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VEHICLE

EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
STUDENT LITERARY PUBLICATION
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photo by JIM PAINTER

The City is the Black Man's Land

Charles(Omar)Davis

(1st place in the Afro-American Studies Black Writing Contest)

Black people came to the cities as individuals, seeking to escape the stagnation and regimentation of rural life, hoping that in the turning industrial life of the big city, they would be able to advance themselves. Thus, they came with hope. But this hope was an individual one. Each black man, each black woman, came to the city, hoping that he or she could improve his or her own condition, expecting that somehow black folks would be able to advance upwards in the same pattern that had been established for immigrants coming from Europe not realizing that this pattern only worked for immigrant whites because they were advancing themselves on the backs of blacks.

It has been pointed out, that its traditional in the U.S. for the largest ethnic group within each city, be that group Irish, German, Italian, or Polish, to take over the political administration of the cities, and how this pattern had been taken for granted as the proper and just one until blacks became the largest ethnic group. As each of these white ethnic groups gained political power, the other ethnic groups who had already advanced higher into the system, did not run away from the city. Rather they remained to continue their contribution to the further development of the city, in the economic as well as in the cultural arena. Today, however, as blacks have grown in numbers within the cities, we have witnessed the rapid exodus from the cities, and from the problems of the cities, of all those white who could afford to leave. Along with them have gone the economic structure, the factories, the offices, which originally lured all groups to the city and provided the material foundation for their advancement. Therefore what blacks came to the cities hoping and expecting to find has been rapidly disappearing all around them. The cities themselves, having been used and reused by so many white ethnic groups in succession, are on their last legs, decaying, dilapidated, plain worn-out. Thus, instead of being the largest minority in the cities, blacks have become the victims of the cities. In other words, what the cities formerly provided as a material basis for the hopes and advancement of other ethnic groups, no longer exists for blacks. So that even when black politicians, black teachers, black administrators, black workers, take over positions or jobs in the cities, whether these jobs are high or low, they are simply playing once again the old scavenger role which blacks have always played in this country. Every black politician, every administrator, who takes over a city or an institution, takes over a city or institution in decay, disintegration and crisis..

Every black policeman who joins the police force is from the very outset compelled to play the role of occupation army in the ghetto, no matter how anxious he may be to build the confidence of the community in him as a guardian and servant of the people.

On, on, on we go, as to the list of increasing costs and declining services is practically endless. Libraries, museums, recreation facilities are closing down, sanitation services stagnate; and for the first time in history people are demonstrating to demand better jails because more and more blacks are going to jail, and therefore the conditions in jails and prisons are growing worse instead of better.

Day after day, hour after hour, at every station or program break, television bombards us with false solutions to the ills of our society and of our cities. More often than not, they make us feel that we blacks are the main cause of the breakdown in all services, while at the same time sparing no effort to lure us to become bigger consumers of their products. Today we live in the only society in the world which thrives on advertising such essential commodities as bread, milk, cheese and meat. Prices of all commodities soar as their abundance increases, because now the cost of pushing them in competition with one another is a major item added to the price that the consumer must pay. Today, using entertainment as a bait for their commercials, the big corporations are brain-washing everyone of us to want more painkilling drugs and at the same time fancier, more elaborate material things, while at the same time destroying any human incentives on our part to serve the collective needs of our communities and our people. This

means that until we can abolish commercials altogether and abolish the control of the mass media by capitalism, we have very little chance to use the media (mass) to develop rather than to corrupt our people.

Permit me, in conclusion, to say to you: Ask not what others can do for us; ask what we must do for ourselves!



NIGGER!

Sibyl Burrell

(3rd place in the Afro-American Studies Black Writing Contest)

Check Nigger
ain't he clean
six inch kicks
and a gangster lean

Umbrella hat
tailor made veins
six foxie ladies
lay'n on the line

Superfly do
black and gold ride
tell me that character
ain't got no pride
stand on the corner
pass'n time
a "j" in one hand
and a bottle of wine

Cool Nigger
ain't got no gig
don't need one
he's on the rig
pulled in ten grand
just the other day
beating the system
the American way

Boss Nigger
he's no fool
ran a mack on 'Charlie'
"Charlie" blew his cool
"silks" try'n to be negrophile
don't pay
Nigger live not for tomorrow
Nigger live for today

Soberphobia Nigger
never got busted by "the man"
cold-blooded brother
who has taken a stand

Check Nigger
ain't he clean
six inch kicks
and a gangster lean



Essay

El-Edrisi Assibai

(2nd place in the Afro-American Studies Black Writing Contest)

"...What happened to the black man?" "They lost their history and died..."

