## **Fiction**

# **"Growing Wings"**

**By Alan Davis**

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Diane stopped using her full-length mirror when the small white feathers on her back were large enough to see from across the room if she twisted in her nightgown like a dancer. Closeup, the feathers were invisible, the angle of vision all wrong, so she turned the mirror around and stared for hours at its black paint. She also made regular retreats to a large utility closet full of baggy flannel shirts and large woolen socks. In class, sitting against the back wall, she wore a faded grey trenchcoat to hide the feathers, but her teacher, Mrs. Hanes, often made her hang it up in the coatroom.

She stared at a waterstain above the classroom door. Jamie, who always sat next to her, leaned close and whispered something. She failed to respond to him or to a question from Mrs. Hanes. "Pay attention," the teacher said. Diane lowered her eyes to the worn floor, pockmarked with swirling wormlike scratches. We should learn not to be aware of ourselves, she had read that morning in her sister's spiritual notebook, to no longer have ideas, but to simply live what we are.

"Diane, redeem yourself. What's the theme of Lord Jim?"

Her pennyloafers scraped circles on the tiles, a muffled rhythmic whisper. You tend to interpret everything, an internal conversation goes on always in the mind. She repeated Melinda's polished phrases for the comfort. You must open yourself to the possibility of not-thinking, or meditation, as it's commonly called.

"Diane!"

Jamie poked her gently. She looked up. My sister often wore purple, she thought; it's very spiritual. Maybe I should dye the coat.

Mrs. Hanes got the students writing. "Come with me, Diane."

In the principal's office the steady hum of an air-conditioner sounded like the whisper of shoe leather on tile and she thought about the Salvation Army store. Her mother would be scandalized to know how much time she spent there, off the beaten path her classmates followed to school, but it was comfortably musty with a smell of wool and mothballs. The woman at the store always let her sit quietly, often next to a wheezing air- conditioner on its last legs, and she would listen to Melinda's voice. We see what we want to see. We don't see things as they are. We have to discipline ourselves, watch the motes of dust in the sunlight, learn how to put such discipline into effect.

Sometimes the woman gave her a glass of milk. "You ever talk, sweetie? Or do you just sit and think?"

For the first time Diane told someone. "I'm growing wings."

"Oh. Well, that's good, I suppose."

"I need an overcoat. Do you have one?"

"Oh, I think we might." The woman smiled and moved away with her sweet smell of Feen-a-mint. She fitted Diane with a coat a size too large. "It only costs a dollar today, wings or not. A special."

A hand placed itself gently on her shoulder. The principal. "Don't you listen, Dee?" He guided her to the counselor's office, his hand still on her shoulder like a small friendly animal. "I'm to leave you with Mrs. Esposito, to have a talk."

The door closed. "Hello, Diane."

A pause. "Hello, Diane."

A longer pause. "Well, we don't have much to say today, do we?"

The Universal Law resolves everything, but there is always a tendency to be impatient, Diane thought, still feeling the warm weight of the principal's hand.

Mrs. Esposito adjusted a small gold pin on her tweed jacket and shuffled through a manila folder. Violet nail polish, Diane thought. Why did she choose that color today?

"Now, let's see. You were just here, when? Last week? Yet here we are again, and you're still wearing those silly clothes. What's the story?"

Diane leaned forward. "Is something the matter with your eyes?"

"My eyes?" Mrs. Esposito picked up a small mirror. "My contacts, maybe? They seem ok, but let's look." She closed her eyes and gently massaged each eyelid.

"How's that?"

"Better."

"Hmmm. Well. Tell me, how much time do you and your mother spend together? Does she have much time for you since your father and sister passed away?"

Experience is a flash of lightning in a sky filled with dark clouds. She visualized the words as they appeared, neatly copied in her sister's elegant script.

"Dee? Did you hear me? What's the story?"

Diane smiled. "I'm l4 years old." She held up both hands, fingers spread wide. She closed her hands and then displayed four more fingers, two on each hand.

"Yes, I know." Mrs. Esposito folded her hands over the notes and waited.

"It's my mother. You're right."

"Yes? What about her?" The counselor motioned for the girl to continue. "You can tell me, Dee. You can say anything. Nothing gets past these doors. I'm safe as a bank."

"Well..."

"Yes?"

"Well, my mother... Look, I don't know how to say this, Mrs. Esposito. But Mother, well, she eats tennis balls."

Mrs. Esposito's face reddened.

"It's the truth." Diane crossed her heart. "It's driving me bananas. But what can I do?"

"What do you mean, 'eats tennis balls'? What's that supposed to mean? Does she spend a lot of time at her club?"

"No, just what I said. She uses ketchup, mustard, sometimes a slice of onion. And on the good china, Mrs. Esposito. Can you believe? It's disgusting." She pointed to the telephone on the desk.

"Please call her right away and tell her to stop."

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As she walked through the empty hallways, classroom voices discussed dangling modifiers and the Civil War. Words filtered into her awareness and fell away to vague murmurs. Drone City, she thought, and looked up. Sorry, sister, I'll get serious. Then she giggled, remembering the expression on the counselor's face.

Her trenchcoat and floppy hat waited in Mrs. Hanes' classroom. She overcame a desire to feign sickness or maybe just go home and settled instead for the comforting silence of the lavatory. The low hum of fluorescent lights, the coziness of dull porcelain and laminated particle board stalls made this the one place where she could stop thinking without fear of reproach. They've told me I won't have to come back here again. This is the last time I'll have to go through this. The words had the graininess of chipped marble, as though written on the wall before her. She stretched and turned to the mirror, twisted her neck and noticed how her flannel shirt bunched up near the shoulder blades.

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"What happened in the office?" Jamie asked on the walk home. "They didn't kick you around, did they?"

There was a layer of sky above the one where most people stopped looking. She always had at least one ear cocked in that upward direction. I'm becoming better, she thought, at walking towards each moment without interpreting anything. But if I don't listen with discernment, I'll miss Melinda's call when it comes. She saw Jamie frown. "Are you happy?"

"Huh?" Jamie shrugged. He looked down at his feet. "I guess."

"You ever pay attention to the way you walk?"

"I don't know. Not really."

"You ought to."

"I guess. You don't, um, pay attention sometimes." He stared down the street to her house. "By the way, you want to walk to the park before we go home?"

"No. Not today. I don't have time. Thanks, though."

"Oh. What else do you have to do?"

"I grow wings." She looked at him appraisingly.

"Oh. Wings, huh? I grow hair." He smiled.

"Well, good-bye, Jamie," she said when they reached her house. "Thanks for walking with me."

"Did you wink at me?" he asked.

She giggled. "Are you happy?"

"Sure. I'm glad you winked. Didn't you wink?"

"It doesn't matter. See you later. Be happy."

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The sounds of dusk became clear, as though travelling across water. Diane sat on the front porch, her feet propped on the railing, leafing through Melinda's notebook and eating a banana sandwich. Eyes closed, she saw her sister talking in a slow hypnotic voice about the long spiritual struggle to leave behind the chains of the world, to climb cold mountain slopes. The dreamy voice brought Diane to the edge of trance, but willing her sister's appearance was more difficult. A car door slammed. Chords of practice exercises started up behind lacy curtains across the street, and then voices in the drive. Her mother stepped to the porch, holding an unlit cigarette. "Hello, kiddo. You get something to eat?" No reply. "Jack and I are going to a movie. You want to come? It's a Burt Reynolds thing, a romantic comedy. But we got to leave soon to make it."

"Okay. Have a good time. Don't eat too many tennis balls."

"Huh?"

"You better take it easy on the onions, Mother."

"Sometimes you're too silly to believe." She puffed on the unlit cigarette. "I don't have bad breath, do I?"

"Only when you frown, Mother." She riffled the pages of the closed notebook, still carrying a faint suggestion of patchouli. "Mother. Did Melinda ever grow wings?"

"Huh?"

"Wings on her back?"

"Wings? What you saying, kiddo?"

"Wings, Mother. White, with feathers. Flap flap." She dangled her arms to illustrate.

"I still don't understand." She tapped her cigarette on the porch railing. "Stay in the real world, kiddo. It's all we have these days. Right?" She glanced at her watch. "Hey, you sure you don't want to come see Burt Reynolds?"

"What do you mean, 'the real world'?"

A large dog, fenced in, barked fiercely at a passerby. It was Jamie, shuffling past. He waved feebly and put his hands in his pockets, shoulders slumped. The car door slammed, her mother and Jack drove away. Alone, she realized how much she missed Melinda, whose presence always calmed her, like Sunday mornings stroking the veneered pew in church, daydreaming through stained-glass windows, absent-mindedly mouthing hymns. Across the street curtains parted briefly to reveal the wistful face of the young piano student. All actions should be spiritual manifestations. If approached with the right motivation, it is fine to have all sorts of actions and experiences, even distractions, but not to attach to them. Diane smiled. Maybe the piano student secretly flapped her arms like wings, became a black crow and flew, squawking.

She lay on her bed. Were her own wings a sign from Melinda? Or rather, what kind of sign? Maybe she too had lived many lives, and had to be here only this one last time. In the light of a single candle shadows played on the ceiling. An owl chased a pumpkin, the owl became a cactus-flower, the cactus-flower became a pumpkin. The thunder of an airplane turned on car headlights that slanted through the window, illuminating a hanging fern, which in turn shed a tangle of waving fingers on the ceiling. A huge brown bird wearing her overcoat grabbed her. She fell in Jamie's lap, he kissed her, she reached up, touched her sister's lips. And woke, thirsty, uncomfortable, back aching, on the verge of tears. Don't think, she thought, and blew out her candle. There were places, she decided, remembering her wings and turning to her side, where she wasn't ready to go. One of Melinda's books, Spiritual Initiation, urged the apprentice to maintain detachment, discrimination, discernment, the three keys to interior serenity. But she couldn't relax. Why did dreams of flying frighten her so? Why did Jamie, in her dream, become Melinda? Was she ready for wings?

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"Go to the counselor's office for your appointment," Mrs. Hanes said several days later. Distracted by Jamie, Diane stared at the floor, where a black ant made its deliberate way to a crumb.

"Young lady!"

She grabbed her coat and hat as she left.

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"Dee, please take off that ridiculous hat," said Mrs. Esposito.

"If you take out your eyes."

"How can you hear me with that stupid thing on?"

"Excuse me. What did you say?"

Mrs. Esposito lit a cigarette. She wore a neatly-tailored suede jacket, dark-green, which Diane wanted to caress. "You can be so sweet," she said after a long puff, "but you're in one of those moods, aren't you? What's the story?"

"There's nothing to be done." Diane stared into swirling smoke. "There's nothing to be done and nowhere to go."

"That's a ridiculous thing to say, isn't it, Dee? I mean, where would we be if we all thought that?"

"Nowhere."

"Exactly. Nowhere. We can't give up, can we?"

"You don't understand."

"Well, maybe not." The counselor stubbed out her cigarette. "You know, Dee, you haven't had much to say to me. Have you? Melinda died last summer and we still haven't talked about it. Is there anyone else you talk with?"

Diane touched her forehead. "What does this have to do with anything?"

"I don't know, maybe a lot. It depends what the story is." She reached across her desk. "Take this glass of water, for instance. I would say it's half full, but someone else might call it half empty." She sipped water and cleared her throat. "Look, Dee, it's not nice to have a father or sister die, much less both, and especially when it happens all of a sudden. I've had that happen."

"You had a sister die?"

"Well, no, I was an only child, but my father died when I was twenty, and my mother not so long ago."

She stroked her chin. "They were sick, granted, and we expected them to go, but that didn't make it easier." She picked up a ballpoint pen and clicked it. "I only want to help. If we can monitor these automatic thoughts you have, maybe we can figure out some sort of rational response. Your thoughts affect your feelings, and then your feelings control your thoughts. It should be the other way around."

Diane breathed deeply. "What makes you think I need help?"

Mrs. Esposito leaned forward. "The way you get sometimes. The way you are right now. The way you react to my questions. You do want to talk, don't you?"

Suddenly Diane pulled her floppy hat over her eyes and lowered her voice an octave. "I have the trenchcoat. Don't you think I should ask the questions? Where were you on October l5th?"

"Come on, Dee. What's the story? Let's get down to brass tacks."

"Okay. You smoke cigarettes. Aren't you afraid of cancer? Think about it."

