

*Books by John Edgar Wideman*

A GLANCE AWAY

HURRY HOME

THE LYNCHERS

DAMBALLAH

HIDING PLACE

SENT FOR YOU YESTERDAY

BROTHERS AND KEEPERS

REUBEN

FEVER

PHILADELPHIA FIRE

THE COLLECTED STORIES OF  
JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN

FATHERALONG

THE CATTLE KILLING

TWO CITIES: A LOVE STORY

HOOP ROOTS

# HOOP ROOTS

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John Edgar Wideman



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fragment a cause for celebration, for hope that someday the broken body will be restored, renewed, lovers united, but also each fragment bearing memories of ancient crimes, ancient pain and loss.

We were seekers of sorts too. Homewood boys and men running to the court to find our missing fathers. Playing the game of basketball our way of telling stories, listening to stories, piecing a father together from them. Practicing bittersweet survival whether we find fathers or not.

Recalling your stories, telling mine, I'm practicing survival again. Remembering what's lost. Remembering my stories can't save you. Remembering the fullness of time no story encloses. Remembering that the miracle of return is only a story, only a dream.

## Who Invented the Jump Shot (A Fable)

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*The native American rubber-ball game played on a masonry court has intrigued scholars of ancient history since the Spaniards redefined the societal underpinnings of the New World.*

—*The Mesoamerican Ballgame*, Vernon L. Scarborough and David R. Wilcox, eds.

THE SEMINAR ROOM was packed. Packed as in crowded, packed as in a packed jury or Supreme Court, packed as in a fresh-meat inmate getting his shit packed by booty bandits. In other words the matter being investigated, “Who Invented the Jump Shot,” has (a) drawn an overflow crowd of academics, (b) the fix is in, (c) I’m about to be cornholed without giving permission.

The title of the session let the cat out the bag. It broadcast two faulty assumptions—that at some particular moment in time the jump shot appeared, new and as fully formed as Athena popping from the head of Zeus, and that a single individual deserved credit for originating the jump shot. “Who Invented the Jump Shot” would be a pissing contest. And guess who will win. Not my perpetually outnumbered, outvoted, outgunned side. Huh-uh. No way. My colleagues of the Euro persuasion will claim one of their own, a white college kid on such and such a night, in such and such an obscure arena, proved by such and such musty, dusty documents, launched the first jump shot. Then they’ll turn the session into a coming-out party for the scholar who invents the inventor. Same ole, same ole aggression, arrogance, and conspicuous consumption. By the end of two hours they’ll own the jump shot, unimpeachable experts on its birth, development, and death. Rewriting history, planting their flag on a chunk of territory because nobody’s around to holler *Stop thief*.

And here I sit, a co-conspirator in my blue plastic contour chair, transported, lodged, fed free of charge, waiting for an answer to a question nobody with good sense would ask in the first place. Even though I've fired up more jumpers than all the members of the Association for the Study of Popular Culture combined, do you think anybody on the planning committee bothered to solicit my opinion on the origins of the jump shot. With their lock-step sense of time, their solipsism, and their bonehead priorities, no wonder these suckers can't dance.

I prefer anonymity since I'm trashing my colleagues and biting the hand of the profession that feeds us—feeds us luxuriously on rare occasions such as the buffet luncheon preceding this seminar, hosted in the penthouse suite by our corporate sponsors, long tables draped in glistening linen, groaning under mounds of bloody roast beef, crab, shrimp, smoked salmon, etc., etc., that we swarmed around and stripped of everything but chopped veggies and dip in five minutes—so call me Ishmael. I like the sound of the name, the preparatory juicing of my lower gum, the stiffened tongue pressing against the roots of my bottom teeth to *Isssh* before the dying fall of *My-ell*. A name sensuous to pronounce and also right on because it recalls faraway lands, ancient times, outcasts wandering in the desert, looking for a home. Ishmael continues to collect his university salary, but he's defected. Lost faith in teaching, research, the enfranchisement and vending of knowledge. Though his heart remains out there, pumping good wishes to the good of heart, Ish doesn't sign humanitarian petitions anymore. Please don't talk about him when he's gone.

Let's quietly exit from this crowded hall in a mega-conference center in Minneapolis and seek the origins of the jump shot elsewhere, in the darkness where Ishmael's lost tribe wanders still.

Imagine the cramped interior of an automobile, a make and model extant in 1927 since that's the year in which we're touching down, backward in time on a snowy January night inside a

medium-sized, let's say, Studebaker sedan humping down a highway, a car packed with the bodies of five large negro basketball players and a smallish driver whose hairy white knuckles grip the steering wheel.

Chug. Chug. The hot engine strains through a colder-than-cold night, emits an occasional arrhythmic flutter, *fluuup*, warning the man hunched over the wheel that his Studebaker is severely overloaded, a *fluuup* like the irregular heart murmurs of certain tragic athletes, usually long, lean people, often Americans of African descent, who will appear half a century later in the headlines after they suddenly expire, young and healthy, in the prime of life, then disappear, unlucky victims of a disease just as teasingly present and undetectable and fatal in their bodies as whatever it is under the Studebaker's hood worrying the driver. Who, listening for *fluuups*, loses track of time. Miles become minutes and minutes hours and hours melt into the space between one chug and the next, an infinity of time or a split second as the engine cycles. The driver listens so intently he's not sure in the overheated, drowsy space whether he actually hears a *fluuup* or imagines it. Simulates a wet *fluuup* with his lips. Does he miss the sound. Does he really want to hear it again if it's the sound of doom. He sees the whole carful of them marooned, stuck together like popsicles till spring thaws this wilderness between Chicago and Hinckley, Illinois.

