

BEFORE THE N-WORD

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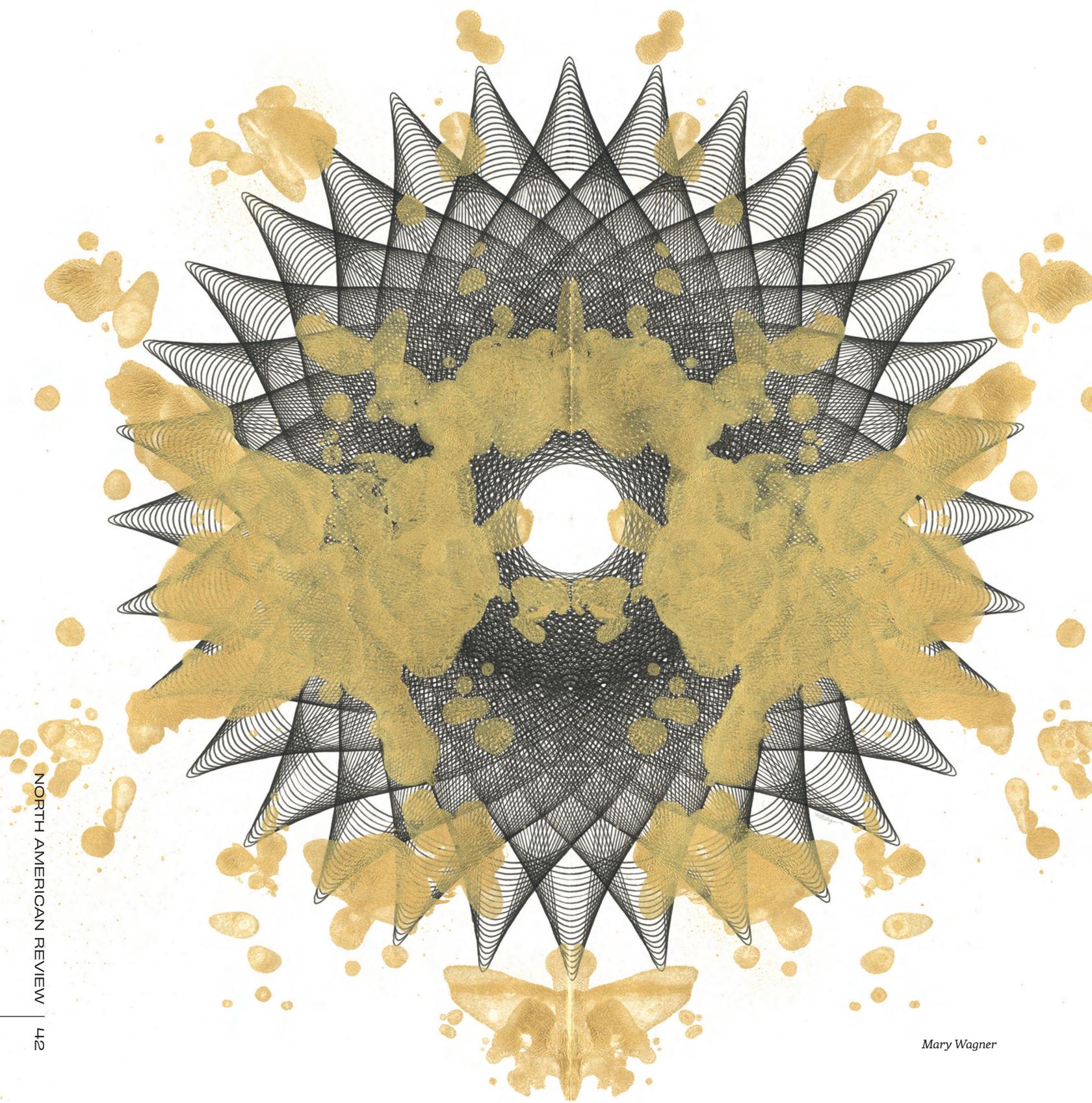
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Mary Wagner

BEFORE THE N-WORD

C. E. POVERMAN

Starting up the stairs to the second-floor dining room—I'm still pressing my name tag to my lapel—I thought I recognized Joe Clark on the landing above me. As if looking into a distance, he said, "That you, Tim Moore?" He waited for me. Easily ten years since we'd seen each other, but he was much as I remembered him. There seemed to be guys who looked more or less the way we were when we were undergraduates—well, almost—and then guys who turned a corner and became unrecognizable. I read that at some time in our lives we internalize a fixed image of ourselves and after that can never really know how we appear to others.

I told him I was up from DC for a conference here in NY and realized at the last minute that I could make the class dinner; I'd been looking forward to hearing Gary Johnson, our announced speaker. He had been an Olympic gold medalist and had also held the American Record in the 100 and 200 yard freestyle when we were undergrads—his 100 time was a quantum leap above what anyone else could do for the next ten years. He had lived in my entryway in our college, had always been modest, even shy, and I wanted to know what his life had been after such early greatness. Joe said that he hated to disappoint me, but a couple of weeks ago Gary had graciously given up his place to Percy Flowers. Had I known him? He'd been a social worker in Philadelphia.

