

# THE VISITORS

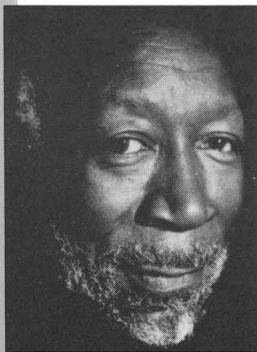
BY JOHN A. WILLIAMS

Throughout the course of his work, **John A. Williams** has interpreted world events from a black perspective, and his current novel-in-progress is no exception. He enters new territory with a black view of the Holocaust.

The story revolves around Clifford, a black homosexual musician trapped in Berlin at the beginning of World War II and sent to the concentration camp Dachau. Clifford keeps a diary of his Dachau experiences, but parts with it there. Some 40 years later, a German soldier, who has held the diary all those years, passes it on. By chance, he gives the diary to Gerald and Justine, a black American couple touring Europe, hoping that they will know what to do with it. In fact, they are so affected by Clifford's story that they feel it must be told; the diary winds up in the hands of a writer, named Jay.

When the novel is complete, Williams will tell his story through three distinct voices: Clifford, Gerald (with Justine), and Jay—separate characters connected by experience, history, race, and now Clifford's diary. In the excerpt presented here—an early chapter from the novel—we meet two of these major voices. In the first section we meet Jay, reminiscing about the Syracuse neighborhood where he grew up. In the second, we are introduced to Gerald, a high school football coach, and his wife Justine, who feel compelled, after beginning to read Clifford's diary, to visit Dachau.

Williams is a professor at Rutgers University, where he teaches creative writing, literature, and journalism. He is considered one of America's preeminent contemporary authors, and is certainly one of the most prolific. Since the publication of his first novel, *The Angry Ones*, in 1960—ten years after his graduation from Syracuse—Williams has written nearly a book a year. The result is staggering: 11 novels, seven books of non-fiction, over a dozen more volumes that he's edited or contributed to, at least one play, and many, many, works of poetry. He has proved a fearless visionary and spokesman for the oppressed, and an extraordinarily skilled craftsman.



I

It was a splendid early summer evening when daylight was so big, bright and broad, and so slow to leave the sky and people so reluctant to enter their homes for the night, that all the neighborhood was like a fresh canvas ready to receive any impression. The mud from all the rain had dried to a point

between clay and solid earth; the dust was yet to come. The trees and bushes were budding like emeralds not yet focused in light.

There had been much bathing, preening and grooming in the house, which now smelled of barber's talc and bay rum, the hairdresser's hot comb, perfume and powder and pomade. My parents were going to a dance with Fred and Betty. It was a Thursday night, for that was the day and evening or at least part of it, when so many women had the time off. Watching them rush about was like seeing characters who'd leaped from the pages of the magazines right into your very house. There characters were in sepia. With

