

organization," as Ralph Ellison puts it) have given more to the world than anyone can say; are responsible, literally, for generations. They gave our sorrow and danger back to us, transformed, and they helped us to embrace and triumph over it. They gave us back our joy, and we could give it to our children. Out of the depths of the midnight hour, we could laugh. "*One never knows*," says the bemused Fats Waller, "*do one?*"

Yes. I, too, have said that I would exchange all the blues to save one starving child. I was wrong, not only because the exchange is not in my power, but because this singing of the Lord's song in so strange a land has saved more children than anyone will ever know, and the beginning is not yet in sight.

The New York Times Book Review,
October 16, 1977

Every Good-bye Ain't Gone

I AM writing this note just 29 years after my first departure from America. It was raining—naturally. My mother had come downstairs, and stood silently, arms folded, on the stoop. My baby sister was upstairs, weeping. I got into the cab, waved, and drove away.

It may be impossible for anyone to tell the truth about his past. You drag your past with you everywhere, or it drags you. Therefore, the simplest thing for me to say concerning that first departure from America is that I had no choice. It was not the heroic departure of a prodigy. Time was to prove (and how!) that I was a prodigal son indeed, but, by the time the fatted calf came my way, intimacy with too many dubious hamburgers had caused me to lose my appetite. I *did* want the people I loved to know how much I loved them, especially that little girl weeping on the top floor of that tenement: I will say that. And my departure, which, especially in my own eyes, stank of betrayal, was my only means of proving, or re-deeming, that love, my only hope. Or, in other words, I knew then that I was a writer, but did not know if I could last long enough to prove it. And, if I loved the people I loved, I also knew that they loved me, did not deserve and could scarcely afford the spectacle of the firstborn as a disaster. That seems a grandiose way of putting it, yet it is the only honest way for *me* to put it; and it is not really grandiose at all—it comes out of the life I saw all around me. The song says, *motherless children have a hard time!* And so do the fatherless, and the brotherless. The firstborn knows this first, and, therefore, the accident of being the firstborn is also a reality, and I took it very seriously.

For, in the years that I—we—were growing up in Harlem, Harlem was still, essentially, a southern community, but lately, and violently, driven north. The people had dragged the South with them, *in* them, to the northern ghetto, and one of the results of this was that all of the children belonged to all of the elders. If, for example, a grown-up, even a very young grown-up, caught me doing something I should not have been doing, blocks from my house, he, or she, would

whip my behind and carry me, howling, to my house, to tell my mother or father why I had been whipped. Mama or Daddy would thank the person, and then whip my behind again. It is a hard way to learn, perhaps, but there are no easy ways, and so I learned that I was supposed to be an "example." That didn't make sense to me in the beginning—I hated what seemed to me to be an injustice—but it made sense to me later. We were *all* expected to be examples to each other. The eldest was expected to do his best to protect those behind him from being destroyed by the bloody discoveries the eldest had already made. The price for this was astronomical: that the eldest did not allow *himself* to be destroyed.

This was quite an assignment for a black, defenseless-looking high school graduate who—to remain within the confines of the mentionable—had had feet, fists, tables, clubs, and chairs bounced off his only head, and who, by the time of November, 1948, trusted no one, and knew that he trusted no one, knew that this distrust was suicidal, and also knew that there was no question any longer of his *life* in America: his violent destruction could be taken as given; it was a matter of time. By the time I was 22, I was a survivor—a survivor, furthermore, with murder in his heart.

A man with murder in his heart will murder, or be murdered—it comes to the same thing—and so I knew I had to leave. Somewhere else, anywhere else, the question of my life might still be open, but in my own country that question was closed.

Well, I was lucky—the black people I grew up with would say I was blessed. Some things had happened to me because I was black, and some things had happened to me because I was *me*, and I had to discover the demarcation line, if there was one. It seemed to me that such a demarcation line must certainly exist, but it was also beginning to be borne in on me that it was certainly not easy to find: and perhaps, indeed, when found, not to be trusted. How to perceive, define, a line nearly too thin for the naked eye, so mercurial, and so mighty. Only a really shattered, scotch- or martini-guzzling, upward-mobility-struck house nigger could possibly deny the relentless tension of the black condition. Being black affected one's life span, insurance rates, blood pressure, lovers, children,

every dangerous hour of every dangerous day. There was absolutely no way *not* to be black without ceasing to exist. But it frequently seemed that there was no way to *be* black, either, without ceasing to exist.