I said that Percy and I had gone to the same prep school, Brewster, back in the dark ages when it had been all-boys. We had seen little of each other in college and not at all since then. With this, I remembered that Percy had transferred into Brewster in the 4th form, Brewster's proudly anglophile way of saying 10th grade. He had always carried a little extra weight, but he was big overall and had turned out to be a spectacular athlete—football, basketball, baseball. He had brought a nickname with him, *Chubz*, which had a Teddy Bear ring. After he'd been with us a few months, I greeted him in our usual way, "Hey, Chubz," and he answered, not as a reproach, but with quiet dignity, "My name is Percy." As I had undergone

my own self-styled, name revision from Timmy, which had recently become too kiddish for me, to Tim, I instantly got it. "Okay, Percy."

Joe said. "You and Percy were kids together at Brewster?" I hadn't thought of it that way, but I nodded. "I'm telling you this in confidence: Percy has a cancer—he didn't go into detail—that's taken a turn for the worse. We moved him ahead to talk now instead of Gary because he," Joe lowered his voice, "doesn't think he's going to be able to make it to our dinner next year."

We reached the dining room as the appetizers were coming out. We were one of the last all-male classes at Yale. Almost everyone at the tables closest to us nodded in recognition at Joe, who as class secretary did the alumni notes and sat on reunion committees; he'd been a captain of the baseball team and gone on to Wall Street. Most looked a bit uncertainly at me and, I, too, wasn't sure that I immediately recognized anyone. Seeing Percy at a head table, I raised my hand, a quick hello, but he had leaned forward to talk to someone, and I don't think he saw me.

With a pat on the shoulder, good to see you, Joe went to sit with Percy and several of the class officers. I found a half empty table toward the back, a last-minute, straggler's table. I said hello to the three already there, none of whom I recognized. Could I say I had ever known them—there'd been a thousand guys in our class—but that now they had morphed beyond recognition? After a few minutes, I thought that I might have taken a history seminar with the one across from me, but I couldn't be sure—his name tag didn't ring a bell—and getting no signal that he remembered me, I decided to let it ride for now. At a reunion I'd made over the years, I'd run into one of our history professors who said, "Your class was among the last of the True Believers." From time to time I have found myself asking what he had meant by that—and what had we believed?

I glanced around the dining room, a sumptuous atmosphere that I had felt envelop me the moment I'd stepped inside

from Vanderbilt Avenue; it was the club's throwback to the Gilded Age—the Robber Barons, the Rockefellers, Carnegies and Mellons—its grandiosity and presumption, its oil paintings of past presidents, senators, college professors, its irreproachable eminences all somberly gazing down on us; the university, itself, had the same unassailable ambiance with its wood paneled common rooms and dining halls, lecture and seminar rooms, colleges, courtyards, and bell towers, and their implicit promise that they could keep the world's squalor at bay.

Which also brought back the feeling that I had never really belonged there, nor, I realized, here today, but that there were those who did and who had been the heart of our class and who had had an easy rapport and who shared some elusive assumption and certainty and had stayed in touch with the university and each other. Well, maybe that was an illusion or fantasy, even paranoia, those who really belonged, those who didn't. I do know that I had also felt that way back when I'd gone to Brewster, where outsiders identified you as a preppie, but I had been a scholarship student and that wasn't the way I saw myself. My scholarship, itself, had come out of one of those fortuitous accidents, your life is one way, but if it weren't for that, everything could just as easily have turned out another. I had been headed for the local junior high and then an even more mediocre high school. After that, who knew, maybe a college like UConn or Southern? My mother worked as a secretary in a doctor's office, and one afternoon the doctor's wife had stopped by and they got talking and she said that her son was taking the entrance exam for Elijah Brewster, the all-boys day school—and she suggested that I apply. Money had always been tight in our family, but the doctor's wife knew they had scholarships and that's how I wound up a work scholarship boy. Percy had been one, too. I started in the first form—seventh grade. My first three years at Brewster were a struggle: subject, verb, object, subordinate clause, prepositional phrase. Misplaced modifier. Multiples and decimal points. A muddle. All of it. I've always been grateful to them and given generously to their alumni fund. And even then, with all that Brewster and Yale gave me, I was still at sea and had cast about for several years after graduation—first the Peace Corps, then two false starts in different grad schools before I came across a summer internship in an ACLU office, discovered that I loved law, and ended up a lawyer in DC.

I was half following the conversation at our table, but quietly leaning from side to side as I tried to get a better look at Percy across the room. Though Joe had told me about his cancer,

I couldn't see that he looked too different.... A medium length afro and heavy black framed glasses, a short beard. Whatever the cancer was doing to him, it was damage from the inside. Of course, when I thought of Percy, we were on the football field at Brewster....