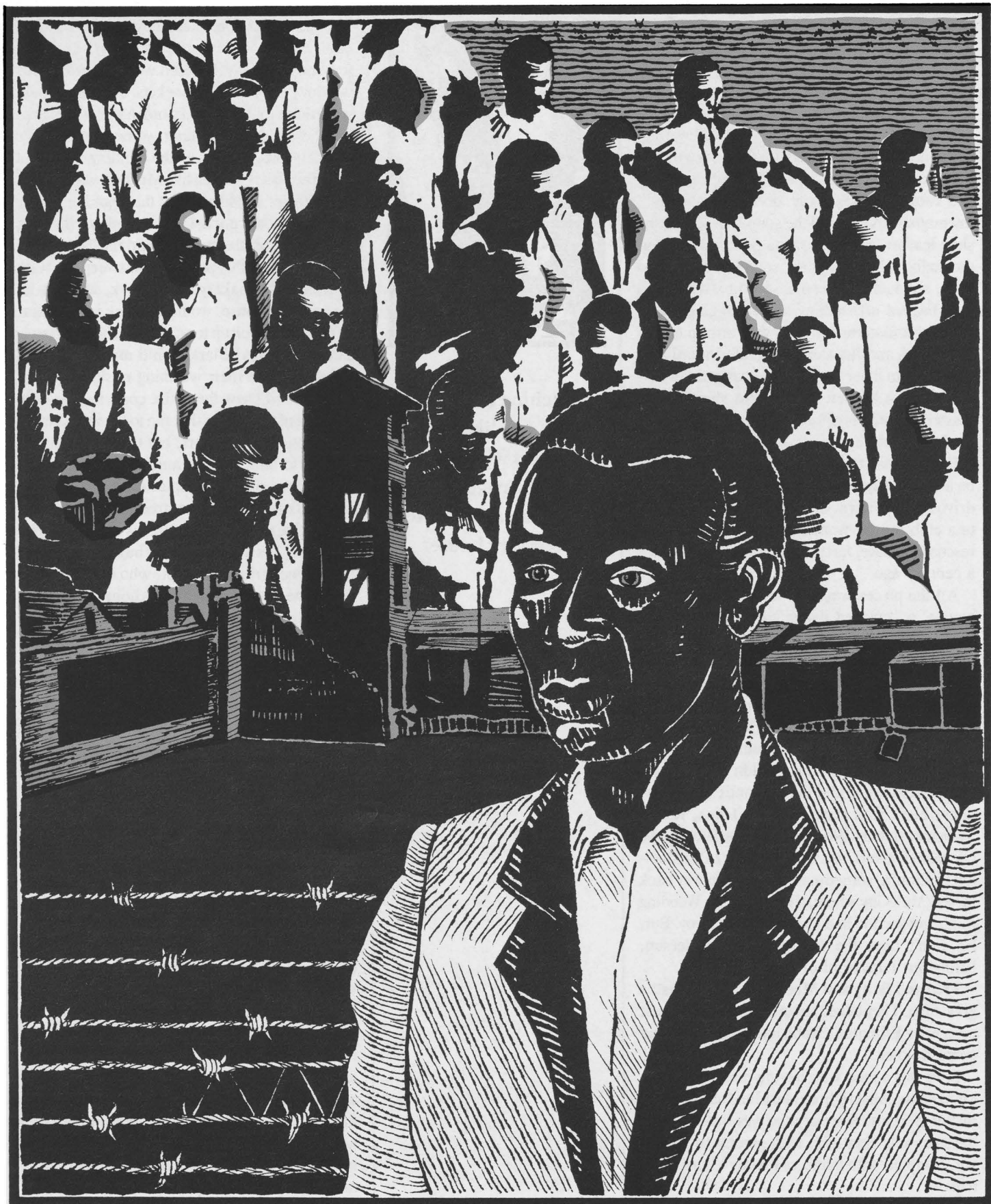


ILLUSTRATION BY CHRISTOPHER C. PURCELL

each breathless passage a new item was added—spats, tie, cufflinks; beads, earrings, bracelets.

Once they stopped in the middle of the living room (the same where I had observed Fred and Betty in the soft glow of the street light) and, with my father humming, broke into a few practice dance steps. “Birmingham Break-down,” my father called, and they squatted, stepped, swung and swayed. “Breakaway, do the Breakaway!” my mother urged amid the sounds of squeaking shoe leather, swishing rayon petticoat, the authoritative billow-popping sound of a starched shirt, so much like a small sail in a wind, and they backed off shaking and shrugging, high-stepping and stomping. “Now, go on home,” my father said, and they stepped grandly toward each other, she in that classic, lean-back pose of surrender, with her left hand on his shoulder, he masterful with his right arm firmly and supportively behind her.

But they had to hurry! Fred and Betty would be arriving any minute with the car, and they’d drive through town, down West Erie Boulevard to a club not far from where abolitionists had rescued the slave, Jerry, from slave catchers about a century ago.

