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Meanwhile in Another Part of the City

Sherley Anne Williams

*I'm just about to go insane:
I thought I heard my baby call
the way he used to call my name
—Jesse Fuller
“San Francisco Bay Blues”*

I

THEY SAID, in San Francisco, it was not a fascinating story: black people were always meeting each other in odd places. It was the nature of the middle class, their peculiar diaspora. So the sister had talked about love; which of them now looked for it? At which point Carm had told about the brother who called her in the middle of the night to demand that she go with him to the motel where her husband, Chester, was shackled up with the brother's wife. “I told him that was his business and if he was so concerned about it he ought to take care of it.” Amah Dean tried not to stare. The sister's chocolate drop complexion was still unlined at what had to be at least forty; her hair was dulled by chemicals, not grey. She looked too good to be telling such tales on herself, had seemed to take such pride in the pictures she'd shown them of herself and Chester on their twentieth wedding anniversary. And there was more to her story.

The brother had chased his half-naked wife down the street with a butcher knife. At least, Carm continued primly, he'd had the sense to take his spite out on his Mexican and leave Chester alone. She'd seen the brother at a recent opening; he'd thanked her profusely for not letting him ruin his life: he was still with the hussy. The others thought this uproariously funny, but Amah had looked at Carm uneasily. This had to be an old story; else, how could she talk about this infidelity so cavalierly?

There were six of them that time, Horace, two brothers and three sisters, in a crowded bar overlooking the bay. Amah had a visiting appointment at Mills College, the others were in town for the annual literature convention. Horace, a friend of a friend, had called Amah and invited her for drinks. From his voice and his name, Horace Meux, she had pegged him as a

wannabe who probably ran anns on the side, but he had read her book on black schoolteachers in the antebellum South. Sure, she'd said, knowing she should pass. But even drinks with a wannabe was better than driving out to East Oakland for another dutch dinner with Pearl. There was only one table with blacks at it in the whole room. She'd thought when she approached the table, and the men all stood, that Horace was the overweight brother with dancing eyes she later learned was Richard. She almost let her mouth fall open when the white boy stepped forward and took her hand. "Kwaku Modua said to tell you his brother's widow divorced him, so you'd now be his number two wife." At least that got a genuine laugh, though Amah realized that the message was only half play and for a minute, just a minute, she was back on Goree Island, in the silence of the old Slave House with sinewy arms wrapped tight around her shoulders, physical arousal replacing centuries of grief. "Kwaku ought to quit," she'd said, and was embarrassed to realize she'd missed the first introductions.

They talked fast and loud, even Horace, who, though not as loud, had a way of making himself heard—mostly about movies, music, books, calling authors and stars alike by their first names, tossing in personal anecdotes and outrageous tales about people Amah didn't know, but suspected were faculty colleagues and others well-known in what she'd always called "English," but which they called "literary studies." They were all Afro-Americanists, even Horace, who, she realized, was something of a star in the field. Encouraged by their gaiety and a third ramos fizz, she'd told them about the last time she'd seen Celeste—though without mentioning any names. Not all of their stories, scandalous as they were, could be true. And Celeste's life, though a legend at Mission, was not really in the public domain. Carm's story seemed to prove what Celeste had said about love that long ago night: a lot of it had been lost between black men and black women.

"What do brothers get out of always trying to catch?" Amah had missed the sister's name but she had spoken the question on her own lips. The women looked at Richard, though it was the other brother, Donald, who quipped, "About what you all get out of trying to get caught." They frowned him down and Amah thought he was probably gay.

Richard grinned a little sheepishly. "I can speak only for myself. But, I don't know," offhand, but steady so Amah didn't know whether to believe

him or not. “There is something, for some brothers, you know, about, hmm,” in a rush, “new, ah, new pussy.”

There was silence; Amah watched their faces. The light was so bright it seemed to wash the color out of the largely middling hues of their complexions. “So it has nothing to do with love.” Amah didn’t know which sister had spoken.

Richard himself hesitated. “Not as often as some would probably like.”

“I rather like new pussy myself,” boldly from the tall elegant sister, Ailene, and even Amah had to laugh.

“It’s not variety that hurts,” Donald said, “let me tell you. . . .” They were off again; the conversation would eventually end up on something halfway obscure, a process she had followed with delight and exasperation. They were so quick, played against each other so well. But they had missed the point of her story. Privately she wondered that they cared so little for a story about a sister who had taught English at a big white college at a time when only a handful of black women did that. Celeste had been a revelation to Amah who hadn’t really believed you could cram your head with so many facts about white people and yell like Celeste did or keep a wooden tub full of *New Yorkers* in the bathroom and say *chiiil*’ on just that braying note. Maybe, Amah thought then, you had to know Celeste.