I see him in practice as the huddle breaks with a clap of eleven pairs of hands, and the offense comes up over the ball at the line of scrimmage; I had been a second-string offensive end, but the coach had moved me to safety on defense. The ball is snapped. I'm watching for Percy, hoping to get a jump on the play by reading the keys, which are the tackles. I see the exaggerated pitching motion of Sloan Morgan, the quarterback—he's trying to sell the fake, which I don't buy—and though I can't yet spot the ball, I'm sure that Percy has taken the handoff; if he's going right, Bill Henderson—aka Baby Huey, as we called him, at 230—the right tackle will be pulling out and leading the sweep; if running left, he's on the heels of Jimmy Manzo at 220; if a linebacker can get a hand on Percy, he will bounce off his massive, powerful thighs as he lowers his shoulder to make the tackle; if he hasn't already made him miss with a fake, Percy has a way of spinning out of his grasp, almost like a top shaped like a bowling ball, nimble, a dancer, and now he has broken into the open and is coming toward me, and at six feet and 170 to his six-two, 215, I know only a shoestring tackle, an all-out dive at those quick feet can trip him. Sometimes Percy just runs me over. On game days, November, cold, the sky black and gray, in the rain and mud, the trees gone bare, coming breathless to the sidelines with the rest of the defense, I can get an unobstructed view of Percy following Baby Huey or Jimmy, ducking, juking, spinning, reversing fields, shedding bodies, breaking tackles with an explosive crack of pads and bursting into the open, play after play....

Standing behind the microphone at the head table, Percy had been speaking to us for some time. For a moment more, big, powerful, he is floating above the ground, fast, graceful. But now I noticed there was something tentative in the way he was standing, as if with a slight precariousness to his footing he was consciously trying to keep his balance. At the first sound of his voice, part of me almost had to restrain myself from rushing up to hug him—Percy, remember me? Tim Moore, geometry and American History, football and baseball, the smell of fresh cut grass on the diamond and outfields in the spring.... No doubt part of me wanting to reclaim the time gone by. Percy had started his talk by thanking Gary Johnson for letting him take his place today. He paused to search the room, nodded, and I

saw whoever it was—long white hair, glasses—smile and nod back, and I realized *that* was Gary Johnson. Percy said that he was addressing us out of a sense of urgency because he realized that time was running out. Those of us who had been blessed with great educations and the opportunities they had given us and who were therefore in positions of power to impact the lives of our fellow Americans—and our fellow Black Americans—had not really gotten the job done and entering our twilight years it was now going to be up, “...to you and your children to take over and do everything you can to level the playing field and help my people.”

Percy said *my people* with simplicity and a lack of pretension and yet the words had an almost Biblical ring to them, and I envied him that ease. Was there anything in my life I could have invoked with such certainty? Well, my wife and children.... But something more, something beyond? I glanced around the dining room and became aware of the obvious, that everyone here today was white. From what little I knew—not much—I believed I was some watery concoction of Irish and English, my hair reddish-blond once upon a time, eyes pale blue, skin that tanned slightly only after it reddened.

Without reproach, without an appeal for sympathy, Percy stated that most of his classmates and other non-Black people couldn't really understand how difficult it was to be Black in America and this was just because they

Was there anything in my life I could have invoked with such certainty?

didn't have to. And he understood that. Still.... In one way or another, his people had been ignored, stereotyped, and as Ralph Ellison had so eloquently depicted in his novel, *The Invisible Man*, rendered unseen because America was too nervous and ashamed to face up to what it had done to them for 400 years. On the other hand, Blacks had not been able to ignore white America because their very survival depended on knowing as much about those in power as they possibly could; the powerful didn't have to spend time understanding the powerless as long as they continued to fear and respect them....

I momentarily drifted.... I saw myself in a white shirt and tie in the Brewster kitchen. Our glee club and Miss Thorne's Girls School were to have a joint dinner and evening concert and a dance afterward, and several of the work scholarship boys had been called in to set up and wait the tables in the dining hall. As a kind of perk, we could have our own rushed dinner beforehand at a food prep table in the kitchen.

Percy was one of the other waiters, and laughing and joking, perched on utility stools, we ate our dinners and were just finishing up as we heard the singers from the two glee clubs starting to flood the dining hall, the rising hum of their talk and laughter. At the same time, Richard Childs—Dicky—and Cornell Sims, in tie and jacket, pushed through the swinging doors into the kitchen. Dicky had a beautiful soaring voice—he sang in the glee club, and having the best voice and ear, he was also the pitch-pipe for a group of twelve who sang songs permeated with a kind of blithe melancholy and yearning, elaborate acapella harmonies: “Blue Skies,” “Moonglow,” “Hey There”.... Not including a falsetto, he could stretch his voice more than two octaves, and he once joked with a playful, mischievous smile that in taking his solo in the church choir, he had reduced his mother and several of the women in the congregation to tears. Tall, with café au lait skin, he was an amazing long and high jumper, and with an elegant slimness, he had an ease of movement, a quiet affability, a shy apartness. Beside him, Cornell Sims: an almost Asian contour to his eyes, skin that glowed like dark maple syrup, huge hands with long fingers. He was manager of the football team. With a look of sullen skepticism, almost a scowl, he rarely smiled, but when he did, it was a sudden, beautiful smile which showed impossibly perfect white teeth. What were they doing in here now in their jackets and ties?