We were once kings and queens of ancient empires now we must move from the slave masters fire.

How men could progress from a people who built pyramids and cities, to mental pygmies who allowed the enslavement of fifty million people, is one of the greatest riddles of mankind.

I am talking of millions of men who have been skillfully injected with fear, inferiority complexes, trepidations, servility, despair, abasement, and dehumanization to the point where humanism has been replaced with animalism.

I propose nothing short of the liberation of the black man from himself and those who would enslave him, mentally and physically.

What happened to the pride that allowed Queen Candence, Empress of Ethiopia, and General-in Chief of it's armies, throw fear into the heart of Alexander the great? Alexander the Great, who by 332 B.C. had conquered most of the then known world, halted his armies at the First Cataract and retreated back into Egypt, rather than suffer defeat at the hands of black women.

What became of the strength that Kalydosos, King of Makuria, used to stop and destroy invading Arab forces in the decisive Battle of the Makurian Plains in 651 A.D.? Thus halting Arab invasions, and slavery in subsaharan Africa for 600 years.

What caused the disappearance of the intelligence displayed by Sunni Ali? Ali craved the Songhay Empire amid the sands of the Sahara desert. The Songhay Empire at it's peak was larger than the continent of Europe, and within it's borders were riches beyond

anything seen by man at that time.

Greatness was born out of the savage oppression of the African people. And From that oppression came, "Africa's greatest daughter"; Queen Nzinga of Angola. For forty years, from 1623 to 1663, Queen Nzinga led her troops against the Portuguese and Dutch slavers. And almost destroyed the African slave trade in Angola and the Congo when it was at it's apex.

Even after we were kidnapped and forced from our motherland the determination that produced Denmark Vessey, Gabriel Prosser, Cinque, and Nat Turner flamed across the American continent. The unrelenting drive for equality and freedom manifested itself in Fredrick Douglas, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman, and washed across the United States like a huge tidal wave against slavery and injustice.

The fire again burned in the eyes and hearts of Malcolm X, as he pulled himself from the manmade hell of the streets to become the most eloquent freedom fighter of his time.

The fire must not be allowed to be snuffed out or dimmed by the misleading treachery and broken promises of an enemy that has time and time again proven himself to be something less than human.

This is the dawn of a new day. Shall we repeat the mistakes of the past? Or, will we move forward through unity, here and abroad, to meet the challenge of tomorrr and make the hope a reality. The future is ours, we need only by ready to seize it. Then the new day will be as in the words of Booker T. Washington..."...A new heaven and a new earth!"



photo by TOM TIEFFENBACHER

The Gypsy Ghost

Bill Vermillion

When she was in that land she dreamed of wire corn cribs filled with red cobs that smoldered all day long and then burst into flames at night and no sirens sounded and she could not hear the fire though she could see its lurid light flavoring the sky and the rough black ground; of dark crows with their ravenous wings flapping and their narrow, parched voices; of brown paths covered with cinders. I would have called them nightmares, but she refused to give them that name. Had anything happened in them she would have called them that, but things did not happen: crows sailed across the blue-white sky, and the red towers burned silently at night, and then the long, empty walk and the crunch of the volcanic cinders...

They lived for a time beside a dangerous intersection. You could hear the screaming of tires and the horns and the jagged bone-scrape of metal and the crashes and the cries. One hot summer month there was a wreck every day or so. People sat by the edge of the road, their knees drawn up to their chins, weeping into their bloody hands. The state policemen with their grim blue jaws and sunglasses stood beside her father by the gas pumps and they all shook their heads as if they did not understand it as the bodies were tenderly wrapped in glaring sheets and put into the ambulance.

Brigid could clearly remember one Halloween night when a boy from town was out trick or treating on his bicycle. A plastic Casper the Friendly Ghost mask hung around his neck on a slender elastic string and the boy, a peculiar boy with a pasty face and big, black-rimmed glasses, could no doubt hear the mask scraping against his chest and chin. A flashlight had been wired to his handlebars. He must have been coming to their house for there wasn't another house on the highway for a mile or more. His head was severed from his body and the policemen shone their lights into the ditches and the boy's head lay unbound in a ditch until the next morning.

Brigid and her sister watched the red lights and the black, gliding simulacra through a window as they perched on their knees on the spongy couch, their forearms and chins resting on its fat, curved back. Her mother stood outside on the wet grass in a rectangle of yellow light that fell like talcum powder through one of the windows of their trailer. She was wearing her pink housecoat and she drew its thin cloth close to her neck and breast. The moist, rotting October night sighed all around them. She could see it move through her mother's shivering hair.