All the pieces would fit later: that it was, of course, a “colored dance,” and that the Sam Wooding band was playing after several years in Europe; that Wooding’s was a pick-up band because he had been away a long while and had lost his following at a time when the music was changing, rag fast losing out, swing changing even faster, lead rhythm instruments changing faster than fast. Wooding couldn’t get serious dates and so would play the halls and clubs across upper New York state—Albany, Utica, Rome, Syracuse, Auburn, Rochester and Buffalo; maybe Cleveland, Ohio, too, and then play Binghamton or Elmira, sometimes both, on the way back to New York City where, if he was lucky, Wooding might get second band billing at the Savoy. But, he didn’t have the following of Henderson, Ellington, Lunceford or Webb.

Fred and Betty and Mother and Father had a good time. They talked about that dance for years, even after Ellington, Webb and Henderson had come to town.

Fred was a man who having decided to have a good time, went right on ahead and had it, didn’t matter who was there or who was watching. So the story was later told, with great warmth and wit, complete with mime, of Freddy’s lunch hour trips.

He and Betty had a flat a half-block from



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Simon’s, on Almond Street next door to Mr. Tate (who was one evil old man). At about five minutes to noon every day, Pearson would approach his window, hands in his pockets. Robbins would sometimes join him. Old women who were keeping the children of young women doing day’s work, would scrunch up the window curtains a bit to peer out. Old men like Mr. Tate with nothing better to do, would haul out their gold or silver-plated Waltham pocket watches, check the time and look down the street toward the Texaco station. Bloom at this point would sweep the walk in front of his bakery. Rev. Clark, who ran an ice and coal house, would tip back in his chair, sit down and look up toward Simon’s. (In winter, Bloom and Rev. Clark would make necessary adjustments in their watching positions.)

Now Fred knew the entire corner along with sections of the streets that ran to the intersection had noon-time watchers, but that didn’t matter a damn to him. He just hurriedly washed with that thick, gritty soap, splashed water over his face and rushed down the street to his home, feet thundering over the sidewalk, his face alight with his smile, his voice a bright bugle of greeting for anyone, grinning or not, who spoke to him. Everyone knew that Betty was home waiting for him, having rushed herself from her own job (which she had taken on the condition that she be allowed off from 11:45 to 12:45) only four blocks away.

In barber shops and pool halls they’d say, “That Page is a *blip*, man!” And laugh, warmly, almost as though Fred had taught them to laugh that way.

Fred didn’t always laugh. We were Methodists (African Methodist Episcopal Zion) and Fred and Elizabeth were Baptists (Bethany). Betty left the Methodists for Fred whose family had helped found the church in which Harriet Tubman was baptized and in which Adam Clayton Powell (Senior) once preached a rousing sermon, probably while his son was raising hell as a student over at Colgate. Fred seemed to have been on the Board of Trustees forever. He was one of two white-gloved men who flanked the counting-table where the contents of the baskets were delicately deposited, and the Trustee who counted the money and whispered the total in the minister’s ear. There were times (for I, on occasion, attended the Baptist church and found the members were greater shouters than Methodists) when after the whispered communication, the minister promptly stood and asked for more money for missionaries, for painting the church, to pay to coal bill, to pay for his car repairs and

so on. Fred stood beside the table, hands behind his back, his face expressionless, his suit without wrinkle. The congregation had faith in Fred. He was one of the few black men who on his job was allowed to handle money—receive it, ring it up in a cash register, change it, total it up at the end of the day. So they gave more knowing that Fred Page would demand an accounting for every penny.

Preachers as a rule tend to be slick, but Fred was always slicker and besides, preachers came and went. Only one went to the wall with Fred over where the money went—and he came back weak. That preacher was the only person I ever heard Fred speak of with contempt. Fred felt, I think, that with the involvement of his family in establishing and maintaining the church for the community, he was its guardian against interlopers and usurpers, the fly-by-night and the jackleg.

**I**t looked like any other town in Germany, nothing special, nothing that said, “Hey, we kicked ass here when we were in business, chumps, and don’t forget it.”