Mrs. Esposito smiled tightly, pulling back her lips into a line. She glanced at her watch. "Of course. You're right. I should give them up. Anyway, it's time for the bell. You think about it too, okay, Dee? We'll keep seeing one another for a while, or maybe we can find somebody else to help."

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"Did you hear me in class?" Jamie asked.

"No."

"There's, um, a dance tomorrow night. It's in the gym. Want to come?"

"No. I don't think so. But thanks for asking, Jamie."

"You don't like dances?" Jamie kicked a divot out of somebody's lawn. "Me neither. What I mean is, what else you have to do? I mean, we can do something else."

She picked up a leaf and pressed it carefully into the pages of her book. "I told you. I grow wings." Why was she telling him again? It was secret.

"Oh." Jamie frowned. "That's interesting. And I told you, I grow hair. You know we all have the same amount of hair? Only some of us have it inside our heads and some of us outside."

Diane laughed. "That's funny, Jamie." He glanced at her and she giggled. "You don't believe me?"

"Oh, sure. Can I see?"

"No. Definitely not. Why you have to see? You can't take my word?"

"Yeah, I guess. But I let you see my hair."

"Let's forget about it. You have expectations, don't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Think about it."

"Why should I think about it? Why can't you tell me?"

"Are you happy?"

"How can I be happy when you won't tell me?"

"That's what I mean."

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She tossed in bed that night, tried to lie still, but her body was taut, wings larger. And she didn't feel comfortable on her stomach. She turned on the bedside lamp and the curtains ruffled in a slight breeze. She listened for crickets, but it was too late in the year. They've told me I won't have to come back here again. This is the last time I'll have to go through this. The last time she saw Melinda, her sister had a load of books for the library. "I'll be right back," she said. "You wait up and we'll make banana bread for the orphans." Diane tilted her head quizzically. "Orphans?" "You know," Melinda said, laughing, "the ones on the railroad tracks." Oh, thought

Diane, the cartoon we saw.

The memory made her angry. I've seen Melinda since then, she thought. Other people, no, but I've seen her. Staring at the well-thumbed notebook, she shook her head stubbornly and turned off the light. The library books, the last conversation, the way Melinda precariously balanced what she said and what she carried. At the funeral, clutching the book like a portable altar, deliberately impersonal, one of the few without tears, Diane was detached, even serene. Mourners descended upon her. "They called for her," she told them. "The death was painful because she could learn something. And my father didn't feel anything." At the wheel, he had a heart attack, the car swerved across the highway's center stripe.

Come to me, she willed, sitting up in a half-lotus position. Instead, Melinda stood painfully vivid before the car with the library books. Okay, sis. I know things don't work that way, but give me a sign. In what form do you watch over me? Make yourself known, I will wait for you here. Her tongue swollen, she dragged herself to the bathroom for water. The light at the bottom of the stairs guided her down the hall, past her mother's empty bedroom, where two glasses glinted on a night table.

She gulped down the water and turned, to go back to her room. Instead, she slipped off her gown and opened the medicine cabinet over the basin. She took down a pair of scissors with blades the color of graphite. I'll trim my wings, she thought, beginning to cry. I'll have baby wings.

**"The Dead Kid"**

**By Gillian King**

Recognized as “Notable Story” in [2008 Million Writers Award](http://www.storysouth.com/millionwriters/millionwritersnotable2008.html)

Received “Special Mention” in 2010 Pushcart Prize series

“The Dead Kid” is currently being [adapted into a short film](http://carvezine.com/from-the-editor/tag/the-dead-kid/).

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*Gillian King has a BA in film production and an MFA in creative writing from Southern Illinois University. She has written several short stories, screenplays, and technical guides, and is currently at work on a novel. She lives in the middle of nowhere in Wisconsin, with her husband and her husband’s dog.*

 Frankie Thomas was a kid we all knew, a kid we all picked on at recess because he was slow and fat and lousy at kickball. He lived on the same street as me and my very best friend Jean. Our street was like this: my house, the mean boys’, the Thomases’, Jean’s.

The mean boys were Jimmer and Ted, eleven and thirteen. They were the kind of kids who always looked dirty. They smoked, swore, shot bottle rockets at me and Jean, and always tried to look up our skirts and down our shirts, even before there was anything to see. I pretended I wasn’t afraid of them, but Jean and I made wide arcs to the other side of the street when we went back and forth between our houses, that was if we could keep ourselves from breaking into a sprint. Jimmer and Ted chased people sometimes, and when they wanted to catch someone, they did.

They always caught Frankie.

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In fifth grade, Frankie disappeared. His body was found about a year later in the town dump. This was back before our town had curb-side trash pick-up, before we even had curbs in most places. The dump was an adventure. There were no rules about what could be thrown away and what couldn’t. There was no recycling, no eco-awareness, just two big holes in the ground: one for things that would burn and one for things that wouldn’t.

Mr. Dunbar was the dump keeper. He always wore the same pair of denim coveralls. They were the color of summer thunderheads from grit and the soot of burning garbage. His face had pocks, craters, and dark permanent ripples of wrinkles, and looked like it had been left out in the sun too long and picked at by crows. A face that couldn’t smile. Kids said Mr. Dunbar stayed out all night on the porch of his leany shack, sleeping with his eyes open and his shotgun cocked, to guard the dump from trespassers. Whatever he saw, wild dogs or bear or drunk teenagers, he shot and threw into the fire pit.

Jean and I could make it to the dump in twenty minutes when we took the path through the woods. Ten minutes if we were running away from our mothers or the mean boys.

If we got to the dump early enough, we’d get to see Mr. Dunbar start the trash fires with gasoline. This was my favorite part: the rush and whoosh of the first fire ball, the hot blast reddening my cheeks and blowing back my hair, the black garbage bags being licked open by flame, the wavy swirls of heat and smoke flying up past the garbage, over the treetops, to heaven.

Sometimes Mr. Dunbar singed himself—got too close and came away with blacker sleeves and shorter char-tipped hair. He’d climb out of the fires, eyes cold and coaly, coveralls smoking, and he’d cuss, “Hot shit.” Jean and I would scurry out of his way.

Six to four the dump was like a flea market without tables. There were treasures around the pits you could take if you paid old Dunbar a dollar a haul. I found one roller skate and Jean found a bike without a seat. She had to ride it standing up, but it was a good bike. There were other good things there, too, like board games and jigsaw puzzles with most all their pieces, and doll parts: heads and limbs and torsos that sometimes fit together right like the pretty new dolls in shop windows, the kind me and Jean were saving up to get. Once we found a shoebox full of kittens, still blind and hairless. Jean and I gave them all names and warm milk. We longed for the time when their hair would grow in, when they’d look like real cats we could hold and brush and love. But they died during the night and my parents made me take them back to the dump.

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Everyone thought Frankie had been kidnapped by some child-rapist, or eaten by a pack of dogs, or just wandered away somewhere and didn’t have sense enough to come home. People combed the woods and sent rescue divers to the bottoms of all the lakes around town, and the Ben Franklin on Main Street sold out of blue ribbons—blue was Frankie’s favorite color—because everyone wanted to show their support for the Thomas family.

And even though our parents were paranoid about curfews and stray dogs and white vans, they were extra nice to us for a while too: talking sweeter, hugging tighter, buying more ice cream.

The Thomas family kind of fell apart without Frankie. He was their only child, and they loved him even if he was fat and slow and lousy at kickball. For weeks, Mrs. Thomas stopped going to her job and stopped leaving the house for fear her baby would come home and she wouldn’t be there to wrap her arms around him and feed him cookies and assure him he’d been missed. She was constantly baking batches and batches of oatmeal raisin cookies, one pan after another, from the time Frankie went missing to well after his funeral. And no one was allowed to eat the cookies. Frankie’s cookies. But Jean and I could smell them baking from the street when Mrs. Thomas opened up her kitchen windows and the breeze blew right.

Mr. Thomas spent as much time out of the house as he could, wandering around town with rumpled clothes, wet eyes, and quivering lips, asking everyone he passed, “You seen Frankie? You seen my boy?” Most people tried to avoid him after the first couple weeks when the searches were called off and it was widely assumed Frankie was dead.

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Frankie had been gone maybe four months, and his blue ribbons were fading to gray on the trees around town. Jean and I were playing in the stretch of street between our houses. We decided to put Frankie’s ribbons to better use and gathered them up from every yard except the Thomas’s to decorate Jean’s seat-less bike.

“We’ll be princesses,” Jean said.

“We’ll be older,” I said, “like seventeen.” So we laced ribbons through the spokes and tied ribbons to the handlebars so they’d fly out like streamers when we rode. We tied bows to the bike’s steel stump where the seat should have been. We braided ribbons into each other’s hair. Then we were all dolled-up and ready to ride.

The bike was beautiful. And we were beautiful, too.

I sat on the bike’s handlebars, Jean peddled standing up, and we paraded around waving the cupped-hand stiff-wristed wave of county fair queens.

We didn’t think anyone was watching, but Mrs. Thomas was watching. She was always watching, waiting for Frankie. We heard her front door open and slam shut and we heard her crunching up the gravel driveway. She was running at us. Jean tried to push back on the foot brakes and stop the bike. I tried not to fall off the handlebars.

Mrs. Thomas wore a pink robe and a pair of her husband’s slip-on loafers. Her red hair was matted up in piles on her head. She came up on us quick. Jean couldn’t stop the bike. We couldn’t get away from Mrs. Thomas and we couldn’t go around her. She sidestepped us, grabbed onto our shoulders, and pushed. I fell off the handlebars. The road rushed up and jarred against me. Jean was pinned to the pavement, half on and half under the bike. Then, Mrs. Thomas was on us. Scratching, slapping, tearing, trying to rip the ribbons off bike and bodies, out of hair and spokes.

“These are Frankie’s ribbons,” she said. She seemed to have more than two hands. She was hurting me everywhere, but I didn’t try to stop her. I just squeezed my eyes shut and lay there in the road. Jean was crying somewhere behind me. Mrs. Thomas was screaming over us. “Frankie’s going to see these and come home.”

She stopped clawing and stood up. I opened my eyes. Mrs. Thomas blotted out the world. She was huge, pink, and heaving. Her hands were filled with hair and ribbons. She turned and left us whimpering on the pavement.

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Mr. Dunbar is the one who found the body. He was at the dump digging around in the pit—the one where things weren’t burned—looking for scrap-metal he could use or sell. He found Frankie in an old refrigerator. Frankie must have crawled in not knowing the door would latch. Not knowing he wouldn’t be able to crawl out. There were no signs of struggle or foul play, just dead decaying little Frankie curled up, thumb in mouth, waiting to be found.

We played together when we were babies, Frankie and me, before it mattered who was friends with whom. I’d like to say that I stuck up for him, that I was brave when he couldn’t be and helped him when he couldn’t help himself or, at the very least, that I left him alone. I didn’t.

I made fun of him, too. I tripped him sometimes and flicked his pink earlobes when it was cold out, and laughed when other people laughed at him.

I wasn’t proud. I wasn’t fast or pretty or rich, either. And I didn’t have many friends except Jean. It could have been me who got beat up and pushed down all the time, who most days went hungry because bullies stole my change, who pissed in my pants so I wouldn’t have to face whoever was waiting for me in the bathroom. But it wasn’t me, because it was Frankie.

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There was a dare, after Frankie was out of the dump and in the ground, in his coffin that was so much like his refrigerator I wanted to put magnets on it at the funeral, after his mom and dad moved away because they couldn’t bear being called ‘the dead kid’s parents’, after every K through twelver in town found out how he suffocated alone in the dark in the pit in the Kenmore 500 Koolmark T.

This dare couldn’t be done in Frankie’s particular refrigerator. That one was thrown into the fire pit. All the men, all the fathers in town gathered to watch, and when all that could be burned had burned away, they pulled the refrigerator’s metal carcass out of the pit and let Frankie’s dad beat it with a sledgehammer. Mr. Thomas’s hands were blistered and bloody. He screamed at the refrigerator, not in any kind of words, just in pain, until somebody dragged him away and took him to the tavern to drink, to forget for a while, and, hopefully, to pass out. Mr. Dunbar had the pieces of Frankie’s refrigerator hauled off to some other town’s dump to be buried with some other people’s garbage.

This was the dare: get to the dump at night, the later the better, find a refrigerator, a stove was okay too, depending on what had recently been thrown away, leave your friends outside, close yourself in, and give yourself over, temporarily, to death.