She added more detail in New York: Celeste sitting upright in the narrow bed, lamplight falling on her dark skin, her face innocent of make-up. She had looked like a slip of milk chocolate floating in that sea of white bed linen. She might almost have been a girl, certainly younger than when Amah first met her. Somewhere in that image was a profound commentary on the last two decades. They acted like Amah was corny and went on to the next story, their voices rising raucously. They had met in another bar; a new round came as Amah pondered. In the pause as they took their first sips, she told “Consider the Lilies,” which brought chuckles; theirs was not a generation that could quote the Bible at length or at will, at least not accurately. But they declared her attempts to return to the original theme, which she called the metaphysics of sexual relations between black men and women, boring.

She had come east for a panel at the Schomberg and stayed, at Horace’s invitation, for their yearly convention. He was then at NYU, had been for several years, was being recruited by Berkeley. What did she think? he’d asked after walking her back to the hotel room he’d booked for her at

conference rates. She looked at him helplessly. “If the money’s good and you like the weather—what do you mean, what do I think?” They had talked on the phone several times, but had not seen each other since San Francisco the year before. She unlocked her door, leaving it slightly ajar, and, turning back to him, stuck out her hand. He put his hands on her shoulders and ducked his head, searching for her lips. Startled, she backed away; it had been a long time since she’d kissed a white man. Come on, she told herself, you’re a grown woman. But her hand fumbled for the doorknob behind her. She pecked quickly at his lips and slipped in the door.

In Chicago, the “Lost Literati Expedition” met with silence. Horace had gone to Berkeley, and, Amah assumed, been seduced by all that new pussy. At any rate she’d had nothing from him but a postcard with his new phone number and address. And his name hadn’t come up when Thelma, who had made one of the groups in New York and, like herself, specialized in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, had called to tell Amah that she was responding to a paper called “The Club Movement Among Colored Women at the Turn of the Century and Its Representation in Literature” at the yearly convention. They could share a room at the convention rate if she were going to be in the area. What the hell, Amah had thought; it sure beat turning out closets or going to another Kwanzaa alone. And lit people were not afraid of music, even if they no longer danced.

Listening to the panel talk about the club movement “project” and “discursive subversion,” “essentialism” and “displacement,” Amah understood, as she had only dimly perceived from reading, where the new terminology in history came from. “We got it from anthropology and linguistics,” Thelma said a trifle sourly over cappuccino. “You know, if some of these philosophers have their way, won’t be no history, not as we know it.”

Amah shrugged, “Malcolm said all along history wasn’t nothing but a white man’s fiction.”

“Richard say Horace’s wife left him for a graduate student.”

Amah looked away from Thelma’s watchful gaze, suppressing a little spurt of guilty pleasure. This was Thelma’s first mention of Horace and she, as a matter of principle, had refused to ask about him. “I thought that was the male line.” She hoped Thelma heard how little she cared. “The ones at my school are even on the undergraduates like rabbits.” She halfway

expected him to walk up; what was wrong with him that his wife would leave him for some kid?

“Just thought you’d like to know, sister,” Thelma said. “We’re going to have drinks here at the hotel; it’s too cold to go out.”

She had been too cool by half, Amah realized then, but still couldn’t bring herself to ask even one question. Apparently Horace had skipped the convention and she’d settled in to enjoy the present company. Oh, they nodded after her story, but the group had grown and she and Thelma sat somewhat apart.

“Seven Black Women in Search of Music?” Paul finally asked.

Even Amah had to laugh; he was so droll for a young man. And seven black women together drew attention, no doubt about that. “At first we were just trying to have brunch.”

“You say, yo’all was named Myisha, Helen and Ann-Marie Calhoun? Let me guess—” Lois eased her bulk forward in the overstuffed chair and began to tick off points on her fingers. “One was dressed ‘Roots,’ complete with loud print and head wrap. One was city sharp, linen pants and loose cotton shirt; or campus slick, penny loafers, ruffled skirt? You,” she pointed at Amah, “had on sandals and drawstring pants.” Though she only knew Amah, Lois had hit them all fairly accurately and the others chortled. “Honey, you know that constitute a gang even in downtown New York.” And settled into her own story amid their laughter: “Remind me of Prudence. . . .” Amah had heard this one before: Having been cursed with bad feet, Prudence, a rising star on Wall Street, incorporated her limp into the expected Black Woman’s Strut. Lois’s “Prudence” reminded someone else of . . .