They lived in one of those old, oddly-shaped trailers in an arid lot beside the gas station her father was trying to turn into a business in order for him to be able to join that semi-circle of plump, wrinkled men who gathered in the station after dark on Saturday nights. They sat on wooden chairs, chopping blocks, empty blue drums, with their egg-shaped bellies that tapered to soft narrow pouches between their weak thighs, smoking Swisher Sweet cigars that her father gave out. These men advised her father on business matters, on money-saving improvements. These men

who were named Bud and Junior and Smilie and Shavie joked and told stories that wandered to lost, stark cemeteries, that fumbled through sleepy Pullman cars that smelled of sweaty horsehide and forgotten cigars and strange women, stories that could only end with a befuddled sigh and an apologetic shake of a fuzzy, lost head. They laughed and argued politics.

And her father admired them greatly. He would lean against his candy and cigarette case, his blue baseball cap tipped high on the back of his head, his thick, innocent face so intent upon dislodging and fleeing with one of their secrets of success that they could not help but pull his leg once in awhile. It took him a long time to get it through his head that they were only fooling. One of them had to tell him they were just kidding and then all of them had to say it several times and, if he still wasn't convinced, they laughed to show him that he must laugh and then they would feel guilty, ashamed of themselves because he, and old man already, was not the sort of man you could push right up to the edge and ask him to look into the deep hole and expect him not to be overcome by vertigo, not to wheel about like a chicken on giddy legs. They tried to protect him as best they could, but sometimes even they could not stand his innocence.

Her father moved through his dreams as if he too were a part of them, as if he were merely an image conjured up by some distant dreamer, and often as he walked the smooth path from the trailer to the station either at dawn or at ten o'clock at night, she felt, seeing him stooped in his dark overalls and blue baseball cap, that he did not know exactly why he was there or how he got there or who was with him and that the man who cried at the movies was hopelessly puzzled by the unfamiliar shape of the world he had stumbled into.

Her father gave her orange pop and candy, patted her head with a stiff, shy hand, sang the foreign words his father, an old-fashioned drunkard, had taught him, shuddered under her vacant, absorbed gaze and eventually had to shoo her from the station out into the yard to play.

The gas station sat in one corner of the intersection, the lot and the trailer beside it. The only things to see besides the too-wide, almost African sky and the long fields of corn and soybeans were the water tower and the grain elevator which were fashioned out of the vapid brilliance of the air above the hazy trees of the town that sat behind them a quarter of a mile away and a dingy building that occupied the opposite corner of the intersection like some glowering, half-tamed animal. The building bore no signs that told them what it was. Trucks and cars were parked in the gravel lot, but they seldom saw anyone enter or leave the place. Once she and her sister did see someone, a man in a yellowed T-shirt who walked across the white gravel to the edge of the highway. Brigid and her sister sat in the fine dust under the only tree in their yard, a few dolls scattered around their dirty legs in chilling attitudes that not so much resembled aspects of life as mocked the whole affair. The man unzipped his pants, raised his shirt and showed them his hairy belly and greasy genitals. Later she would say that she wished she had at least screamed rather than just sit there in the warm dust with her silent sister, for it would have given some satisfaction to the man who stood there twiddling with his penis until he at last gave up and scurried back into the nameless building.

She might as well have led that sister of her's around on a leash. That's what her mother said. The sister was about the size of a large, expensive baby doll and she had the same sort of delicate china features and it was Brigid's job to see to her, a job that was fairly easy because her sister did indeed follow her everywhere except at dusk when the sister went off on her own. Brigid's sister could not, or did not want to, raise herself out of the little wine-red rocker in which she tossed herself backwards and forwards in an involuntary frenzy, staring ahead at nothing. It was at dusk always and the lights inside the trailer were left off just for her and the trailer was filled with that palpable twilight air and with the sound of the motion of the rocker, not the sound of beating or the sound of scraping or the sound of the curved wood rubbing, being lifted into the air and falling back against the floor, but rather the sound of dumb immobility itself.

The VEHICLE staff:

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photo by TOM TIEFFENBACHER

Brigid's mother would not enter the trailer while the sister rocked. She stood in the yard and waited for that sound to diminish and then cease entirely and waited still longer for its lingering echoes to leave and only then did she inch towards the door and peep inside and find the sister sitting there, barely visible in the darkness, breathing calmly, her small hands still gripping the arms of the rocker like warm vises.