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We were tent-camping one night in Jean’s backyard. The bonfire had gone out so we curled up in our sleeping bags and tried to pretend the night noises and the darkness pushing in around the yellow circles of our flashlights didn’t scare us. We thought about Frankie and talked about ghosts.

“They suck out your breath when you’re asleep,” Jean said. “They sucked out my cousin Sandy’s breath when she was eighteen months old.” Jean hunkered down lower in her sleeping bag so she was just a strip of pale skin and two shining yellow eyes. She never was so brave, unless there were boys around to impress.

“You lie,” I said.

“She died in her playpen. They got her.” Jean’s voice was muffled by the sleeping bag. I covered my mouth and nose up, too.

Something scraped against our canvas roof, with that hissing noise of fingernails against fabric. Jean must have heard it too because she’d turtled herself up in her sleeping bag. I couldn’t hide though. I wanted to see what it was. My breath seemed raspy and louder than it had ever been, and I had to go to the bathroom, but I waited for the sound to come again.

Something banged against the tent’s zipped-flap front door and the wall bowed in toward us.

“It’s Frankie,” Jean yelled. “He’s come back to kill us!” I was scared. Maybe it was Frankie. Maybe it was something worse. The door banged and banged again. I had to know. I reached out to the shaking wall and grabbed the door’s zipper. I looked back at Jean.

“No,” she said. I turned away and unzipped the zipper, one metal tooth at a time. Jean covered her eyes. Halfway to the top the zipper shot away from me up its metal track and the flaps snapped open.

There was nothing outside, nothing but darkness.

But then the darkness came alive, jumped at me, tackled me, and pushed me onto the tent floor. I thought it was Frankie coming for me, maybe for taking his ribbons, maybe for nothing at all.

I kicked and punched my way out from under the thing, and when I got free I realized the thing was Ted and just outside the tent, laughing his butt off, was Jimmer.

“Jerks,” I said. My muscles were all tight and my heart was going too fast and I think I peed a little when I thought a ghost was mauling me, but I couldn’t let them see that. I wasn’t cute like Jean, so I had to be tough. Jean heard my voice, knew I wasn’t dead, and came out of hiding. Now she wanted to be brave, too.

Scaring us must have been Jimmer’s plan, everything always was. Ted was the muscle of the two, the stout silent threatening mass of thirteen-year-old, who did his younger brother’s bidding, punched when Jimmer said punch, scared when Jimmer said scare. Ted had huge round eyes that seemed to take in everything, but understand nothing. Understanding was Jimmer’s job.

Jimmer was short and thick and fast. He had blonde hair, blue eyes, and reminded me of these kids I saw in a history book, the Hitler Youth, but by way of Middle America. Most of all the brothers were mean. Ted was mean because he didn’t have sense not to be. But Jimmer had sense; he was mean because he liked it.

They rolled on the ground laughing. Jean and I still trembled, but tried not to show it, not in front of the boys. They were unpredictable. I never knew if they were going to try to hit us or kiss us, and I couldn’t decide which was worse. Which I wanted.

Jimmer crawled into the tent and wiggled up to Jean. He fluttered his eyelashes, puckered his lips, and spoke in a high girly voice.

“It’s Frankie. It’s Frankie. Oh, help.”

Ted grabbed my flashlight, held it under his chin, and made a gurgley choking noise at Jean. She giggled a flirty giggle. Jimmer stretched out across the middle of the tent and drew a long breath to get our attention back from Ted.

“Do you know about the dare?” Jimmer said. I looked at Jean. She examined the strings of her sleeping bag. We couldn’t *not* know about the dare. “We’re going,” Jimmer said.

“To the dump,” Ted said.

“Now,” Jimmer said. He took my flashlight away from Ted and shined it in my eyes. “You coming?” He scooted up next to me, close enough I could feel his words hiss out and hit my face. He was paying attention to me now, not Jean, and I liked it. “Or are you scared?”

I was scared. Jean was scared. I bet Jimmer and Ted were scared, too. But it was a *dare*. What was I supposed to say?*I’m afraid of the dark. I’m afraid of the dead kid. I want to be punched instead of kissed for the rest of my life.* I couldn’t say those things. I said this:

“Let’s go.”

Don’t tell,” I said. Then I zipped the zipper shut.

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Jimmer took us to the edge of the pit where things weren’t burned, then he took us past it, down below the last safe ledge that Mr. Dunbar always yelled at us to back our asses away from. We slid down through the sand and junk to the bottom, but there was no solid ground here. We were standing on and surrounded by garbage.

It didn’t smell like I thought it would. The rotten food, the soiled diapers, the dead pets parents said they were going to bury in the back yard, all those things could be and were burned in the fire pit. This pit smelled like rust and garage sale and grandparent’s attics and fumes I couldn’t really place but knew I shouldn’t breathe in.

“There,” Jimmer said. But we all saw it at the same time. White like the moon and the smoke against the grays and browns and blacks of the rest of the night. A rectangle, jutting out of the clutter of the pit, slightly rounded at the corners, a latching handle on one side. A Koolmark T. Just like Frankie’s.

The refrigerator door came open quietly. No screaming creeks of rusted hinges like in the movies. Jimmer reached in and slid out the metal racks so there would be room to sit.

Then we stood there, staring at the empty inside of the refrigerator, and the refrigerator seemed to be staring back, like it had been waiting for us, like it wanted to be filled.

I could already feel the air squeezing out of my lungs and the total black closing in around me. “Ted,” Jimmer said, “you go first.” I sighed and breathed again. Ted looked at Jimmer like a puppy who’d been kicked in the head, but he didn’t say no. He nodded. Jimmer pointed the flashlight into the refrigerator. Ted followed the beam and crouched down inside. “Shut the door,” Jimmer said. So I locked Ted in. Jimmer and I stared at the closed door and waited. The moon glared down on us like a giant pupil-less eye.

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 “How long’s he supposed to be in there?” I said.

Jimmer shrugged. “Don’t know.” There was a faint sound from inside the refrigerator. Ted was knocking.

“Can we let him out now?” I said. Jimmer’s lips curled up at the sides.

“Wait,” he said. It had been a long time, I thought. I didn’t really know, though. But it seemed like hours. It seemed too long.

“I’m opening the door,” I said. I reached for the handle. Jimmer shoved me out of the way, opened the door himself, and shined the flashlight on his brother.

Ted was huddled up, his arms clutching his chest, his eyes clenched shut. He gasped when he realized the door was open and half-fell, half-crawled out. He laughed and spit and looked up at us. He was shaking.

“That wasn’t so bad,” he said. Now Jimmer turned the flashlight on me.

“Your turn,” Jimmer said. I didn’t want to go. I wanted to be back with Jean, safe in my sleeping bag, but I had to pretend to be brave. I wanted the boys to like me.

“Get in,” Ted said. I sucked my last breath of free air, stepped in, and crouched down like Ted had. The inside of the refrigerator was smooth painted metal. The tracks from the shelves dug into my back. I looked out at Jimmer and Ted. They looked down at me, laughed, and closed the door.

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I was completely alone in complete darkness.

I knew if I reached my arms out, I should have been able to touch the walls of the refrigerator. But the emptiness around me was so thick. I didn’t want to try for walls and find nothing.

And I didn’t want to think about Frankie. I thought about the food people used to put in this refrigerator. I was sitting where milk had sat, eggs, shaved thin slices of deli ham, pickles. Not Frankie. Cheese, orange juice, pie someone’s mom had baked. No. Not Frankie. Butter, macaroni salad, that other salad with the marshmallows that’s not really salad at all, mustard, bacon. Not Frankie. Not Frankie. Not Frankie.

Something soft and warm and wrinkly rubbed against my leg. My stomach caved in on itself. More warm things wriggled around me. They climbed up my sweatshirt. I closed my eyes and opened them and shut them again until I couldn’t tell what blackness was which. The things had tiny claws, not for scratching, but for gripping, holding on. One of them made it to my neck and licked and nuzzled. I craned my neck away until my forehead pressed against the back wall of the refrigerator. I heard the things meowing.

The meowing was drowned out by something like giggling. I think I opened my eyes then, or maybe they’d been open the whole time, but I saw through the dark. I saw my dead pet kittens. And I saw doll heads smiling painted white smiles through molded plastic lips. Floating around me were plastic legs, arms, and torsos with smooth round nippleless breasts. The pieces tried to put themselves back together, but thighs were where heads should have been, arms were in leg holes. Heads were just bobbing and laughing at the confusion of parts. Nothing fit right.

And a baby was at my face, gripping my ears with tiny fists. Small lips on my lips. The baby breathed in and in and in and in. Never out. My lungs deflated, dried out, crumbled away.

Then there was Frankie. Curling up next to me. His cheeks were pink, his eyes blurry with sleep. His chubby hand found mine and he squeezed tight.

“Rest with me here,” Frankie said. “Hide with me here.” I didn’t care anymore that I wasn’t breathing, that I couldn’t get away from the darkness. I was warm and comfortable. “We’re safe here,” Frankie said. So I leaned against him and I slept.

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Mr. Dunbar was the one who found me. Much sooner than he found Frankie; I wasn’t quite dead. “Just in time,” he said later. He’d heard noises and taken his shotgun to investigate. He shot twice in the air to flush any intruders out. Jimmer and Ted scrambled up from the pit. Jimmer and Ted left me down there. But Jimmer and Ted got caught and told Mr. Dunbar about the dare and the refrigerator and the girl they’d accidentally left inside.

Light came in and air came in and Mr. Dunbar was standing over me. Frankie was gone.

“Good Christ,” Mr. Dunbar said. He lifted me out of the refrigerator. “You fucking kids.”

Jimmer still had my flashlight. He led Ted and Mr. Dunbar through the woods and back to our street. I was in and out, between waking and dreaming, but I remember Mr. Dunbar carrying me in his arms, keeping me tight against his chest. He smelled like fire. He was looking straight ahead over Ted and Jimmer and kept stepping on Ted’s heels. He said over and over, “fucking kids, stupid fucking kids.” And there were tears in his eyes. They twinkled when the moonlight caught them but never spilled out or down his cheeks.

**"Through the Tunnel"**  
**By Doris Lessing**

*Doris Lessing was born in Kermanshah, Persia (present-day Iran), on October 22, 1919. After growing up in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), she moved to England and embarked upon a writing career. Her first novel was published in 1950 and her 1962 novel The Golden Notebook turned her into a feminist role model. The author of more than 55 works spanning fiction, nonfiction, poetry and opera, Lessing became the oldest recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2007, at the age of 88. She died in 2013, at age 94.*

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Going to the shore on the first morning of the holiday, the young English boy stopped at a turning of the path and looked down at a wild and rocky bay, and then over to the crowded beach he knew so well from other years. His mother walked on in front of him, carrying a bright-striped bag in one hand. Her other arm, swinging loose, was very white in the sun. The boy watched that white, naked arm, and turned his eyes, which had a frown behind them, toward the bay and back again to his mother. When she felt he was not with her, she swung around. "Oh, there you are, Jerry!" she said. She looked impatient, then smiled. "Why, darling, would you rather not come with me? Would you rather-" She frowned, conscientiously worrying over what amusements he might secretly be longing for which she had been too busy or too careless to imagine. He was very familiar with that anxious, apologetic smile. Contrition sent him running after her. And yet, as he ran, he looked back over his shoulder at the wild bay; and all morning, as he played on the safe beach, he was thinking of it.   
  
Next morning, when it was time for the routine of swimming and sunbathing, his mother said, "Are you tired of the usual beach, Jerry? Would you like to go somewhere else?"   
  
"Oh, no!" he said quickly, smiling at her out of that unfailing impulse of contrition - a sort of chivalry. Yet, walking down the path with her, he blurted out, "I'd like to go and have a look at those rocks down there."   
  
She gave the idea her attention. It was a wild-looking place, and there was no one there, but she said, "Of course, Jerry. When you've had enough come to the big beach. Or just go straight back to the villa, if you like." She walked away, that bare arm, now slightly reddened from yesterday's sun, swinging. And he almost ran after her again, feeling it unbearable that she should go by herself, but he did not.   
  
She was thinking, Of course he's old enough to be safe without me. Have I been keeping him too close? He mustn't feel he ought to be with me. I must be careful.   
  
He was an only child, eleven years old. She was a widow. She was determined to be neither possessive nor lacking in devotion. She went worrying off to her beach.   
  