Amah drifted out. Talk of the expedition put her in mind of another salient fact. That night in Elmira had been the first time in years she had seen Celeste without something—scarf, hat, turban—covering her hair. There was nothing humble about the way Celeste covered head. Her headdress on the expedition had favored the Egyptian, a light cloth curving cleanly across her coffee colored brow, falling loosely about her neck. But this was before dreadlocks and long after the boomlet for gelees and wraps. Until that night in Elmira, Amah had assumed that Celeste had greyed early or, less charitable, that she was bald; life had taken more than one sister like that. She must have been fifty by then, but Celeste’s hair in the lamplight seemed as black as the day they met and looked almost as long; still relaxed, it was

pulled back from her face and bound with a rubber band. And Celeste's face could still bear such austere treatment. So Amah added that to the telling in New Orleans: Celeste had chosen mystery as her crowning glory.

"When was the last time you were 'all you could be'?" Donald was always so sardonic. You probably got the AIDS anyway, Amah thought with conscious cruelty, though it was not something she would say aloud. It had been years since she'd uttered an unthinking word so she seldom censored her thoughts. And Donald, usually so acute, had again missed the point. Celeste's legends never quite lived up to her flesh; in the legends she was simply a character, and they all were that.

Horace claimed her attention then. She caught herself stiffening under his hand on her shoulder. Their table was attracting a lot of attention. They were not the only blacks in the bar, but theirs was the only integrated table. Ailene sat next to a small blonde whose tan skin was almost as dark as hers, whom Amah took to be Ailene's lover. Horace pulled her closer and hailed the waiter, nuzzling her ear as he whispered. Yes, she told him, she would have another ramos fizz.

He had called around Thanksgiving to say that he was giving a paper on nineteenth century black men's clubs (she'd felt a certain satisfaction, knowing he must have heard that she'd gone to Chicago); would she come to the Big Easy to hear it? It was the first time she'd heard New Orleans called that and she asked if he were sure about his ancestry. "You mean, am I black?"

The question caught her off guard, but a "yes" sure would solve a lot. "Right," she answered, and could have kicked herself. There was nothing about his coloring to make his race suspect and she sure didn't want to seem anxious.

"No," he'd responded, "but my daddy is a southerner. I spent some summers down there after he made up with his family." She knew she was supposed to ask what they'd fallen out about but it was all beginning to feel too much like a game. He wanted to play at being a brother, well she'd treat him like one. "Why don't you stop trying to act so cute?"

He understood where she was coming from. "I would like to see you, Amah," he'd said. So she had come. The firm pressure of his hand on her knee kept her sitting until all the others had left the table. Thelma, looking at her with a slightly raised eyebrow, was the last to go. Amah watched her

walk toward the door, determined not to break the silence that had settled about the table when Thelma announced her intention to retire.

“Here’s my health card.”

He really was pushing something small and white across the table toward her. His hand was no longer on her knee and she stared at the index card as if it would bite.

“Look, I’m no more practiced at this than you, but that is what women need to know, isn’t it? Does he sleep around, mess with drugs?” He was smiling but he looked serious, too, and when she reached hesitantly in that direction, he shoved the card in her hand. “I was pretty much faithful to my wife,” the card read, “and have slept with three women since my divorce.”

“And they were all like you, I mean us, I mean. . . .” His voice faltered under her incredulous stare. “They weren’t swingers,” he said. “I was really trying to make a relation with one of them—just like I am with you. None of them worked out.” He paused. “Look,” he said suddenly, “am I the one who’s crazy here? Why don’t you say something?”

“Like what?” She kept staring at the card. Was this how you dated now? How people got it on? “I sure don’t have a card to give you. If you think I’m going to tell you how long it’s been since I last had sex—”

“Well, unless you’ve slept with someone who was into hard drugs. . . .” He waited, hopefully it seemed to her, but she had nothing to say. “Or who slept with someone . . .?”

Again that pause. She couldn’t even bring herself to say no. She grabbed her purse and scooted away from him. He held onto her wrist. “I know this is what you’re supposed to do,” looking pointedly at his hand, “trade case histories. . . . Did you ask those other women this?” She wished there were more light—had his face flushed red?

“I trust you. . . . Okay, okay, men are more likely to transmit AIDS to their female partners than vice versa. I just want you to trust me, or at least trust that I’m disease-free.”

“At this moment, anyway.” She laughed. God, the things you had to say, had to listen to before you got in bed. And of course there would be more discussion about condoms by the time they finally got down to it. “I can’t,” she said lifting her head. He made sure that her lips met his, lightly at first so that she was surprised at how moving she found their seeking, then more firmly, with his hand holding her face steady as his tongue touched hers.