Outside in the dining room, we waited by our serving stations as our headmaster, Mr. Stubbs, made a few welcoming remarks in his stiff, awkward way to the large gathering. The air had traces of perfume. Even at a distance, I felt nervous around him, his self-consciously erect posture, equally self-conscious attempt at a smile, his large, slightly beaked nose, his big feet placed earnestly one in front of the other as he galumphed into the morning assembly or up to the field to stand on the sidelines during a football game; taken together, they seemed to translate themselves into his careful, straight up and down handwriting with just the slightest fastidious slant to the left, and which always gave you a nervous hit if for any reason this handwriting—dark blue, fountain pen ink—came your way in a note: *Tim, please stop by my office after lunch today. W.S.* His initials, Whitney Stubbs. Oh, Christ, what had I done—we *had* been more than a little disruptive once too often in study hall....

As Mr. Stubbs went on, I looked around the dining hall. Each member of our glee club had been paired with one of the girls from Miss Thorne's—dinner partners—eight or ten to a table. Miss Thorne's was a school where the

girls were named Faith and Prudence, Patience, Muffie and Abigail, and where they wore Peter Pan collars and circle pins, or a thin necklace suspending a glass ball pendant the size of a marble with a tiny, immaculate mustard seed at its center, and which I later learned alluded to something Jesus had said about how if one had faith as a grain of mustard one could move mountains; a fashion, I'm sure it was purely decorative. The best of the girls—two or three—might be going to Vassar or Smith, others to Endicott and Emerson....

Mr. Stubbs finished his welcome, the conversation rose to a din, and loading our trays, we backed through the swinging doors. Making sure I didn't trail my tie through someone's dinner—I finally tucked it into my white shirt—was all I thought about until I looked up and was surprised to see Dicky and Cornell still in the kitchen; they were sitting on stools at the food prep table. They had shed their jackets and had dinner plates in front of them, but sitting side by side, Dicky had his elbows on the table, his head drooped, and not really eating, he was picking at his food. Dicky glanced over and put his arm around Cornell, and I realized that Cornell was crying, and Dicky seemed to be covertly wiping his own eyes. What was going on? I understood that they were in the glee club—Dicky was one of their stars, really—and that the dinner was going on out there in the dining hall and they were in here eating at the food prep table....

I wanted to go over and do something—we'd been in school together since the first form of the Lower School, but I had no idea what was wrong and maybe I would be making it worse—hurting their pride—by acknowledging that I'd witnessed their crying. Later, I would remember this moment of uncertainty. I decided that I'd clear my tables and by then maybe I'd know what to do or say.

As I unloaded my dishes, I saw that Percy had put down his tray, and standing behind Dicky and Cornell, he had an arm around each and had pulled their heads in close to his, the three of them huddled together, their foreheads touching, and Percy was holding them, and then he straightened, and with a hand on each of their shoulders, he gave them a squeeze and a kind of rousing shake.

Charlie, the cook, was sliding trays of desserts onto the pickup table, and as Percy and I headed that way, I said, "What's happening with Dicky and Cornell...?" It was only in the thickening of my tongue as I asked that I sensed my dread.

Percy bounced the aluminum tray against his knee and steered me out of the coming and going of the other waiters, and lowering his voice he

told me that when the dinner and concert had been arranged between Miss Thorne's and Elijah Brewster, the plan was for each of our glee club members to be paired with someone from Miss Thorne's. I knew that much. In setting up the program, Mr. Stubbs, had found that none of the girls would consent to partnering with Dicky or Cornell because they were *negro*, the word at the time. How the girls knew that I don't know. Maybe it had been as simple as finding a picture of the Brewster glee club. Even allowing for the possibility of a few prejudiced students—I'd had no idea!—weren't there at least two that could pair up with Dicky and Cornell? No? Really?! Mr. Stubbs had called Dicky and Cornell into his office, apologized for the situation and asked them what they wanted him to do. This seemed unbelievable. And perhaps more unbelievable still, that Stubbs hadn't cancelled the concert, end of story. Whether it had been by the way he had presented the situation to them—Mr. Stubbs's dilemma: help me—and it had been their brave attempt to do so, or that he had suggested this as a solution, maybe hoping it would be seen as a compromise in the best interests of the school, here was the end result. Perhaps in going along, they had not anticipated how painful it would be. Even at the time I was amazed that Mr. Stubbs hadn't known better, but then it was widely reputed that he was ambitious for himself—a social climber—and for the school, which in the end may have been one and the same.

Percy put his hand on my shoulder and nodded as he finished telling me, and then brought Dicky and Cornell their desserts, which they pushed away, and we went back to serving our tables. Drying and smoothing their faces, they stood and straightened their ties, and putting on their jackets, they did what they could to compose themselves to join the two glee clubs. As he always did, Dicky would later take his solos and sing beautifully, though how he was able to pull himself together and do so I would never know. Listening to him at the back of the auditorium, I still had such a tight ache in my throat from seeing them crying in the kitchen that I could hardly swallow....

