always absent because they lived lives that were unacceptable to his Momma's code. Having witnessed the quicksand that had swallowed many of her brothers and sisters, she avoided the kinfolk that walked that same path, headed for the same sorrowful endings. She protected her sons and daughter by keeping them away from those that danced with madness and gambled with danger. She hoarded the innocence of her children, protected them for years from the dark currents that threatened to swallow them at the first opportunity. So Lonnie grew up with survivors who had passed through the gauntlet of the Black experience. Folks who found something to grab on to like religion or abstinence to protect them from the temptations that would destroy them. Unknowingly, as a youth, he would fashion his salvation from the stuff of books, wrap himself in the mantle of knowledge and become a seeker. It would be this path that he would traverse, armed with his mother's prayers, that would allow him to parry the dangers that consumed uncles and aunts and cousins.

As a child, he became familiar with death by the empty holes it left behind, by the vanishing of precious things. Amidst weeping and sorrow, he would meet his kinfolk, gaze upon the dead he barely knew. The same hungers lived in his blood. The same passions quick-

ened his soul. The same intelligence illumined his thoughts. His only advantage was his youth, Time was on his side. As the disappearances continued, each imparted a lesson. If he was to overcome the karma of this tribe, he would have to listen, remember, watch, wait, study and write. Surrounded by the tribe of the disappeared, he opened his soul to their sorrows and their songs. He opened his soul to the wind that carried their voices, the nights pregnant with their visitations, the land of dreams that brought them together in ballrooms of oblivion. He invited these ancestors into the mansions of his dreams, begged them to utter what was never said, to reveal the history he was never told.

“Lonnie!”

“Yes, Momma?”

“Your great grandmother was full-blooded Cherokee!”

“You mean . . .?”

“Yes, we have Indian blood in the family. Look at your sister’s long, straight, black hair. Your grandmother could tell the future by her dreams!”

“I see things in dreams too, Momma! Sometimes, I just know things without the dreams!”

“I know, son! Your sister was born with a veil over her face!”

“What dat mean, Momma?”

“It mean she can ‘see’ the dead!”

“That’s scary, Momma!”

“It ain’t the dead you gotta worry ‘bout, son, it’s the livin’!”

Every community has one. That person or home that is strange.

In East Liberty the house that frightened all the neighborhood children was located on Broad Street, occupied by a woman that was always heavily rouged and wore caftans around her head. She had a hump in her back and lived behind a high cyclone fence with a red-painted walkway leading up to the front steps. Even on Halloween her house was avoided. She was rarely seen, and when she was,

it was vague glimpses of her as she ventured out on her front porch to water her plants or sit in the shadows of her porch hidden behind growths of vines that snaked up to her roof.

She was always garbed in black, and was married to a dark-skinned man who left for work every day. Some said he worked in the coal mines. His dress was always that of overalls, gold-rimmed glasses, and a cap like those worn by locomotive engineers. Neither he nor she ever spoke to anyone, just came and went, leaving neighbors and children to speculate about their lives. Softballs or baseballs that ended up in their yard were just considered forever lost. No one dared to climb the six-foot cyclone fence in an attempt to retrieve them.

Caramel-colored and always scowling, as well as frequently seen mumbling to herself, only confirmed in everyone's mind that Mrs. Johnson was truly a witch and for some reason or another actually hated children. Children passing by her home always did so on the run glancing with terror at her porch as they passed, hoping not to catch her eye. Sometimes, especially if it was near dusk, children would make their way home by going the long way around the block just so as to not have to pass in front of her home.

One day, a yellow boy from around the corner on Rural Street had words with her, flinging rude remarks in her direction. Not long after, while playing baseball in the parking lot across the street from her home, he ran full tilt into an iron telephone pole while attempting to catch a fly ball. The collision knocked him out cold and it was rumored that the neighborhood witch had cursed him with a spell. Whatever myths were circulating about her were intensified, and the fear and trembling concerning her doubly enforced.

As the years went by, she would sometimes be seen outside her home, leaving her locked front gate to shop, or returning with a shopping cart full of groceries. Withered and barely larger than a gnome, she looked ageless, like she had been on earth forever and would never die. Her legacy in the community was one of meanness and privacy and witchery. Even grownups had nothing to say to her.