Later, in bed, he asked her why she kept returning to that particular story. She had not made love in a long time and was flattered that he wanted to talk. “Doesn’t the story say anything at all to you?”

“I’m not going to abuse you,” he told her.

“Well, that’s not what Celeste’s story means.” He waited; she could think of nothing else to say. They made love again and slept. In the morning, over breakfast, he invited her to tell the whole story.

II.

Ce—, Ce, I’ll call her Ce, was the most beautiful *black* woman I’d ever met, and I’d thought that about a lot of the black women my first time in District. And, yes, I was daunted by all that beauty. These were some sharp sisters: they went to law school, majored in architecture and art, used tampons and aspired to whole drawers devoted to gloves; one even had hair on her chest and men slavered over that! I had nothing so exotic and knew myself to be real country, so I kept what I thought of as quiet. I shared a room in the attic of an elegant old mansion near downtown, the headquarters building of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs, Inc. In those days I measured myself by how far I had come from Ashland and that first night in the District I sat on one of the twin beds in the guest room, fresh from a warm bath, rubbing perfumed cream into my feet. I’d come from Indiana by bus, Greyhound, arriving in more rain than I’d seen in life. No honey, you talking about northern Indiana, that lake-effect wet. I’m from southern Indiana and if we see more than twenty-five inches a year, you talking about flood. Anyway, wet to the drawers, I registered for classes and secured a place to stay, at least for the night.

The storm that had nearly drowned me earlier in the day rumbled outside. A fire flamed brightly on the hearth. I’d never slept in a room with a fireplace, didn’t even know you could have one in a bedroom. Chandeliers glittered in the rooms below; a double staircase, its polished, walnut finish gleaming, rose grandly above a marble foyer. An opulent four-poster dominated the guest room across the hall. In time, the building, the furnishings would seem irrelevant to me, relics—like Mrs. Hardy, its housekeeper and Miss Busard, the permanent occupant of the other guest room—of a bygone era when black people had divided themselves on the basis of class and color, but I never quite lost my awe that black people

owned all that. Like much that we inherited in that era, the building was later sold and passed outside my knowledge. But that night I was satisfied; I hadn't waited where no self-respecting fate would find me.

There might be a vacant room, Charise told me languidly, as though Mrs. Hardy would not have done so already. Invited in by the open door, she'd made herself at home on the other twin bed. She went to business college; the other roomers worked—mostly at lower level civil service jobs—though Charise seemed to hint that one was actually a supervisor too cheap to move out of the fifth-floor room she shared with her sister. They were mostly from the South: Virginia, the Carolinas, Tennessee. The tightwad supervisor, I learned later, was from New Jersey. All the roomers shared a bath and had cooking privileges in the first floor kitchen, but rent was steep, seventy dollars a month. Look, I was only getting two hundred dollars a month on my grant and out of that I had to buy books and food and pay bus fare. I didn't understand much of what Charise said that first night; she was from Memphis and her accent remained almost impenetrable to me. After several weeks I realized that what I called "Beeale" Street—which she had never heard of—she called "Bail" Street. It was so run-down, she said, nobody went there anymore, and I worried anew that our rich southern heritage would be run-down and urban-renewed, looted, like the Negro Collection at Fisk, before I got a chance to see it.

I had come to Mission, the university, the capstone of black education, following a call across country, to rendezvous with the ancestors, the former slaves whose sweat and blood had reared the walls of Freedman's Hospital and whose exploits were chronicled in the closed stacks of Founder's Library. Oh, I know I wasn't the first to aspire to history; Mission has fired the dreams of black people around the world for more than a century. But I was especially earnest then, determined that my life would not be spent in the silent sacrifice of my parents. And rather prissy too; I washed my face with dollar-a-bar soap and went to classes, where I found myself in a silent war with the academy.

My hair, which I had cropped for the first time that summer, my style of address—Professor, Doctor, of course, but never sir or ma'am, the equalitarian principles I had learned in the classes of exiled easterners back in Indiana—none of it suited the genteel mode, though I swear I was as polite as I knew how to be. The men I could handle, but those two-last-name women almost defeated me. Sometimes I think I made up their

names—Hortense Rivers Spence, Claudia Aldrodo-Beaumont. But I've run into women at conferences and discussions who claim blood kinship with them.