We’d been quiet, with no reading after clearing Nuremburg and now we approached Dachau from the northwest, on 304, spotting our first sign for the camp: *KONZENTRATIONSLAGER DACHAU*. The sky clouded over again and began to spit rain.

“Oh, God, that’s it,” Justine said.

“Sure nuff is. *That’s* the sign that means ‘we kicked ass—but now we’re sorry.’” I slowed. The contours of the land changed and became one huge place along the road on our right, with poplars at regular intervals spearing the low, gray sky.

“That’s it,” Justine said again. “Where Clifford was.”

There were other signs to the camp and an arrow pointing to a parking place. An old man whose face looked like the first, second, and third teams of the Raiders had stomped on it demanded two marks and gave us a stub. We pulled into a huge lot in which buses, cars, vans, U.S. Army trucks, motor scooters and motorcycles were parked. “Must be some kind of ball game going on,” I said. Justine glared at me. Well, I didn’t think she’d laugh. But I had this tennis ball doing topspin in my belly; I’d wanted to lighten the weight. We parked, got out and dug out an umbrella and jackets. Europe is a cold mother in



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the summer and when it rains, the drops feel like snow. Damn. I glanced around the lot and wondered if they ever filled it up. They didn’t have parking like this at Giant Stadium in the Meadowlands. Guess not: there they play games; this shit here was for real.

“Maybe we should have finished the journal?” Justine’s face was anxious. The fine little lines between her eyebrows were gathered.

“It’s not like we were gonna do a *field* trip here, honey. We’re just, ah, looking around?”

“Pictures!” Justine said. “Let’s get the camera.”

We were walking out of the parking lot onto the sidewalk, following the slender crowd to another gate. “You really don’t want pictures of *this* do you? Not really, come on.” We bent beneath the umbrella and turned into the gate. There was a huge diagram, like you might find at the entrances of a division one football stadium. I took a look at it and then looked into the camp and, man, there was space enough to put five football stadiums. People were in front of us, behind us, speaking all kinds of languages. The diagram itself was in German, English, French, Italian and Russian, which seemed to me to be pretty goddamn exclusive. And then we walked from the sign around the front of the building it was fastened to. Space! Goddamn! Now I’ve never been inside an American prison, but I’ve seen shots of them on TV or in the movies with their high walls and guards and shit, but in this mother, the walls were so far away you couldn’t hardly see them. Like these cats must’ve been like Bear Bryant first week of training camp: work shit out of every sucker fool enough to put on cleats, everybody, because he had the *space*.

I walked to the center of the front of all that space, leaving Jus out of the rain at the entrance of what they called “The Museum,” and I raised the umbrella, the “shoot” as the kids called it, and peered all that long way down to some kind of structure (there was another, more complicated one, art, I think, right behind me). I could barely make it out in the rain and distance, and I thought, Clifford walked here. Maybe he even stood where I’m standing between these two long rows of things, *foundations*, because there were two buildings that seemed to match the size where similar buildings had been.

And, man, I sure nuff *could not* believe it. But, I could, yes.

“Bounce! Gerald!” Justine. I turned and joined her at the entrance of the Museum. Somehow, I wished we had done this without Cliff. We didn’t

know what he looked like, except he was black. How tall? How much did he weigh? What kind of voice did he have? How did he walk? And his eyes, what did they give you? He was like a holy ghost. More, because he'd written his testament; some of his flesh was in the trunk of the car. Once a few years ago, when I had a team that was bad and had depth, and we'd run over everybody on our schedule and had two backs and two linemen listed on *Parade's* High School All-American team, the town raised some money so we could accept a challenge from the best high school team in Mississippi. We bused down, naturally.

