Contemporary Black Writers List

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Excerpts From Conference Session Below
Behold the Dreamers by Imbolo Mbue

Chapter One

He’d never been asked to wear a suit to a job interview. Never been told to bring along a copy of his résumé. He hadn’t even owned a résumé until the previous week when he’d gone to the library on Thirty-fourth and Madison and a volunteer career counselor had written one for him, detailed his work history to suggest he was a man of grand accomplishments: farmer responsible for tilling land and growing healthy crops; street cleaner responsible for making sure the town of Limbe looked beautiful and pristine; dishwasher in Manhattan restaurant, in charge of ensuring patrons ate from clean and germ-free plates; livery cabdriver in the Bronx, responsible for taking passengers safely from place to place.

He’d never had to worry about whether his experience would be appropriate, whether his English would be perfect, whether he would succeed in coming across as intelligent enough. But today, dressed in the green double-breasted pinstripe suit he’d worn the day he entered America, his ability to impress a man he’d never met was all he could think about. Try as he might, he could do nothing but think about the questions he might be asked, the answers he would need to give, the way he would have to walk and talk and sit, the times he would need to speak or listen and nod, the things he would have to say or not say, the response he would need to give if asked about his legal status in the country. His throat went dry. His palms moistened. Unable to reach for his handkerchief in the packed downtown subway, he wiped both palms on his pants.

“Good morning, please,” he said to the security guard in the lobby when he arrived at Lehman Brothers. “My name is Jende Jonga. I am here for Mr. Edwards. Mr. Clark Edwards.”

The guard, goateed and freckled, asked for his ID, which he quickly pulled out of his brown bifold wallet. The man took it, examined it front and back, looked up at his face, looked down at his suit, smiled, and asked if he was trying to become a stockbroker or something.

Jende shook his head. “No,” he replied without smiling back. “A chauffeur.”

“Right on,” the guard said as he handed him a visitor pass. “Good luck with that.”

This time Jende smiled. “Thank you, my brother,” he said. “I really need all that good luck today.”

Alone in the elevator to the twenty-eighth floor, he inspected his fingernails (no dirt, thankfully). He adjusted his clip-on tie using the security mirror above his head; reexamined his teeth and found no visible remnants of the fried ripe plantains and beans he’d eaten for breakfast. He cleared his throat and wiped off whatever saliva had crusted on the sides of his lips. When the doors opened he straightened his shoulders and introduced himself to the receptionist, who, after responding with a nod and a display of extraordinarily white teeth, made a phone call and asked him to follow her. They walked through an open space where young men in blue shirts sat in cubicles with multiple screens, down a corridor, past another open space of cluttered cubicles and into a sunny office with a four-paneled glass window running from wall to wall and floor to ceiling, the thousand autumn-drenched trees and proud towers of Manhattan standing outside. For a second his mouth fell open, at the view outside—the likes of which he’d never seen—and the exquisiteness inside. There was a lounging section (black leather sofa, two black leather chairs, glass coffee table) to his right, an executive desk (oval, cherry, black leather reclining chair for the executive, two green leather armchairs for visitors) in the center, and a wall unit (cherry, glass doors, white folders in neat rows) to his left, in front of which Clark Edwards, in a dark suit, was standing and feeding sheets of paper into a pullout shredder.

“Please, sir, good morning,” Jende said, turning toward him and half-bow ing.

“Have a seat,” Clark said without lifting his eyes from the shredder.

Jende hurried to the armchair on the left. He pulled a résumé from his folder and placed it in front of Clark’s seat, careful not to disturb the layers of white papers and Wall Street Journals strewn across the desk in a jumble. One of the Journal pages, peeking from beneath sheets of numbers and graphs, had the headline: whites’ great hope? barack obama and the dream of a color-blind america. Jende leaned forward to read the story, fascinated as he was by the young ambitious senator, but immediately sat upright when he remembered where he was, why he was there, what was about to happen.

“Do you have any outstanding tickets you need to resolve?” Clark asked as he sat down.

“No, sir,” Jende replied.

“And you haven’t been in any serious accidents, right?”
“No, Mr. Edwards.”

Clark picked up the résumé from his desk, wrinkled and moist like the man whose history it held. His eyes remained on it for several seconds while Jende’s darted back and forth, from the Central Park treetops far beyond the window to the office walls lined with abstract paintings and portraits of white men wearing bow ties. He could feel beads of sweat rising out of his forehead.

“Well, Jende,” Clark said, putting the résumé down and leaning back in his chair. “Tell me about yourself.”

Jende perked up. This was the question he and his wife, Neni, had discussed the previous night; the one they’d read about when they Googled “the one question they ask at every job interview.” They had spent an hour hunched over the cranky desktop, searching for the best answer, reading much-too-similar pieces of advice on the first ten sites Google delivered, before deciding it would be best if Jende spoke of his strong character and dependability, and of how he had everything a busy executive like Mr. Edwards needed in a chauffeur. Neni had suggested he also highlight his wonderful sense of humor, perhaps with a joke. After all, she had said, which Wall Street executive, after spending hours racking his brain on how to make more money, wouldn’t appreciate entering his car to find his chauffeur ready with a good joke? Jende had agreed and prepared an answer, a brief monologue which concluded with a joke about a cow at a supermarket. That should work very well, Neni had said. And he had believed so, too. But when he began to speak, he forgot his prepared answer.

“No, sir,” he said instead. “I live in Harlem with my wife and with my six-years-old son. And I am from Cameroon, in Central Africa, or West Africa. Depends on who you ask, sir. I am from a little town on the Atlantic Ocean called Limbe.”

“I see.”

“Thank you, Mr. Edwards,” he said, his voice quivering, unsure of what he was thankful for.

“And what kind of papers do you have in this country?”

“I have papers, sir,” he blurted out, leaning forward and nodding repeatedly, goose bumps shooting up all over his body like black balls out of a cannon.

“I said what kind of papers?”

“Oh, I am sorry, sir. I have EAD. EAD, sir . . . that is what I have right now.”

“What’s that supposed—” The BlackBerry on the desk buzzed. Clark quickly picked it up. “What does that mean?” he asked, looking down at the phone.

“It means Employment Authorization Document, sir,” Jende replied, shifting in his seat. Clark neither responded nor gestured. He kept his head down, his eyes on the smartphone, his soft-looking fingers jumping all over the keypad, lithely and speedily—up, left, right, down.

“It is a work permit, sir,” Jende added. He looked at Clark’s fingers, then his forehead, and his fingers again, uncertain of how else to obey the rules of eye contact when eyes were not available for contact. “It means I am allowed to work, sir. Until I get my green card.”

Clark half-nodded and continued typing.

Jende looked out the window, hoping he wasn’t sweating too profusely.

“And how long will it take for you to get this green card?” Clark asked as he put down the BlackBerry.

“I just really don’t know, sir. Immigration is slow, sir; very funny how they work.”

“But you’re in the country legally for the long term, correct?”

“Oh, yes, sir,” Jende said. He nodded repeatedly again, a pained smile on his face, his eyes unblinking. “I am very legal, sir. I just am still waiting for my green card.”

For a long second Clark stared at Jende, his vacant green eyes giving no clue to his thoughts. Hot sweat was flowing down Jende’s back, soaking the white shirt Neni had bought for him from a street vendor on 125th Street. The desk phone rang.
“Very well, then,” Clark said, picking up the phone. “As long as you’re legal.”

Jende Jonga exhaled.

The terror that had gripped his chest when Clark Edwards mentioned the word “papers” slowly loosened. He closed his eyes and offered thanks to a merciful Being, grateful half the truth had been sufficient. What would he have said if Mr. Edwards had asked more questions? How would he have explained that his work permit and driver’s license were valid only for as long as his asylum application was pending or approved, and that if his application were to be denied, all his documents would become invalid and there would be no green card? How could he have possibly explained his asylum application? Would there have been a way to convince Mr. Edwards that he was an honest man, a very honest man, actually, but one who was now telling a thousand tales to Immigration just so he could one day become an American citizen and live in this great nation forever?

“And you’ve been here for how long?” Clark asked after putting down the receiver.

“Three years, sir. I came in 2004, in the month—”

He paused, startled by Clark’s thunderous sneeze.

“May God bless you, sir,” he said as the executive placed his wrist under his nose and let loose another sneeze, louder than the first. “Ashia, sir,” he added. “May God bless you again.”

Clark leaned forward and picked up a bottle of water on the right side of his desk. Behind him, far beyond the spotless glass window, a red helicopter flew above the park, going from west to east under the cloudless morning sky. Jende returned his gaze to Clark and watched as he took a few sips from the bottle. He yearned for a sip of water, too, to erase the dryness in his throat, but dared not change the trajectory of the interview by asking for some. No, he couldn’t dare. Certainly not right now. His throat could be the driest spot in the Kalahari and it wouldn’t matter right now—he was doing well. Okay, maybe not too well. But he wasn’t doing too badly, either.

“All right,” Clark said, putting down the bottle. “Let me tell you what I want in a driver.” Jende swallowed and nodded. “I demand loyalty. I demand dependability. I demand punctuality, and I demand that you do as I say and ask no questions. Works for you?”

“Yes, sir, of course, Mr. Edwards.”

“You’re going to sign a confidentiality agreement that you’ll never say anything about what you hear me say or see me do. Never. To anyone. Absolutely no one. Do you understand?”

“I understand you very clearly, sir.”

“Good. I’ll treat you right, but you must treat me right first. I’ll be your main priority, and when I don’t need you, you’ll take care of my family. I’m a busy man, so don’t expect me to supervise you. You’ve come to me very highly recommended.”
The Peculiar Second Marriage of Archie Jones

Early in the morning, late in the century, Cricklewood Broadway. At 06.27 hours on 1 January 1975, Alfred Archibald Jones was dressed in corduroy and sat in a fume-filled Cavalier Musketeer Estate face down on the steering wheel, hoping the judgement would not be too heavy upon him. He lay forward in a prostrate cross, jaw slack, arms splayed either side like some fallen angel; scrunched up in each fist he held his army service medals (left) and his marriage license (right), for he had decided to take his mistakes with him. A little green light flashed in his eye, signaling a right turn he had resolved never to make. He was resigned to it. He was prepared for it. He had flipped a coin and stood staunchly by its conclusions. This was a decided-upon suicide. In fact it was a New Year's resolution.