I had switched my major from history to English under the mistaken assumption that English majors read more novels. (Yes, I admit it freely: I turned to Eliot and Thackeray only after being discouraged from medieval history because I got into languages "late." I didn't know then it was easier to learn a dead language like Latin than a living one because you didn't have to speak it. But Latin was still supposed to be Greek to negroes back then.) Carlyle and Ruskin both seemed crazy to me and, besides, had scarcely been mentioned in Victorian lit classes at State. The books required for the negro lit class that had been part of Mission's attraction for me were always checked out, stolen or just plain gone, and the guy who taught bibliography seldom came and, when he did, reeked of alcohol. Somehow the books for the American short story class had not been ordered and, when Professor Johns finally took over for whoever had failed to teach it, there was another two or three week wait for the books he'd ordered to arrive.

I tutored a couple of fifth year seniors who tried putting me to the blush with sophomoric passes. That was kind of cute, really; sometimes you can get off into books so deep you forget you have a body. Tutoring gave me claim to a desk in the warehouse where the department's teaching assistants held office hours. They were the most cosmopolitan group I'd ever been with: West and East Indians, American blacks, whites, males, females; I reveled in their varied accents, puzzling, as I would not with Charise, over every word they said. I knew already that many of the blacks were southerners, graduates of smaller black colleges. Often they were singled out in classes for "remedial" attention. It was that kind of authoritarian department and I soon learned that I had not come in the heyday of it.

The senior faculty was on the verge of retirement and there were no younger luminaries to replace them. They still knew their people and periods. They had been among the brightest of their day. By then, they were almost parodies of themselves: the men all had middle initials and the women two last names. Most of the time, they rambled, or were ill or did not show. The grad students exempted Johns, whom they called by first name with shocking ease, from their diatribes against the incompetence of the senior staff. He had cause to be bitter: a voice silenced almost as it flowered, despite critical acclaim; a teaching career maliciously stifled by

colleagues with higher degrees and shorter bibliographies than his. He didn't speak of these things to students but it was common knowledge among us, passed down from one generation of graduate students to the next, like the names of the famous writers, painters and civil rights lawyers who had passed through Mission. One always said "passed through." Almost everybody who became somebody has spent some time at one or another black college. That's part of the leadership training, to have some experience of blending in with our crowd. And the tales explained a great deal. Sometimes, behind the fragile old faces of the senior faculty, I sensed a seething anger that we, from our no-name little colleges, were to have the chances for which their degrees from Harvard and Princeton and Yale had so thoroughly prepared them. If America had been equal they would have had jobs there as well. Yet we resented it when one of the white TAs pointed out that Johns was the only one to have published extensively in his field and even he had not done so recently. And all of them hung on for those rare occasions when the senior faculty showed flashes of a former and grander form, telling themselves it was worth it.

All the Colored Women were virgins, at least that's what Mrs. Hardy liked to think since we couldn't have male visitors in our rooms or guests in the parlor after 10 P.M. The Virgins, who mostly dated Africans and West Indians trying to become US citizens, took me in hand, but I quickly cut them loose. Though they worked up quite a sweat when they danced, they were pretty staid for my taste, but that wasn't the real reason. Everybody knows about date rape now; back then there was no word for what almost happened to me in the arms of a northern Nigerian I met through one of the virgins. All that fall, I berated myself for having been so stupid, falling for his trumped-up story about expecting a call from the Nigerian mission at the UN that would keep him near his phone. Of course little missy from Ashland wouldn't mind waiting at his apartment. He was tall and slim and carried himself, so I barely noticed his limp and in his spotless white tunic and baggy white pants—well, shoot, that was what I'd come east for.

The lights were low in his apartment (aren't they always), there was bouncy music on the phonograph and, yeah, I wanted to dance. I really don't think I drank anything; in those days I didn't drink. Regardless, I found myself on the floor with my legs clamped shut as he tried to force his hand between them. He covered my face with closed-mouth kisses, saying impatiently, "Come on, Amah, loosen up."

“I don’t want you to do this,” I said, thinking the evening could still be saved. He backed off a little, stopped trying to force my legs open, let me sit up. “Come on,” he said smiling, “you can be a little nicer than this.”

That little brimless cap was still on his head and the light made his yellow skin look almost white. He touched my lips with his own and I let him. When he did it again, I touched his lips back. He pushed me; I grabbed at him and we both fell back. This time he was more determined. It was no better than being in the front seat of some jalopy in Ashland—I never would get in the back. That was like an open declaration that you were going to have sex. I didn’t think there was anything wrong with a few kisses, even if the guy wanted to put his tongue in your mouth. Sometimes you actually liked it and it never actually felt bad. But first the guy wanted to kiss you, then he wanted to touch your tits, and if you let him, the next thing you knew his hand was between your legs, under your dress if he could manage it, trying to sneak inside your drawers. And he wanted you to touch that little squishy thing in his crotch like brother man was trying to make my hand do then.