As for Jerry, once he saw that his mother had gained her beach, he began the steep descent to the bay. From where he was, high up among red-brown rocks, it was a scoop of moving bluish green fringed with white. As he went lower, he saw that it spread among small promontories and inlets of rough, sharp rock, and the crisping, lapping surface showed stains of purple and darker blue. Finally, as he ran sliding and scraping down the last few yards, he saw an edge of white surf, and the shallow, luminous movement of water over white sand, and, beyond that, a solid, heavy blue.   
  
He ran straight into the water and began swimming. He was a good swimmer. He went out fast over the gleaming sand, over a middle region where rocks lay like discolored monsters under the surface, and then he was in the real sea - a warm sea where irregular cold currents from the deep water shocked his limbs.   
  
When he was so far out that he could look back not only on the little bay but past the promontory that was between it and the big beach, he floated on the buoyant surface and looked for his mother. There she was, a speck of yellow under an umbrella that looked like a slice of orange peel. He swam back to shore, relieved at being sure she was there, but all at once very lonely.   
  
On the edge of a small cape that marked the side of the bay away from the promontory was a loose scatter of rocks. Above them, some boys were stripping off their clothes. They came running, naked, down to the rocks. The English boy swam towards them, and kept his distance at a stone's throw. They were of that coast, all of them burned smooth dark brown, and speaking a language he did not understand. To be with them, of them, was a craving that filled his whole body. He swam a little closer; they turned and watched him with narrowed, alert dark eyes. Then one smiled and waved. It was enough. In a minute, he had swum in and was on the rocks beside them, smiling with a desperate, nervous supplication. They shouted cheerful greetings at him, and then, as he preserved his nervous, uncomprehending smile, they understood that he was a foreigner strayed from his own beach, and they proceeded to forget him. But he was happy. He was with them.   
  
They began diving again and again from a high point into a well of blue sea between rough, pointed rocks. After they had dived and come up, they swam around, hauled themselves up, and waited their turn to dive again. They were big boys — men to Jerry. He dived, and they watched him, and when he swam around to take his place, they made way for him. He felt he was accepted, and he dived again, carefully, proud of himself.   
  
Soon the biggest of the boys poised himself, shot down into the water, and did not come up. The others stood about, watching. Jerry, after waiting for the sleek brown head to appear, let out a yell of warning; they looked at him idly and turned their eyes back towards the water. After a long time, the boy came up on the other side of a big dark rock, letting the air out of his lungs in a spluttering gasp and a shout of triumph. Immediately, the rest of them dived in. One moment, the morning seemed full of chattering boys; the next, the air and the surface of the water were empty. But through the heavy blue, dark shapes could be seen moving and groping.   
  
Jerry dived, shot past the school of underwater swimmers, saw a black wall of rock looming at him, touched it, and bobbed up at once to the surface, where the wall was a low barrier he could see across. There was no one visible; under him, in the water, the dim shapes of the swimmers had disappeared. Then one, and then another of the boys came up on the far side of the barrier of rock, and he understood that they had swum through some gap or hole in it. He plunged down again. He could see nothing through the stinging salt water but the blank rock. When he came up, the boys were all on the diving rock, preparing to attempt the feat again. And now, in a panic of failure, he yelled up, in English, "Look at me! Look!" and he began splashing and kicking in the water like a foolish dog.   
  
They looked down gravely, frowning. He knew the frown. At moments of failure, when he clowned to claim his mother's attention, it was with just this grave, embarrassed inspection that she rewarded him. Through his hot shame, feeling the pleading grin on his face like a scar that he could never remove, he looked up at the group of big brown boys on the rock and shouted, *"Bonjour! Merci! Au revoir! Monsieur, monsieur!"* while he hooked his fingers round his ears and waggled them.   
  
Water surged into his mouth; he choked, sank, came up. The rock, lately weighed with boys, seemed to rear up out of the water as their weight was removed. They were flying down past him, now, into the water; the air was full of falling bodies. Then the rock was empty in the hot sunlight. He counted one, two, three . . . .   
  
At fifty, he was terrified. They must all be drowning beneath him, in the watery caves of the rock! At a hundred, he stared around him at the empty hillside, wondering if he should yell for help. He counted faster, faster, to hurry them up, to bring them to the surface quickly, to drown them quickly - anything rather than the terror of counting on and on into the blue emptiness of the morning. And then, at a hundred and sixty, the water beyond the rock was full of boys blowing like brown whales. They swam back to the shore without a look at him.   
  
He climbed back to the diving rock and sat down, feeling the hot roughness of it under his thighs. The boys were gathering up their bits of clothing and running off along the shore to another promontory. They were leaving to get away from him. He cried openly, fists in his eyes. There was no one to see him, and he cried himself out.   
  
It seemed to him that a long time had passed, and he swam out to where he could see his mother. Yes, she was still there, a yellow spot under an orange umbrella. He swam back to the big rock, climbed up, and dived into the blue pool among the fanged and angry boulders. Down he went, until he touched the wall of rock again. But the salt was so painful in his eyes that he could not see.   
  
He came to the surface, swam to shore and went back to the villa to wait for his mother. Soon she walked slowly up the path, swinging her striped bag, the flushed, naked arm dangling beside her. "I want some swimming goggles," he panted, defiant and beseeching.   
  
She gave him a patient, inquisitive look as she said casually, "Well, of course, darling."   
  
But now, now, now! He must have them this minute, and no other time. He nagged and pestered until she went with him to a shop. As soon as she had bought the goggles, he grabbed them from her hand as if she were going to claim them for herself, and was off, running down the steep path to the bay.   
  
Jerry swam out to the big barrier rock, adjusted the goggles, and dived. The impact of the water broke the rubber-enclosed vacuum, and the goggles came loose. He understood that he must swim down to the base of the rock from the surface of the water. He fixed the goggles tight and firm, filled his lungs, and floated, face down, on the water. Now he could see. It was as if he had eyes of a different kind — fish eyes that showed everything clear and delicate and wavering in the bright water.   
  
Under him, six or seven feet down, was a floor of perfectly clean, shining white sand, rippled firm and hard by the tides. Two greyish shapes steered there, like long, rounded pieces of wood or slate. They were fish. He saw them nose towards each other, poise motionless, make a dart forward, swerve off, and come around again. It was like a water dance. A few inches above them, the water sparkled as if sequins were dropping through it. Fish again — myriads of minute fish, the length of his fingernail, were drifting through the water, and in a moment he could feel the innumerable tiny touches of them against his limbs. It was like swimming in flaked silver. The great rock the big boys had swum through rose sheer out of the white sand, black, tufted lightly with greenish weed. He could see no gap in it. He swam down to its base.   
  
Again and again he rose, took a big chestful of air, and went down. Again and again he groped over the surface of the rock, feeling it, almost hugging it in the desperate need to find the entrance. And then, once, while he was clinging to the black wall, his knees came up and he shot his feet out forward and they met no obstacle. He had found the hole.   
  
He gained the surface, clambered about the stones that littered the barrier rock until he found a big one, and, with this in his arms, let himself down over the side of the rock. He dropped, with the weight, straight to the sandy floor. Clinging tight to the anchor of stone, he lay on his side and looked in under the dark shelf at the place where his feet had gone. He could see the hole. It was an irregular, dark gap, but he could not see deep into it. He let go of his anchor, clung with his hands to the edges of the hole, and tried to push himself in.   
  
He got his head in, found his shoulders jammed, moved them in sidewise, and was inside as far as his waist. He could see nothing ahead. Something soft and clammy touched his mouth, he saw a dark frond moving against the grayish rock, and panic filled him. He thought of octopuses, of clinging weed. He pushed himself out backward and caught a glimpse, as he retreated, of a harmless tentacle of seaweed drifting in the mouth of the tunnel. But it was enough. He reached the sunlight, swam to shore, and lay on the diving rock. He looked down into the blue well of water. He knew he must find his way through that cave, or hole, or tunnel, and out the other side.   
  
First, he thought, he must learn to control his breathing. He let himself down into the water with another big stone in his arms, so that he could lie effortlessly on the bottom of the sea. He counted. One, two, three. He counted steadily. He could hear the movement of blood in his chest. Fifty-one, fifty-two . . . . His chest was hurting. He let go of the rock and went up into the air. He saw that the sun was low. He rushed to the villa and found his mother at her supper. She said only "Did you enjoy yourself?" and he said "Yes."   
  
All night, the boy dreamed of the water-filled cave in the rock, and as soon as breakfast was over he went to the hay.   
  
That night, his nose bled badly. For hours he had been underwater, learning to hold his breath, and now he felt weak and dizzy. His mother said, "I shouldn't overdo things, darling, if I were you."   
  
That day and the next, Jerry exercised his lungs as if everything, the whole of his life, all that he would become, depended upon it. And again his nose bled at night, and his mother insisted on his coming with her the next day. It was a torment to him to waste a day of his careful self-training, but he stayed with her on that other beach, which now seemed a place for small children, a place where his mother might lie safe in the sun. It was not his beach.   
  
He did not ask for permission, on the following day, to go to his beach. He went, before his mother could consider the complicated rights and wrongs of the matter. A day's rest, he discovered, had improved his count by ten. The big boys had made the passage while he counted a hundred and sixty. He had been counting fast, in his fright. Probably now, if he tried, he could get through that long tunnel, but he was not going to try yet. A curious, most unchildlike persistence, a controlled impatience, made him wait. In the meantime, he lay underwater on the white sand, littered now by stones he had brought down from the upper air, and studied the entrance to the tunnel. He knew every jut and corner of it, as far as it was possible to see. It was as if he already felt its sharpness about his shoulders.   
  
He sat by the clock in the villa, when his mother was not near, and checked his time. He was incredulous and then proud to find he could hold his breath without strain for two minutes. The words "two minutes", authorized by the clock, brought the adventure that was so necessary to him close.   
  
In another four days, his mother said casually one morning, they must go home. On the day before they left, he would do it. He would do it if it killed him, he said defiantly to himself. But two days before they were to leave - a day of triumph when he increased his count by fifteen - his nose bled so badly that he turned dizzy and had to lie limply over the big rock like a bit of seaweed, watching the thick red blood flow on to the rock and trickle slowly down to the sea. He was frightened. Supposing he turned dizzy in the tunnel? Supposing he died there, trapped? Supposing — his head went around, in the hot sun, and he almost gave up. He thought he would return to the house and lie down, and next summer, perhaps, when he had another year's growth in him - then he would go through the hole.   
  
But even after he had made the decision, or thought he had, he found himself sitting up on the rock and looking down into the water, and he knew that now, this moment when his nose had only just stopped bleeding, when his head was still sore and throbbing — this was the moment when he would try. If he did not do it now, he never would. He was trembling with fear that he would not go, and he was trembling with horror at that long, long tunnel under the rock, under the sea. Even in the open sunlight, the barrier rock seemed very wide and very heavy; tons of rock pressed down on where he would go. If he died there, he would lie until one day — perhaps not before next year — those big boys would swim into it and find it blocked.   
  
He put on his goggles, fitted them tight, tested the vacuum. His hands were shaking. Then he chose the biggest stone he could carry and slipped over the edge of the rock until half of him was in the cool, enclosing water and half in the hot sun. He looked up once at the empty sky, filled his lungs once, twice, and then sank fast to the bottom with the stone. He let it go and began to count. He took the edges of the hole in his hands and drew himself into it, wriggling his shoulders in sidewise as he remembered he must, kicking himself along with his feet.   
  
Soon he was clear inside. He was in a small rock-bound hole filled with yellowish-grey water. The water was pushing him up against the roof. The roof was sharp and pained his back. He pulled himself along with his hands — fast, fast — and used his legs as levers. His head knocked against something; a sharp pain dizzied him. Fifty, fifty-one, fifty-two . . . He was without light, and the water seemed to press upon him with the weight of rock. Seventy-one, seventy-two . . . . There was no strain on his lungs. He felt like an inflated balloon, his lungs were so light and easy, but his head was pulsing.   
  
He was being continually pressed against the sharp roof, which felt slimy as well as sharp. Again he thought of octopuses, and wondered if the tunnel might be filled with weed that could tangle him. He gave himself a panicky, convulsive kick forward, ducked his head, and swam. His feet and hands moved freely, as if in open water. The hole must have widened out. He thought he must be swimming fast, and he was frightened of banging his head if the tunnel narrowed.   
  