For one of the ways of being black is to accept what the world tells you about your mother and your father, your brother and your sister; and what that world tells you—in many ways, from the language of the lawgiver to the language of the liberal—is that "your" people deserve, in effect, their fate. Your fate—"your" people's fate—involves being, forever, a little lower than these particular angels, angels who, nevertheless, are always ready to give you a helping hand.

Well, this is, after all, but another way of observing that it is exceedingly difficult for most of us to discard the assumptions of the society in which we were born, in which we live, to which we owe our identities; very difficult to defeat the trap of circumstance, which is, also, the web of safety; virtually impossible, if not completely impossible, to envision the future, except in those terms which we think we already know. Most of us are about as eager to be changed as we were to be born, and go through our changes in a similar state of shock.

Including this writer, of course, who was far, however, years ago, from being able to forgive himself for being so irretrievably human. The power of the social definition is that it becomes, fatally, one's own—but it took time, and much deep water, to make me see this. Rage and misery can be a source of comfort, simply because one has lived with rage and misery for so long.

But to accept this rage and misery as a source of comfort is to enter one of the vicious circles of hell. One does not, after all, forgive the world for this horror, nor can one forgive oneself. Because one cannot forgive oneself, one cannot forgive others, or, even, really, *see* others—one is always striking out at the wrong person, for only some other, poor, doomed innocent, obviously, is likely to be in striking range. One's self-esteem begins to shrivel, one's hope for the future begins to crack. In reacting against what the world calls you, you endlessly validate its judgment.

I had not conceived, then, that I had only to study the

hieroglyphic of my circumstances if I wished to decipher my inheritance. *Circumstances*: a rather heavy word, when you consider it, connecting, for me, by means of Ezekiel's *wheel in the middle of a wheel*, with the iron, inescapable truth of revolutions—we black folk say, what goes around, comes around. Circumstances, furthermore, are complicated, simplified, and, ultimately, defined by the person's reaction to these circumstances—for no one, no matter how it may seem, simply *endures* his circumstances. If we are what our circumstances make us, we are, also, what we make of our circumstances. This is, perhaps, the key to history, since *we* are history, and since the tension of which I am speaking is so silent and so private, with effects so unforeseeable, and so public.

In any case, the Americans' ladder is not Jacob's ladder, their pillow is not Jacob's pillow. Armed with this legacy, this testament, and this envelope which I had not yet opened, I went to France.

November 11, 1948: rain, fatigue, panic, the absolute certainty of being dashed to death on the vindictive tooth of the Eiffel Tower, which we circled, it seemed to me, for hours. I do not remember feeling the remotest exhilaration. I had a few "friends" in Paris, and \$40 in my pocket, and expected a little less from my friends than I did from the \$40. I was wrong, I must tell you at once, as to my friends, who were far more present than I would have dared allow myself to hope—my first lesson, perhaps, in humility; perhaps the first opening of a certain door. For the people who were nice to me were very nice to me without, if you see what I mean, being *nice*: They forced me to recognize that they cared about me. This was a bewildering, a paralyzing, revelation, and I know that I was not very graceful. The Bronx, Brooklyn, Texas, Princeton, and Alabama accents stammered out a need and anguish like my own: If I were ever to grow up, ever, then I had to hear my accent in the accent of others, and to recognize that anguish was not a province which I had discovered only yesterday, alone. On the other hand, I was right about the \$40, which melted in a day, and there I was, in Paris, on my ass.

My ass, mister, mine: and I was glad. In spite of every-

thing—the cops, the concierges, the hotels, the alleys, the joints, eventually the hospital, finally the jail—I was glad. If the demarcation line existed, then I had to be somewhat close to it, for I refused to believe that I could be so abject as to blame my trials, those crises which I myself perpetually precipitated, on my color. Furthermore, I could not dare to see that the question of the demarcation line was a false question and that I could hide behind it, paralyzed, vindictive, and guilty, for the rest of my life.

It was not for this, however, that I had left a small girl crying on the top floor of a Harlem tenement.