I became aware that Percy had been talking about the history of Blacks in America and that he, himself, had not been fully aware of the unspeakable cruelty directed at them until his American studies seminars at Yale. Here he learned of the ten million that died in the so-called Middle Passage from Africa—disease, suicide, murder. The Dred Scott Decision. He talked of survival strategies in the face of such brutality—childlike behaviors to mask how slaves

Today millions of Blacks suffered from a form of PTSD: Post Traumatic Slavery Disorder.

really felt and so their owners would fear them less, and their correlatives, pretending to be stupid, lazy or clumsy to buy time and energy and hang on. Plessy versus Ferguson: separate but equal. Segregation. Ironic, wasn't it, that Yale was where he had learned the details of his own history? Nineteen generations. Today millions of Blacks suffered from a form of PTSD: Post Traumatic Slavery Disorder, a form of oppression that was still taking a toll in their daily lives: they endured poor housing; a greater incidence of disease and early mortality—high blood pressure, stroke, diabetes; a wide-spread lack of access to first rate education and often any real education at all which denied them jobs, without which they couldn't find economic security; when there

was work, often the unspoken message was that it should be in lower echelon jobs—a way of maintaining a knee-high glass ceiling. “To this day, I still can't tell you what exactly an investment banker does.” Without financial stability, Blacks couldn't support families; young Black males, excluded from society, without real hope, found themselves pitted against each other; if they, Black males, had been in the animal kingdom and identified as a group, their high rate of death by violence, by knife and gun, by police, would have resulted in their being designated an endangered species and given protected status, yet another irony. If nothing else, maybe irony was what American society had to offer its Blacks.... It certainly had not been the underfunded schools his wife attended in Alabama where the outdated math and science and history books—pages torn and missing, bindings broken—were sent over only after the white districts discarded them. As for self-image: “I remember my sisters on Saturday afternoons in the kitchen accidentally burning their scalps as they tried to straighten their *bad* hair with lye” —Percy made air quotes around *bad*. “Better to burn your own skin and hair than be yourself with your *bad* hair.”

Percy said he wasn't out to settle scores. Nor was he bitter. He couldn't afford to be—it did nothing, helped no one. And on the contrary, he knew he had been one of the extremely lucky ones and he never for one minute forgot it. He'd been brought up in an integrated public housing complex where—Black friends, white friends—race consciousness had been almost non-existent. Call it a time for him of pre-race consciousness, a kind of Eden, if you will. This came to an end

when he was about thirteen and all his white friends had been invited to a party, and, excluded, he'd been deeply hurt and knew this was the beginning of a new reality, a color line.

Still, he understood that he was one of the few fortunate ones. His sixth-grade teacher had recommended him for a special tutoring program which prepared students to apply for several top prep schools—a very positive experience of race consciousness—and all through junior high he'd been placed in accelerated classes. In ninth grade, he was invited to apply for one of the best prep schools in New England, Elijah Brewster.

When he said, “Elijah Brewster,” he seemed to pause and look around the room. *Had* he noticed me as I'd come in? I raised my hand slightly off the table, a private wave...felt a stab of uneasiness.

Of course, Percy had more good luck, the best luck, when he'd gotten into Yale, which, in many ways, had been the greatest time in his life. Though there were only eight Blacks in his class of a thousand at the time, he still felt that he had been fully accepted as an equal among his peers—four wonderful years—and where for the most part he had been the recipient of positive race consciousness, both there and in many other places, since.

There was, of course, negative race consciousness. And he wanted to be clear; this kind of prejudice was not just held by whites or non-Blacks such as Asians or Hispanics. Not at all. He had to say that he had an extremely hard time with Clarence Thomas. Every single advance he had ever made in his life—high school, college at Holy Cross, Yale Law School, his appointment to the US Court of Appeals, and on to the Supreme Court—had been made possible by affirmative action. His publicly opposing it was the epitome of hypocrisy. Beyond, it gave ammunition to those who would strike it down, letting them say, in effect, if a Black Justice was against it, then it really was unfair. What kind of man was this? A man who so hated himself and his own Blackness that he would deny those same benefits to other Blacks.

Percy said quietly, “Though my mother taught me not to hate—and I know she would be very disappointed in me for this if she were alive, I just don't have words strong enough for Clarence Thomas.”

Percy placed his hand on his stomach, slid it up toward his chest. I was sure that he was in pain now—Joe had said that Percy's cancer had taken a turn for the worse—and that he was going to have to stop and sit down, but he picked up where he'd left off: positive race consciousness, negative race consciousness...and then there was something else, call it a third thing, which

in its complexities could only be illustrated by an incident that took place on the 300th anniversary of the Elijah Brewster Grammar School as it was known at the time.

“We had a headmaster—I’ll call him Mr. S—who I know sincerely cared about me. And I believe he tried to help me in many ways. But now I’m talking about a race consciousness that is so deeply engrained in American life and so insidious that even someone like Mr. S, who I don’t doubt had the best intentions in the world, could not recognize and overcome it in himself. I’ve come to think that in its own way it sabotaged Mr. S; I also believe that he, Mr. S—or it—unwittingly inflicted enduring wounds. Back then, there were only three Blacks in an entire day school of 300: Richard Childs, Cornell Sims and myself. In Richard’s case the damage would eventually turn out to be fatal. The Elijah Brewster Grammar School—that was its full name back then—was....”