A hundred, a hundred and one. . . The water paled. Victory filled him. His lungs were beginning to hurt. A few more strokes and he would be out. He was counting wildly; he said a hundred and fifteen, and then, a long time later, a hundred and fifteen again. The water was a clear jewel-green all around him. Then he saw, above his head, a crack running up through the rock. Sunlight was falling through it, showing the clean dark rock of the tunnel, a single mussel shell, and darkness ahead.   
  
He was at the end of what he could do. He looked up at the crack as if it were filled with air and not water, as if he could put his mouth to it to draw in air. A hundred and fifteen, he heard himself say inside his head — but he had said that long ago. He must go on into the blackness ahead, or he would drown. His head was swelling, his lungs cracking. A hundred and fifteen, a hundred and fifteen pounded through his head, and he feebly clutched at rocks in the dark, pulling himself forward, leaving the brief space of sunlit water behind. He felt he was dying. He was no longer quite conscious. He struggled on in the darkness between lapses into unconsciousness. An immense, swelling pain filled his head, and then the darkness cracked with an explosion of green light. His hands, groping forward, met nothing, and his feet, kicking back, propelled him out into the open sea.   
  
He drifted to the surface, his face turned up to the air. He was gasping like a fish. He felt he would sink now and drown; he could not swim the few feet back to the rock. Then he was clutching it and pulling himself up on it. He lay face down, gasping. He could see nothing but a red-veined, clotted dark. His eyes must have burst, he thought; they were full of blood. He tore off his goggles and a gout of blood went into the sea. His nose was bleeding, and the blood had filled the goggles.   
  
He scooped up handfuls of water from the cool, salty sea, to splash on his face, and did not know whether it was blood or salt water he tasted. After a time, his heart quieted, his eyes cleared, and he sat up. He could see the local boys diving and playing half a mile away. He did not want them. He wanted nothing but to get back home and lie down.   
  
In a short while, Jerry swam to shore and climbed slowly up the path to the villa. He flung himself on his bed and slept, waking at the sound of feet on the path outside. His mother was coming back. He rushed to the bathroom, thinking she must not see his face with bloodstains, or tearstains, on it. He carne out of the bathroom and met her as she walked into the villa, smiling, her eyes lighting up. "Have a nice morning?" she asked, laying her head on his warm brown shoulder a moment.   
  
"Oh, yes, thank you," he said.   
  
"You look a bit pale." And then, sharp and anxious. "How did you bang your head?"   
  
"Oh, just banged it," he told her.   
  
She looked at him closely. He was strained. His eyes were glazed-looking. She was worried. And then she said to herself, "Oh, don't fuss! Nothing can happen. He can swim like a fish."   
  
They sat down to lunch together.   
  
"Mummy," he said, "I can stay under water for two minutes — three minutes, at least."   
  
It came bursting out of him.   
  
"Can you, darling?" she said. "Well, I shouldn't overdo it. I don't think you ought to swim any more today."   
  
She was ready for a battle of wills, but he gave in at once. It was no longer of the least importance to go to the bay.

**“The Scarlet Ibis”**

**By James Hurst**

*James Hurst grew up in North Carolina on a coastal farm, the present site of US Marine Corps. Camp LeJeune. During his early years at the bank, he wrote a play and short stories, some of which were published in small literary magazines. "The Scarlet Ibis" first appeared in The Atlantic Monthly in the July, 1960 issue and won the "Atlantic First" award that year.*

It was in the clove of seasons, summer was dead but autumn had not yet been born, that the ibis lit in the bleeding tree.  The flower garden was stained with rotting brown magnolia petals, and ironweeds grew rank amid the purple phlox.  The five o’clock by the chimney still marked time, but the oriole nest in the elm was untenanted and rocked back and forth like an empty cradle.  The last graveyard flowers were blooming, and their smell drifted across the cotton field and through every room of our house, speaking softly the names of our dead.   
  
           It’s strange that all this is still so clear to me, now that that summer has long since fled and time has had its way.  A grindstone stands where the bleeding tree stood, just outside the kitchen door, and now if an oriole sings in the elm, its song seems to die up in the leaves, a silvery dust.  The flower garden is prim, the house a gleaming white, and the pale fence across the yard stands straight and spruce.  But sometimes (like right now), as I sit in the cool, green-draped parlor, the grindstone begins to turn, and time with all its changes is ground away---and I remember Doodle.   
  
 Doodle was just about the craziest brother a boy ever had. Of course he wasn’t a crazy crazy like old Miss Leedie, who was in love with President Wilson and wrote him a letter every day, but was a nice crazy, like someone you meet in your dreams. He was born when I was six and was, from the outset, a disappointment. He seemed all head, with a tiny body which was red and shriveled like an old man’s. Everybody thought he was going to die-everybody except Aunt Nicey, who had delivered him. She said he would live because he was born in a caul and cauls were made from Jesus"'" nightgown. Daddy had Mr. Heath, the carpenter, build a little mahogany coffin for him. But he didn’t die, and when he was three months old, Mamma and Daddy decided they might as well name him. They named him William Armstrong, which was like tying a big tail on a small kite. Such a name sounds good only on a tombstone.    
  
           I thought myself pretty smart at many things, like holding my breath, running, jumping, or climbing the vines in Old Woman Swam, and I wanted more than anything else someone to race to Horsehead Landing, someone to box with, and someone to perch within the top fork of the great pine behind the barn, where across the fields and swamps you could see the sea. I wanted a brother. But Mama, crying, told me that even if William Armstrong lived, he would never do these things with me. He might not, she sobbed, even be "all there." He might, as long as he lived, lie on the rubber sheet in the center of the bed in the front bedroom where the white marquisette curtains billowed out in the afternoon sea breeze rustling like palmetto fronds.

It was bad having an invalid brother, but having one who possibly was not all there was unbearable, so I began to make plans to kill him by smothering him with a pillow. However one afternoon as I watched him, my head poked between the iron posts of the foot of the bed, he looked straight at me and grinned. I skipped through the rooms, down the echoing halls, shouting, "Mama, he smiled. He’s all there! He’s all there!" and he was.    
  
  When he was two, if you laid him on his stomach, he began to try to move himself, straining terribly. The doctor said that with his weak heart this strain would probably kill him, but it didn’t. Trembling, he’d push himself up, turning first red, then a soft purple, and finally collapse back onto the bed like an old worn-out doll. I can see Mama watching him, her hand pressed tight across her mouth, her eyes wide and unblinking. But he learned to crawl (it was his third winter), and we brought him out of the front bedroom, putting him on the rug before the fireplace. For the first time he became one of us.   
  
 As long as he lay all the time in bed, we called him William Armstrong, even though it was formal and sounded as if we were referring to one of our ancestors, but with his creeping around on the deerskin rug and beginning to talk, something had to be done about his name. It was I who renamed him.  When he crawled, he crawled backward, as if he were in reverse and couldn’t change gears. If you called him, he’d turn around as if he were going the other direction, then he’d back right up to you to be picked up. Crawling backward made him look like a doodlebug so I began to call him doodle, and in the time even Mamma and Daddy thought it was a better name that William Armstrong. Only Aunt Nicey disagreed. She said cawl babies should be treated with special respect since they might turn out to be saints. Renaming my brother was perhaps the kindest thing I ever did for him, because nobody expects much from someone called Doodle.  

Although Doodle learned to crawl, he showed no signs of walking, but he wasn’t idle. He talked so much that we all quit listening to what he said**.**

It was about this time that Daddy built him a go cart, and I had to pull him around. At first I just paraded him up and down the piazza, but then he started crying to be taken out into the yard and it ended up by my having to lug him wherever I went. If I so much as picked up my cap, he’d start crying to go with me, Mamma would call from wherever she was, "Take Doodle with you"   
  
 He has a burden in many ways. The doctor had said that he mustn’t get too excited, too hot, too cold, or too tired and he must always be treated gently. A long list of don’ts with him, all of which I ignored once we got out of the house. To discourage his coming with me, I’d run with him across the ends of the cotton rows and careen him around corners on two wheels. Sometimes I accidentally turned him over, but he never told Mama. His skin was very sensitive, and he had to wear a big straw hat whenever he went out. When the going got rough and he had to cling to the sides of the go-cart, the hat slipped all the way down to his ears. He was a sight. Finally I could see why I was licked. Doodle was me brother, and he was going to cling to me forever, no matter what I did, so I dragged him across the burning cotton field to share with him the only beauty I knew, Old Woman Swamp.  I pulled the go-cart through the sawtooth fern, down into the green dimness where the palametto fronds whispered by the stream. I lifted him out and set him down in the soft rubber grass beside a tall pine. His eyes were round with wonder as he gazed about him, and his little hands began to stroke the rubber grass. Then he began to cry.   
  
           "For heaven’s sake, what’s the matter?" I asked, annoyed.   
  
           "It’s so pretty," he said. "So pretty, pretty, pretty."         
  
           After that day Doodle and I went down into Old Women Swamp. I would gather wildflowers, wild violets, honeysuckle, yellow jasmine, snake flowers and waterlilies, and with wire grass we’d weave them into necklaces and crowns. We’d bedeck ourselves with our handiwork and loll about this beautified, beyond the touch of the everyday world. Then when the slanted rays of the sun burned orange in the tops of the pines, we'd drop our jewels into the stream and watch them float away toward the sea.   
  
           There is within me (and with sadness I have watched it in others) a knot of cruelty borne by the stream of love, much as our blood sometimes bears the seed of our destruction and at times I was mean to Doodle. One day I took him up to the barn loft and showed him his casket, telling him how we all had believed he would die. It was covered with a film of Paris green sprinkled to kill the rats, and screech owls had built a nest inside it.   
  
Doodle studied the mahogany box for a long time then said. "It’s not mine."   
  
 "It is," I said. "And before I’ll help you down from the loft, you’re going to have to touch it."   
  
 "I won’t touch it," he said sullenly.    
  
 "Then I’ll leave here by yourself," I threatened, and made as if I were going down.   
  
 Doodle was frightened of being left.  "Don’t go leave me, Brother," he cried, and he leaned toward the coffin.  His hand, trembling, reached out, and when he touched the casket, he screamed.  A screech owl flapped out of the box into our faces, scaring us and covering us with Paris green.  Doodle was paralyzed, so I put him on my shoulder and carried him down the ladder, and even when we were outside in the bright sunshine, he clung to me, crying, "Don’t leave me.  Don’t leave me."   
  
 When Doodle was five years old, I was embarrassed at having a brother of that age who couldn’t walk, so I set out to teach him.  We were down in Old Woman Swamp and it was spring and the sick-sweet smell of bay flowers hung everywhere like a mournful song.  "I’m going to teach you to walk, Doodle," I said.   
  
 He was sitting comfortably on the soft grass, leaning back against the pine.  "Why?" he asked.   
  
 I hadn’t expected such an answer. "So I won’t have to haul you around all the time."   
  
 "I can’t walk, Brother," he said.    
  
 "Who says so?" I demanded.    
  
 "Mama, the doctor-everybody."   
  
 "Oh, you can walk," I said, and I took him by the arms and stood him up. He collapsed onto the grass like a half-empty flour sack. It was as if he has no bones in his legs.    
  
 "Don’t hurt me, Brother" he warned.    
  
 "Shut up. I’m not going to hurt you. I’m going to teach you to walk." I heaved him up again, and again he collapsed.    
  
 This time he did not lift his face up out of the rubber grass. "I just can’t do it. Let’ make honeysuckle wreaths."    
  
 "Oh yes you can Doodle," I said. "All you got to do is try. Now come on," and I hauled him up once more.    
  
 It seemed so hopeless from the beginning that it’s a miracle I didn’t give up. But all of us must have something or someone to be proud of, and Doodle has become mine. I did not know then that pride is a wonderful, terrible thing, a sees that bears two vines, life and death. Every day that summer we went to the pine beside the stream of Old Woman Swamp, and I put him on his feet at least a hundred times each afternoon. Occasionally I too became discouraged because it didn’t seem as if he was trying and I would say: "Doodle don’t you want to learn to walk?"    
  
 He’d nod his head, and I’d say, "well, if you don’t keep trying, you’ll never learn." Then I’d paint for him a picture of us as old men, white-haired, him with a long white beard and me still pulling him around in the go-cart. This never failed to make him try again.   
  