But even as his breathing became spasmodic and his lights dimmed, Archie was aware that Cricklewood Broadway would seem a strange choice. Strange to the first person to notice his slumped figure through the windscreen, strange to the policemen who would file the report, to the local journalist called upon to write fifty words, to the next of kin who would read them. Squeezed between an almighty concrete cinema complex at one end and a giant intersection at the other, Cricklewood was no kind of place. It was not a place a man came to die. It was a place a man came in order to go other places via the A41. But Archie Jones didn't want to die in some pleasant, distant woodland, or on a cliff edge fringed with delicate heather. The way Archie saw it, country people should die in the country and city people should die in the city. Only proper. In death as he was in life and all that. It made sense that Archibald should die on this nasty urban street where he had ended up, living alone at the age of forty-seven, in a one-bedroom flat above a deserted chip shop. He wasn't the type to make elaborate plans - suicide notes and funeral instructions - he wasn't the type for anything fancy. All he asked for was a bit of silence, a bit of shush so he could concentrate. He wanted it to be perfectly quiet and still, like the inside of an empty confessional box or the moment in the brain between thought and speech. He wanted to do it before the shops opened.

Overhead, a gang of the local flying vermin took off from some unseen perch, swooped, and seemed to be zeroing in on Archie's car roof - only to perform, at the last moment, an impressive U-turn, moving as one with the elegance of a curve ball and landing on the Hussein-Ishmael, a celebrated halal butchers. Archie was too far gone to make a big noise about it, but he watched them with a warm internal smile as they deposited their load, streaking white walls purple. He watched them stretch their peering bird heads over the Hussein-Ishmael gutter; he watched them watch the slow and steady draining of blood from the dead things - chickens, cows, sheep - hanging on their hooks like coats around the shop. The Unlucky. These pigeons had an instinct for the Unlucky, and so they passed Archie by. For, though he did not know it, and despite the Hoover tube that lay on the passenger seat pumping from the exhaust pipe into his lungs, luck was with him that morning. The thinnest covering of luck was on him like fresh dew. Whilst he slipped in and out of consciousness, the position of the planets, the music of the spheres, the flap of a tiger-moth's diaphanous wings in Central Africa, and a whole bunch of other stuff that Makes Shit Happen had decided it was second-chance time for Archie. Somewhere, somehow, by somebody, it had been decided that he would live.

The Hussein-Ishmael was owned by Mo Hussein-Ishmael, a great bull of a man with hair that rose and fell in a quaff, then a ducktail. Mo believed that with pigeons you have to get to the root of the problem: not the excretions but the pigeon itself. The shit that Makes Shit Happen had decided it was second.

'Get out of it! Get away, you shit-making bastards! Yes! SIX!'

It was cricket, basically - the Englishman's game adopted by the immigrant, and six was the most pigeons you could get at one swipe.

'Varin!' said Mo, calling down to the street, holding the bloodied cleaver up in triumph. 'You're in to bat, my boy. Ready?'

Below him on the pavement stood Varin - a massively overweight Hindu boy on misjudged work experience from the school round the corner, looking up like a big dejected blob underneath Mo's question mark. It was Varin's job to struggle up a ladder and gather spliced bits of pigeon into a small Kwik Save carrier bag, tie the bag up, and dispose of it in the bins at the other end of the street.

'Come on, Mr. Fatty-man,' yelled one of Mo's kitchen staff, poking Varin up the arse with a broom as punctuation for each word. 'Get-your-fat-Ganesh-Hindu-backside-up-there-Elephant-Boy-and-bring-some-of-that-mashed-pigeon-stuff-with-you.'

Mo wiped the sweat off his forehead, snorted, and looked out over Cricklewood, surveying the discarded armchairs and strips of carpet, outdoor lounges for local drunks; the slot-machine emporiums, the greasy spoons and the minicabs - all covered in shit. One day, so Mo believed, Cricklewood and its residents would have cause to thank him for his daily massacre; one day no man, woman or child in the broadband would ever again have to mix one part detergent to four parts vinegar to clean up the crap that falls on the world. The shit is not the shit, he repeated solemnly, the pigeon is the shit. Mo was the only man in the community who truly
understood. He was feeling really very Zen about this - very goodwill-to-all-men - until he spotted Archie's car.

'Arshad!'

A shifty-looking skinny guy with a handlebar moustache, dressed in four different shades of brown, came out of the shop, with blood on his palms.

'Arshad!' Mo barely restrained himself, stabbed his finger in the direction of the car. 'My boy, I'm going to ask you just once.'

'Yes, Abba?' said Arshad, shifting from foot to foot.

'What the hell is this? What is this doing here? I got delivery at 6.30. I got fifteen dead bovines turning up here at 6.30. I got to get it in the back. That's my job. You see? There's meat coming. So, I am perplexed--' Mo affected a look of innocent confusion. 'Because I thought this was clearly marked "Delivery Area". I pointed to an aging wooden crate which bore the legend NO PARKINGS OF ANY VEHICLE ON ANY DAYS. Well?'

'I don't know, Abba.'

'You're my son, Arshad. I don't employ you not to know. I employ him not to know' - he reached out of the window and slapped Varin, who was negotiating the perilous gutter like a tightrope-walker, giving him a thorough cosh to the back of his head and almost knocking the boy off his perch -'I employ you to know things. To compute information. To bring into the light the great darkness of the creator's unexplainable universe.'

'Abba?'

'Find out what it's doing there and get rid of it.'

Mo disappeared from the window. A minute later Arshad returned with the explanation. 'Abba.'

Mo's head sprang back through the window like a malicious cuckoo from a Swiss clock.

'He's gassing himself, Abba.'

'What?'

Arshad shrugged. 'I shouted through the car window and told the guy to move on and he says, 'I am gassing myself, leave me alone.' Like that.'

'No one gasses himself on my property;' Mo snapped as he marched downstairs. 'We are not licensed.'

Once in the street, Mo advanced upon Archie's car, pulled out the towels that were sealing the gap in the driver's window, and pushed it down five inches with brute, bullish force.

'Do you hear that, mister? We're not licensed for suicides around here. This place halal. Kosher, understand? If you're going to die round here, my friend, I'm afraid you've got to be thoroughly bled first.'

Archie dragged his head off the steering wheel. And in the moment between focusing on the sweaty bulk of a brown-skinned Elvis and realizing that life was still his, he had a kind of epiphany. It occurred to him that, for the first time since his birth, Life had said Yes to Archie Jones. Not simply an 'OK' or 'You-might-as-well-carry-on-since-you've-started', but a resounding affirmative. Life wanted Archie. She had jealously grabbed him from the jaws of death, back to her bosom. Although he was not one of her better specimens, Life wanted Archie and Archie, much to his own surprise, wanted Life.

Frantically, he wound down both his windows and gasped for oxygen from the very depths of his lungs. In between gulps he thanked Mo profusely, tears streaming down his cheeks, his hands clinging on to Mo's apron.

'All right, all right,' said the butcher, freeing himself from Archie's fingers and brushing himself clean, 'move along now. I've got meat coming. I'm in the business of bleeding. Not counseling. You want Lonely Street. This Cricklewood Lane.'

Archie, still choking on thank yous, reversed, pulled out from the curb, and turned right.

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Archie Jones attempted suicide because his wife Ophelia, a violet-eyed Italian with a faint moustache, had recently divorced him. But he had not spent New Year's morning gagging on the tube of a vacuum cleaner because he loved her. It was rather because he had
lived with her for so long and had not loved her. Archie's marriage felt like buying a pair of shoes, taking them home and finding they don't fit. For the sake of appearances, he put up with them. And then, all of a sudden and after thirty years, the shoes picked themselves up and walked out of the house. She left. Thirty years.

As far as he remembered, just like everybody else they began well. The first spring of 1946, he had stumbled out of the darkness of war and into a Florentine coffee house, where he was served by a waitress truly like the sun: Ophelia Diagilo, dressed all in yellow, spreading warmth and the promise of sex as she passed him a frothy cappuccino. They walked into it blinkered as horses. She was not to know that women never stayed as daylight in Archie's life; that somewhere in him he didn't like them, he didn't trust them, and he was able to love them only if they were haloes. No one told Archie that lurking in the Diagilo family tree were two hysteric aunts, an uncle who talked to aubergines and a cousin who wore his clothes back to front. So they got married and returned to England, where she realized very quickly her mistake, he drove her very quickly mad, and the halo was packed off to the attic to collect dust with the rest of the bric-a-brac and broken kitchen appliances that Archie promised one day to repair. Amongst that bric-a-brac was a Hoover.

On Boxing Day morning, six days before he parked outside Mo's halal butchers, Archie had returned to their semi-detached in Hendon in search of that Hoover. It was his fourth trip to the attic in so many days, ferrying out the odds and ends of a marriage to his new flat, and the Hoover was amongst the very last items he reclaimed - one of the most broken things, most ugly things, the things you demand out of sheer bloody-mindedness because you have lost the house. This is what divorce is: taking things you no longer want from people you no longer love.

'So you again,' said the Spanish home-help at the door, Santa-Maria or Maria-Santa or something. 'Meester Jones, what now? Kitchen sink, si?'

'Hoover,' said Archie, grimly. 'Vacuum.'

She cut her eyes at him and spat on the doormat inches from his shoes. 'Welcome, senor.'

The place had become a haven for people who hated him. Apart from the home-help, he had to contend with Ophelia's extended Italian family, her mental-health nurse, the woman from the council, and of course Ophelia herself, who was to be found in the kernel of this nuthouse, curled up in a foetal ball on the sofa, making lowing sounds into a bottle of Bailey's. It took him an hour and a quarter just to get through enemy lines - and for what? A perversive Hoover, discarded months earlier because it was determined to perform the opposite of every vacuum's objective: spewing out dust instead of sucking it in.

'Meester Jones, why do you come here when it make you so unhappy? Be reasonable. What can you want with it? The home-help was following him up the attic stairs, armed with some kind of cleaning fluid: 'It's broken. You don't need this. See? See? She plugged it into a socket and demonstrated the dead switch. Archie took the plug out and silently wound the cord round the Hoover. If it was broken, it was coming with him. All broken things were coming with him. He was going to fix every damn broken thing in this house, if only to show that he was good for something.

'You good for nothing!' Santa whoever chased him back down the stairs. 'Your wife is ill in her head, and this is all you can do!'

Archie hugged the Hoover to his chest and took it into the crowded living room, where, under several pairs of reproachful eyes, he got out his toolbox and started work on it.