She was avoided at all cost.

No one saw her attend church. No one ever saw her smile. Even now, no one has any memory of her ever moving away when the urban renewal project came through to demolish the block. No one knows if she even died, it's as if her spooky house is there lost in time on Broad Street forever, frozen in a time warp of the 1950s waiting, waiting, waiting to frighten careless children out of their wits.

“I ain’t gonna be with you always, son!”

“O Momma, I’m gonna die before you!”

“Umm huh. Just know that when you lose me, you’ll have lost your best friend! You’ll never have another friend like me!”

If Momma knew something about jazz, she wasn’t talkin’. If

Momma knew something about the blues, she wasn’t talkin’. Most she ever said about that kinda livin’ was that her brother William usta do the Charleston—that wide hip dance that had feet, legs and arms akimbo. Naw, Momma never talked about that fast, swin-gin’ gin-soaked lifestyle of flashy niggers and gals, diamonds, big rolls of ill-gotten cash and the splash of blood on late night, early mornin’ neon streets. Momma didn’t want her youngin’s fol-lowing her brothers in and out of the slammer or carryin’ pistols or skippin town ‘cuz big burly black niggers was on dey ass. So Momma never spoke of such things nor tuned the radio to stations that played that kind of music. Momma wanted her boys to remain boys for as long as possible. Wanted them to be innocent as straw-berries in a farmers field, pure as sunlight kissing a dew drop.

Momma ruled her kingdom like an Amazon queen ready to smite anything that threatened her moral code. Sunday morn-ing was Sunday morning and at the very least Sunday school was required and never an option! Attempts to resist were overcome by force. You either went to church or got smacked and in many cases smacked all the way to church! Hollerin’ and screamin’ and

threats of not eating or not goin' to school or rollin' eyes or stompin' feet meant nothing. Just more blows upside your head 'cuz Momma knew what was out there in the world, how bad kids led to bad roads and bad roads led straight to hell! Momma was saving you from yourself even if you didn't know it. Naw, wasn't no jazz in Momma's house. Wasn't no blues 'cept those you was livin'!

“Wake up son! Wake up! It's time to eat breakfast before you deliver your papers!”

“Is it cold outside, Momma?”

“Yes, it snowed overnight so you've gotta wear your galoshes! What do you want for breakfast Grapenuts or oatmeal?

(singing)

*“What a friend we have in Jesus. All our sins and sorrows bare.
We shall never be discouraged. Take it to the Lord in prayer.
All our friends despise and forsake thee, take it to the Lord in prayer.”*

“I like to hear you sing that song, Momma. Why do you and the old folks sing those hymns?”

“Well, son. You eatin' your white bread now. But there'll come a time when you have to make it in the world all by yourself and you'll need Jesus to lean on! We can't afford no psychologist or psychiatrist. Jesus is our doctor! Now, go on and finish your breakfast, so's you can get to your papers. Be careful out there. There's two feet of snow on the ground. Slippery as all get out!”

Highland Park is a large urban retreat in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

It houses the Pittsburgh Zoological Gardens, two large reservoirs, two swimming pools and a small lake that is annually stocked with catfish, carp, bass, sunfish, crappies and turtles. Grassroot children, predominately Black, utilize all the amenities, especially the swimming pools and the fishing hole. Granted permission by their parents to venture so far from home—about three miles—from East Liberty,

they take full advantage of the tree-lined roads, the dense woods, and the magnet of the lake to discover nature. Far away from the crowded rooms of their homes, they explore the woods and change into pirates, Indians, cowboys, scouts and escaping bandits, thrashing through underbrush, whooping and hollering, possessed by the madness of childhood.

They arrive at the lake with fishing-line, bamboo poles, and plastic floats determined to haul up from the depths a shimmering, battling mystery that will be shown off in the neighborhood and embellished with bravado and laughter. Garbed in cheap sneakers, five-and-dime shirts and pants, these children are the happiest they will ever be. Entangled in a universe of dreams, they run from excitement to excitement; energized with youth. What does it matter that they are raggedy? What does it matter they come from roach and mice-infested homes? What does it matter they will never be rocket scientists or CEOs? What does it matter they are under-educated and lied to and prepared like pigs to the slaughter?