....the second oldest school in the country after Boston Latin School, as Mr. Stubbs never tired of telling the students. In anticipation of the tricentennial, he had raised a group of volunteers several years before who on weekends and vacations had built an exact replica of the original, one-room schoolhouse—this was out where the football field met the woods just beyond. Its original mission: the teaching of Latin and Greek and Hebrew; in 1660, a gentleman deemed educated should be able to read Cicero and the Aeneid in Latin, the Gospel of St. John in Greek, the Old Testament in Hebrew. Those were the *grammar in grammar school*. The year of the anniversary, there had been a regime of self-congratulatory talks and ceremonies honoring Brewster and its history. Think of it! Elijah Brewster was older than the country, itself!

I remembered this falderal and its air of self-satisfied superiority all too well, and it was just as Percy was describing, though, as he went on, I had known nothing of this next part.

Mr. S had called Percy at home the night before the morning assembly for one of these commemorative events. He had a request. He wanted to bring to life the original Elijah Brewster endowment to the school, which had been: one negro manservant and 440 British pounds. Mr. S asked Percy if he would stand beside him during his morning talk and be the negro manservant. Jimmy Manzo and Bill Henderson, the tackles on the football team, each weighing easily over 220 pounds, were to be the 440 British pounds on his other side.

Percy hung up the phone and shared his doubts with his mother; he feared the idea was in poor taste and the whole thing made him very uneasy.

I don’t believe that I had ever really understood how Dicky and Cornell had let themselves be sent to eat in the kitchen—impossible and grotesque—but hearing Percy now, it suddenly seemed simple and clear; your headmaster presented you with a situation and asked you to do something for him and you didn’t refuse: the atmosphere of the school. And at sixteen it was hard to say no not just to our headmaster but to anyone whom we saw as an adult.

I remembered an incident, small, seemingly minor, but which had never left me, and it had also involved Mr. Stubbs in the morning assembly, which was how we started our school day, first standing to sing a Christian hymn and this in turn followed by announcements. On this morning, it had taken several requests for Stubbs to quiet the auditorium, his voice increasingly curt and angry. Someone coughed, and Mr. Stubbs jerked his head around and glared. Someone else dropped his books. Another glare. Several rows back, I shifted in my seat and propping my elbows on my knees, I leaned forward. Mr. Stubbs stared at me. Me? “Timothy Moore, you will leave this assembly immediately! Right now!”

I flushed. I stood and worked my way down the long row to the aisle, every face turning to watch me, and escaped through the doors in back. When the assembly broke up, my adviser, Mr. Reilly, came out and waved me aside. He crossed his arms over his chest and cocked his head slightly, a request for an explanation. I said, “I didn’t do anything.” Mr. Reilly waited. “I leaned forward in my seat. That’s all. I didn’t say a word.”

Mr. Reilly said, “I believe you. But you know something? It doesn’t matter. You’d better go apologize.”

“I would if I did something!” Had my thought been to go back inside and tell that to Mr. Stubbs? Make a case for myself?

“And I said I believe you, Tim. But.” He stopped. He telegraphed a knowing look, which said: do you get what this place is about? He waited. Seeing something in my face—obstinacy, anger—his expression, perhaps slightly impatient, answered: No, I see you don’t. And you are still not getting me, are you? Carefully, he said, “Whether you did something or not has nothing to do with it. And so, I will repeat: if I were you, Tim, I would go back in there and apologize right now. And that’s all I can say.”

Seething—this was wrong—but cowed, I went back to where Mr. Stubbs was gathering his notes off the lectern and gulped out a dry-mouthed apology. Without looking at me, he said in a tight, angry voice, “Don’t let it happen again.”

“Yes, sir.”

A scholarship boy, yes, but white and with every advantage and privilege that this bestowed upon me and of which I was almost completely unaware, how easily and contemptibly I had caved. Even now I squirmed with embarrassment remembering this as I listened to Percy describe Mr. Stubbs's request to him the night before the assembly: would Percy come to the front of the school and be the negro manservant tomorrow morning?

No, it definitely would have been unthinkable to refuse Mr. Stubbs, who, with the right well-timed nudge, held the power to push or keep us from getting into the college of our choice, as

Whatever else his motives, he'd had enough of the silent intimidation.

the term had been collectively instilled and which had been framed as a matter of life and death. We lived in an atmosphere of relentless intimidation, the more treacherous

because we were constantly being reminded how fortunate that we were being taught to think and question for ourselves. Someone who I hadn't thought of in years.... Brett Montgomery. A year ahead of me. The summer after junior year, instead of going into his last year and on to college, Brett, without a word to anyone, abruptly joined the Marines, which had been utterly incomprehensible at the time, the equivalent of, say, having someone standing quietly beside you at the top of the Empire State Building and then climb over the parapet and jump. But I completely got it now. Whatever else his motives, he'd had enough of the silent intimidation and had decided to take his life into his own hands.

Gazing out the window, Percy seemed to leave us completely before gathering himself and going on. He had his misgivings about Mr. S's request—in fact, he didn't want any part of it—but he dared not say no. The next morning, in jacket and tie, the school dress code, Percy took his place to the right of Mr. S at the oak lectern, and Bill Henderson and Jimmy Manzo, the two tackles, representing 440 British pounds, stood to his other side. Having gone on at length about the life of Elijah Brewster, a prosperous merchant, and having alluded to the British pounds with a sly inclination of his head toward Jimmy and Bill, which brought forth the quiet, knowing laugh he'd hoped for—oh, yeah, Bill and Jimmy were definitely 440 pounds, we get it—and perhaps gaining confidence, Mr. S went on to the other part of Elijah Brewster's bequest, the negro manservant. Except that instead of referring to Percy as the “one negro manservant,” Mr. S said, “one nigger slave.”