Maybe he listens to distract himself from the claustrophobia, the scotophobia he can't help experiencing when he's alone, the only white man somewhere in the middle of nowhere with these colored guys he gets on with so well most of the time. C'mon. He rides, eats, drinks with them. Will sleep in the same room with one tonight to save money. In the same bed, for Chrissake, if there's only one bed and they fit. He'll be run out of godforsaken little midwestern towns with them after thumping the locals too soundly, nearly get lynched when Foster grins back at a white woman's lingering grin. So don't question my motives. Who are you to throw the first stone, anyway. Who

gave you a striped shirt and whistle. He listens to stay awake, stay alive. For their benefit as much as his own. Stuffed like sardines in the tin can car; nobody would survive a wreck. Everybody out here tonight driving way too fast. As if they can outrun the weather, outrun accidents, gas pedal pressed to the metal, feeding the heart's last open artery.

So when the motor *flumps* you listen. Or try to listen through the daze of driving. Windshield iced over except for a semiclear half-moon swatch maybe ten inches by four, the size more or less of his bunkmate Cooper's long, skinny paw. Like looking at the world through one of those slotted deep-sea-diver helmets. Squinting's giving the driver a headache and he still can't see shit. The thought of colliding with some bootlegger's giant rattling truck shivers through his body. He stomps harder on the gas. Do the others believe he sees where he's going. Do they care. Is anybody paying attention. He spies on his players in the rearview mirror above the dash. Too many stocking-capped, stingy-brimmed, big heads in the way. Blind as he is peering through the stubborn snow grit studding the glass, he might as well swivel around, strike up a conversation with anybody awake in the back seat.

Why am I first thing inside the driver's head. A carful of bloods and look whose brains I pick to pick. Is my own gray matter hopelessly whitewashed. Isn't the whole point of this fieldwork to escape what people like him think of me. The steamboat hauling us to Memphis glides steady in a broad stretch of river. Massa promised us we could come up on deck later and play. Is that why we serenade him, mind his business even now, in the hold where he can't see or hear us.

*Hi de good boat, Neely  
She row bery fast, Miss Neely  
Ain't no boat like a Miss Neely  
Ho yoi Miss Neely*

In my defense I'll say it's too easy to feel what the players trapped in the car in the snowstorm feel. Simple to slip inside one of them. Not all of them, mind you, each player different from the others as each is different from the driver, but I know how athletes' bodies absorb them, save them, a house of refuge as you consider with truly deep, appalled curiosity your own body parts and wonder, really wonder how they accomplish the deeds, do the damage, your body always you and not you, it lives separately no matter how close to others, lives in your hands, shoulders, or your cramped buttocks or an arm squeezed numb under somebody else. Crammed in the Studebaker you patrol and explore and practice within the precincts of your body, fit and don't fit, cause when you get right down to it, ain't nowhere else to go. Rooted in their bodies, players kick back for the long haul to Hinckley. The ground we pass over may be unfamiliar and the body can be broken, unravel, smoke up the chimney, but players enjoy the temporary sense of belonging, of substance and weight, as they hunker down, anticipate action.

A kind of semi-hibernation during this long ride, eating yourself, nourishing your muscle with muscle, fat with fat, consuming yourself to survive. You must be ready, whatever's left, whatever still belongs to you, ready to explode when the cargo door bangs open. Saving yourself. Body a comfort and chain. Huge white flakes fall outside and you crouch inside your body's den while dreams of winning or losing, of being a star drift through like clouds changing your weatherscape, tossing and turning you as in sleep. Doesn't matter what rages outside the window. If it ain't one thing, it's another, my brothers. Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow.

I am them. One of us. In our ancient, thatched village of round mounds aboveground covering our hidden entrances. Circled like covered wagons at night to protect ourselves from these great howling plains, howling savages. *Howling. Savages.* Where did those words come from. Who invented them. Treach-

erously, the conqueror's narrative insinuates itself. Certain words attract us, their sound, their weight. It's easy to stray. Say the words as if you believe them. Lost again. Found again. *Savages*. *Howling*. Once you learn to speak a language, does it speak for you. Who comes out of your mouth. As I pleaded above, the mystery, the temptation of being other than I am disciplines me. Playing the role of a character I would not choose in most circumstances to be renders me hyperalert. Pumps me up and maybe I'm most myself.

In other words—if you believe nothing else, please, please believe I am always struggling for other words, my own words even if they seem to spiral out of a mind, a mouth like the driver's, my words are words I've earned, words if they fail me, I'm bound to fall on like a sword—in other words, I already understand what it's like to be one of the dark passengers. Been there. Done that. Swapped stories. Shared rides. What I haven't done and never will be is him, a small, scared, pale, hairy mammal surrounded by giant carnivores asleep just inches away in the dark and any move I make, the slightest twitch or shiver, the tremors, stutters, and *fluuups* it's my nature to produce, might awaken them.