No, like freight trains carrying iron ore and bituminous coal, they are railroaded to horrible futures, but in the sunlight of their youth they know nothing of this, are only boys being boys and girls being girls living imaginative lives whooping like Indians, fast-drawing like gunslingers of a western romance. Mothers and fathers are waiting at home together or apart ready to tuck them in, scold them or whip them, take them to church. They will return home, their eyes filled with lions and tigers, bears, spiders and snakes. They will race through the parks' verdant roads, become intoxicated on the green perfume of growth, unaware of sex or love or loneliness. They will sweat and the sunlight will fill the globules of water, making them sparkle like jewels spilling into the streets. They are alive and full of joy and hope and dreams. They are dreams in flesh and bone and death is far away and happens only to other people for they will live forever and riches and wealth await them and they are brave and in love with games and make believe. They are undefeated and

ESSAY

healthy, untainted by drugs or alcohol, believers in God and heaven and hell.

Home is a warm place where they will fall into bed exhausted by their athletic jaunts and tomorrow is only adventure and the day after tomorrow is more adventure. Like new colts they shy away from meanness and anger, drawn to sunlight and open fields. They are boys and friends and curious and sometimes wisdom falls from their lips like gold coins. They look out on a world that challenges, and look in on the clear rivers of their spirits full of wonder and amazement. They are short and tall, chubby and round, lean and skinny. They are blooming roses in gardens owned by others, their mouths wide like young birds full of thirst. Rain storms are nothing to them and they run through downpours full of glee, tasting the raindrops, tattooing time with their lives. They are honest and full of light, glittering diamonds shaped by history, draped in robes of parental love. They are electric eels swimming through the 1950s and days are eternal and they are boys forever and friends forever and mad with youth and nothing can rob them and each moment is sacred and holy.

“Aunt Minnie, can I lick out the bowl?”

“Hush, boy! I told you when I get these cookies in the oven and finish with the pound cake batter you can lick out both bowls.”

“It’s hot in the kitchen!”

“Well, go out in the back yard and play ‘til I get done in here. I got to finish this baking before my stories come on! I’m tired ‘cuz I been washin’ and ironin’ all mornin’. I started at six o’clock and I just wanna go sit down and have a highball and watch my stories. I don’t need you up under me worryin’ me ‘bout some batter in the bowl. And if you don’t stay up from under me you won’t get nothin’. Now, get on outta here. Shoo!”

“Where’s Rusty?”

“He’s upstairs takin’ a nap. Leave him be! Get on out in ‘dat yard, boy!”

STEPTOE

Children do secret things, have secret places, places of magic and imagination. Special places in the woods, favorite alleyways to and from school. They know neighborhoods in ways that adults do not or have forgotten in the tribulations of grown-up life. Between home and school are battlefields, moats, places where monsters live, where brave knights gather to plan strategies, where enemies lay in ambush.

There are backyards where fruit can be pillaged or short cuts taken. There are alleyways that are only experienced at a gallop and you ride hard on your invisible horse because bad guys are in pursuit or a pretty girl has been kidnapped and must be quickly rescued. There are club houses constructed from found objects, old doors, discarded window frames, tattered rugs, unused wooden boxes. Passwords and codes only for the initiates. There are hunting parties armed with slingshots, stalking helpless birds and squirrels. There are supply sergeants who pilfer foodstuffs from home to slake hunger and sweet-tooths. There are generals who plot warfare against other tribes. They are jokesters who keep everyone laughing. There are liars forever outsiders to the truth. There are the weak who depend on the strong. There are the strong who rule the weak.

Such is the real life of the child. School and home being merely the framework, the boundaries that hem the child in. Occasionally, there is a tomboy who is tough or rougher than the boys who shun her fellow females content to walk in their mothers' shadow. She is one of but apart from the tribes of boys who tolerate her presence while always ready to look for weakness and compassion and pounce like ravenous wolves. So while parents pay bills, shop, stagger beneath the weight of societal demands, their children sail the turbulent and changing weathers of the mind.

“That boy’s always readin’. Everytime I see ‘im, he got some kinda book in his hand.”

“Yea, chile. I had to talk to his Momma ‘bout him burnin’ my lights at all hours of the night!”