We passed many wide, great spaces that had been cleared for the cotton, tremendous rectangles of space filled with cotton plants, and I don't know what the kids were thinking (if they ever do), but I was into generations of brothers and sisters out there picking that shit, not daring not to. But, damn, those slave-holders *needed* bodies that were alive, could pick and snatch and drop, year after year after year, and have energy enough left to return to the cabin and diddle some more cotton pickers. Very bad shit, but this was unbelievable, like a disease.

I joined Justine inside the museum and we picked up all the free paper that had some English on it. We got a catalogue and soon saw that it was filled with many of the same pictures that were blown up and hung there in the hall. Maybe it damn sure was a museum; you looked at the pictures and somehow distance in time shoved its way between what they showed and the deed that was done or being done. Like you look at a cemetery and know there are dead people there, but since you can't see them or hear how they died, they don't mean diddly. This was a little different. There were the pictures and maybe these were the crosses and Stars of David you see in cemeteries; pictures *way* up the gig, but nothing else.

You couldn't say that people behaved the way they do in a church. They were cool, yeah, and quiet, and they stared at the pictures and some shook their heads; but, somehow they reminded me of the people you see on TV who rubber-neck tornados or plane crashes or other disasters. There were about four other black couples wandering through the place, and a number of black and white GIs in streetshit (and not a one could I imagine on a high school football team—I guess that was why they were in the Army). These young cats sped through, cracking on the pictures, leaning close to each other, grinning, whispering.

A class of kids trailed not far behind us. Ger-



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mans. I wondered what is was the teacher was telling them. How could you tell them and make them understand when grown-ups didn't understand themselves, tell them and leave them as whole as possible? Well, shit. Teaching the segment on slavery and the slave trade didn't seem even remotely to touch the white kids in my classes, and I knew the black kids wished you hadn't bothered in the first place.

"Gerald, Gerald."

I turned away from a photo of a young dead guy. He was strapped in a harness like you wear with a parachute.

Justine was talking with one of the young black GIs. "This is Harry," she said. "He's from Nashville. Harry, this is my husband."

I gave him the grip. "What do you think of this?"

Harry smiled slow and soft. "I'm sure glad I wasn't around when this happened."

So, I'm standing there, looming over this dude, and I could tell he was taken with my size, as he should have been, because I ain't no speck, lemme tell you, thinking, That's it? That's all he's got to say? Then I said, "Could happen again, you know, and I don't mean *here*."

The kid sort of rolled his eyes up to mine and smiled again, but he didn't know what I was talking about and I let it drop. I said, "Good meeting you," and strolled off to the next picture, leaving him with Justine who was probably talking about Margo, just talking, because I know that the last thing Justine was thinking about was a private first class, if that, husband for Margo.

We were between showings of a film. Justine wasn't interested in it, anyway. "We've seen films, parts of films, documentaries, reminiscences, memoirs, all out lives, practically. Why do they think *moving* pictures are better or more important than these blow-ups? Sometimes I think they were not only crazy when they did this, they were crazy before and crazy now. Bounce, I don't want to see any damned movie. Let's go back outside and walk."

There was more mist than rain now and we moved outside, checking the guide. Right in front of us, one of the two restored barracks, was the canteen. "There's where Dieter Lange had his shop," I said. "The canteen." I pointed.

"There?" Justine said.

"There. That's where Clifford spent some of his time."

Justine started toward it, walking quickly, stepping around puddles of water. She stopped at the door, then leaned inside. When I came up she

said quietly, "Shoot. It smells of wood that's new, or almost new. The place is—I guess—like Disneyland must be."

"What did you think it'd be like?"

"Dunno."

She took my arm and we strolled around behind the museum and peered into a long building with a series of stalls in it. She took the guide and flipped the pages back and forth. "The Bunker," she said. She looked up at me. "It was the camp prison. Imagine that, a prison within a prison."

It was cold and damp inside. To walk all the way down and back would have taken, I guessed, about 40 minutes. We turned away and walked to the nearby watch tower and tried the door. It was locked.