When the sister spoke it was only to respeak some words she had picked up from her mother or else it was to bring up something from the past, something that Brigid, two years older than her, could not even remember. The sister, however, knew every detail of the event, could reconstruct it with such clarity, with so much regard for what anyone else would have considered too small to mention, that you could see the scene forming bit by bit like an elaborate picture puzzle until at last there was, assembled within the doll's head, a world more charming and more dreadful than the one in which the tiny figure physically sat.

Even the sister's gestures were not her own and it always came as quite a shock to Brigid's mother when she realized that she was facing a funhouse-mirror image of herself.

Her mother took them downtown to a cafe every payday. (She worked as a checker in the IGA store.) Brigid's mother always carried with her on these days, in a plastic shopping bag with cool, translucent lavender flowers on it, her library of paperback books on the occult. There was a rack beside the magazine stand filled with supernatural things at the cafe. Her mother patted her pursed lips with her finger as she looked for new books. She had underlined and annotated in a clumsy, wonderous fashion every one of the books she owned. She spent her days off and the evenings, if it wasn't too hot, at the little table beside the kitchen stove in the center of the trailer with her pencil hovering above a yellow page. She was not to be disturbed, she said, although she was unaware of the movement of people around her when she studied.

"Did you know, Sweetie, that we can contact other people we care about if they are in some kind of trouble, if something is about to happen to them? I remember the time my brother was

coming home from the service, hitch-hiking home, and at a certain time, 7:30 at night because I checked the clock because I knew something was happening, I said to him, 'be careful,' and he was a hundred miles away at that time and he had the people he was riding with pull over and let him out and they went on and were killed in an accident and he went by in another car later and saw it. There is a gland in your brain, right here just about, that responds to the electricity of people. What about that?"

Brigid watched the other people in the cafe, how they sat in the black wooden booths, how they dipped their noses into their drinks, how they moved through the aisles of magazines, cigars, pipes, books and model cars. She could have told you what each one was wearing and the color of their eyes, the shape of their earlobes (her father said you could tell people by that).

"Does she want a drink? Does Sissie want a drink? Say yes or no. Come on. For Mommy. Please, Sissie. Brigid. Brigid, stop staring like that. People will think you're addled. Will you give Sissie a sip of your coke? Hurry up. People are looking at us. She won't touch her own. Can't you drink your own, Sissie?"

"She always squashes the straw."

"Sissie, will you straighten up, please? Can't you make her mind?"

"She ain't doin nothin."

"How many times do I have to tell you that only stupid people say ain't? Can't you do something with her? Make her stop fidgeting. I don't see why I can't have a little peace."

Every summer for a few weeks another trailer was parked on their lot. Brigid's father called the man and his daughter who lived in it gypsies although most people did not believe it. The bowlegged man worked as a field hand for awhile and then they moved on.

The girl's name was Rose. She was a little older than Brigid and she had dark, fuzzy hair and yellowish skin and she loved the muggy heat and her sharp smell burned in Brigid's nose. She had a pet rooster with one crippled foot. The rooster wandered all over

the lot and when it strayed too near the highway Rose would yell, "Come back here, you bastard," and the rooster would flop across the dirt to her and she would pull its tailfeathers and send it squaking. Brigid's father used to hurry out of the station whenever he heard Rose yell and watch her and the rooster. Sometimes he would call his buddies out and they would laugh at the odd show that Rose, when she had them for an audience, made even odder by exaggerating her outrage and calling the rooster all sorts of names.

Rose's father watched his daughter with covetous, horrible, loving eyes. Rose said she could twist him around her little finger as if he were one of the paper cigar bands he slipped on her finger for her to wear as jewelry, but no one knew for sure which one of them had the upper hand.

The man would sit on the stoop of the trailer in his undershirt in the evenings waiting for the beer to leave his breath so he could walk over to the station and sit with Brigid's father, and he would watch the three girls playing in the dead grass (blades of the faded grass scattered from their naked feet like fleeing insects) or merely sitting, whispering and laughing together. He would call Rose and ask her what she was doing, although he could very well see her every move. Rose would stand up defiantly, with her hands on her hips, her hard belly stuck out, and say, "nothing" and then laugh at him.

Brigid's mother would join them after the man had gone to the station. She would sit on a kitchen chair under the tree with the three girls cross-legged on the ground in front of her. She still wore her work uniform--scarlet pants and a tan jacket with her name stitched above her breast pocket.

A car squealed on the highway and they all squeezed their eyes tight and slowly opened them, peeping first through the interstices of their eyelashes, after they heard no crash.

"I think they do that on purpose," Brigid's mother said.

The sister rose and walked towards the trailer at dusk.

"There she goes," Rose said.