Though he wears a uniform under his business suit just in case the refs foul one of us out and he's forced to play, you know, the way some men sport bra and panties under their clothes, the driver's not an athlete. He's all business. A wannabe wheeler-dealer but so far no big deal. So far every time he's signed on the dotted line, the dots, the deal peel off the page, skitter away. Now he's got a better idea. White people pay good money to see negroes do what white people can't or won't or shouldn't do but always wanted to do as soon as they see negroes doing it. Big money in the pot at the end of that rainbow. Old-time minstrel shows and medicine shows, and now black-faced hoofers and crooners and tooters starring in clubs downtown. Why not basketball. Step right up ladies and gents. Watch Jimbo Crow fly. Up, up, and away with the greatest of

ease. Barnstorming masters of thin air, of flim and flam and biff-bam-thank-you-mammy jamming.

The Globies' first tour had commenced in daylight, the dregs of it anyway you get at 3:30 P.M. on overcast gray days in a gray metropolis. Slocumbe Rucker, the last pickup, fusses as he squeezes his pivot man's bulk into the back seat, and we're off. Soon the first highway bug, *splat*, invents the windshield. The driver's happy. Whistles chorus after herky-jerky chorus, mangling a Satchmo jump. He believes in daylight. Believes in the two-lane, rod-straight road, his sturdy machine. He believes he'll put miles between us and Chicago before dark. Believes he'll deliver his cargo to Hinckley on time. Mercifully, whistling stops as giant white flakes surround us. Shit, he grunts, then hollers, No sweat, boys. Cooper twists round from the front seat, rolls his lemur eyes at me, *Right*, and I roll my eyes back at him, *Right*.

It's later. Imagine someone in the car at least as wired as the driver, someone who, after night's fallen blackly and falling snow piles against fences bordering the highway in ghostly drifts taller than the Studebaker's roof, watches the driver and tries to piece together from his movements and noises a picture of what the man at the wheel is thinking. Rooted there, maybe it's me, fresh from the conference in Minneapolis, attempting to paint this picture of the driver's invisible thoughts. Or perhaps I'm still sitting in my blue chair inventing this car chase. You can't tell by looking at my face what's on my mind. Who besides the person making it up ever sees the world each of us dreams inside our head, the play world supposed to function in certain crucial situations as a reasonably reliable facsimile of the world outside our heads. Is each inner world different. Are we all pursuing the same world, a reality somewhere, somehow, once and for all the same for everyone, even though no one can go there or know there. Who knows. Stories pretend to know. Stories always true and not. Real and unreal. Outside and inside. Stories swirling like the snowstorm pounding the Studebaker. Meaning what.

Doesn't meaning always sit like Hinckley somewhere in the darkness beyond the steamy peephole, meaning already sorted, tagged, logged, an accident waiting to happen.

It's the night of 27 January 1927 and we're on the road from Chicago to Hinckley, Illinois, population 3,600, no colored to speak of, a town as white as Ivory Snow except on one bedraggled, dead-end street a dozen or so shanties inhabited by negro hewers of wood, toters of water, bootblacks, janitors, whores, laundresses, waiters, maids, future presidential candidates, unemployed professional athletes.

One Hinckley negro in particular anxiously awaits the Globetrotters' arrival. A boy named Rastas whose own arrival in town is legendary. They say his mama, a hoboing prostitute, so the story goes, landed in Hinckley just before her son, landed butt first, hard enough to break every picked bone in her body when the flatcar she was standing on, last car of a mile-long freight, zipped when she thought it would zag and whipped her off her feet, tossing her ass over elbows high in the air. Miraculously, the same natural-born talent that transforms negro athletes into skywalkers and speed burners enabled this lady to regain her composure while airborne and drop like an expertly flipped flapjack flat on her back. In spite of splitting her skull wide open and spilling brains like rotten cantaloupe all over the concrete platform of Hinckley station, the maneuver preserved the baby inside her. Little Rastas, snug as a bug in a rug, sustained only minor injuries: a slight limp, a sleepy IQ. Imagine the fruity mess if she'd belly-flopped.

Poor Rastas didn't talk much and didn't exactly walk or think straight either, but the townsfolk took pity on the orphaned survivor. Maybe they believed the good luck of his sunny-side up landing might rub off, because they passed him house to house until he was nine years old, old enough to earn his keep in the world, old enough to stop playing doctor in back yards with the town's daughters. Grown-up Rastas a familiar sight in Hinckley, chopping, hauling, sweeping. A hired boy

you weren't required to pay except with a few scraps from the table. Rastas grateful for any kind of employment and pretty reliable too if you don't mind him plodding along at his lazy pace. Honey dipping, exhumations, porn flicks, wet nurse—Rastas could do it all. If somebody had invented fast-food joints in those days, Rastas might have aspired to assistant-assistant-manage one. Rastas, Hinckley's pet. Loved and worked like a dog by everyone. No respect, no pussy, and nothing but the scarecrow rags on his back he could really call his own, but Rastas only thirty-six. There's still time. Time Rastas didn't begin to count down until the Tuesday he saw on a pole outside the barbershop a flyer announcing the Harlem Globetrotters' visit.