Elijah Brewster had bequeathed 440 British pounds and one nigger slave.

Percy stopped. “Well, you could have heard a pin drop in the auditorium. No one moved. No one breathed. I froze. We were frozen. Everyone, that is, except Mr. S, who stopped, looked up and around into the stunned silence, and then went on. I truly don't think he realized what he'd said. Or maybe the effect of it. Or both.”

Even now among us, Percy's college classmates, decades later, there was an awkward silence, a ripple of movement in our chairs, an averting of gazes.

Nigger slave. Percy said that his first reaction to those words had been to look for Richard and Cornell, but he couldn't find their eyes because they had dropped their heads in shame. That was the word Percy used. *Shame.* Which confused me. Why *shame*? Certainly not his shame? Shame for Mr. Stubbs, that he had used a word so charged that now it can only be alluded to as *the n-word*? Or did Percy mean *shame* in the sense of humiliation, that despite his academic excellence and sports achievements, with the mere pronouncing of a single word, he, and Richard and Cornell, could still not escape being rendered anonymous and erased? *Shame*? It had been Mr. Stubbs who had used the word before the whole school. The respectful word at the time was *negro*, and though no one was aware of it—or perhaps was nothing but aware of it—even that word was to be avoided at all costs in Percy's presence—Percy, Cornell, Dicky—if for no other reason than that it was the elephant in the room at Brewster, the all-white, all-boy's prep school, founded in 1660, in which it was above all else our pervasive and unwavering and silent mission to do whatever we had to do to get into the college of our choice.

Though I had variously feared and at times loathed Mr. Stubbs, his stiffness, his awkwardness, his self-consciousness, his air of smug patronization, detectable in a certain compression of his lips—noblesse oblige—in his way of saying, *the Jewish boys will be excused on Friday for Yom Kippur and can take the make-up exam the following week; or, the work scholarship boys will be excused from sixth period to set up extra tables in the dining hall*, I was baffled as to how he could have transformed *one negro manservant* into *one nigger slave*. And though I never could have imagined myself trying to extend a sympathetic or even empathetic interpretation to Stubbs' motivations—Stubbs, who beyond his position of authority, was easy to caricature and dislike—I was hoping to understand both him and this egregious breach. My kindest take was that maybe—just maybe—he had intended to speak in what he thought would have been the point of view of Elijah Brewster,

1660—how Brewster might have thought of his negro manservant at the time. Maybe. But even that didn't hold up, as he had referred to him in his bequest as *negro manservant*. And if I had wanted to make Mr. Stubbs out to be a villain, I still couldn't have imagined him to have been so blind, so unaware. If nothing else, so stupid.

As if tracking my thoughts, Percy picked up. "I stated earlier that I know Mr. S genuinely cared for me. And tried to help me. In telling this story today, I am not trying to demonize or scapegoat him. There's already been way too much of that on all sides and it's too easy and only begets more of the same. But I am trying to reveal something about the world all of us have inherited and are now getting ready to pass on to our children. And this is the elusive part." Percy paused and I could see him weighing each word. "Perhaps it might help to think of it as a kind of affliction, that Mr. S was beset by an affliction, that it was as if some part of him, beyond his knowing or understanding, buried deep, disguised, concealed from himself and beyond his control, had to find a way to call me outside my name, had to find a way to use *the n-word*, or to put it in plain English, a way to call me a nigger. And never really knowing or acknowledging it, or recognizing it, he did just that. Or maybe *it*, that thing in him, did just that. I believe that if someone had asked or confronted him, he would have been horrified. Or one part of him would have—the part he believed he knew of himself." He paused and then said quietly. "But the other part had to find a way to the surface and had to call me a nigger." Percy said, "Pre-race consciousness, positive race consciousness, negative race consciousness, and then this last thing, which I think, almost on the cellular level, comes out of a deep-seated and unconscious aversion to Blackness. It is an equal opportunity aversion. It is found in Clarence Thomas, a Black man. It was there in Mr. S, a white man. It is what we pass on to our children and what we are still fighting, and what they will go on fighting."

No one moved.

"I had a loving home. I had a mother who taught me not to hate. And I think that got me through—and is still getting me through. I know that Richard Childs, too, came from a loving home and family, but this was a moment Richard never got over. It was the start of an unraveling."

Percy told us how shortly after that incident Richard felt he couldn't stay at Brewster and went to the public high school, but he never graduated and instead of going on to college, he joined the navy. He went on to rise through the ranks of the *Black Panthers* until he was gunned down by a rival group known as *US*. It was later discovered that the FBI had worked to exacerbate

the rivalry between the *Panthers* and *US*, which led to his assassination.