“Come on Amah, be nice.” You would be surprised how often I’ve heard that, and in what circumstances. The father of a friend once hit on me with those exact words, wanting me to tongue him even though I’d said I had too much respect for his wife. I almost went along with him because I didn’t want to hurt the old man’s feelings. Brothers in Ashland asked you to be “sweet” when they were trying to beg up on some pussy. But I’d never been importuned with just that sort of impatience. The Nigerian had thrown his leg across mine and had my other arm pinned under me. I kept dodging his kisses and thinking about Ashland.

Those guys treated every caress like a promise, and *True Confessions* talked real bad about girls who promised but didn’t deliver and made it quite clear what happened to those who gave it up without benefit of clergy. It had gotten so that, much as I liked to kiss, to cuddle, I never wanted boys to touch my places because they were never satisfied with touching just breasts and crotch. Not that I’d had much choice once I got to college. Seemed like as soon as a brother learned I was majoring in an academic subject—in those days you could major in education and p.e. and most black people did—I was off limits to them. So I was pretty startled to find myself damn near spread-eagled on this Nigerian’s floor in the District.

I reminded myself that I'd told homeboy (I couldn't pronounce his name then, can't remember it now) I didn't want to do this. Was even kissing an invitation? Didn't "no" mean anything? And why was *I* the one who had to be "nice"? I began to sniffle. It was, I'd discovered in high school, about the only way to really get a boy's attention in those situations, short of maybe finding something to crack him upside the head with—which left you open to equally physical retaliation. Oh, I know how to take better care of myself now, but then I didn't think he'd noticed, he was so intent on eliciting some passion from me. I sniffled louder.

"What's the matter Amah?" he finally asked like I was the one out of step with the program.

"You treat me just like some old white girl." I had worked up some tears by then and he was really rocked by that one. I scrambled away from his loosened grip.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

I don't know what I meant except back then we all thought white girls asked for "it," threw themselves at black men, practically begging to give "it" up. I only knew I meant what I said. And I knew he was trying to take something I hadn't offered. And, whatever it meant back then, when I made that comparison, he stopped trying to get under my dress.

"History or herstory?" Horace's voice startled her and for a moment she stared at him blankly, unable to place his face. "Sounds like some of both to me. I thought historians had to be more careful."

He speared a bit of sausage from her plate and popped it into his mouth and she knew herself back in this present. "If you didn't know where I was coming from, it'd be hard to understand how important Celeste was to me or why."

"I know that wasn't your last brush with sex in the District, or Africans for that matter."

He was kidding her and she allowed herself to smile. "No, but suffice it to say I didn't go out with any more Nigerians for a long, long while."

III

Horace's paper, as it turned out, was not really about turn-of-the-century black men's clubs but how the rampant and pervasive sexism of the period

had worked to destroy the egalitarianism forged by slavery between black men and women. Much of it was based on an unpublished short story collection by the editor of one of the small black weeklies that had struggled for survival during the period. The stories were little better than political tracts but Horace's reading of them was lively and sympathetic. She thought the papers of the other panelists were no more than routinely boring, but, in other circumstances, she might have found Horace's paper fascinating. Her attention, however, kept wandering: he had howled with delight at the abstract design printed on the nail of her left toe; his stubbled chin had pricked the skin in the curve of her neck. Embarrassed, she would pull herself back to the present, only to feel his mouth grazing the hysterectomy scar slicing across her belly, hear the soft plosive sound his lips made when he kissed her ear, the hoarsely whispered love words she'd thought only brothers knew drift out again. The intense odor of the love they'd made came back on her so strongly she feared for a moment that others must smell it, too. It was almost a relief to feel his arm, heavy and solid across her shoulders as they left the room after the session.

She said something intelligent about his paper; at least he seemed pleased. He suggested they skip the grouping, have a quiet dinner together and she readily agreed. "You never did say just how you met Ce."

"Oh. The story." She had forgotten about it, had really assumed that he was being no more than polite in listening to it.

"Yeah, 'The Story.'" He grinned. "I'm a sucker for tales of the sixties."

No heads had seemed to turn when they walked into the restaurant and she felt rather at ease sitting across from him. In New Orleans, even with his grey eyes, Horace didn't necessarily have to be white. And she could look him in the face now without actively remembering last night. "I bet you have some stories of your own: Vietnam, Stop the War?"