'Look at him,' said one of the Italian grandmothers, the more glamorous one with the big scarves and fewer moles, 'he take everything, capisce? He take-a her mind, he take-a the blender, he take-a the old stereo - he take-a everything except the floorboards. It make-a you sick...' The woman from the council, who even on dry days resembled a long-haired cat soaked to the skin, shook her skinny head in agreement. 'It's disgusting, you don't have to tell me, it's disgusting ... and naturally, we're the ones left to sort out the mess; it's muggins here who has to -'

Which was overlapped by the nurse: 'She can't stay here alone, can she ... now he's buggered off, poor woman ... she needs a proper home, she needs ...'

I'm here, Archie felt like saying, I'm right here you know, I'm bloody right here. And it was my blender.

But he wasn't one for confrontation, Archie. He listened to them all for another fifteen minutes, mute as he tested the Hoover's suction against pieces of newspaper, until he was overcome by the sensation that Life was an enormous rucksack so impossibly heavy that, even though it meant losing everything, it was infinitely easier to leave all baggage here on the roadside and walk on into the blackness. You don't need the blender, Archie-boy, you don't need the Hoover. This stuff's all dead weight. Just lay down the rucksack, Arch, and join the happy campers in the sky. Was that wrong? To Archie - ex-wife and ex-wife's relatives in one ear, spluttering vacuum in the other - it just seemed that The End was unavoidably nigh. Nothing personal to God or whatever. It just felt
like the end of the world. And he was going to need more than poor whisky, novelty crackers and a paltry box of Quality Street - all the strawberry ones already scoffed - to justify entering another annum.

Patiently he fixed the Hoover, and vacuumed the living room with a strange methodical finality, shoving the nozzle into the most difficult corners. Solemnly he flipped a coin (heads, life, tails, death) and felt nothing in particular when he found himself staring at the dancing lion. Quietly he detached the Hoover tube, put it in a suitcase, and left the house for the last time.
Princeton, in the summer, smelled of nothing, and although Ifemelu liked the tranquil greenness of the many trees, the clean streets and stately homes, the delicately overpriced shops, and the quiet, abiding air of earned grace, it was this, the lack of a smell, that most appealed to her, perhaps because the other American cities she knew well had all smelled distinctively. Philadelphia had the musty scent of history. New Haven smelled of brine, and Brooklyn of sun-warmed garbage. But Princeton had no smell. She liked taking deep breaths here. She liked watching the locals who drove with pointed courtesy and parked their latest model cars outside the organic grocery store on Nassau Street or outside the sushi restaurants or outside the ice cream shop that had fifty different flavors including red pepper or outside the post office where effusive staff bounded out to greet them at the entrance. She liked the campus, grave with knowledge, the Gothic buildings with their vine-laced walls, and the way everything transformed, in the half-light of night, into a ghostly scene. She liked, most of all, that in this place of affluent ease, she could pretend to be someone else, someone specially admitted into a hallowed American club, someone adorned with certainty.

But she did not like that she had to go to Trenton to braid her hair. It was unreasonable to expect a braiding salon in Princeton—the few black locals she had seen were so light-skinned and lank-haired she could not imagine them wearing braids—and yet as she waited at Princeton Junction station for the train, on an afternoon ablaze with heat, she wondered why there was no place where she could braid her hair. The chocolate bar in her handbag had melted. A few other people were waiting on the platform, all of them white and lean, in short, flimsy clothes. The man standing closest to her was eating an ice cream cone; she had always found it a little irresponsible, the eating of ice cream cones by grown-up American men, especially the eating of ice cream cones by grown-up American men in public. He turned to her and said, “About time,” when the train finally creaked in, with the familiarity strangers adopt with each other after sharing in the disappointment of a public service. She smiled at him. The graying hair on the back of his head was swept forward, a comical arrangement to disguise his bald spot. He had to be an academic, but not in the humanities or he would be more self-conscious. A firm science like chemistry, maybe. Before, she would have said, “I know,” that peculiar American expression that professed agreement rather than knowledge, and then she would have started a conversation with him, to see if he would say something she could use in her blog. People were flattered to be asked about themselves and if she said nothing after they spoke, it made them say more. They were conditioned to fill silences. If they asked what she did, she would say vaguely, “I write a lifestyle blog,” because saying “I write an anonymous blog called Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black” would make them uncomfortable. She had said it, though, a few times. Once to a dreadlocked white man who sat next to her on the train, his hair like old twine ropes that ended in a blond fuzz, his tattered shirt worn with enough piety to convince her that he was a social warrior and might make a good guest blogger. “Race is totally overhyped these days, black people need to get over themselves, it’s all about class now, the haves and the have-nots,” he told her evenly, and she used it as the opening sentence of a post titled “Not All Dreadlocked White American Guys Are Down.” Then there was the man from Ohio, who was squeezed next to her on a flight. A middle manager, she was sure, from his boxy suit and contrast collar. He wanted to know what she meant by “lifestyle blog,” and she told him, expecting him to become reserved, or to end the conversation by saying something defensively bland like “The only race that matters is the human race.” But he said, “Ever write about adoption? Nobody wants black babies in this country, and I don’t mean biracial, I mean black. Even the black families don’t want them.”

He told her that he and his wife had adopted a black child and their neighbors looked at them as though they had chosen to become martyrs for a dubious cause. Her blog post about him, “Badly-Dressed White Middle Managers from Ohio Are Not Always What You Think,” had received the highest number of comments for that month. She still wondered if he had read it. She hoped so. Often, she would sit in cafés, or airports, or train stations, watching strangers, imagining their lives, and wondering which of them were likely to have read her blog. Now her ex-blog. She had written the final post only days ago, trailed by two hundred and seventy-four comments so far. All those readers, growing month by month, linking and cross-posting, knowing so much more than she did; they had always frightened and exhilarated her. SapphicDerrida, one of the most frequent posters, wrote: I’m a bit surprised by how personally I am taking this. Good luck as you pursue the unnamed “life change” but please come back to the blogosphere soon. You’ve used your irreverent, hectoring, funny and thought-provoking voice to create a space for real conversations about an important subject. Readers like SapphicDerrida, who reeled off statistics and used words like “reify” in their comments, made Ifemelu nervous, eager to be fresh and to impress, so that she began, over time, to feel like a vulture hacking into the carcasses of people’s stories for something she could use. Sometimes making fragile links to race. Sometimes not believing herself. The more she wrote, the less sure she became. Each post scraped off yet one more scale of self until she felt naked and false.

The ice-cream-eating man sat beside her on the train and, to discourage conversation, she stared fixedly at a brown stain near her feet, a spilled frozen Frappuccino, until they arrived at Trenton. The platform was crowded with black people, many of them fat, in short, flimsy clothes. It still startled her, what a difference a few minutes of train travel made. During her first year in
America, when she took New Jersey Transit to Penn Station and then the subway to visit Aunty Uju in Flatlands, she was struck by how mostly slim white people got off at the stops in Manhattan and, as the train went further into Brooklyn, the people left were mostly black and fat. She had not thought of them as “fat,” though. She had thought of them as “big,” because one of the first things her friend Ginika told her was that “fat” in America was a bad word, heaving with moral judgment like “stupid” or “bastard,” and not a mere description like “short” or “tall.” So she had banished “fat” from her vocabulary. But “fat” came back to her last winter, after almost thirteen years, when a man in line behind her at the supermarket muttered, “Fat people don’t need to be eating that shit,” as she paid for her giant bag of Tostitos. She glanced at him, surprised, mildly offended, and thought it a perfect blog post, how this stranger had decided she was fat. She would file the post under the tag “race, gender and body size.” But back home, as she stood and faced the mirror’s truth, she realized that she had ignored, for too long, the new tightness of her clothes, the rubbing together of her inner thighs, the softer, rounder parts of her that shook when she moved. She was fat.

She said the word “fat” slowly, funneling it back and forward, and thought about all the other things she had learned not to say aloud in America. She was fat. She was not curvy or big-boned; she was fat, it was the only word that felt true. And she had ignored, too, the cement in her soul. Her blog was doing well, with thousands of unique visitors each month, and she was earning good speaking fees, and she had a fellowship at Princeton and a relationship with Blaine—“You are the absolute love of my life,” he’d written in her last birthday card—and yet there was cement in her soul. It had been there for a while, an early morning disease of fatigue, a bleakness and borderlessness. It brought with it amorphous longings, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living, that over the months melded into a piercing homesickness. She scoured Nigerian websites, Nigerian profiles on Facebook, Nigerian blogs, and each click brought yet another story of a young person who had recently moved back home, clothed in American or British degrees, to start an investment company, a music production business, a fashion label, a magazine, a fast-food franchise. She looked at photographs of these men and women and felt the dull ache of loss, as though they had prised open her hand and taken something of hers. They were living her life. Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil. And, of course, there was also Obinze. Her first love, her first lover, the only person with whom she had never felt the need to explain herself. He was now a husband and father, and they had not been in touch in years, yet she could not pretend that he was not a part of her homesickness, or that she did not often think of him, sifting through their past, looking for portents of what she could not name.

The rude stranger in the supermarket—who knew what problems he was wrestling with, haggard and thin-lipped as he was—had intended to offend her but had instead prodded her awake.

She began to plan and to dream, to apply for jobs in Lagos. She did not tell Blaine at first, because she wanted to finish her fellowship at Princeton, and then after her fellowship ended, she did not tell him because she wanted to give herself time to be sure. But as the weeks passed, she knew she would never be sure. So she told him that she was moving back home, and she added, “I have to,” knowing he would hear in her words the sound of an ending.

“Why?” Blaine asked, almost automatically, stunned by her announcement. There they were, in his living room in New Haven, awash in soft jazz and daylight, and she looked at him, her good, bewildered man, and felt the day take on a sad, epic quality. They had lived together for three years, three years free of crease, like a smoothly ironed sheet, until their only fight, months ago, when Blaine’s eyes froze with blame and he refused to speak to her. But they had survived that fight, mostly because of Barack Obama, bonding anew over their shared passion. On election night, before Blaine kissed her, his face wet with tears, he held her tightly as though Obama’s victory was also their personal victory. And now here she was telling him it was over.

“What?” he asked. He taught ideas of nuance and complexity in his classes and yet he was asking her for a single reason, the cause. But she had not had a bold epiphany and there was no cause; it was simply that layer after layer of discontent had settled in her, and formed a mass that now propelled her. She did not tell him this, because it would hurt him to know she had felt that way for a while, that her relationship with him was like being content in a house but always sitting by the window and looking out.