 Finally, one day, after many weeks of practicing, he stood alone for a few seconds**.**

When he fell, I grabbed him in my arms and hugged him, our laughter pealing through the swamp like a ringing bell. Now we knew it could be done. Hope no longer hid in the palmetto thicket but perched like a cardinal in the lacy toothbrush tree, brilliantly visible. "Yes, yes," I cried, and he cried it too, and the grass beneath us was soft and the smell of the swamp was sweet.   
  
 With success so imminent, we decided not to tell anyone until he could actually walk. Each day, bearing rain, we sneaked into Old Woman Swamp, and by cotton-picking time, Doodle was ready to show what he could do. He still wasn’t able to walk far, but we could wait no longer. Keeping a nice secret is hard to do, like holding your breath. We chose to reveal all on October eighth, Doodle’s sixth birthday, and for weeks ahead we mooned around the house, promising everybody a most spectacular surprise. Aunt Nicey said that, after so much talk, if we produced anything less tremendous than the Resurrection, she was going to be disappointed.

At breakfast on our chosen day, when Mama, Daddy, and Aunt Nicey were in the dinning room, I brought Doodle to the door in the go-cart just as usual and had them turn their backs, making them cross their hearts and hoped to die if they peeked. I helped Doodle up, and when he was standing alone I let them look. There wasn’t a sound as Doodle walked slowly cross the room and sat down at his place at the table. Then Mama began to cry and ran over to him, hugging him and kissing him. Daddy hugged him too, so I went to Aunt Nicey, who was thanks-praying in the doorway, and began to waltz her around. We danced together quite well until she came down on my big toe with her brogans, hurting me so badly I thought I was crippled for life.   
  
           Doodle told them it was I who has taught him to walk, so everyone wanted to hug me, and I began to cry.   
  
           "What are you crying for?" asked Daddy, but I couldn’t answer. They did not know that I did it for myself; that pride, whose slave I was, spoke to me louder than all their voices; and that Doodle walked only because I was ashamed of having a crippled brother.    
  
           Within a few months Doodle had learned to walk well and his go-cart was put up in the barn loft (it’s still there) beside his little mahogany coffin.  Now, when we roamed off together, resting often, we never turned back until our destination had been reached, and to help pass time, we took up lying.  From the beginning Doodle was a terrible liar, and he got me in the habit. Had anyone stopped to listen to us, we would have been sent off Dix Hill.     
  
           My lies were scary, involved, and usually pointless, but Doodle’s were twice as crazy.  People in his story all had wings and flew wherever they wanted to go.  His favorite lie was about the boy named Peter who had a pet peacock with a ten-foot tail. Peter wore a golden robe that glittered so brightly that when he walked through the sunflowers they turned away from the sun to face him.  When Peter was ready to go to sleep, the peacock spread its magnificent tail, enfolding the boy gently like a closing go-to-sleep flower, burying him in the gloriously iridescent, rustling vortex.  Yes, I must admit it.  Doodle could beat me lying.   
  
 Doodle and I spent lots of time thinking about our future. We decided that when we were grown, we’d live in Old Woman Swamp and pick dog’s tongue for a living. Beside the stream, he planned we’d build us a house of whispering leaves and the swamp birds would be our chickens.

All day long (when we weren’t gathering dog’s tongue) we’d swing through the cypresses on the rope vines, and if it rained we’d huddle beneath an umbrella tree and play stickfrog. Mama and Daddy could come and live with us if they wanted to. He even came up with the idea that he could marry Mama and I could marry Daddy. Of course, I was old enough to know this wouldn’t work out, but the picture he painted was so beautiful and serene that all I could do was whisper yes, yes.

Once I had succeeded in teaching Doodle to walk, I began to believe in my own infallibility and I prepared a terrific development program for him, unknown to Mama and Daddy, of course.  I would teach him to run, to swim, to climb trees, and to fight.  He, too, now believed in my infallibility, so we set the deadline for these accomplishments less than a year away, when, it had been decided, Doodle could start school.   
  
           That winter we didn’t make much progress, for I was in school and Doodle suffered from one bad cold after another.  But when spring came, rich and warm, we raised our sights again.  Success lay at the end of summer like a pot of gold, and our campaign got off to a good start.  On hot days, Doodle and I went down to Horsehead Landing, and I gave him swimming lessons or showed him how to row a boat.  Sometimes we descended into the cool greenness of Old Woman Swamp and climbed the rope vines or boxed scientifically beneath the pine where he had learned to walk.  Promise hung about us like leaves, and wherever we looked, ferns unfurled and birds broke into song.   
  
 That summer the summer of 1918, was blighted. In May and June there was no rain and the crops withered, curled up, and then died under the thirsty sun. One morning July a hurricane came out of the east, tipping over the oaks in the yard and splitting the limbs of the elm trees. That afternoon it roared back out of the west, blew the fallen oaks around, snapping their roots and tearing them out of the earth like hawk at the entrails of a chicken. Cotton bolls where wrenched from the stalks and lay like green walnuts in the valleys between the rows, while the cornfield learned over uniformly so that the tassels touched the ground. Doodle and I followed Daddy out into the cotton field, where he stood, shoulders sagging, surveying the ruin. When his chin sank down onto his chest, we frightened, and Doodle slipped his hand into mine. Suddenly Daddy straightened his shoulders, raised a giant knuckly fist, and with a voice that seemed to rumble out of the earth itself began cursing heaven, hell, the weather, and the Republican Party. Doodle and I, prodding each other and giggling, went back to the house, knowing that everything would be all right.  
  
 And during that summer, strange names were heard through the house: Chateau-Thierry, Amiens, Soissons, and in her blessing at the supper table, Mama once said, "And bless the persons whose boy Joe was lost in Belleau Wood."   
  
 So we came to that clove of seasons. School was only a few weeks away, and Doodle was far behind schedule. He could barely clear the ground when climbing up the rope vines, and his swimming was certainly not passable. We decided to double our efforts, to make that last drive and reach out pot of gold. I made him swim until he turned blue and row until he couldn’t lift an oar. Wherever we went, I purposely walked fast, and although he kept up, his face turned red and his eyes became glazed. Once, he could go no further, so he collapsed on the ground and began to cry.   
  
           "Aw, come on, Doodle," I urged. "You can do it. Do you want to be different from everybody else when you start school?"

"Does it make any difference?"   
  
           "It certainly does," I said. "Now, come on," and I helped him up.   
  
           As we slipped through the dog days, Doodle began to look feverish, and Mama felt his forehead, asking him if he felt ill. At night he didn’t sleep well, and sometimes he had nightmares, crying out until I touched him and said, "Wake up. Doodle. Wake up."   
  
           It was Saturday noon, just a few days before school was to start. I should have already admitted defeat, but my pride wouldn’t let me. The excitement of our program had now been gone for weeks, but still we kept on with a tired doggedness. It was too far into a net of expectations and had left no crumbs behind.       
  
 Daddy, mama, Doodle and I were seated at the dining-room table having lunch.  It was a hot day, with all the windows and doors open in case a breeze should come.  In the kitchen Aunt Nicey was humming softly.  After a long silence, Daddy spoke. "It’s so calm, I wouldn’t be surprised if we had a storm this afternoon."    
  
           "I did," declared Doodle.  "Down in the swamp."   
  
           "He didn’t," I said contrarily.   
  
           "You did eh?" said daddy, ignoring my denial.   
  
           "I certainly did," Doodle reiterated, scowling at me over the top of his iced-tea glass, and we were quiet again.   
  
           Suddenly, from out in the yard came a strange croaking noise. Doodle stopped eating, with a piece of bread poised ready for his mouth, his eyes popped round like two blue buttons. "   
  
 "What’s that?" he whispered.   
  
           I jumped up, knocking over my chair, and had reached the door when Mama called, "Pick up the chair, sit down again, and say excuse me."   
  
By the time I had done this, Doodle had excused himself and had slipped out into the yard. He was looking up into the bleeding tree.    
  
 "It’s great big red bird!" he called.   
  
           The bird croaked loudly again, and Mama and Daddy came out into the yard. We shaded our eyes with our hands against the hazy glare of the sun and peered up through the still leaves. On the topmost branch a bird the size of a chicken, with scarlet feathers and long legs, was perched precariously. Its wings hung down loosely, and as we watched, a feather dropped away and floated slowly down through the green leaves.   
  
           "It’s not even frightened of us," Mama said.   
  
           "It looks tired," Daddy added. "Or maybe sick."   
  
           Doodle’s hands were clasped at his throat, and I had never seen him stand still so long. "What is it?" he asked.   
  
           Daddy shook his head. "I don’t know, maybe it’s------"    
  
 At that moment the bird began to flutter but the wings were uncoordinated, and amid much flapping and a spray of flying feathers, it tumbled down, bumping through the limbs of the bleeding tree and landing at our feet with a thud.  Its long, graceful neck jerk twice into an S, then straighten out, and the bird was still.  A white veil came over his eyes, and the long white beak unhinged.  Its legs were crossed and its clawlike feet were delicately curved at rest.  Even death did not mar its grace, for it lay in the earth like a broken vase of red flowers, and we stood around it, awed by its exotic beauty.   
  
           "It’s dead" Mama said.   
  
           "What is it?" Doodle repeated.   
  
           "Go bring me the bird book," said Daddy**.**  
  
       I ran into the house and brought back the bird book.  As we watched, Daddy thumbed through its pages. "It’s a scarlet ibis," he said pointing to the picture.  "It lives in the tropics- South America to Florida.  A storm must have brought it here."   
  
       Sadly, we all looked back at the bird.  A scarlet ibis!  How many miles it had traveled to die like this, in our yard, beneath the bleeding tree.   
  
 "I’m not hungry," said Doodle, and he knelt down beside the ibis.   
  
 "We’ve got peach cobbler for dessert" mama tempted from the doorway.    
  
 Doodle remained kneeling.  "I’m going to bury him.   
  
 "Don’t you dare touch him" Mama warned.  "There’s no telling what disease he might have had."   
  
 "All fight said doodle. "I won’t."   
  
 Daddy, Mama and I went back to the dining room table, but we watched doodle through the open door. He took out a piece of string from his pocket and, without touching the ibis, looped one end around its neck. Slowly, while singing softly "shall we gather at the river" he carried the bird around to the front yard and dug a hole in the flower garden, next to the petunia bed. Now we were watching him through the front window, but he didn’t know it. His awkwardness at digging the hole with a shovel whose handle was twice as long as he was made us laugh, and we covered our mouths with our hands so he wouldn’t hear.   
  
           When doodle came into the dining room, he found us seriously eating our cobbler. He was pale and lingered just inside the screen door.  "Did you get the scarlet ibis buried?" asked Daddy.   
  
 Doodle didn’t speak but nodded his head.   
  
            "Go wash your hands, and then you can have some peach cobbler," said Mama.   
  
"Dead birds is bad luck," said Aunt Nicey, poking her head from the kitchen door. "Specially red dead birds!"   
  
 As soon as I had finished eating, doodle and I hurried off to Horsehead Landing. Time was short, and doodle still had a long way to go if he was going to keep up with the other boys when he started school. The sun, gilded with the yellow cast of autumn, still burned fiercely, but the dark green woods through which we passed were shady and cool. When we reached the landing, Doodle said he was too tired to swim, so we got into a skiff and floated down the creek with the tide. Far off in the marsh a rail was scolding, and over on the beach locusts were singing in the myrtle trees. Doodle did not speak and kept his head turned away, letting one hand trail limply in the water.   
  
 After we had drifted a long way, I put the oars in place and made Doodle row back against the tide. Black clouds began to gather in the southwest, and he kept watching them, trying to pull the pars a little faster. When we reached Horsehead landing, lightning was playing across half the sky and thunder roared out, hiding even the sound of the sea. The sun disappeared and darkness descended, almost like night. Flocks of marsh crows flew by, heading inland to roosting nests, and to egrets, squawking, arose from the oyster-rock shallows and careened away.   
  
           Doodle was both tired and frightened, and when he stepped from the skiff he collapsed onto the mud, sending an armada of fiddler crabs rustling off into the marsh grass. I helped him up, and as he wiped the mud off his trousers, he smiled at me ashamedly. He had failed and we both knew it, so we started back home, racing the storm. We never spoke (what are the words that can solder cracked pride?), but I knew he was watching me, watching for a sign of mercy.  The lightning was near now, and from fear he walked so close behind me he kept stepping on my heels.  The faster I walked, the faster he walked, so I began to run.  The rain was coming, roaring through the pines, and then, like a bursting Roman candle, a gum tree ahead of us was shattered by a bolt of lightning.  When the deafening peal of thunder had died, and in the moment before the rain arrived, I heard Doodle, who had fallen behind, cry out, "Brother, Brother, don’t leave me!  Don’t leave me!"   
  