There *was* a demarcation line, to be walked every hour of every day. The demarcation line was my apprehension of, and, therefore, my responsibility for, my own experience: the chilling vice versa of what I had made of my experience and what that experience had made of me. I will owe the French a debt forever, for example, if only because, during one of my passionately insane barroom brawls, I suddenly realized that the Frenchman I was facing had not the remotest notion—and could not possibly have had the remotest notion—of the tension in my mind between *Orléans*, a French city, and *New Orleans*, where my father had been born, between *Louis*, the coin, and *Louis*, the French king, for whom was named the state of Louisiana, the result of which celebrated purchase had been the death of so many black people. Neither did any African, as far as I could tell, at that moment of my own time and space, have any notion of this tension and torment. But what I began to see was that, if they had no notion of *my* torment, I certainly had no notion of theirs, and that I was treating people exactly as I had been treated at home.

In order to keep the faith—climbing Jacob's ladder—I came home, to go to Little Rock and Charlotte, and so forth and so on, in 1957, and was based in America from 1957 to 1970.

I have been in and out of my country, in and out of various cauldrons, for a very long time, long enough to see the doctrine of white supremacy return, like a plague, to the continent which spawned it. This is not a bitter statement. It comes, to tell the truth, out of love, for I am thinking of the children. I watch—here, for example—French and Algerian children trying to become friends with each other, reacting to, but not

yet understanding, the terrors of their parents, and very far indeed from having any notion of the terrors of the state. They have no way of knowing that the state is menaced and shaken to the degree, precisely, that they, themselves, the presumed victims, or at least, the wards of the state, make manifest their identity—which is not what it might be, either for better or for worse, if they were still in Algeria. They cannot possibly know that they, ex-slave and ex-master, cannot be used as their fathers were used—that all identities, in short, are in question, are about to be made new.

Every good-bye ain't gone: human history reverberates with violent upheaval, uprooting, arrival and departure, hello and good-bye. Yet, I am not certain that anyone ever leaves home. When "home" drops below the horizon, it rises in one's breast and acquires the overwhelming power of menaced love.

In my early years in Paris, I met and became friends with an elderly man who had left Germany in something like 1933 to become a hunted refugee because he had refused, in any way whatever, to be a part of the criminal Nazi state. I admired this man very much, and his pain was very vivid to me. God knows one couldn't quarrel with his reasons for leaving Germany, and yet his repudiated homeland was present in everything he said and did. The French landscape, which he loved as I did, could console, could even nearly reconcile: but it could not replace the landscape he carried in his heart. In the early fifties his mother was dying and wanted to see her son one last time, and I took my friend to the railroad station. I never, never forgot that moment. I wondered if that was going to happen to me. I wanted to go home, I wanted to see *my* mother and my brothers and my sisters and my friends—but the novel wasn't finished (it seemed, indeed, that it would *never* be finished), and that was the only trophy I could carry home. All my love was in it, and the reason for my journey.

I suspect, though I certainly cannot prove it, that every life moves full circle—toward revelation: You begin to see, and even rejoice to see, what you always saw. You can even tell anguish to sit down, and shut up, you're busy right now—and anguish, as you should certainly know by now, ain't to go nowhere. It might go around the corner, on a particularly

bright day, and there *are* those days: but anguish has your number, knows, to paraphrase the song, where you live. It's a difficult relationship, but mysteriously indispensable. It teaches you.

So. I *could* talk about the European panic, which takes so monotonous a form: but what is happening in Europe, now, to blacks, and to other, unprecedented niggers, has been happening for a very long time. Once I began to recover from my delirium, it was the first thing in Europe that I clearly saw: so it would be dishonest to pretend that this crisis, a global crisis, has anything to do with my motives or my movement now. I will say that my baby sister is a grown, married woman now, with an exceedingly swift and cunning son who has not the faintest intention of allowing me to forget that I'm his uncle: so, for me, for all of us, I believe, that dreadful day in November of '48 is redeemed.

Neither do I want anyone to suppose that I think that the gem of the ocean has kept any of its promises, but my ancestors counseled me to *keep the faith*: and I promised, I vowed, that I would. If I am a part of the American house, and I am, it is because my ancestors paid—*striving to make it my home*—so unimaginable a price: and I have seen some of the effects of that passion everywhere I have been, all over this world. That music is everywhere, resounds, resounds: and tells me that now is the moment, for me, to return to the eye of the hurricane.

New York, December 19, 1977