Of course Rastas couldn't read. But he understood what everybody else in town understood. The poster meant colored people. Niggers. Maybe the word *Harlem*, printed in big letters across the top of the poster, exuded some distinctive ethnic scent, or maybe if you put your ear close to the word you'd hear faint echoes of syncopated jazz, the baffled foot-tapping of Darktown strutters like ocean sound in seashells. Absent these subtler clues, the cartoon colored boys cavorting on the flyer worth a thousand words. Folks get the point. And if other illiterates (the majority) in Hinckley understood immediately who was coming to town, why not Rastas. He's Hinckley if anybody's Hinckley. What else was he if he wasn't.

So let's say our boy Rastas sniffed opportunity knocking, and decided, with an alacrity that would have surprised and shocked the townsfolk, to get the hell out of Dodge.

Given Poe's rules for composing a short story, have we meandered too far from the Studebaker's steamy interior, a site suspiciously like the inside of whatever car it was John Cinicola drove back in the days when he chauffeured us, the Shadyside Boys Club under-twelve hoop team, to games around the city of Pittsburgh, digressed too far from the *flumps* which, recalling now those cramped rides in Mr. Cinicola's car, might not have

been warnings of a bad engine or bad heart after all but muted farts, as discreet as possible in close quarters, almost involuntary, yet unavoidable, scrunched up as our intestines needed to be in the overpacked car. Last suppers of beans and wieners from moms who could conjure filet from neck bones didn't help. On the other hand, subsisting on the same low-rent diet homogenized as much as possible, given each individual's peculiar body chemistry, the sneaky, unseeable bubbles of gas nobody could keep from expelling, grit your teeth, squeeze your sphincter as you might. Mize well ask us to stop breathing and snoring. Smells from our bodies rising and percolating, a foul miasma that might have knocked you off your feet if you were too close to the Studebaker's door when it opened at the Hinckley Armory, but no big deal if you'd been along for the ride. The looming thunderhead of bad air above our heads like gloom or history or civilization and we couldn't disown it, couldn't deny our complicity, without disowning ourselves.

Yes, stone funky inside the car and one game the driver played to keep himself alert was every now and then taking a hit of this raunchy air, a deep junky snort, then a blast of icy air when he rolled his window a quick down-and-up inch. Overloading his senses, gorging to purge, purging to gorge, that eternal channel-surfing to overcome the insufficiency of human enjoyments. The old black magic fiddling that keeps us going. Till we stop.

In other words not much happening in the single-car wagon train, its pale canvas cover flapping like a berserk sail, our ship yawing, slapped and bruised by waves that crest the bow in blinding surges of spray, wind roar, foamy fingers of water scampering like mice into the vessel's every nook and cranny. Splish-splash. A monotonous sameness in the sea's monumental assault, and even though our hearts pump madly, though our throats tighten and bowels loosen, after a while it's same ole, same ole whipping till the storm gets tired whipping. Thus we're really not missing much if we flash forward to Hinckley.

Rastas gazes raptly at the crudely drawn figures on the flyer. He's the ugly duckling in the story first time it sees swans. Falls in love with the long, dark men, their big feet, big hands, big lips, big eyes, shiny white smiles, broad spade noses just like his. Falls in love with himself. Frowns recalling the first time his eyes strayed into a mirror and it revealed how different from other Hinckley folks he looked. Until the mirror sneaked up, *Boo*, he'd never considered he might be the beast dwelling in the fearful depths of other people's stares, the beast he'd encountered himself from time to time, daring him to look into its blazing eyes, eyes that could steal his soul, eat his flesh. The world full of devils. They assume many shapes. A hairy-fingered fat man coming at you with a knife. Soft-limbed, blue-eyed things wearing tiny dresses who'd turn your joint to fiery stone, then skip away giggling at your agony. He'd learned not to look. Taught himself to ignore his incriminating image when it floated across fragments of glass or the surface of still puddles, even in his thoughts sometimes, tempting him to drown and disappear in glowing beast eyes that might be his. Hiding from himself no cure. Each and every Hinckley day eyes penetrated his disguise. Eyes chewing and swallowing and spitting him out wet and mangled. Beast eyes no matter how artfully the bearer shapeshifted, fooled you with fleshy wrappings make your mouth water.

One day at closing time Barber Jones had said, You look like a wild man from Borneo, boy. All you need's a bone through your nose you ready for the circus. Put down the broom and get your tail over here to the mirror. Ima show you a wild cannibal.

See yourself, boy. Look hard. Filthy naps dragging down past your shoulders. People getting scared of you. Who you think you is. Don King or somebody. Damned wool stinks worse'n a skunk. Ima do you a favor, boy.