 The knowledge that Doodle’s and my plans had come to naught was bitter, and that streak of cruelty within me awakened.  I ran as fast as I could, leaving him far behind with a wall of rain dividing us.  The drops stung my face like nettles, and the wind flared the wet, glistening leaves of the bordering trees.  Soon I could hear his voice no more.   
  
 I hadn’t run too far before I became tired, and the flood of childish spite evanesced as well.  I stopped and waited for Doodle.  The sound of the rain was everywhere, but the wind had died and it fell straight down in parallel paths like ropes hanging from the sky.  As I waited, I peered through the downpour, but no one came.  Finally I went back and found him huddled beneath a red nightshade bush beside the road.  He was sitting on the ground, his face buried in his arms, which were resting on his drawn-up knees.  "Let’s go, Doodle," I said.   
  
 He didn’t answer, so I placed my hand on his forehead and lifted his head.  Limply, he fell backward onto the earth.  He had been bleeding from the mouth, and his neck and the front of his shirt were stained a brilliant red.     
  
 "Doodle!  Doodle!" I cried, shaking him, but there was no answer but the ropy rain.  He lay very awkwardly, with his head thrown far back, making his vermillion neck appear unusually long and slim.  His little legs bent sharply at the knees, had never before seemed so fragile, so thin.     
  
 I began to weep, and the tear-blurred vision in red before me looked very familiar.  "Doodle!" I screamed above the pounding storm, and threw my body to the earth above his.  For a long, long time, it seemed forever, I lay there crying, sheltering my fallen scarlet ibis from the heresy of rain.

**NON-FICTION**

## **Booker T. Washington Delivers the 1895 Atlanta Compromise Speech**

*On September 18, 1895, African-American spokesman and leader Booker T. Washington spoke before a predominantly white audience at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta. His “Atlanta Compromise” address, as it came to be called, was one of the most important and influential speeches in American history*.

Mr. President and Gentlemen of the Board of Directors and Citizens:

One-third of the population of the South is of the Negro race. No enterprise seeking the material, civil, or moral welfare of this section can disregard this element of our population and reach the highest success. I but convey to you, Mr. President and Directors, the sentiment of the masses of my race when I say that in no way have the value and manhood of the American Negro been more fittingly and generously recognized than by the managers of this magnificent Exposition at every stage of its progress. It is a recognition that will do more to cement the friendship of the two races than any occurrence since the dawn of our freedom.

Not only this, but the opportunity here afforded will awaken among us a new era of industrial progress. Ignorant and inexperienced, it is not strange that in the first years of our new life we began at the top instead of at the bottom; that a seat in Congress or the state legislature was more sought than real estate or industrial skill; that the political convention or stump speaking had more attractions than starting a dairy farm or truck garden.

A ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen a signal, “Water, water; we die of thirst!” The answer from the friendly vessel at once came back, “Cast down your bucket where you are.” A second time the signal, “Water, water; send us water!” ran up from the distressed vessel, and was answered, “Cast down your bucket where you are.” And a third and fourth signal for water was answered, “Cast down your bucket where you are.” The captain of the distressed vessel, at last heeding the injunction, cast down his bucket, and it came up full of fresh, sparkling water from the mouth of the Amazon River. To those of my race who depend on bettering their condition in a foreign land or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the Southern white man, who is their next-door neighbor, I would say: “Cast down your bucket where you are”— cast it down in making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom we are surrounded.

Cast it down in agriculture, mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service, and in the professions. And in this connection it is well to bear in mind that whatever other sins the South may be called to bear, when it comes to business, pure and simple, it is in the South that the Negro is given a man’s chance in the commercial world, and in nothing is this Exposition more eloquent than in emphasizing this chance. Our greatest danger is that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands, and fail to keep in mind that we shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify common labour, and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life; shall prosper in proportion as we learn to draw the line between the superficial and the substantial, the ornamental gewgaws of life and the useful. No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top. Nor should we permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities.

To those of the white race who look to the incoming of those of foreign birth and strange tongue and habits for the prosperity of the South, were I permitted I would repeat what I say to my own race, “Cast down your bucket where you are.” Cast it down among the eight millions of Negroes whose habits you know, whose fidelity and love you have tested in days when to have proved treacherous meant the ruin of your firesides. Cast down your bucket among these people who have, without strikes and labour wars, tilled your fields, cleared your forests, builded your railroads and cities, and brought forth treasures from the bowels of the earth, and helped make possible this magnificent representation of the progress of the South. Casting down your bucket among my people, helping and encouraging them as you are doing on these grounds, and to education of head, hand, and heart, you will find that they will buy your surplus land, make blossom the waste places in your fields, and run your factories. While doing this, you can be sure in the future, as in the past, that you and your families will be surrounded by the most patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful people that the world has seen. As we have proved our loyalty to you in the past, in nursing your children, watching by the sick-bed of your mothers and fathers, and often following them with tear-dimmed eyes to their graves, so in the future, in our humble way, we shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach, ready to lay down our lives, if need be, in defense of yours, interlacing our industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life with yours in a way that shall make the interests of both races one. In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.

There is no defense or security for any of us except in the highest intelligence and development of all. If anywhere there are efforts tending to curtail the fullest growth of the Negro, let these efforts be turned into stimulating, encouraging, and making him the most useful and intelligent citizen. Effort or means so invested will pay a thousand percent interest. These efforts will be twice blessed—blessing him that gives and him that takes. There is no escape through law of man or God from the inevitable: The laws of changeless justice bind Oppressor with oppressed; And close as sin and suffering joined We march to fate abreast...

Nearly sixteen millions of hands will aid you in pulling the load upward, or they will pull against you the load downward. We shall constitute one-third and more of the ignorance and crime of the South, or one-third [of] its intelligence and progress; we shall contribute one-third to the business and industrial prosperity of the South, or we shall prove a veritable body of death, stagnating, depressing, retarding every effort to advance the body politic.

Gentlemen of the Exposition, as we present to you our humble effort at an exhibition of our progress, you must not expect overmuch. Starting thirty years ago with ownership here and there in a few quilts and pumpkins and chickens (gathered from miscellaneous sources), remember the path that has led from these to the inventions and production of agricultural implements, buggies, steam-engines, newspapers, books, statuary, carving, paintings, the management of drug stores and banks, has not been trodden without contact with thorns and thistles. While we take pride in what we exhibit as a result of our independent efforts, we do not for a moment forget that our part in this exhibition would fall far short of your expectations but for the constant help that has come to our educational life, not only from the Southern states, but especially from Northern philanthropists, who have made their gifts a constant stream of blessing and encouragement.

The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing. No race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized. It is important and right that all privileges of the law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercise of these privileges. The opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now is worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera-house.

In conclusion, may I repeat that nothing in thirty years has given us more hope and encouragement, and drawn us so near to you of the white race, as this opportunity offered by the Exposition; and here bending, as it were, over the altar that represents the results of the struggles of your race and mine, both starting practically empty-handed three decades ago, I pledge that in your effort to work out the great and intricate problem which God has laid at the doors of the South, you shall have at all times the patient, sympathetic help of my race; only let this be constantly in mind, that, while from representations in these buildings of the product of field, of forest, of mine, of factory, letters, and art, much good will come, yet far above and beyond material benefits will be that higher good, that, let us pray God, will come, in a blotting out of sectional differences and racial animosities and suspicions, in a determination to administer absolute justice, in a willing obedience among all classes to the mandates of law. This, coupled with our material prosperity, will bring into our beloved South a new heaven and a new earth.

**Citation Information:** Louis R. Harlan, ed., *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, Vol. 3, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 583–587.

# **“The Talented Tenth” [excerpts] 1903**

**By W.E.B. Du Bois**

*W.E.B. Du Bois was an American* [*sociologist*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sociology)*,* [*historian*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historian)*,* [*civil rights activist*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_rights_activist)*,* [*Pan-Africanist*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pan-Africanism)*, author, writer and editor. He was an avid supporter of the rights of blacks everywhere: civic equality, education, and the right to vote. "But they are absolutely certain that the way for a people to gain their reasonable rights is not by voluntarily throwing them away and insisting that they do not want them; that the way for a people to gain respect is not by continually belittling and ridiculing themselves; that, on the contrary, Negroes must insist continually, in season and out of season, that voting is necessary to modern manhood, that color discrimination is barbarism, and that black boys need education as well as white boys."*

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The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races. Now the training of men is a difficult and intricate task. Its technique is a matter for educational experts, but its object is for the vision of seers. If we make money the object of man-training, we shall develop money-makers but not necessarily men; if we make technical skill the object of education, we may possess artisans but not, in nature, men. Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of the schools—intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it—this is the curriculum of that Higher Education which must underlie true life. On this foundation we may build bread winning, skill of hand and quickness of brain, with never a fear lest the child and man mistake the means of living for the object of life… .

If this be true—and who can deny it—three tasks lay before me; first to show from the past that the Talented Tenth as they have risen among American Negroes have been worthy of leadership; secondly, to show how these men may be educated and developed; and thirdly, to show their relation to the Negro problem… .

From the very first it has, been the educated and intelligent of the Negro people that have led and elevated the mass, and the sole obstacles that nullified and retarded their efforts were slavery and race prejudice; …

And so we come to the present—a day of cowardice and vacillation, of strident wide-voiced wrong and faint hearted compromise; of double-faced dallying with Truth and Right. Who are to-day guiding the work of the Negro people? The “exceptions” of course. And yet so sure as this Talented Tenth is pointed out, the blind worshippers of the Average cry out in alarm; “These are exceptions, look here at death, disease and crime—these are the happy rule.” Of course they are the rule, because a silly nation made them the rule: Because for three long centuries this people lynched Negroes who dared to be brave, raped black women who dared to be virtuous, crushed dark-hued youth who dared to be ambitious, and encouraged and made to flourish servility and lewdness and apathy. But not even this was able to crush all manhood and chastity and aspiration from black folk. A saving remnant continually survives and persists, continually aspires, continually shows itself in thrift and ability and character. Exceptional it is to be sure, but this is its chiefest promise; it shows the capability of Negro blood, the promise of black men … . Is it fair, is it decent, is it Christian to ignore these facts of the Negro problem, to belittle such aspiration, to nullify such leadership and seek to crush these people back into the mass out of which by toil and travail, they and their fathers have raised themselves?

Can the masses of the Negro people be in any possible way more quickly raised than by the effort and example of this aristocracy of talent and character? Was there ever a nation on God’s fair earth civilized from the bottom upward? Never; it is, ever was and ever will be from the top downward that culture filters. The Talented Tenth rises and pulls all that are worth the saving up to their vantage ground. This is the history of human progress; …

How then shall the leaders of a struggling people be trained and the hands of the risen few strengthened? There can be but one answer: The best and most capable of their youth must be schooled in the colleges and universities of the land… . All men cannot go to college but some men must; every isolated group or nation must have its yeast, must have for the talented few centers of training where men are not so mystified and befuddled by the hard and necessary toil of earning a living, as to have no aims higher than their bellies, and no God greater than Gold. This is true training, and thus in the beginning were the favored sons of the freedom trained. Out of the colleges of the North came, after the blood of war, Ware, Cravath, Chase, Andrews, Bumstead and Spence to build the foundations of knowledge and civilization in the black South. Where ought they to have begun to build? At the bottom, of course, quibbles the mole with his eyes in the earth. Aye! truly at the bottom, at the very bottom; at the bottom of knowledge, down in the very depth of knowledge there where the roots of justice strike into the lowest soil of Truth. And so they did begin; they founded colleges, and up from the colleges shot normal schools, and out from the normal schools went teachers, and around the normal teachers clustered other teachers to teach the public schools; the college trained in Greek and Latin and mathematics, 2,000 men; and these men trained full 50,000 others in morals and manners, and they in turn taught thrift and the alphabet to nine millions of men who to-day hold $300,000,000 of property. If was a miracle—the most wonderful peace-battle of the 19th century, and yet to-day men smile at it, and in fine superiority tell us that it was all a strange mistake; that a proper way to found a system of education is first to gather the children and buy them spelling books and hoes; afterward men may look about for teachers, if haply they may find them; or again they would teach men Work, but as for Life—why, what has Work to do with Life, they ask vacantly… .