“Take the plant,” he said to her, on the last day she saw him, when she was packing the clothes she kept in his apartment. He looked defeated, standing slump-shouldered in the kitchen. It was his houseplant, hopeful green leaves rising from three bamboo stems, and when she took it, a sudden crushing loneliness lanced through her and stayed with her for weeks. Sometimes, she still felt it. How was it possible to miss something you no longer wanted? Blaine needed what she was unable to give and she needed what he was unable to give, and she grieved this, the loss of what could have been.
Effia

The night effia otcher was born was into the musky heat of Fanteland, a fire raged through the woods just outside her father’s compound. It moved quickly, tearing a path for days. It lived off the air; it slept in caves and hid in trees; it burned, up and through, unconcerned with what wreckage it left behind, until it reached an Asante village. There, it disappeared, becoming one with the night.

Effia’s father, Cobbe Otcher, left his first wife, Baaba, with the new baby so that he might survey the damage to his yams, that most precious crop known far and wide to sustain families. Cobbe had lost seven yams, and he felt each loss as a blow to his own family. He knew then that the memory of the fire that burned, then felled, would haunt him, his children, and his children’s children for as long as the line continued. When he came back into Baaba’s hut to find Effia, the child of the night’s fire, shrieking into the air, he looked at his wife and said, “We will never again speak of what happened today.”

The villagers began to say that the baby was born of the fire, that this was the reason Baaba had no milk. Effia was nursed by Cobbe’s second wife, who had just given birth to a son three months before. Effia would not latch on, and when she did, her sharp gums would tear at the flesh around the woman’s nipples until she became afraid to feed the baby. Because of this, Effia grew thinner, skin on small birdlike bones, with a large black hole of a mouth that expelled a hungry cry which could be heard throughout the village, even on the days Baaba did her best to smother it, covering the baby’s lips with the rough palm of her left hand.

“Love her,” Cobbe commanded, as though love were as simple an act as lifting food up from an iron plate and past one’s lips. At night, Baaba dreamed of leaving the baby in the dark forest so that the god Nyame could do with her as he pleased.

Effia grew older. The summer after her third birthday, Baaba had her first son. The boy’s name was Fiifi, and he was so fat that sometimes, when Baaba wasn’t looking, Effia would roll him along the ground like a ball. The first day that Baaba let Effia hold him, she accidentally dropped him. The baby bounced on his buttocks, landed on his stomach, and looked up at everyone in the room, confused as to whether or not he should cry. He decided against it, but Baaba, who had been stirring banku, lifted her stirring stick and beat Effia across her bare back. Each time the stick lifted off the girl’s body, it would leave behind hot, sticky pieces of banku that burned into her flesh. By the time Baaba had finished, Effia was covered with sores, screaming and crying. From the floor, rolling this way and that on his belly, Fiifi looked at Effia with his saucer eyes but made no noise.

Cobbe came home to find his other wives attending to Effia’s wounds and understood immediately what had happened. He and Baaba fought well into the night. Effia could hear them through the thin walls of the hut where she lay on the floor, drifting in and out of a feverish sleep. In her dream, Cobbe was a lion and Baaba was a tree. The lion plucked the tree from the ground where it stood and slammed it back down. The tree stretched its branches in protest, and the lion ripped them off, one by one. The tree, horizontal, began to cry red ants that traveled down the thin cracks between its bark. The ants pooled on the soft earth around the top of the tree trunk.

And so the cycle began. Baaba beat Effia. Cobbe beat Baaba. By the time Effia had reached age ten, she could recite a history of the scars on her body. The summer of 1764, when Baaba broke yams across her back. The spring of 1767, when Baaba bashed her left foot with a rock, breaking her big toe so that it now always pointed away from the other toes. For each scar on Effia’s body, there was a companion scar on Baaba’s, but that didn’t stop mother from beating daughter, father from beating mother.

Matters were only made worse by Effia’s blossoming beauty. When she was twelve, her breasts arrived, two lumps that sprung from her chest, as soft as mango flesh. The men of the village knew that first blood would soon follow, and they waited for the chance to ask Baaba and Cobbe for her hand. The gifts started. One man tapped palm wine better than anyone else in the village, but another’s fishing nets were never empty. Cobbe’s family feasted off Effia’s burgeoning womanhood. Their bellies, their hands, were never empty.

In 1775, Adwoa Aidoo became the first girl of the village to be proposed to by one of the British soldiers. She was light-skinned and sharp-tongued. In the mornings, after she had bathed, she rubbed shea butter all over her body, underneath her breasts and between her legs. Effia didn’t know her well, but she had seen her naked one day when Baaba sent her to carry palm oil to the girl’s hut. Her skin was slick and shiny, her hair regal.

The first time the white man came, Adwoa’s mother asked Effia’s parents to show him around the village while Adwoa prepared herself for him.

“Can I come?” Effia asked, running after her parents as they walked. She heard Baaba’s “no” in one ear and Cobbe’s “yes” in the other. Her father’s ear won, and soon Effia was standing before the first white man she had ever seen.

“He is happy to meet you,” the translator said as the white man held his hand out to Effia. She didn’t accept it. Instead, she hid behind
her father’s leg and watched him.

He wore a coat that had shiny gold buttons down the middle; it strained against his paunch. His face was red, as though his neck were a stump on fire. He was fat all over and sweating huge droplets from his forehead and above his bare lips. Effia started to think of him as a rain cloud: sallow and wet and shapeless.

“Please, he would like to see the village,” the translator said, and they all began to walk.

They stopped first by Effia’s own compound. “This is where we live,” Effia told the white man, and he smiled at her dumbly, his green eyes hidden in fog.

He didn’t understand. Even after his translator spoke to him, he didn’t understand.

Cobbe held Effia’s hand as he and Baaba led the white man through the compound. “Here, in this village,” Cobbe said, “each wife has her own hut. This is the hut she shares with her children. When it is her husband’s night to be with her, he goes to her in her hut.”

The white man’s eyes grew clearer as the translation was given, and suddenly Effia realized that he was seeing through new eyes. The mud of her hut’s walls, the straw of the roof, he could finally see them.

They continued on through the village, showing the white man the town square, the small fishing boats formed from hollowed-out tree trunks that the men carried with them when they walked the few miles down to the coast. Effia forced herself to see things through new eyes, too. She smelled the sea-salt wind as it touched the hairs in her nose, felt the bark of a palm tree as sharp as a scratch, saw the deep, deep red of the clay that was all around them.

“Baaba,” Effia asked once the men had walked farther ahead of them, “why will Adwoa marry this man?”

“Because her mother says so.”

A few weeks later, the white man came back to pay respects to Adwoa’s mother, and Effia and all of the other villagers gathered around to see what he would offer. There was the bride price of fifteen pounds. There were goods he’d brought with him from the Castle, carried on the backs of Asantes. Cobbe made Effia stand behind him as they watched the servants come in with fabric, millet, gold, and iron.

When they walked back to their compound, Cobbe pulled Effia aside, letting his wives and other children walk in front of them.

“Do you understand what just happened?” he asked her. In the distance, Baaba slipped her hand into Fiifi’s. Effia’s brother had just turned eleven, but he could already climb up the trunk of a palm tree using nothing but his bare hands and feet for support.

“The white man came to take Adwoa away,” Effia said.

Her father nodded. “The white men live in the Cape Coast Castle. There, they trade goods with our people.”

“Like iron and millet?”

Her father put his hand on her shoulder and kissed the top of her forehead, but when he pulled away the look in his eyes was troubled and distant. “Yes, we get iron and millet, but we must give them things in return. That man came from Cape Coast to marry Adwoa, and there will be more like him who will come and take our daughters away. But you, my own, I have bigger plans for you than to live as a white man’s wife. You will marry a man of our village.”

Baaba turned around just then, and Effia caught her eyes. Baaba scowled. Effia looked at her father to see if he had noticed, but Cobbe did not say a word.

Effia knew who her choice for husband would be, and she dearly hoped her parents would choose the same man. Abeeku Badu was next in line to be the village chief. He was tall, with skin like the pit of an avocado and large hands with long, slender fingers that he waved around like lightning bolts every time he spoke. He had visited their compound four times in the last month, and later that week, he and Effia were to share a meal together.

Abeeku brought a goat. His servants carried yams and fish and palm wine. Baaba and the other wives stoked their fires and heated the oil. The air smelled rich.

That morning, Baaba had plaited Effia’s hair. Two long braids on either side of her center part. They made her look like a ram, strong,
willful. Effia had oiled her naked body and put gold in her ears. She sat across from Abeeku as they ate, pleased as he stole appreciative glances.

“Were you at Adwoa’s ceremony?” Baaba asked once all of the men had been served and the women finally began to eat.

“Yes, I was there, but only briefly. It is a shame Adwoa will be leaving the village. She would have made a good wife.”

“Will you work for the British when you become chief?” Effia asked. Cobbe and Baaba sent her sharp looks, and she lowered her head, but she lifted it to find Abeeku smiling.

“We work with the British, Effia, not for them. That is the meaning of trade. When I am chief, we will continue as we have, facilitating trade with the Asantes and the British.”

Effia nodded. She wasn’t exactly sure what this meant, but she could tell from her parents’ looks that it was best to keep her mouth shut. Abeeku Badu was the first man they had brought to meet her. Effia wanted desperately for him to want her, but she did not yet know what kind of man he was, what kind of woman he required. In her hut, Effia could ask her father and Fiifi anything she wanted. It was Baaba who practiced silence and preferred the same fromEffia, Baaba who had slapped her for asking why she did not take her to be blessed as all the other mothers did for their daughters. It was only when Effia didn’t speak or question, when she made herself small, that she could feel Baaba’s love, or something like it. Maybe this was what Abeeku wanted too.

Abeeku finished eating. He shook hands with everyone in the family, and stopped by Effia’s mother. “You will let me know when she is ready,” he said.

Baaba clutched a hand to her chest and nodded soberly. Cobbe and the other men saw Abeeku off as the rest of the family waved.

That night, Baaba woke Effia up while she was sleeping on the floor of their hut. Effia felt the warmth of her mother’s breath against her ear as she spoke. “When your blood comes, Effia, you must hide it. You must tell me and no one else,” she said. “Do you understand?” She handed Effia palm fronds that she had turned into soft, rolled sheets. “Place these inside of you, and check them every day. When they turn red, you must tell me.”