Barber Jones yakkety-yakking as he yaks daily about the general state of the world, the state of Hinckley and his dick first thing in the morning or last thing at night when just the



two of them in the shop. Yakkety-yak, only now the subject is Rastas, not the usual nonstop monologue about rich folks in charge who were seriously fucking up, not running the world, or Hinckley, or his love life, the way Barber Jones would run things if just once he held the power in his hands, him in charge instead of those blockheads who one day will come crawling on their knees begging him to straighten things out, yakking and stropping on the razor strop a Bowie knife he'd brought special from home for this special occasion, an occasion Rastas very quickly decided he wanted no part of, but since he'd been a good boy his whole life, he waited, heart thumping like a tomtom, beside the counter-to-ceiling mirror while fat-mouth Jones keened his blade.

A scene from Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* might well have flashed through Rastas's mind if he'd been literate. But neither the African slave Babo cutting Captain Delano's hair nor the ironic counterpoint of that scene, blackface and white-face reversed, playing here in the mirror of Jones Barbershop, tweaks Rastas's consciousness of who he is and what's happening to him. Mr. Melville's prescient yarn doesn't creep into the head of Barber Jones either, even though Rastas pronounces Barber as *baba*, a sound so close to *Babo* it's a dead giveaway. Skinning knife in hand, Baba Jones is too busy stalking his prey, improvising Yankee Doodle-like on the fly how in the hell he's going to scalp this coon and keep his hands clean. He snatches a towel from the soiled pile on the floor. He'll wrap the bush, raise it in his fist, chop through the thick, knotty locks like chopping cotton.

Look at yourself in the mirror, boy. This the way you want to go round looking. Course it ain't. And stop your shakin. Ain't gon hurt you. You be thanking me once I'm done. Hell, boy, won't even charge you for a trim.

Lawd, lawd, am I truly dat nappy-haired ting in de mere. Am dis my bery own self, the ugly ole pestering debil what don't look lak nobody else in Hinckley sides me. Is me, Rastas

confesses, confronting the living proof. His picture reversed right to left, left to right in the glass. Caged in the mirror like a prisoner in a cell is what he thinks, though not precisely in those words, nor the word *panopticon*, clunkily Melvillean and appropriate if Rastas's vocabulary had been somewhat more extensive. No words necessary to shatter the peace in Rastas's heart, to upset the détente of years of not looking, years of imagining himself more or less like other folks, just a slightly deformed, darker duck than the other ducks floating on this pond he'd learned to call Hinckley.

*Boom.* A shotgun blasts, as cold as the icy jolt when the driver cracks the Studebaker's window, as cold and maybe as welcome too, since if you don't wake up, Rastas, sleep can kill you. *Boom.* Every scared Hinckley duck quacks and flutters and scolds as it rises from the pond and leaves you behind, very much alone, watching them form neat, V-shaped squadrons overhead, squawking, honking, off to bomb the shit out of some Third World somebody, so high in the blue empyrean, so far gone and distant so quickly, you should have known long ago, should have figured it would happen like this one day. You all alone. Your big tarbaby feet moored in miring clay. You ain't them and they ain't you. Birds of a different feather. They coo and gobble-gobble and chirp and peep and you might mistake them for geese flying way up in the sky, but you sure ain't never heard them caw-caw, boy. No. They ain't blackbirds. Not ravens, crows, grackles, jackdaws neither. Huh-uh. You the cawing night bird and the shotgun ain't gon miss next time. Your cover's busted, boy. Here come Baba Jones.

You sure don wanna go around looking just so, do you boy.

Well, Rastas ain't all kinds of fool. He zip-coons outta there, faster than a speeding bullet. Maybe he didn't rise and fly, but he didn't Jim Crow neither. No turning dis way and wheeling dat way and jiggling up and down in place. Next time the Baba seen him, bright and early a couple mornings later, Rastas had shaved his skull clean as a whistle. Gold chains draping his neck

like Isaac Hayes. How Rastas accomplished such a transformation is another story but we got enough stories by the tailfeathers, twisted up in our white towel—count em—so let's switch back to the moment, earlier in storytime, later in Hinckley time, months after Rastas clipped his own wings rather than play Samson to Jones's Delilah.

Rastas still stands hoodooed by the Harlem Globetrotters flyer, welcomed and undone. Rastas who's been nowhere. Doesn't even know the name his mother intended for him. Didn't even recognize his own face in the mirror till just yesterday, Hinckley time. Is the flyer a truer mirror than the one in the barbershop, the mirror Rastas assiduously keeps at his back these days as he sweeps, dusts, mops. He studies the grinning black men, their white lollipop lips, white circles around their eyes, his gaze full of longing, nostalgia, more than a small twinge of envy and regret. He doesn't know the Globetrotters ain't been nowhere neither, their name unearned, ironic at this point in time. They haven't been invented quite yet. *Globetrotters* the owner/driver's wishful thinking, his vision of international marketing, prodigious piles of currency, all colors, sizes, shapes promiscuously stacking up. Not Globetrotters yet because this is the maiden voyage, first trot, first road game, this trek from Chicago to Hinckley. But they're on their way, almost here, if you believe the signs tacked and glued all over town, a rain, a blizzard, a storm of signs. If Rastas wasn't afraid the flimsy paper would come apart in his hands, he'd pull the flyer off the pole, sneak it into the barbershop, hold it up next to his face so he could grin into the mirror with his lost brothers. Six Globetrotters all in a row. Because yes, in spite of signs of the beast, the players are like him. Different and alike. Alike and different. The circle unbroken. Yes. Yes. Yes. And *whoopee* they're coming to town.