Now I understood why Percy had said that some wounds were ultimately fatal. It had not just been a figure of speech. He'd meant this literally. In his telling, it had been an almost unbroken line from the Stubbs incident to Dicky's killing a few years later. Dicky had been there beside me in my classes from the first form until what would have been his senior year, the sixth form, when he wasn't there anymore. I hadn't known why—I just knew that he was gone. I saw his sudden acceleration in the spring when track started as, with his last few steps, he approached the high jump bar set at head height, his amazing rise as he floated clear with a last little lift and inhalation. After college I remembered that there were vague rumors that he'd become a *Black Panther* and that something had happened to him, that maybe he'd been shot, but I'd never really believed them. I heard the burst of his singing coming from around a corner in a hall, two octaves and a falsetto, heard the soar of his voice, remembered his saying how his solos in church had brought his mother to tears. Dicky.... A *Panther*? Shot? Not Dicky, and anyway, things like that didn't really happen to people I knew. I could still see us playfully pushing each other back and forth down the hall in the ninth grade—the third form, if you will.

Now I saw that Percy suddenly looked exhausted, his voice a little hoarse, and behind his glasses, I could make out circles under his eyes and that his hair and beard were streaked with silver. I was hearing things that he'd said earlier come back into sharp focus, the way he'd said them: that it was going to be up to...*you and your children to take over and level the playing field*....

He had not said: *It is going to be up to us... to take over and*.... He had not included himself. Percy knew that all too soon the fight would be going out of his hands; maybe his talking to us today was one of the last things he could do. Dicky and Cornell in the kitchen.... Not knowing what else to do, hoping that I could figure it out, I had gone on clearing my tables. A few years later, a college lecture: that morning, news of freedom riders, voter registration in Mississippi, beatings, atrocities, black smoke over burning busses, bodies unearthed, a pall hanging over the national news, and a mood of futility among the students in the lecture hall: in the face of this, how trivial, how pointless for us to be studying philosophy of all things. Our professor set aside his notes and spoke to the situation, finally saying that he understood how we felt, but that not everyone could be in Mississippi this morning and that precisely because of what was happening

there, it was more important than ever for us to continue doing philosophy. I had been comforted by his words. And over the years I had continued to draw comfort from them as other crises had arisen. Looking at Percy, I thought that maybe I had drawn just a little too much relief, extracted a little too much....convenience?

As I'd listened to him, I'd felt something nagging as he'd gone on and now it came clear; I had no memory of this incident. None whatsoever. Had I been absent that day? I doubted it for the

I am trying to reveal something about the world all of us have inherited and are now getting ready to pass on to our children.

simple reason that my first years at Brewster had been such a day-to-day struggle to hang in there that I almost never missed school. And even if I had, I knew that everyone would have been talking about this event—Stubbs, Percy, a nigger slave—for days after, though maybe I'd forgotten

that, too. If nothing else, Percy would have eventually said something to me about it. But no, I'm sure that I was there. And yet, the episode was an absence.

I felt a lurch of doubt. Which became a certainty. I suddenly knew that no such incident had ever taken place; this was a false memory, but one that Percy absolutely believed—he would never intentionally lie or stand in front of a roomful of his classmates and misrepresent himself; yet some part of him had fabricated this story out of whatever he had felt coming off Stubbs; it had radiated out from him and silently permeated the school. I had felt it, too. It was in the very air we were breathing, a snobbery and racism masquerading as tolerance.

And yet in the next moment, I knew Percy's story had to be true—if nothing else, the level of detail alone couldn't have been made up—and that it had happened exactly as Percy had told it. I felt shame that I had doubted Percy, even for an instant. And Percy's logic and reasoning as to the how and why Stubbs had "found a way to call me a nigger...a deep-seated aversion to Blackness, almost on the cellular level" I intuitively also knew to be true to my own experience of Stubbs. If nothing else, the cause and effect of Dicky's leaving Brewster shortly afterward was confirmation of his story.

No, I knew it had happened. And I knew that I had to have witnessed it. Besides the incident itself, perhaps almost as troubling was my realization, a kind of paradox or oxymoron, that

there had to have been a willful forgetting on my part, an amnesia or lapse, a part of me that didn't want to know or remember. I'd never thought of myself as capable of such a thing. In the kitchen that day I believed I had chosen not to show Dicky and Cornell that I'd seen their crying to save their pride—and until I knew what to do for them. Even in my own small moment of humiliation—Mr. Reilly's recommending I apologize to Mr. Stubbs for something I hadn't done—knowing that it was wrong, that it was a lie told against myself, a kind of complicity and betrayal, I'd gone ahead and done it. How easily I had folded.

With a few more remarks, Percy finished up, and as if waking up and coming out of a trance, we began to applaud, and then several in the front stood and applauded louder, and taking our cue from them, everyone stood, a standing ovation. Percy waved back and nodded. Looking exhausted, he thanked us, and a murmur and hum of conversation filled the dining room as people broke into small groups. Some started making their way toward the head tables to greet Percy, shake hands, hug him, and I could see him surrounded by a tight knot of well-wishers and classmates.

I, too, started working my way forward. As I did so, I felt an uneasiness, which had been coming and going in me, rise and spread. It was a fear that I couldn't name and then I realized that it was that Percy would not recognize me. On one level, I think I knew this was completely irrational, but on another, it had been a long time, all of us had changed, and then, when I thought about it, I had to ask myself, why would he remember me, really? ●