Effia looked at the palm fronds, held in Baaba’s outstretched hands. She didn’t take them at first, but when she looked up again there was something like desperation in her mother’s eyes. And because the look had softened Baaba’s face somehow, and because Effia also knew desperation, that fruit of longing, she did as she was told. Every day, Effia checked for red, but the palm fronds came out greenish-white as always. In the spring, the chief of the village grew ill, and everyone watched Abeeku carefully to see if he was ready for the task. He married two women in those months, Arekua the Wise, and Millicent, the half-caste daughter of a Fante woman and a British soldier. The soldier had died from fever, leaving his wife and two children much wealth to do with as they pleased. Effia prayed for the day all of the villagers would call her Effia the Beauty, as Abeeku called her on the rare occasions when he was permitted to speak to her.

Millicent’s mother had been given a new name by her white husband. She was a plump, fleshy woman with teeth that twinkled against the dark night of her skin. She had decided to move out of the Castle and into the village once her husband died. Because the white men could not leave money in their wills to their Fante wives and children, they left it to other soldiers and friends, and those friends paid the wives. Millicent’s mother had been given enough money for a new start and a piece of land. She and Millicent would often come visit Effia and Baaba, for, as she said, they would soon be a part of the same family.

Millicent was the lightest-skinned woman Effia had ever seen. Her black hair reached down to the middle of her back and her eyes were tinged with green. She rarely smiled, and she spoke with a husky voice and a strange Fante accent.

“What was it like in the Castle?” Baaba asked Millicent’s mother one day while the four women were sitting to a snack of groundnuts and bananas.

“It was fine, fine. They take care of you, oh, these men! It is like they have never been with a woman before. I don’t know what their British wives were doing. I tell you, my husband looked at me like I was water and he was fire, and every night he had to be put out.”

The women laughed. Millicent slipped Effia a smile, and Effia wanted to ask her what it was like with Abeeku, but she did not dare.

Baaba leaned in close to Millicent’s mother, but still Effia could hear, “And they pay a good bride price, eh?”

“Enh, I tell you, my husband paid my mother ten pounds, and that was fifteen years ago! To be sure, my sister, the money is good, but I for one am glad my daughter has married a Fante. Even if a soldier offered to pay twenty pounds, she would not get to be the wife of a chief. And what’s worse, she would have to live in the Castle, far from me. No, no, it is better to marry a man of the village so that
Baaba nodded and turned toward Effia, who quickly looked away. That night, just two days after her fifteenth birthday, the blood came. It was not the powerful rush of the ocean waves that Effia had expected it to be, but rather a simple trickle, rain dripping, drop by drop, from the same spot of a hut’s roof. She cleaned herself off and waited for her father to leave Baaba so that she could tell her.

“Baaba,” she said, showing her the palm fronds painted red.

“I have gotten my blood.”

Baaba placed a hand over her lips.

“Who else knows?”

“No one,” Effia said.

“You will keep it that way. Do you understand? When anyone asks you if you have become a woman yet, you will answer no.”

Effia nodded. She turned to leave, but a question was burning hot coals in the pit of her stomach.

“Why?” she finally asked.

Baaba reached into Effia’s mouth and pulled out her tongue, pinching the tip with her sharp fingernails.

“Who are you that you think you can question me, enh? If you do not do as I say, I will make sure you never speak again.” She released Effia’s tongue, and for the rest of the night, Effia tasted her own blood.
Sometimes I think I understand everything else more than I'll ever understand Leonie. She's at the front door, paper grocery bags obscuring her, hitching the screen and kicking it open, and then edging through the door. Kayla scoots toward me when the door bangs shut; she snatches up her juice cup and sucks before kneading my ear. The little pinch and roll of her fingers almost hurts, but it's her habit, so I swing her up in my arms and let her knead. Mam says she does it for comfort because she never breast-fed. Poor Kayla, Mam sighed every time. Leonie hated when Mam and Pop began calling her Kayla like me. She has a name, Leonie said, and it's her daddy's. She look like a Kayla, Mam said, but Leonie never called her that. "Hey, Michaela baby," Leonie says.

It's not until I'm standing in the door of the kitchen and see Leonie pulling a small white box out of one of the bags that I realize this is the first year Mam won't be making me a cake for my birthday, and then I feel guilty for realizing it so late in the day. Pop would make the meal, but I should have known that Mam couldn't. She's too sick with the cancer that came and left and returned, steady as the rising and sinking of the marsh water in the bayou with the moon.

"I got you a cake," Leonie says, as if I'm too dumb to know what the box contains. She knows I'm not stupid. She said it herself once, when a teacher called her in to school to talk about my behavior, to tell Leonie: *He never speaks in class, but he's still not paying attention*. The teacher said it in front of all the children, who were still sitting in their seats waiting to be dismissed for the buses. She assigned me to the frontmost desk in the classroom, the desk nearest the teacher's, where every five minutes, she'd say, *Are you paying attention*, which inevitably interrupted whatever work I was doing and made it impossible to focus. I was ten then, and had already begun to see things that other kids didn't, like the way my teacher bit her fingernails raw, like the way she sometimes wore so much eye makeup to hide bruising from someone hitting her; I knew what that looked like because both Michael's and Leonie's faces sometimes looked that way after fights. It made me wonder if my teacher had her own Michael. On the day of the conference, Leonie hissed: *He ain't stupid. Jojo, let's go.* And I winced at the way she used *ain't* and the way she leaned in to the teacher without even knowing it, and the teacher blinked and stepped away from the latent violence coiled in Leonie's arm, running from her shoulder down to her elbow and to her fist.

Mam always made me red velvet birthday cake. She began when I was one. When I was four, I knew it well enough to ask for it: said red cake and pointed at the picture on the box on the shelf in the grocery store. The cake that Leonie brought is small, about the size of both of my fists together. Blue and pink pastel sprinkles litter the top of the cake, and on the side, two little blue shoes. Leonie sniffs, coughs into her bony forearm, and then pulls out a half gallon of the cheapest ice cream, the kind with a texture like cold gum. "They didn't have no more birthday cakes. The shoes is blue, so it fits." It's not until she says it that I realize Leonie got her thirteen-year-old son a baby shower cake. I laugh but don't feel nothing warm, no joy in me when I do it. A laugh that ain't a laugh, and it's so hard Kayla looks around and then at me like I've betrayed her. She starts crying.

Usually, the singing is my favorite part of my birthday, because the candles make everything look gold, and they shine in Mam's and Pop's faces and make them look young as Leonie and Michael. Whenever they sing to me, they smile. I think it's Kayla's favorite part, too, because she sings stutteringly along. Kayla's making me hold her, because she cried and pushed at Leonie's collarbone and reached for me until Leonie frowned and held her out to me, said: "Here." But this year, the song is not my favorite part of my birthday because instead of being in the kitchen, we're all crowded into Mam's room, and Leonie's holding the cake like she held Kayla earlier, out and away from her chest, like she going to drop it. Mam's awake but doesn't really look awake, her eyes half open, unfocused, looking past me and Leonie and Kayla and Pop. Even though Mam's sweating, her skin looks pale and dry, like a muddy puddle dried to nothing after weeks of no rain in the summer. And there's a mosquito buzzing around my head, dipping into my ear, veering out, teasing to bite.

When the happy birthday song starts, it's only Leonie. She has a pretty voice, the kind of voice that sounds good singing low but sort of cracks on the high notes. Pop is not singing; he never sings. When I was younger, I didn't know because I'd have a whole family singing to me: Mam, Leonie, and Michael. But this year, when Mam can't sing because she's sick and Kayla makes up words to the melody and Michael's gone, I know Pop isn't singing because he's just moving his lips, lip-synching, and there's no noise coming out. Leonie's voice cracks on *dear Joseph*, and the light from the thirteen candles is orange. No one but Kayla looks young. Pop is standing too far out of the light. Mam's eyes have closed to slits in her chalky face, and Leonie's teeth look black at the seams. There's no happiness here.

"Happy birthday, Jojo," Pop says, but he's not looking at me when he says it. He's looking at Mam, at her hands loose and open at her sides. Palms up like something dead. I lean forward to blow out my candles, but the phone rings, and Leonie jumps, so the cake jumps with her. The flames waver and feel hotter under my chin. Pearls of wax drip onto the baby shoes. Leonie turns away from me with the cake, looking to the kitchen, to the phone on the counter.
"You going to let the boy blow out his candles, Leonie?" Pop asks.
"Might be Michael," Leonie says, and then there is no cake because Leonie's taken it with her to the kitchen, set it on the counter next to the black-corded phone. The flames are eating the wax. Kayla shrieks and throws her head back. So I follow Leonie into the kitchen, to my cake, and Kayla smiles. She's reaching for the fire. The mosquito that was in Mam's room has followed us, and he's buzzing around my head, talking about me like I'm a candle or a cake. So warm and delicious. I swat him away.

"Hello?" Leonie says.

I grab Kayla's arm and lean in to the flames. She struggles, transfixed.

"Yes."

I blow.

"Baby."

Half the candles gutter out. "This week?"

The other half eating wax to the nub. "You sure?"

I blow again, and the cake goes dark. The mosquito lands on my head. So scrumptious, he says, and bites. I swat him, and my palm comes away smeared with blood. Kayla reaches.

"We'll be there."

Kayla has a handful of frosting, and her nose is running. Her blond afro curls high. She sticks her fingers in her mouth, and I wipe.

"Easy, baby. Easy."

Michael is an animal on the other end of the telephone behind a fortress of concrete and bars, his voice traveling over miles of wire and listing, sun-bleached power poles. I know what he is saying, like the birds I hear honking and flying south in the winter, like any other animal. I'm coming home.

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Salvage the Bones by Jesmyn Ward

Chapter One
THE FIRST DAY: BIRTH IN A BARE-BULB PLACE

China's turned on herself. If I didn't know, I would think she was trying to eat her paws. I would think that she was crazy. Which she
is, in a way. Won't let nobody touch her but Skeet. When she was a big-headed pit bull puppy, she stole all the shoes in the house, all
our black tennis shoes Mama bought because they hide dirt and hold up until they're beaten soft. Only Mama's forgotten sandals, thin-
heeled and tinted pink with so much red mud seeped into them, looked different. China hid them all under furniture, behind the toilet,
stacked them in piles and slept on them. When the dog was old enough to run and trip down the steps on her own, she took the shoes
outside, put them in shallow ditches under the house. She'd stand rigid as a pine when we tried to take them away from her. Now
China is giving like she once took away, bestowing where she once stole. She is birthing puppies.

What China is doing is fighting, like she was born to do. Fight our shoes, fight other dogs, fight these puppies that are reaching for the
outside, blind and wet. China's sweating and the boys are gleaming, and I can see Daddy through the window of the shed, his face
shining like the flash of a fish under the water when the sun hit. It's quiet. Heavy. Feels like it should be raining, but it isn't. There are
no stars, and the bare bulbs of the Pit burn.