As befits a fallen world, however, no good news travels without bad. The night of the game Rastas not allowed in the Armory. Hinckley a northern town so no Jim Crow laws turned

Rastas away. Who needed a law to regulate the only negro in town. Sorry, Rastas, just white folks tonight.

I neglected to mention that the little burnt-cork, burnt-matchstick tip of the particular dead-end street noted earlier as I speculated on Hinckley's racial composition had been razed, spontaneously urban-removed, and the negro inhabitants of that portion of the street, those who survived the pogrom, had disappeared into the night, the same kind of killingly cold night roughing up the Studebaker. That detail, the sudden exodus of all the town's negroes, should have been noted earlier in storytime because it had registered many years before, Hinckley time, imprinted indelibly in the town's memory. Now you see it, now you don't, but always present. A permanent marker separating before and after. Hinckley a white man's town from that night on. A billboard at the edge of town said NIGGER, DON'T LET THE SUN SET ON YOUR BLACK ASS.

And just to emphasize how white a town, the night of the house-razing party everybody wore sheets bleached white as snow, and for a giggle, under the sheets, blacked their faces. A joke too good to share with the niggers, who'd see only white robes and white hoods with white eyes in the eyeholes. We blacked up blacker than the blackest one of them. Yes we did. Blacker than a cold, black night, blacker than black. Hauled the coloreds outdoors in their drawers and nightgowns, pickaninies naked as the day they born. You got five minutes to pack a sack and git. Five minutes we's turnin these shacks and everything in em to ash. Ash and cinders. Like what we'd smeared on our faces they couldn't see under our hoods. A double ha-ha. White blacks burning out niggers so scared they lost their color. Ashy white. Ashy black. Poor coons don't know there's a party going on.

They hobbled off cawing and moaning, singing melancholy songs they stole from us when we used to cork up and pretend to be them. A flock of blackbirds without wings. *Shoo. Shoo.* Time to strike the match. Catch you stealing one scarecrow

peek back at those raggedy shacks, scorch you white as a pillar of salt.

So Rastas the only negro left in town, and with that fact established just in time we're in a better position to imagine how he would react seeing himself duplicated on the flyer. Can't you identify with his excitement, expectation, anxiety. His hunger. And then, just a few hours later, the absolutely deflating, prostrating sense of loss and unfairness when he's told there's no room in the inn.

The gillies transporting the Globies into town sported billowing canvas covers, noisy as wind-whipped sails, and their wooden sides, steep as clipper ships, were splashed with colorful, irresistible ads for merchandise nobody in Hinckley had ever dreamed of, let alone seen. A cornucopia of high-tech goods and services from the future, Hinckley time, though widely available in leading metropolitan centers for decades. Some stuff packed in the deep holds of the wagons extremely ancient. Not stale or frail or old-fashioned or used or useless, though there was plenty, plenty of that rummage sale trash too in the capacious holds, trinkets and baubles Hinckley hicks would see as new and gotta-have-it. No, the oldest, deepest cargo consisted of things forgotten. *Forgotten?* Yes, forgotten. Upon which subject I would expand if I could, but forgotten means forgotten, doesn't it. Means lost. A category, none of whose contents are available to list or describe because if you could, the items wouldn't be forgotten. Forgotten things are really, really gone. Even if you remember them. Like a *Free Marcus* button you tucked in a drawer and lived the rest of your life not knowing it lay there, folded in a bloodstained headkerchief, until one afternoon as you're preparing to move the last mile into senior citizens' public housing, the Le Roy Irvis Homes to be precise, and you must divest yourself finally of ninety-nine and nine-tenths percent of the junk you've accumulated over the years because the cubicle 610 you're assigned in the high-rise isn't much larger than a coffin, certainly not a king-sized

coffin like pharaohs erected so they could take everything with them—chariots, boats, VCRs, slaves, wives—so you must extricate yourself from what feels like layers of your own tender skin for a while as you appraise and toss, appraise and toss layers of who you've been and are, flaying yourself patiently, painfully, one precious forgotten thing after another, toss, toss, toss. Forgotten till you come across it in the gritty bottom of a drawer and realize you've not been living the kind of life you could have lived if you hadn't forgotten. And now, remembering, it's too late.

The wagons carried tons of alternative pasts. Roads not taken, costumes, body parts, promises, ghosts. The Hinckley hicks line up for miles at these canvas-topped depots crackling whitely in the prairie wind. Poor folks who can't afford to purchase anything mob the landing anyway. So much to be exchanged, so many bright hopes in the bellies of the schooners, they might still be docked there doing brisk business a hundred years from now storytime, my time, your time, the globetrotters in their gaudy, revealing uniforms delivering stuff to the sea of waving hands, grappling, grasping hands, but hands not too busy to clãp, volleys of clapping interspersed with collective sighs of relief, ohing and ahing, hands brought together, then sighs so deep and windy they scythe across the Great Plains and bow mile after endless mile of wheat, corn, barley, fields of grain rippling and purring as if they'd been caressed when a tall globie dangles aloft some item everybody recognized, a forgotten thing all would claim if they could afford it, a priceless pearl the dark ball player tosses gratis into the grateful, huddling mass of Hinckleyites, just doing it to do it, and the gift would perform tricks, loop-de-looping, sparkling, gliding airborne long enough to evoke spasms of love and guilt and awe and desire and regret, then disappear like a snowflake grown too large and baroque, its own weight and ambition and daring and vanity ripping it apart before it reaches the earth. A forgotten thing twisting in the air, becoming a wet spot on a finger reaching for

it. A tear inching down a cheek. An embarrassing pinpoint of moisture at the crotch of somebody's drawers.