They watched her purposeful steps and the slight pause before

she entered the trailer and they waited and soon they could hear, faintly, the sound of her rocking.

Brigid scratched her scabby knees. She seemed to be always having little accidents for no apparent reason.

Sparrows and starlings were making quite a racket above them and they were careful of the droppings.

Rose shook her head and ran her fingers through her tangled hair.

"I bet I look like I've been in the bushes all day," she said.

Brigid's mother tittered with delight.

"You'll be ready for the boys soon enough," she said, wagging her finger.

"I know. I can feel it already." She let her tongue hang out like a winded dog's and then she lay on her back and, using her shoulders and heels, made a limber arc of her body.

Rose's father waddled out of the station, tugging at his drooping pants. He stopped beside the blue gas pumps and asked Rose what she was doing wallowing around like that.

"Nothing."

He did not trust her, you could tell that much, and he stared at her quite awhile and then, still frowning, went back into the station.

Rose was scared and they sat, not speaking, until the rocking stopped.

The next summer the old car with the reluctant silver trailer holding back against the car's grinding engine did not show up at the right time and everyone waited and wondered where they were and watched the highway. And then one evening while the sister rocked and Brigid was lying down on the couch, a little sick from the heat, Rose came into the trailer. She did not speak, nor did either one of the sisters. Brigid said that the look Rose gave them, as serene as twilight, reassured her, made her think that things were all right. Then Rose's ghost left and Brigid could hear, coming out of the shadows, the convulsive rocker being thrown backwards and forwards.

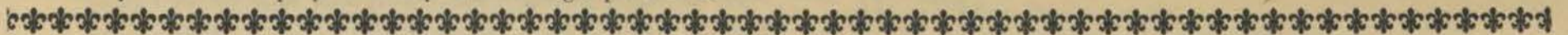


photo by TOM TIEFFENBACHER



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Fair Loving

Gary Thomas

Somewhere in me
 I know I'm always being watched,
 certainly in crowds,
 vaguely when crossing a field
 in the long-legged spring;
 even in my room,
 dark and eyeless,
 I hear some eternal camera faintly
 whirring
 at me. Just
 once, I
 would like to watch
 you, you, either
 sleeping quietly
 or striding singly, unaware
 or even because
 you didn't care.
 That's the only way
 I'd know for sure
 that it's you I'm looking at,
 and loving,
 and not another
 me
 with different eyes and mouth
 and woman-scented hair.

H.M.(Wendy)Smith

e.e.,
 i
 love the
 l (oo) k
 of your poem
 even if it does
 take me a day and $\frac{a}{half}$
 to figure
 x out=
 what the heck you're talking about

!

Still and Same once told me your stuff is
 cite mim/mimetic

!

BULLs

h

i

t

i never seen
 anything like one of your poems running around.

i am life
 and all i can do is imitate you.



photo by TOM TIEFFENBACHER

Night and Summer in Two Worlds

Barry Smith

1

Caught inside a car at night in a fog that made two worlds, a world inside a world. A world traveling in the midst of darkness and blue, sweeping shadows that made the windshield an eye with huge, fluttering eyelids that would lift suddenly to show the next approaching lid. That kept our faces turned toward each other, while we carried up like antiques from a basement names that were ideas---Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre---they tried to go beyond the world that was outside our world, and weaving between the fog and reason and darkness and wonder, clinging to the blacktop road and arguing the rationalizations for being allowed to leave the womb, the headlights reflected off waves of earth-bound clouds: we had stopped.

2

In a Dakota summer the grass is naturally brown, the hills are as rounded and smooth and yellow as warm ice cream on a plate and the ground is hard like the eyes of the Oglala Sioux children who watch us dig holes in their reservation to plant bushes that will die before we even leave. The air is thin and dry, we do not sweat doing work in God's name. Later, in a cool, ever-green forest we chop down dead trees with an Indian, who tells us if he were chief he would go with his rifle into the Black Hills to snipe at tourists until none returned, glancing at each other between axe-blows, silently gripping the axe handle tighter until each chop sends vibrations along every nerve. A tree crashes between us and the Indian, Tom, straightens up, heavy axe in his hand, and offers us his canteen; we gulp it down.

3

We were on different steps of the same staircase, but as we stopped in the fog and as we shared the canteen we were both afraid to ask the same question. We leaned against each other somber and still like cattle in a storm and pushed, one against the other, like arm wrestlers in a tournament and tumbled around each other. Yet, I believe I would die and he would not accept the same for himself, he frowned at this world while I laughed at it and him; his courage was loose, obvious and untenable as gravity, mine created and destroyed freshly each day and with each season: we were two worlds, always new.