"You didn't have to be Dan Quayle not to fight." He had a soft voice, spoke in a caressing tone that made even the most casual remark sound intimate. He was offhand now, as though this were an old story. "I was in ROTC for a while in college, long enough to see the military wasn't the place for me. Mostly what you needed was a little education and some luck. Mine was I got married. Oh I manned some picket lines, swelled the anti-war chorus, stayed in school. But I wasn't doctrinaire enough for the Movements."

"I know what you mean," she said feelingly.

“Black Power?”

She nodded. “The fringes at least. For a long time I really did believe the black *man* was going to take over the earth.” They laughed.

“What about Ce?”

“Are you writing some kind of paper?” she asked suspiciously.

He shook his head. “Scout’s honor.”

“You know most of this is not true? You the one called it ‘herstory’,” she jeered, “like you don’t think fiction is true.”

“Bad joke,” he said, putting up his hands in mock defense. “But you know literature people don’t separate fact from fiction.”

They stared at each other across the table. He reached for her hands. “You don’t find stories like this in any book, Amah.” Smiling coaxingly, “Helps me understand some of that bad poetry.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say this stuff read precisely like a poem.” Tales of the sixties, she thought, and had to laugh. He watched her; she touched his hand. She, after all, had asked to tell them. “Okay, but I won’t say this is the whole story.” He ordered dinner and two ramos fizzes. She took up the tale again over Irish coffees.

I hung out with some of the single grad students after I put the Virgins down. One of them had been in residence during a recent renaissance of the department. If I mentioned the names, you’d know them: a Pulitzer Prize winning novelist, a Tony Award winning playwright had been instructors there. Neither had won those awards then and, though the stories were amusing—“Consider the Lilies,” another one had replied haughtily when asked if she’d made the dress she wore (and they always spoke in a honeyed southern drawl), “neither do they toil and neither do they spin. Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as I am. Chiiil’, my eye is on the cosmos.” Yes, that was Ce; she was a legend in my mind before I even knew her name. But I grew tired of hearing about people I didn’t know and had no hope of meeting.

I began going to events advertised on flyers and hand-lettered signs. I found the culturalists at the New School like that. Through them I met some nationalists who leased a row house on Third Street near the campus. They invited me to move in with them. The SNCC radicals found me at another such rally. They were plotting a coup against the integrationists in Atlanta—you know, get enough people in key positions to change the

direction of the organization. Weekends we'd drive to Philly, sometimes New York. I slept while the men planned direct actions and propaganda campaigns. The only one I remember is Black Women Enraged—over black men fighting in Vietnam for what they didn't have at home. I was to coordinate the women in the District. In those days my politics were pretty much defined by the men I slept with and, though I didn't know it then, this made my name known in some pretty radical places. I hadn't had many lovers, and those two were poles apart politically. But I was marked in certain circles because of them. Instead of coming to the big city, as I thought I was doing, I had, in many ways, moved from one small town to another—but, like your friends told me, that's the nature of the black middle class.

I moved in with a nationalist couple shortly after Christmas. By then the couple had expanded to include two co-wives. They, along with their new baby, had the first two floors of the row house. A sister named Nell rented the top floor, though I seldom saw her that winter. I took the basement room next to the furnace. The heat that was supposed to radiate from the hot water pipes that crisscrossed the basement ceiling never materialized and whenever I plugged in the hot plate they gave me to cook on, it blew all the fuses on the first floor. I spent as little time there as possible. I had become interested in the Harlem Renaissance, or at least the music. What time I didn't spend at the Library of Congress, the Folk Song Archive, I spent camped out on someone's couch, as long as their place was warm. I sometimes dressed in the basement but when I slept there, I always did so ready-rolled. And no one paid any attention to my mutterings about the heat. I muttered because I wasn't quite sure who to confront. The experiment seemed to have grown into a group marriage, at least there was another brother there some mornings when I went up to make coffee in the kitchen and another of the women seemed to be increasing.

Nell found me in the kitchen one morning, huddled over my third cup of coffee, wrapped in all my coats, muttering. I'd finally gotten up the nerve the night before to use the separate entrance that had been a selling point for the room. It was under the main entrance stairway, dark, damp, cobwebby—which is why I hadn't used it before—but the first floor people had been doing some muttering of their own about my using their entrance and stomping through the halls late at night. Of course, I wasn't stomping but the floors were uncarpeted and it seemed like you could hear every step

anybody took all through the house. I guess it really made a difference at ten or eleven o'clock at night when their baby was asleep. You could hear him crying all through the house, but, we "knew" they "had a baby" when we "moved in." Anyway, when I turned the key in the basement door that night, the lock fell out in my hand and the door came unhinged. I had propped my steamer trunk against the door but I sure didn't want to spend another night like that. I was sitting there wondering who to make my complaint to when Nell came down the back stairway.