Wheee. Forgotten things. Floating through the air with the greatest of ease. Hang-gliding. Flip-flopping.

Clippety-clop. Clippety-clop. The horse-drawn caravan clomps up and down Hinckley's skimpy grid of streets. U-turns at the abandoned, dead-end former black quarter where the foundations of a multiuse, multistory, multinational parking garage and amusement center already yawn, gouged deeper into the earth than the stainless-steel-and-glass edifice will rise in the sky.

Is that going to be the mall of America, one of the Globie kids asks, peeking out from behind a wagon's starched canvas flap. A little Hinckley girl answers the little boy: I dunno.

And then she's bright and chirrupy as Jiminy Cricket after the gillies saunter down the block, the last horse's round, perfect rump swaying side to side like Miss Maya's doggerel. The girl feels delicious about herself because she managed to be polite to the small brown face poking out of the white sheet just as her mother said she must, but also really, basically, ignored it, didn't get the brown face mixed up with Hinckley faces her mother said it wouldn't and couldn't ever be. Always act like a lady, honey. But be careful. Very careful. They are not like us. Warmed now by the boy's soft voice, the long lashes like curly curtains or question marks, his cute size, the dreamy roll of the horse's big, split butt, she's chattering to herself in a new language, made up on the spot, as if she's been tossed a forgotten thing and it doesn't melt.

Daddy said after the bulldozers a big road's coming and we'll be the centerpiece of the universe, the envy of our neighbors, and said I can have anything I want, twenty-four seven, brother, just imagine, anything I want, any toy or exotic taste or evil thought. Wow. Gumby-o. Opp-poop-a-doop.

After the dust cloud churned by the giant tires of the convoy settles, the little girl discovers chocolate drops wrapped in silver

foil the chocolate soldiers had tossed her. In the noise and confusion of the rumbling vehicles, before she'd answered the boy, she'd thought the candies were stones. Or bullets. Aimed at her by the dark strangers in canvas-roofed trucks her mother had warned her to flee from, hide from. Realizing they are lovely dark chocolate morsels, immaculate inside their shiny skins, she feels terrible for thinking ugly thoughts about the GIs, wants to run to the convoy and holler *Danke, Danke* even though her mother had told her they're illiterate, don't speak our language. As she scoops up the surprises and stuffs them in her apron pocket, she imagines her chubby legs churning in pursuit of the dusty column. Maybe she could catch it. The convoy had taken hours to pass her, so it must be moving slowly. But war has begun to erode her innocence. She's learned the treacherous distance between appearance and reality. Even after crash diets and aerobic classes her pale, short legs would never reach the retreating wagons, so she settles for lip-synching, *Danke, Danke*, where she sits. Little Miss Muffet on a tuffet, eating not curds and whey, whatever curds and whey might be, but Hershey's chocolate kisses, although from a distance, through the eye of a casual observer, the difference would have been negligible. A starved urchin cramming food into her mouth with both hands, as if she'd forgotten how good food could be and wanted to make up for all the lost meals at once. Licking, sucking, crunching, chewing. The melting, gooey drops smear her cheeks, hands, dimpled knees—chocolate stain spreading as the magic candy spawns, multiplies inside her apron pocket, a dozen new sweet pieces popping into being for every one she consumes. Eating, eating till the poor child's about to bust, till the sweet chocolate coating her outside and that chocolate welling up inside transform her into a glistening, sticky tarbaby her own mother would have warned her not to touch. Instead of busting wide open like a cantaloupe dropped from one of the twin towers of the imminent amusement center, she tilts on her round bottom, rolls over into the dust.

(Dust? What happened to the snowstorm?)

The snow? Oh In expectation of the mega-convention center, Hinckley's been domed for years.)

Believe it or not, it's Rastas who discovers the girl. Night now. Since being refused entrance to the Globetrotters show, he's been wandering disconsolate through the dark streets of Hinckley, when suddenly, as fate would have it, he stumbles into her. Literally. Ouch.

Less painful than disquieting, this abrupt contact with something soft and squishy underfoot freezes Rastas in his tracks. Instinctively his leg retracts. He shakes it, scuffs the bottom of his shoe on the ground; something Velcroishly tacky clings. He remembers the parade earlier in the day. Horses large as elephants. Sniffs the night air cautiously. Hopes he's wrong. Must be. He smells sugar and spice, everything nice, overlaid with the cloyingly sweet reek of chocolate. Another time and place he might have reared back, kicked the obstacle in his path, but tonight he's weak, depleted, the mean exclusion of him from the Globetrotters extravaganza the final straw. Besides, what kind of person would kick a dog already down, and dog or cat's what he believes he'll see as he peers into the shadows webbing his feet.