"Get out the doorway. You making her nervous." Skeetah is Daddy's copy: dark, short, and lean. His body knotted with ropy muscles.
He is the second child, sixteen, but he is the first for China. She only has eyes for him.

"She ain't studying us," Randall says. He is the oldest, seventeen. Taller than Daddy, but just as dark. He has narrow shoulders and
eyes that look like they want to jump out of his head. People at school think he's a nerd, but when he's on the basketball court, he
moves like a rabbit, all quick grace and long haunches. When Daddy is hunting, I always cheer for the rabbit.

"She need room to breathe." Skeetah's hands slide over her fur, and he leans in to listen to her belly. "She gotta relax."

"Ain't nothing about her relaxed." Randall is standing at the side of the open doorway, holding the sheet that Skeetah has nailed up for
a door. For the past week, Skeetah has been sleeping in the shed, waiting for the birth. Every night, I waited until he cut the light off,
until I knew he was asleep, and I walked out of the back door to the shed, stood where I am standing now, to check on him. Every
time, I found him asleep, his chest to her back. He curled around China like a fingernail around flesh.

"I want to see." Junior is hugging Randall's legs, leaning in to see but without the courage to stick in more than his nose. China usually
ignores the rest of us, and Junior usually ignores her. But he is seven, and he is curious. When the boy from Germaine bought his male
pit bull to the Pit to mate with China three months ago, Junior squatted on an oil drum above the makeshift kennel, an old
disconnected truck bed dug in the earth with chicken wire stretched over it, and watched. When the dogs got stuck, he circled his face
with his arms, but still refused to move when I yelled at him to go in the house. He sucked on his arm and played with the dangling
skin of his ear, like he does when he watches television, or before he falls to sleep. I asked him once why he does it, and all he would
say is that it sounds like water.

Skeetah ignores Junior because he is focused on China like a man focuses on a woman when he feels that she is his, which China is.
Randall doesn't say anything but stretches his hand across the door to block Junior from entering.

"No, Junior." I put out my leg to complete the gate barring Junior from the dog, from the yellow string of mucus pooling to a puddle
on the floor under China's rear.

"Let him see," Daddy says. "He old enough to know about that." His is a voice in the darkness, orbiting the shed. He has a hammer in
one hand, a clutch of nails in another. China hates him. I relax, but Randall doesn't move and neither does Junior. Daddy spins away
from us like a comet into the darkness. There is the sound of hammer hitting metal.

"He makes her tense," Skeetah says.
"Maybe you need to help her push," I say. Sometime I think that is what killed Mama. I can see her, chin to chest, straining to push Junior out, and Junior snagging on her insides, grabbing hold of what he caught on to try to stay inside her, but instead he pulled it out with him when he was born.

"She don't need no help pushing."

And China doesn't. Her sides ripple. She snarls, her mouth a black line. Her eyes are red; the mucus runs pink. Everything about China tenses and there are a million marbles under her skin, and then she seems to be turning herself inside out. At her opening, I see a purplish red bulb. China is blooming.

If one of Daddy's drinking buddies had asked what he's doing to night, he would've told them he's fixing up for the hurricane. It's summer, and when it's summer, there's always a hurricane coming or leaving here. Each pushes its way through the flat Gulf to the twenty-six-mile manmade Mississippi beach, where they knock against the old summer mansions with their slave galleys turned guest houses before running over the bayou, through the pines, to lose wind, drip rain, and die in the north. Most don't even hit us head-on anymore; most turn right to Florida or take a left for Texas, brush past and glance off us like a shirtsleeve. We ain't had one come straight for us in years, time enough to forget how many jugs of water we need to fill, how many cans of sardines and potted meat we should stock, how many tubs of water we need. But on the radio that Daddy keeps playing in his parked truck, I heard them talking about it earlier today. How the forecasters said the tenth tropical depression had just dissipated in the Gulf but another one seems to be forming around Puerto Rico.

So today Daddy woke me up by hitting the wall outside me and Junior's room.

"Wake up! We got work to do."

Junior rolled over in his bed and curled into the wall. I sat up long enough to make Daddy think I was going to get up, and then I lay back down and drifted off. When I woke up two hours later, Daddy's radio was running in his truck. Junior's bed was empty, his blanket on the floor.

"Junior, get the rest of them shine jugs."

"Daddy, ain't none under the house."

Outside the window, Daddy jabbed at the belly of the house with his can of beer. Junior tugged his shorts. Daddy gestured again, and Junior squatted and slithered under the house. The underside of the house didn't scare him like it had always scared me when I was little. Junior disappeared between the cinder blocks holding up the house for afternoons, and would only come out when Skeetah threatened to send China under there after him. I asked Junior one time what he did under there, and all he would say is that he played. I imagined him digging sleeping holes like a dog would, laying on his back in the sandy red dirt and listening to our feet slide and push across floorboards.

Junior had a good arm, and bottles and cans rolled out from under the house like pool balls. They stopped when they hit the rusted-over cow bath Daddy had salvaged from the junkyard where he scraps metal. He'd brought it home for Junior's birthday last year and told him to use it as a swimming pool.

"Shoot," Randall said. He was sitting on a chair under his homemade basketball goal, a rim he'd stolen from the county park and screwed into the trunk of a dead pine tree.

"Ain't nothing hit us in years. They don't come this way no more. When I was little, they was always hitting us." It was Manny. I stood at the edge of the bedroom window, not wanting him to see me. Manny threw a basketball from hand to hand. Seeing him broke the cocoon of my rib cage, and my heart unfurled to fly.

"You act like you ancient—you only two years older than me. Like I don't remember how they used to be," Randall said as he caught the rebound and passed it back to Manny. "If anything hit us this summer, it's going to blow down a few branches. News don't know what they talking about." Manny had black curly hair, black eyes, and white teeth, and his skin was the color of fresh-cut wood at the heart of a pine tree. "Every-time somebody in Bois Sauvage get arrested, they always get the story wrong."

"That's journalists. Weatherman's a scientist," Randall said.
"He ain't shit." From where I was, Manny looked like he was blushing, but I knew his face had broken out, tinged him red, and that the rest of it was the scar on his face.

"Oh, one's coming all right." Daddy wiped his hand along the side of his truck.

Manny rolled his eyes and jerked his thumb at Daddy. He shot. Randall caught the ball and held it. "There ain't even a tropical depression yet," Randall said to Daddy, "and you got Junior bowling with shine bottles."

Randall was right. Daddy usually filled a few jugs of water. Canned goods was the only kind of groceries Daddy knew how to make, so we were never short on Vienna sausages and potted meat. We ate Top Ramen every day: soupy, added hot dogs, drained the juice so it was spicy pasta; dry, it tasted like crackers. The last time we'd had a bad storm hit head-on, Mama was alive; after the storm, she'd barbecued all the meat left in the silent freezer so it wouldn't spoil, and Skeetah ate so many hot sausage links he got sick. Randall and I had fought over the last pork chop, and Mama had pulled us apart while Daddy laughed about it, saying: She can hold her own. Told you she was going to be a little scrappy scranny thing—built just like you.

"This year's different," Daddy said as he sat on the back of his trunk. For a moment he looked not-drunk. "News is right: every week it's a new storm. Ain't never been this bad." Manny shot again, and Randall chased the ball.

"Makes my bones hurt," Daddy said. "I can feel them coming."

I pulled my hair back in a ponytail. It was my one good thing, my odd thing, like a Doberman come out white: corkscrew curls, black, limp when wet but full as fistfuls of frayed rope when dry. Mama used to let me run around with it down, said it was some throwback trait, and since I got it, I might as well enjoy it. But I looked in the mirror and knew the rest of me wasn't so remarkable: wide nose, dark skin, Mama's slim, short frame. I looked so square. I changed my shirt and listened to them talking outside. The walls, thin and uninsulated, peeling from each other at the seams, made me feel like Manny could see me even stepped outside. Our high school English teacher, Ms. Dedeaux, gives us reading every summer. After my ninth-grade year, we read As I Lay Dying, and I made an A because I answered the hardest question right: Why does the young boy think his mother is a fish? This summer, after tenth grade, we are reading Edith Hamilton's Mythology. The chapter I finished reading day before yesterday is called "Eight Brief Tales of Lovers," and it leads into the story of Jason and the Argonauts. I wondered if Medea felt this way. She was so strong, so brave, so independent. She was the one Medea was going to be a little scrappy scrawny thing—built just like you.

China buries her face between her paws with her tail end in the air before the last push for the first puppy. She looks like she wants to flip over into a headstand, and I want to laugh, but I don't. Blood oozes from her, and Skeetah crouches even closer to help her. China yanks her head up, and her eyes snap open along with her teeth. "Careful!" Randall says. Skeetah has startled her. He lays his hands on her and she rises. I went to my daddy's Methodist church one time with my mama, even though she raised us Catholic, and this is what China moves like; like she has caught the ghost, like the holiest voice moves through her instead of Skeetah's. I wonder if her body feels like it is in the grip of one giant hand that wrings her empty.

"I see it!" Junior squeals.

The first puppy is big. It opens her and slides out in a stream of pink slime. Skeetah catches it, places it to the side on a pile of thin, ripped towels he has prepared. He wipes it.

"Orange, like his daddy," Skeetah says. "This one's going to be a killer."

The puppy is almost orange. He is really the color of the red earth after someone has dug in it to plant a field or pull up stones or put in a body. It is Mississippi red. The daddy was that color: he was short and looked like a big red muscle. He had chunks of skin and flesh crusted over to scabby sores from fighting. When he and China had sex, there was blood on their jaws, on her coat, and instead of loving, it looked like they were fighting. China's skin is rippling like wind over water. The second puppy slides halfway out feet-first and hangs there.

"Skeet," Junior squeaks. He has one eye and his nose pressed against Randall's leg, which he is hugging. He seems very dark and very small, and in the night gloom, I cannot see the color of his clothes.