These figures illustrate vividly the function of the college-bred Negro. He is, as he ought to be, the group leader, the man who sets the ideals of the community where he lives, directs its thoughts and heads its social movements. It need hardly be argued that the Negro people need social leadership more than most groups; that they have no traditions to fall back upon, no long established customs, no strong family ties, no well defined social classes. All these things must be slowly and painfully evolved. The preacher was, even before the war, the group leader of the Negroes, and the church their greatest social institution. Naturally this preacher was ignorant and often immoral, and the problem of replacing the older type by better educated men has been a difficult one. Both by direct work and by direct influence on other preachers, and on congregations, the college-bred preacher has an opportunity for reformatory work and moral inspiration, the value of which cannot be overestimated.

It has, however, been in the furnishing of teachers that the Negro college has found its peculiar function. Few persons realize how vast a work, how mighty a revolution has been thus accomplished. To furnish five millions and more of ignorant people with teachers of their own race and blood, in one generation, was not only a very difficult undertaking, but a very important one, in that it placed before the eyes of almost every Negro child an attainable ideal. It brought the masses of the blacks in contact with modern civilization, made black men the leaders of their communities and trainers of the new generation. In this work college-bred Negroes were first teachers, and then teachers of teachers. And here it is that the broad culture of college work has been of peculiar value. Knowledge of life and its wider meaning, has been the point of the Negro’s deepest ignorance, and the sending out of teachers whose training has not been simply for bread winning, but also for human culture, has been of inestimable value in the training of these men… .

The main question, so far as the Southern Negro is concerned, is: What under the present circumstance, must a system of education do in order to raise the Negro as quickly as possible in the scale of civilization? The answer to this question seems to me clear: It must strengthen the Negro’s character, increase his knowledge and teach him to earn a living. Now it goes without saying, that it is hard to do all these things simultaneously or suddenly, and that at the same time it will not do to give all the attention to one and neglect the others; we could give black boys trades, but that alone will not civilize a race of ex-slaves; we might simply increase their knowledge of the world, but this would not necessarily make them wish to use this knowledge honestly; we might seek to strengthen character and purpose, but to what end if this people have nothing to eat or to wear? … . If then we start out to train an ignorant and unskilled people with a heritage of bad habits, our system of training must set before itself two great aims—the one dealing with knowledge and character, the other part seeking to give the child the technical knowledge necessary for him to earn a living under the present circumstances. These objects are accomplished in part by the opening of the common schools on the one, and of the industrial schools on the other. But only in part, for there must also be trained those who are to teach these schools—men and women of knowledge and culture and technical skill who understand modern civilization, and have the training and aptitude to impart it to the children under them. There must be teachers, and teachers of teachers, and to attempt to establish any sort of a system of common and industrial school training, without first (and I say first advisedly) without first providing for the higher training of the very best teachers, is simply throwing your money to the winds … Nothing, in these latter days, has so dampened the faith of thinking Negroes in recent educational movements, as the fact that such movements have been accompanied by ridicule and denouncement and decrying of those very institutions of higher training which made the Negro public school possible, and make Negro industrial schools thinkable … . .

I would not deny, or for a moment seem to deny, the paramount necessity of teaching the Negro to work, and to work steadily and skillfully; or seem to depreciate in the slightest degree the important part industrial schools must play in the accomplishment of these ends, but I do say, and insist upon it, that it is industrialism drunk, with its vision of success, to imagine that its own work can be accomplished without providing for the training of broadly cultured men and women to teach its own teachers, and to teach the teachers of the public schools.

But I have already said that human education is not simply a matter of schools; it is much more a matter of family and group life—the training of one’s home, of one’s daily companions, of one’s social class. Now the black boy of the South moves in a black world—a world with its own leaders, its own thoughts, its own ideals. In this world he gets by far the larger part of his life training, and through the eyes of this dark world he peers into the veiled world beyond. Who guides and determines the education which he receives in his world? His teachers here are the group-leaders of the Negro people—the physicians and clergymen, the trained fathers and mothers, the influential and forceful men about him of all kinds; here it is, if at all, that all culture of the surrounding world trickles through and is handed on by the graduates of the higher schools. Can such culture training of group leaders be neglected? Can we afford to ignore it? … You have no choice; either you must help furnish this race from within its own ranks with thoughtful men of trained leadership, or you must suffer the evil consequences of a headless misguided rabble.

I am an earnest advocate of manual training and trade teaching for black boys, and for white boys, too. I believe that next to the founding of Negro colleges the most valuable addition to Negro education since the war, has been industrial training for black boys. Nevertheless, I insist that the object of all true education is not to make men carpenters, it is to make carpenters men; there are two means of making the carpenter a man, each equally important: the first is to give the group and community in which he works, liberally trained teachers and leaders to teach him and his family what life means; the second is to give him sufficient intelligence and technical skill to make him an efficient workman; the first object demands the Negro college and college-bred men—not a quantity of such colleges, but a few of excellent quality; not too many college-bred men, but enough to leaven the lump, to inspire the masses, to raise the Talented Tenth to leadership; the second object demands a good system of common schools, well-taught, conventionally located and properly equipped … .

Further than this, after being provided with group leaders of civilization, and a foundation of intelligence in the public schools, the carpenter, in order to be a man, needs technical skill. This calls for trade schools… .

Even at this point, however, the difficulties were not surmounted. In the first place modern industry has taken great strides since the war, and the teaching of trades is no longer a simple matter. Machinery and long processes of work have greatly changed the work of the carpenter, the ironworker and the shoemaker. A really efficient workman must be to-day an intelligent man who has had good technical training in addition to thorough common school, and perhaps even higher training… .

Thus, again, in the manning of trade schools and manual training schools we are thrown back upon the higher training as its source and chief support. There was a time when any aged and worn-out carpenter could teach in a trade school. But not so to-day. Indeed the demand for college-bred men by a school like Tuskegee, ought to make Mr. Booker T Washington the firmest friend of higher training. Here he has as helpers the son of a Negro senator, trained in Greek and the humanities, and graduated at Harvard; the son of a Negro congressman and lawyer, trained in Latin and mathematics, and graduated at Oberlin; he has as his wife, a woman who read Virgil and Homer in the same class room with me; he has as college chaplain, a classical graduate of Atlanta University; as teacher of science, a graduate of Fisk; as teacher of history, a graduate of Smith,—indeed some thirty of his chief teachers are college graduates, and instead of studying French grammars in the midst of weeds, or buying pianos for dirty cabins, they are at Mr. Washington’s right hand helping him in a noble work. And yet one of the effects of Mr. Washington’s propaganda has been to throw doubt upon the expediency of such training for Negroes, as these persons have had.

Men of America, the problem is plain before you. Here is a race transplanted through the criminal foolishness of your fathers. Whether you like it or not the millions are here, and here they will remain. If you do not lift them up, they will pull you down. Education and work are the levers to uplift a people. Work alone will not do it unless inspired by the right ideals and guided by intelligence. Education must not simply teach work—it must teach Life. The Talented Tenth of the Negro race must be made leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people. No others can do this and Negro colleges must train men for it. The Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men.

**Citation Information:**  W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth,” from The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes of To-day (New York, 1903).

**“The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” 1926**

**By Langston Hughes**

*Langston Hughes was a leader of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. He was educated at Columbia University and Lincoln University. While a student at Lincoln, he published his first book of poetry, The Weary Blues (1926), as well as his landmark essay, seen by many as a cornerstone document articulation of the Harlem renaissance, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.”*\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Earlier that year, Freda Kirchwey, editor of the Nation, mailed Hughes a proof of “The Negro-Art Hokum,” an essay George Schuyler had written for the magazine, requesting a counterstatement from Hughes. Schuyler, editor of the African-American newspaper The Pittsburgh Courier, questioned in his essay the need for a separate African-American artistic and literary tradition.   
  
Understanding a fellow African American poet’s stated desire to be “a poet—not a Negro poet,” as that poet’s wish to look away from his African American heritage and instead absorb white culture, Hughes’ essay spoke to the concerns of the Harlem Renaissance as it celebrated African American creative innovations such as blues, spirituals, jazz, and literary work that engaged African American life. Notes Hughes, “this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.”   
  
His attention to working-class African-American lives, coupled with his refusal to paint these lives as either saintly or stereotypical, brought criticism from several directions. Articulating the unspoken directives he struggled to ignore, Hughes observes, “‘Oh, be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are,’ say the Negroes. ‘Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you,’ say the whites.”   
  
Hughes’ early poetry often explored domestic and musical themes—particularly jazz—in African American life, and his work grew increasingly political as the Great Depression wore on and his interest in Marxism deepened.

The following passages are excerpted from Langston Hughes’s essay:

One of the most promising of the young Negro poets[[1]](#footnote-1) said to me once, “I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet,” meaning, I believe, “I want to write like a white poet”; meaning subconsciously, “I would like to be a white poet”; meaning behind that, “I would like to be white.” And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet. But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.

But let us look at the immediate background of this young poet. His family is of what I suppose one would call the Negro middle class: people who are by no means rich yet never uncomfortable nor hungry—smug, contented, respectable folk, members of the Baptist church. The father goes to work every morning. He is a chief steward [[2]](#footnote-2)at a large white club. The mother sometimes does fancy sewing or supervises parties for the rich families of the town. The children go to a mixed school. In the home they read white papers and magazines. And the mother often says “Don’t be like niggers” when the children are bad. A frequent phrase from the father is, “Look how well a white man does things.” And so the word white comes to be unconsciously a symbol of all virtues. It holds for the children beauty, morality, and money. The whisper of “I want to be white” runs silently through their minds. This young poet’s home is, I believe, a fairly typical home of the colored middle class. One sees immediately how difficult it would be for an artist born in such a home to interest himself in interpreting the beauty of his own people. He is never taught to see that beauty. He is taught rather not to see it, or if he does, to be ashamed of it when it is not according to Caucasian [[3]](#footnote-3)patterns…

For racial culture the home of a self-styled “high-class” Negro has nothing better to offer. Instead there will perhaps be more aping [[4]](#footnote-4)of things white than in a less cultured or less wealthy home. The father is perhaps a doctor, lawyer, landowner, or politician. The mother may be a social worker, or a teacher, or she may do nothing and have a maid. Father is often dark but he has usually married the lightest woman he could find. The family attend a fashionable church where few really colored faces are to be found. And they themselves draw a color line. In the North they go to white theaters and white movies. And in the South they have at least two cars and a house “like white folks.” Nordic [[5]](#footnote-5)manners, Nordic faces, Nordic hair, Nordic art (if any), and an Episcopal [[6]](#footnote-6)heaven. A very high mountain indeed for the would-be racial artist to climb in order to discover himself and his people…

The road for the serious black artist, then, who would produce a racial art is most certainly rocky and the mountain is high. Until recently he received almost no encouragement for his work from either white or colored people…

Now I await the rise of the Negro theater. Our folk music, having achieved world-wide fame, offers itself to the genius of the great individual American Negro composer who is to come. And within the next decade I expect to see the work of a growing school of colored artists who paint and model the beauty of dark faces and create with new technique the expressions of their own soul-world. And the Negro dancers who will dance like flame and the singers who will continue to carry our songs to all who listen—they will be with us in even greater numbers tomorrow.

So I am ashamed for the black poet who says, “I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet,” as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world. I am ashamed, too, for the colored artist who runs from the painting of Negro faces to the painting of sunsets after the manner of the academicians because he fears the strange un-whiteness of his own features. An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose.

Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing the Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand. Let Paul Robeson singing Water Boy, and Rudolph Fisher writing about the streets of Harlem, and Jean Toomer holding the heart of Georgia in his hands, and Aaron Douglas drawing strange black fantasies cause the smug Negro middle class to turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimmer of their own beauty. We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.

1. He is referring to Countee Cullen, but not naming him directly. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. **steward**: *noun*, a person who looks after the passengers on a ship, aircraft, or train and brings them meals; an official appointed to supervise arrangements or keep order at a large public event, for example a sporting event [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. **Caucasian**: *adjective*, white-skinned; of European origin [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. **aping:** *verb*, imitate the behavior or manner of (someone or something), especially as a parody [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. **Nordic:** *adjective*, of or relating to Scandinavia, Finland, Iceland; here, Hughes most likely means to use it as another way to say “white” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. **Episcopal**: *adjective*, a United States-based church, associated with Anglicans [↑](#footnote-ref-6)