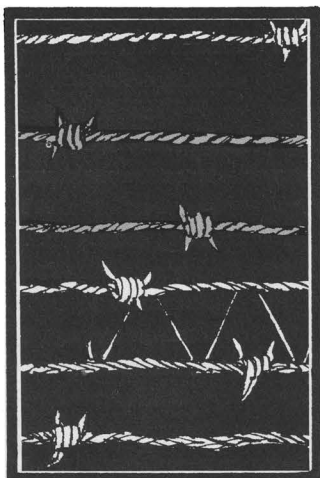
The squat building with the big iron gates seemed to be right at an entrance. On the gates were the words, *Arbeit Macht Frei*. Heavy, black-green foliage ran down a straight line that was both part fence and part wall, and behind it was a creek filled with thick, slow-moving water, and beyond the creek a mass of young trees sagged with the weight of the rain. The gates were locked, too. We walked down the path, following the fence, the creek and the trees, with the foundations of the barracks on our right. It began to rain again. There were people walking throughout the grounds, some together, others by themselves. The GIs were trotting to whatever shelter was close to get out of the rain.

"Clif-ford, Clif-ford, Clif-ford," Justine was saying. I realized that she was calling his name in time to our footsteps in the gray, soggy gravel. I thought of that last page of Clifford's journal and what he said about ashes and bones being crushed to pave the Apple-something. "Clif-ford, Clif-ford." She stopped calling his name and read the guide as we walked. "Sixteen hundred men in each one of *these*?"

"Is that what is says? Well, about as tight as a slave ship, I'd make it, honey."

Her look said, Oh, come on, Bounce, but I ignored it. Yeah, I felt for them, but I also knew that what goes around comes around. It can take a little while. You get a lineman who keeps on breaking in for a sack, he's gonna get trapped and cracked. That's life. And that's the game. Hell, I knew the poor cats who wound up here didn't have anything to do with slavery. Maybe their sin was their fathers' or great-granddaddies or some such shit, who didn't shout across the oceans, "STOP!"

We had slogged to the last foundation of what was the last barracks on this side of the camp.



I thought of the last page of Clifford's journal and what he said about ashes and bones being crushed to pave the Apple-something.

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Other people were taking a muddy road that curved off the grounds. Then I saw the sign that said, *KREMATORIUM (BARACKE X)*.

As we followed the road, I said, "It may not make any difference anymore what sex a kid is, and they ain't gonna have time to build no more shit like this."

"That's not what you told that kid back there."

"He didn't understand, anyway." I stopped. How could I know what he understood? "I don't think he did. Could he have? Great. Maybe *he* could be the one to stop this crap, who knows?"

"How, Bounce?"

"Jus, who cares how as long as it's nothing like this?"

We sidestepped mounds of mud and pools of water. Ahead, there was a low, long building. Before we went inside, Justine paused and looked all around. "I don't see the places where the SS lived, where Clifford was most of the time. Nothing but trees and nothing behind them. That's what I wish we could see."

Inside the building Justine flipped through the guide. "This was the gas chamber," she said. It looked like a big shower room. There was a single wreath of fading and drying flowers on the floor. "But, it says here that it was never used. They took the prisoners somewhere else. Harthem? God, I'm sorry we didn't finish Clifford before we came. But, why would they send people all the way to Austria, it says here, when they have the sucker right here. Doesn't sound very efficient, doesn't sound very German, to me."

We were edging through the cold, damp place, into where the ovens were, four of them, and a smell clamped inside my nose.

"Smell that?" I said.

Justine turned to me. She had a tissue over her nose. "Yesss. Been wondering what it was, what it could be . . . not after all these years. . . ."

Two black GIs who were there when we came in, covered their noses and looked at each other. "Damn!" one said.

Justine's eyes widened. I said, "It can't be that. Maybe some plumbing somewhere, the drainage system."

"Maybe it's all those dead people who died so awfully. And maybe we just aren't supposed to forget them." She turned to walk down the rows of ovens, one, then two together, and then another one. I followed her, the stink drifting with us.