Rastas gulps. His heart *fluups* as he kneels to be certain. The chocolate can't hide a cherub's face, the Gerber baby plump limbs and roly-poly torso. Somebody's daughter lying out here in the gutter. Hoodooed. Stricken. Poor babygirl. The frail—make up your mind—chest rises and falls faintly, motion almost imperceptible in the bad light since they never paved or installed streetlamps on this street when negroes lived here and now the cunning city managers are waiting for the Dutch-German-Swiss conglomerate to install a megawatt, multicolor, mesmerizing blaze of glory luring crowds to the Omniplex.

Rastas sees enough in the darkness at his feet to nearly break his already overtaxed heart on this night of nights, a night he expected his new life to begin, riding off in the Studebaker with

the Globies, laughing, rapping, picking salty slivers of the town they just sacked out their teeth, exhausted but hungry by nightfall for another town. Yet on this penultimate night before the dawning of the first day of his new life, Rastas displays patience and self-denial worthy of Harriet's old Tom. Accepts the sudden turn of fate delaying his flight from Hinckley. Takes time out to rescue a damsel in distress.

One more job, just one more, and I'm through, outta here. Riding with the Globies or trotting on my own two feet. I'm gittin. Giddyup. Yeah. You tell folks it was Rastas sung dis song and now Rastas long gone.

Determined to do the right thing, he stoops and raises the girl's cold heart-shaped face, one large hand under her neck so her head droops backward and her mouth flops open, the other hand flat against her tiny bosom. Figures he'll blow breath into her mouth, then guide it, pump her rib cage like you would a bellows till her lungs catch fire again. In other words Rastas is inventing CPR, cardiopulmonary resuscitation, a lifesaving technique that will catch on big in America one day in the bright future when there are no rules about who can do it to whom, but that night in Hinckley, well, you can imagine what happened when a crowd of citizens hopped-up and confused by the Globetrotters' shenanigans at the Armory came upon Rastas in the shadows crouched over a bloody, unconscious little white girl, puckering up his liver lips to deliver a kiss.

To be fair, not everyone participated in the mayhem you're imagining. They say only the portion of the crowd returning home to the slum bordering the former colored quarter. In other words the poor and fragrant did the dirty work. The ones who'd contracted colored diseases generations back when they lived where no self-respecting white person would. This unruly element, soon themselves to be evicted when Consolidated Enterprises clears more parking space for the pleasure center, these people who, experts say, constituted by far the largest portion of the mob that had burned and chased all the negroes out of

town, these embarrassing undesirables who disrupt city council meetings fussing about the huge, nasty, wet hole at the end of their block and the constant braying, hooting, clanking of pre-historic iron beasts digging the hole, these unemployables who, under their garlic breath, curse the foreign CEOs and would lynch them too if they could get away with it, they're the ones about to perpetrate the horror I'm asking you to imagine. And imagine you must, because I refuse to regale you with gory, unedifying details.

Not everyone's to blame. Still, who wouldn't be upset by an evening of loud, half-naked, large black men fast breaking and fancy dribbling, clowning and stuffing and jamming and preening for women and kids who screamed their silly heads off. Enough to put any man's nerves on edge, especially since you had to shell out hard-earned cash to watch yourself take a beating. Then, to top it all off, you're home, bone-tired, trying to fall asleep, and here comes your old lady bouncing into bed, squirmy, flush-faced, grinning from ear to ear, like she's just bungy-dived naked from one of those goddamned twin towers.

The wipers flop back and forth, bump over scabs of ice. The view isn't improving. The Studebaker's in a long, long black tunnel. Its headlights illuminate slants of snow that seem to converge just beyond the spot where a hood ornament would sit, if Studebakers, like Mercedes Benzes, were adorned with bowsprits in 1927. Bright white lines of force, every kamikazing snowflake in the universe, sucked into this vortex, this vanishing point the headlights define, a hole in the snow we chug-chug behind, deeper into the tunnel that charts our course, an ever-receding horizon drawing us on, drawing us on, a ship to Zion, the song says.

Our driver's appalled by the raw deal Rastas received. I'd never participate in something so mobbishly brutal, he swears. I would not assume appearance is reality. I would not assume truth lodges in the eye of the more numerous beholders. After all, my people also a minority. We've suffered unjustly too. And

will again. I fear it in my bones. In this hot, *fluuping* car. Soon after the Great Depression that will occur just a few years from now, just a few miles down this very road we're traveling, some clever, evil motherfucker will say, Sew stars on their sleeves. It'll work like color. We'll be able to tell who's who. Keep them apart. Mongrels. Gypsies. Globetrotters. Constantly coming and going. Sneaking in and out of our cities. Peddling dangerous wares. Parasites. Criminals. Devils. Through the slit in his iron mask he watches gallows being erected by the roadside, flyers nailed and taped all over town. Wonders if it's wise to warn them we're coming.

So *who* invented the jump shot. Don't despair. All the panelists have taken their seats at the table facing the audience. The emcee taps a microphone and a hush fills the cavernous hall. We're about to be told.