“Whatcha’ mean?”

“Ump, she just payin’ me rent! She ain’t payin’ no electric! I got to go deeper in my pocket if that boy burn them lights all the time. I tole her I want them lights out no later than ten o’clock. Those children suppose to be in bed by then anyway ‘cuz they gots to get up for school in the mornin’ and the younger one be fussin’ and fightin’ ‘bout goin’ to school anyway.

“What she say?”

“What could she say? She either goin’ have the lights out, or give me more money or move out!”

“It’s hard for a woman with kids to find a place. Don’t nobody want no kids rippin’ and runnin’ through the house ‘specially when they ain’t got no kids of they own!”

“Yea, you right. But that extra money comin’ in sho’ do help!”

“When you can get it!”

“You know that’s right! Some of these renters always got an excuse about why they late with the rent! I done heard it all!”

“I ain’t got nothin’ against that boy readin’ all the time. Lord knows it keeps him off the street! He ain’t like some of these half-raised whelps runnin’ up and down the streets using all kinds of foul words headed for hell, but they gonna be in jail fo’ they get to hell!”

“Dat boy sho’ do love books. Seems like when he gets a book in his hand he gets this faraway look on his face. Sometimes you gotta call his name three, four times before he even hear you!”

“Yea, that boy gonna grow up and do somethin’ to make his Momma proud. He ain’t good lookin’ like his younger brother but he real smart!”

Yea, and he’s so dark! That’s one black child!”

“Umm, huh! You wouldn’t think his Momma is his Momma dark as he is and yellow as she is.”

“You know dat’s right!”

“The Lord sho’ do move in mysterious ways!”

“AMEN!”

By the time he was six years old, Lonnie began to sense that he was somehow odd and different from everyone else around him. He couldn't have put it into words, of course. It was just a feeling. He sensed that all that took place around him was somehow making impressions upon him that he would always remember. It was as if he were a living, breathing, walking, talking camera that recorded everything that happened to him. For this reason, he felt different. Others seemed not to notice what he noticed, remember what he remembered, were not moved by what moved him. As early as six, this feeling was very strong and powerful within him. He also sensed that this "sense" was with him for life.

He began to sense that he was a stranger among family and friends, teachers and neighbors. He felt that his power lay in this "difference." He was always seen as the "serious" one. Even as he went forth to play his childhood games, immerse himself in the activities of being a son, or brother or nephew, he was unlike the others. It was as if he were in touch with forces beyond his knowing, as if he were being watched by invisibles. He was a child but not a child. He was still water full of depth. He knew things he shouldn't have known. Even at six years of age, he felt like an old man. He felt an ageless wisdom. He played but was not playing. He watched the life around him with eyes too mature for a child. He waited on something, not quite knowing what he was waiting for. He felt ancient though he knew not the word. Often, he spoke with God knowing that he was heard. He was a believer not yet knowing what a believer was.

The old folks watched him. They, too, knew he was "different." They began to expect something from this strange, odd, dark, serious little boy. Though they knew not what. Because he was not light-skinned like his Momma or his older or younger brothers, even his sister was lighter than him, he felt "odd." He would see people staring at him. Was it the darkness of his skin that made them stare? Was it the big head and unhandsome face that made them stare? Was it his "serious" demeanor that made them stare? Sometimes he

would just blurt out while riding with his Momma on a city streetcar or bus, “Momma, he’s looking at me!” “Momma she’s looking at me!” So others found him odd as well!

Something inside him began to lead him to the knowledge of books. He began to consume them like food, it became a hunger he could never satiate. It became a drug, an addiction, an obsession. If people did not like him for his looks and his dark color, perhaps they would like him if he knew things they did not know. He began to read. Alone, he began to imagine strange worlds and events that gave him comfort, he began to dream of things he would do, places he would go when he became a man. He began to make plans to escape the confines of this world that limited him. Somehow, he knew books were the key to achieving his dreams. Books became his true friends. He came away from them with new knowledge, new power, new hope, new words. He began to watch his playmates more closely and understand how their characters would lead them to certain destinies. He began to know that some “force” protected him, consoled him, informed him, prepared him for what he knew not, only that he in turn had to do what he could to prepare himself for that great unknown that waited to call his name.