Skeetah grabs the puppy's rear, and his hand covers the entire torso. He pulls. China growls, and the puppy slides clear. He is pink. When Skeetah lays him on the mat and wipes him off, he is white with tiny black spots like watermelon seeds spit across his fur. His tongue protrudes through the tiny slit that is his mouth, and he looks like a flat cartoon dog. He is dead. Skeetah lets go of the towel and the puppy rolls, stiff as a bowling pin, across the padding to rest lightly against the red puppy, which is moving its legs in small fits, like blinks.
"Shit, China." Skeetah breathes. Another puppy is coming. This one slowly slides out headfirst; a lonely, hesitant diver. Big Henry, one of Randall's friends, dives into the water at the river like that every time we go swimming: heavy and carefully, as if he is afraid his big body, with its whorls of muscle and fat, will hurt the water. And every time Big Henry does so, the other boys laugh at him. Manny is always the loudest of them all: his teeth white knives, his face golden red. The puppy lands in the cup of Skeetah's palms. She is a patchwork of white and brown. She is moving, her head bobbing in imitation of her mother's. Skeetah cleans the puppy. He kneels behind China, who growls. Yelps. Splits.

Even though Daddy's truck was parked right beyond the front door and Junior hit me in my calf with a shine bottle, I looked at Manny first. He was holding the ball like an egg, with his fingertips, the way Randall says a good ball handler does. Manny could dribble on rocks. I had seen him in the rocky sand at the corner of the basketball court down at the park, him and Randall, dribbling and defending, dribbling and defending. The rocks made the ball ricochet between their legs like a rubber paddleball, unpredictable and wild, but they were so good they caught to dribble again nearly every time. They'd fall before they'd let the ball escape, dive to be cut by shells and small gray stones. Manny was holding the ball as tenderly as he would a pit puppy with pedigree papers. I wanted him to touch me that way.
The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead

Chapter 1

The first time Caesar approached Cora about running north, she said no.

This was her grandmother talking. Cora’s grandmother had never seen the ocean before that bright afternoon in the port of Ouidah and the water dazzled after her time in the fort’s dungeon. The dungeon stored them until the ships arrived. Dahomeyan raiders kidnapped the men first, then returned to her village the next moon for the women and children, marching them in chains to the sea two by two. As she stared into the black doorway, Ajarry thought she’d be reunited with her father, down there in the dark. The survivors from her village told her that when her father couldn’t keep the pace of the long march, the slavers stove in his head and left his body by the trail. Her mother had died years before.

Cora’s grandmother was sold a few times on the trek to the fort, passed between slavers for cowrie shells and glass beads. It was hard to say how much they paid for her in Ouidah as she was part of a bulk purchase, eighty-eight human souls for sixty crates of rum and gunpowder, the price arrived upon after the standard haggling in Coast English. Able-bodied men and childbearing women fetched more than juveniles, making an individual accounting difficult.

The Nanny was out of Liverpool and had made two previous stops along the Gold Coast. The captain staggered his purchases, rather than find himself with cargo of singular culture and disposition. Who knew what brand of mutiny his captives might cook up if they shared a common tongue. This was the ship’s final port of call before they crossed the Atlantic. Two yellow-haired sailors rowed Ajarry out to the ship, humming. White skin like bone.

The noxious air of the hold, the gloom of confinement, and the screams of those shackled to her contrived to drive Ajarry to madness. Because of her tender age, her captors did not immediately force their urges upon her, but eventually some of the more seasoned mates dragged her from the hold six weeks into the passage. She twice tried to kill herself on the voyage to America, once by denying herself food and then again by drowning. The sailors stymied her both times, versed in the schemes and inclinations of chattel. Ajarry didn’t even make it to the gunwale when she tried to jump overboard. Her simpering posture and piteous aspect, recognizable from thousands of slaves before her, betrayed her intentions. Chained head to toe, head to toe, in exponential misery.

Although they had tried not to get separated at the auction in Ouidah, the rest of her family was purchased by Portuguese traders from the frigate Vivilia, next seen four months later drifting ten miles off Bermuda. Plague had claimed all on board. Authorities lit the ship on fire and watched her crackle and sink. Cora’s grandmother knew nothing about the ship’s fate. For the rest of her life she imagined her cousins worked for kind and generous masters up north, engaged in more forgiving trades than her own, weaving or spinning, nothing in the fields. In her stories, Isay and Sidoo and the rest somehow bought their way out of bondage and lived as free men and women in the City of Pennsylvania, a place she had overheard two white men discuss once. These fantasies gave Ajarry comfort when her burdens were such to splinter her into a thousand pieces.

The next time Cora’s grandmother was sold was after a month in the pest house on Sullivan’s Island, once the physicians certified her and the rest of the Nanny’s cargo clear of illness. Another busy day on the Exchange. A big auction always drew a colorful crowd. Traders and procurers from up and down the coast converged on Charleston, checking the merchandise’s eyes and joints and spines, wary of venereal distemper and other afflictions. Onlookers chewed fresh oysters and hot corn as the auctioneers shouted into the air. The slaves stood naked on the platform. There was a bidding war over a group of Ashanti studs, those Africans of renowned industry and musculature, and the foreman of a limestone quarry bought a bunch of pickaninnies in an astounding bargain. Cora’s grandmother saw a little boy among the gawkers eating rock candy and wondered what he was putting in his mouth.

Just before sunset an agent bought her for two hundred and twenty-six dollars. She would have fetched more but for that season’s glut of young girls. His suit was made of the whitest cloth she had ever seen. Rings set with colored stone flashed on his fingers. When he pinched her breasts to see if she was in flower, the metal was cool on her skin. She was branded, not for the first or last time, and fettered to the rest of the day’s acquisitions. The coffle began their long march south that night, staggering behind the trader’s buggy. The Nanny by that time was en route back to Liverpool, full of sugar and tobacco. There were fewer screams belowdecks.

You would have thought Cora’s grandmother cursed, so many times was she sold and swapped and resold over the next few years. Her owners came to ruin with startling frequency. Her first master got swindled by a man who sold a device that cleaned cotton twice as fast as Whitney’s gin. The diagrams were convincing, but in the end Ajarry was another asset liquidated by order of the magistrate. She went for two hundred and eighteen dollars in a hasty exchange, a drop in price occasioned by the realities of the local market. Another owner expired from dropsy, whereupon his widow held an estate sale to fund a return to her native Europe, where it was clean. Ajarry spent three months as the property of a Welshman who eventually lost her, three other slaves, and two hogs in a game of whist. And so on.
Her price fluctuated. When you are sold that many times, the world is teaching you to pay attention. She learned to quickly adjust to the new plantations, sorting the nigger breakers from the merely cruel, the layabouts from the hardworking, the informers from the secret-keepers. Masters and mistresses in degrees of wickedness, estates of disparate means and ambition. Sometimes the planters wanted nothing more than to make a humble living, and then there were men and women who wanted to own the world, as if it were a matter of the proper acreage. Two hundred and forty-eight, two hundred and sixty, two hundred and seventy dollars. Wherever she went it was sugar and indigo, except for a stint folding tobacco leaves for one week before she was sold again. The trader called upon the tobacco plantation looking for slaves of breeding age, preferably with all their teeth and of pliable disposition. She was a woman now. Off she went.

She knew that the white man’s scientists peered beneath things to understand how they worked. The movement of the stars across the night, the cooperation of humors in the blood. The temperature requirements for a healthy cotton harvest. Ajarry made a science of her own black body and accumulated observations. Each thing had a value and as the value changed, everything else changed also. A broken calabash was worth less than one that held its water, a hook that kept its catfish more prized than one that relinquished its bait. In America the quirk was that people were things. Best to cut your losses on an old man who won’t survive a trip across the ocean. A young buck from strong tribal stock got customers into a froth. A slave girl squeezing out pups was like a mint, money that bred money. If you were a thing—a cart or a horse or a slave—your value determined your possibilities. She minded her place.

Finally, Georgia. A representative of the Randall plantation bought her for two hundred and ninety-two dollars, in spite of the new blankness behind her eyes, which made her look simpleminded. She never drew a breath off Randall land for the rest of her life. She was home, on this island in sight of nothing.

Cora’s grandmother took a husband three times. She had a predilection for broad shoulders and big hands, as did Old Randall, although the master and his slave had different sorts of labor in mind. The two plantations were well-stocked, ninety head of nigger on the northern half and eighty-five head on the southern half. Ajarry generally had her pick. When she didn’t, she was patient.

Her first husband developed a hankering for corn whiskey and started using his big hands to make big fists. Ajarry wasn’t sad to see him disappear down the road when they sold him to a sugarcane estate in Florida. She next took up with one of the sweet boys from the southern half. Before he passed from cholera he liked to share stories from the Bible, his former master being more liberal-minded when it came to slaves and religion. She enjoyed the stories and parables and supposed that white men had a point: Talk of salvation could give an African ideas. Poor sons of Ham. Her last husband had his ears bored for stealing honey. The wounds gave up pus until he wasted away.

Ajarry bore five children by those men, each delivered in the same spot on the planks of the cabin, which she pointed to when she didn’t, she was patient.

Ajarry bore five children by those men, each delivered in the same spot on the planks of the cabin, which she pointed to when they misstepped. That’s where you come from and where I’ll put you back if you don’t listen. Teach them to obey her and maybe they’ll obey all the masters to come and they will survive. Two died miserably of fever. One boy cut his foot while playing on a rusted plow, which poisoned his blood. Her youngest never woke up after a boss hit him in the head with a wooden block. One after another. At least they were never sold off, an older woman told Ajarry. Which was true—which poisoned his blood. Her youngest never woke up after a boss hit him in the head with a wooden block. One after another. At least they were never sold off, an older woman told Ajarry. Which was true—back then Randall rarely sold the little ones. You knew where and how your children would die. The child that lived past the age of ten was Cora’s mother, Mabel.

Ajarry died in the cotton, the bolls bobbing around her like whitecaps on the brute ocean. The last of her village, keeled over in the rows from a knot in her brain, blood pouring from her nose and white froth covering her lips. As if it could have been anywhere else. Liberty was reserved for other people, for the citizens of the City of Pennsylvania bustling a thousand miles to the north. Since the night she was kidnapped she had been appraised and reappraised, each day waking upon the pan of a new scale. Know your value and you know your place in the order. To escape the boundary of the plantation was to escape the fundamental principles of your existence: impossible.

It was her grandmother talking that Sunday evening when Caesar approached Cora about the underground railroad, and she said no.

Three weeks later she said yes.

This time it was her mother talking.

V. Georgia

THIRTY DOLLAR REWARD

Ran away from the subscriber, living in Salisbury, on the 5th instant, a negro girl by the name of LIZZIE. It is supposed that said girl is in the vicinity of Mrs. Steel’s plantation. I will give the above reward on the delivery of the girl, or for information on her being lodged in any Gaol in this state. All persons are forewarned of harboring said girl, under penalty of law prescribed.
W. M. DIXON

Jockey’s birthday only came once or twice a year. They tried to make a proper celebration. It was always Sunday, their half day. At three o’clock the bosses signaled the end of work and the northern plantation scurried to prepare, rushing through chores. Mending, scavenging moss, patching the leak in the roof. The feast took precedence, unless you had a pass to go into town to sell crafts or had hired yourself out for day labor. Even if you were inclined to forgo the extra wages—and no one was so inclined—impossible was the slave impudent enough to tell a white man he couldn’t work because it was a slave’s birthday. Everybody knew niggers didn’t have birthdays.

Cora sat by the edge of her plot on her block of sugar maple and worked dirt from under her fingernails. When she could, Cora contributed turnips or greens to the birthday feasts, but nothing was coming in today. Someone shouted down the alley, one of the new boys most likely, not completely broken in by Connelly yet, and the shouts cracked open into a dispute. The voices more crotchety than angry, but loud. It was going to be a memorable birthday if folks were already this riled.

“If you could pick your birthday, what would it be?” Lovey asked.

Cora couldn’t see Lovey’s face for the sun behind her, but she knew her friend’s expression. Lovey was uncomplicated, and there was going to be a celebration that night. Lovey gloried in these rare escapes, whether it was Jockey’s birthday, Christmas, or one of the harvest nights when everyone with two hands stayed up picking and the Randalls had the bosses distribute corn whiskey to keep them happy. It was work, but the moon made it okay. The girl was the first to tell the fiddler to get busy and the first to dance. She’d try to pull Cora from the sidelines, ignoring her protestations. As if they’d twirl in circles, arm in arm, with Lovey catching a boy’s eyes for a second on every revolution and Cora following suit. But Cora never joined her, tugging her arm away. She watched.

“Told you when I was born,” Cora said. She was born in winter. Her mother, Mabel, had complained enough about her hard delivery, the rare frost that morning, the wind howling between the seams in the cabin. How her mother bled for days and Connelly didn’t bother to call the doctor until she looked half a ghost. Occasionally Cora’s mind tricked her and she’d turn the story into one of her memories, inserting the faces of ghosts, all the slave dead, who looked down at her with love and indulgence. Even people she hated, the ones who kicked her or stole her food once her mother was gone.

“If you could pick,” Lovey said.

“Can’t,” Cora said. “It’s decided for you.”

“You best fix your mood,” Lovey said. She sped off.

Cora kneaded her calves, grateful for the time off her feet. Feast or no feast, this was where Cora ended up every Sunday when their half day of work was done: perched on her seat, looking for things to fix. She owned herself for a few hours every week was how she looked at it, to tug weeds, pluck caterpillars, thin out the sour greens, and glare at anyone planning incursions on her territory.

Excerpted from The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead.

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Author Pairings

Zadie Smith
- E. M. Forster
- Franz Kafka
- Mary Shelley
- Emily Dickinson (poems pair well with Smith’s short stories)
- O. Henry (Smith’s short story writing styles are similar)
- Salman Rushdie

Jesmyn Ward
- John Steinbeck
- William Faulkner
- Zora Neal Hurston
- Toni Morrison

Yaa Gyasi
- Octavia Butler
- Jamaica Kincaid
- Edwidge Danticat
- Isabelle Allende
- Zora Neal Hurston

Mbolo Mbue
- F. Scott Fitzgerald (The Great Gatsby in particular)
- Arthur Miller (Death of a Salesman in particular)
- Lorraine Hansberry (A Raisin in the Sun in particular)

Caryl Phillips
- Shakespeare (characters, topics, themes)
- Mary Shelley

Mat Johnson
- Mark Twain

Chimamanda Adiche
- Ernest Hemingway
- Chinua Achebe

Marise Conde
- Dante
- Arthur Miller (The Crucible in particular)
- Nathaniel Hawthorne (The Scarlet Letter in particular)

Colson Whitehead
- Johnathan Swift (Gulliver’s Travels in particular)
- Ernest Hemingway
- Octavia Butler

Octavia Butler
- George Orwell
- Anthony Burgess
- Adolf Huxley

Extras Worth Noting

Tommy Orange (Native American)
- His novel, There, There, pairs nicely with Geoffrey Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales

Mohsin Hamid (Pakistani)
- His book, Exit West, pairs nicely with Yann Martel’s Life of Pi

Kamila Shamsie (Pakistani British)
- Her Home Fire
List of Contemporary Black Poets

Jamaal May
Terrance Hayes
Camille T. Dungy
Natasha Tretheway
Joshua Bennett
Tracy K. Smith
Use this table to help organize poetry prewriting ideas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Notes about form (rhyme scheme, stanza structure, what the poem looks like)</th>
<th>Images, ideas, words, lines that seem to go together</th>
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<tbody>
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<tr>
<td>Things that confuse you; questions you are looking to answer</td>
<td>Possible central ideas (be patient – it may take a while for these to surface)</td>
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<td>Question</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. What is the <strong>dramatic situation</strong> of the poem? (What is taking place literally?)</td>
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<td>2. Who is the speaker in the poem? (Or, at least, what do we know about him/her?)</td>
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<td>3. To whom is he or she speaking? Who is the audience of the poem?</td>
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<td>4. Where is the setting of the poem? Where is the speaker? When does it take place?</td>
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<td>5. What is a possible theme of the poem?</td>
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<td>6. Write one line from the poem that you think tells the theme or main conflict of the poem.</td>
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<td>7. Why does the speaker feel compelled to speak out?</td>
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<td>8. What kinds of patterns are there in the poem? Does the poem rhyme? Does it have a particular rhythm or beat? Does it have a visual pattern when you look at it?</td>
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<td>9. How does the poet use language? Is it elevated or fancier language? Is it more vernacular, colloquial, or casual? Does the poet use a particular dialect or accent?</td>
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<td>10. What do you think is the most important line of the poem? Why do you think so?</td>
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<td>11. What images does the poet use to make his or her point?</td>
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<td>12. What is the <strong>tone</strong> (mood) of the poem at the beginning, at the end, and overall?</td>
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Respond to the following poetry analysis prompts. **Include evidence from the text that supports your thinking.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prompt</th>
<th>Evidence/Analysis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What topic is the impetus/motivation for the poem?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Identify the narrator. What is her/his attitude toward the topic?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What is the tone of the poem? Does it shift at any point?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Which two (main) literary devices are used to convey meaning? There might be more than two, but I’m looking for the two that dominate – the two that move the poem forward, toward its conclusion.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How does the structure of the poem affect the meaning?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Something that is transformative provides a lesson or experience that inspires change or causes a shift in viewpoint. Discuss whether or not the poem serves as a transformative piece of literature. Do not merely list your response, you must defend your position.
After running away from his negligent parents, committing a violent crime and being sentenced to five years in jail, a hardened, streetwise 12-year-old Lebanese boy sues his parents in protest of the life they have given him.

Release date: December 14, 2018 (USA)
Director: Nadine Labaki
Nominations: Palme d'Or, Cannes Best Actor Award, MORE
Awards: Cannes Jury Prize, Golden Orange Award for Best Actor (International), Golden Orange Youth Jury's Award

Available on:
YouTube: From $14.99
Amazon Prime Video: From $14.99
Google Play Movies & TV: $14.99
Vudu: $14.99
Starz: Subscription $14.99

Much like Labaki’s past movies, Caramel and Where Do We Go Now?, Capernaum features a cast of mostly nonprofessional actors, and tackles societal ills. But it stands out as a cautionary tale. And critics have been in awe of its young stars: Zain al Rafeea, a 12-year-old Syrian refugee, and Boluwatife Treasure Bankole, an impressive baby girl cast as a boy.

Capernaum is a biblical village that was doomed by Jesus. Later on, the word started being used to signify chaos. When we started writing the script, I was all over the place, and my husband said, “You need to organize your thoughts.” So I started talking and he started writing all the themes I was talking about on a board. At one point I looked at the board and I went, “C’est un Capernaum”: It’s hell. It’s chaos. And so we started with a title before starting the script.

New York Times interview with director, Nadine Labaki
In 2008, Wall Street guru Michael Burry realizes that a number of subprime home loans are in danger of defaulting. Burry bets against the housing market by throwing more than $1 billion of his investors’ money into credit default swaps. His actions attract the attention of banker Jared Vennett (Ryan Gosling), hedge-fund specialist Mark Baum (Steve Carell) and other greedy opportunists. Together, these men make a fortune by taking full advantage of the impending economic collapse in America.

Release date: December 11, 2015 (USA)
Director: Adam McKay
Story by: Michael Lewis
Awards: Academy Award for Best Writing Adapted Screenplay, MORE
Screenplay: Adam McKay, Charles Randolph

Available on
From $2.99

YouTube
From $2.99

Amazon Prime Video
From $2.99

Google Play Movies & TV
From $3.99

iTunes
From $3.99

Vudu
From $3.99
What is Close Reading?

The process of **writing an essay usually begins with the close reading of a text.** Of course, the writer's personal experience may occasionally come into the essay, and all essays depend on the writer's own observations and knowledge. But **most essays, especially academic essays, begin with a close reading of some kind of text—a painting, a movie, an event—and usually with that of a written text.**

When you close read, you observe facts and details about the text. **You may focus on a particular passage, or on the text as a whole.** Your aim may be to notice all striking features of the text, including rhetorical features, structural elements, cultural references; or, your aim may be to notice only selected features of the text—for instance, oppositions and correspondences, or particular historical references. Either way, making these observations constitutes the first step in the process of close reading.

The second step is interpreting your observations. What we're basically talking about here is inductive reasoning: **moving from the observation of particular facts and details to a conclusion, or interpretation, based on those observations.** And, as with inductive reasoning, close reading requires careful gathering of data (your observations) and careful thinking about what these data add up to.

**How to Begin:**

1. **Read with a pencil in hand, and annotate the text.**
   "Annotating" means underlining or highlighting key words and phrases—anything that strikes you as surprising or significant, or that raises questions—as well as making notes in the margins. When we respond to a text in this way, we not only force ourselves to pay close attention, but we also begin to think with the author about the evidence—the first step in moving from reader to writer.

2. **Look for patterns in the things you've noticed about the text—repetitions, contradictions, similarities, motifs, etc.**

3. **Ask questions about the patterns you've noticed—especially how and why.**

As we proceed in this way, paying close attention to the evidence, asking questions, formulating interpretations, we engage in a process that is central to essay writing and to the whole academic enterprise: in other words, we reason toward our own ideas.

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