She had a kind of brown baby beauty, skin the color of toast, unruly black hair. Men were always trying to care for her (though it was me they fed: I would pick dutifully at the steak or lobster, then ask to have it wrapped up; Nell was especially partial to vegetables and fish, but I thought we needed more red meat). Quite naturally, when she asked me, I told her what I was muttering about and, of course, she had her own list. She invited me up to her room for herb tea and by afternoon we were fast friends. She'd worked for a couple of years after high school to save tuition and was then what she called a mature undergraduate in "Vis Art." Art wasn't just painting and sculpture; it was process and performance. A good artist didn't just use media, she created it. She really talked like that, which was part of what drew me.

See, I worked at U. of I. one summer—a whole 'nother story—but the brothers my boyfriend hung with, grad students, older, sometimes just out of the service, they argued about Baudelaire and Padmore, Kant and Coltrane, Garvey, Malcolm, drank Beaujolais and Heineken and went careening through late night streets howling defiance at shuttered storefronts in white neighborhoods. This was during that brief lull some places had in the sixties when the enforcers of white power and black men could still sometimes deal with each other like everyone involved was human; so, as long as they were near the campus, they were treated like college students, told to keep it quiet, if the police stopped them at all. I knew enough to recognize the names they dropped, to know their conversation was heavy, to want company like this for myself. I was mostly homeboy's girl, never aspired to be much more—I thought nationalism was a stage we were all going through and, as a topic of conversation, was far more interesting than bid-whist or that other pass-the-time shit negroes at my undergrad school were into. I couldn't have said what I wanted, but I knew I wasn't going to find it as Ashland State College.

And Mission did satisfy my craving for *talk*. I told you, there were some sharp sisters in the District: Paulette, who worked in Summer School with me, first year law; her friend, Gina, a little pocket venus who was the slickest one, could take care of some business, likewise in architecture. I met Charlane, a big boned, wholesome sister who knew early childhood education—what black children needed in preschool in order to get a decent start in life—through Nell. Nell herself was into museum pieces then, took me to art shows with huge ugly paintings I would be afraid to hang in my house, and involved me in discussions of scale and value and making art public. I had never met a young woman who fucked just because she liked it; I was tickled she was so bodacious, and deceptively so. She had a sort of fey look about her and seemed too kind of out there to be so bold. And wouldn't you know, we had a lover in common? One of those exiled easterners, who, it turns out, really was from Harlem. They'd fucked around, as she put it, one summer when she was up there visiting an uncle. She rated him a lot lower than I did, but then she'd had more experience. She'd been arrested for sitting in on the steps of the White House a couple of years before we met. The picture of her slung between two policemen had been front page news across the country. The specter of jail hung over her the whole time I knew her. And neither her painting nor the music we both loved nor the men she insisted on laying, could keep that terror fully at bay. We were all out there scuffling, trying to be what the future said we could be: beautiful, successful, secure; we would be loved and valued as the brothers said our mothers had not been. None of us pretending we had more than a clue to the future but nothing had been promised to us and we hadn't even that to lose.

The nationalist kicked Nell and me out of the house in the spring. I think she'd threatened to throw one of the wives down the stairs; I refused to pay my rent—the door, the lock, the lack of heat. This was all about some money, but I think, really, didn't any of us want to be nationalist anymore, at least not all up in that one little house. Nell and I were one step ahead of being put out in the streets when I spotted the “For Rent” sign in the second floor bow window of an apartment on a quiet street, just below the tree line, not far from the park. Nell spotted the name of a sculptor whose name we both remembered from the Renaissance. (I'm making this up like a story. This was the District—Mission—in the sixties and we knew we stepped, if not into history, then at least into fiction and we were

determined to live our dreams.) The rent was more than we could afford but Nell exaggerated my stipend and her savings and talked us into a six-month lease. We both would have done more than a little lightweight lying to be near a working black artist.

Nell took the front room with the bow window that had called to us from the street, because of the light. I took the large second room with a fireplace I never used and a big sycamore brushing at the panes of its single window. I thought I'd missed the spring, it had rained so much. But the blossoms the rain washed away were only the beginning of the season in the district. The weather seemed to hover in that just-right warmth you sometimes get at the tail end of spring. Some nights Nell and I sat out on the fire escape and watched the traffic: big cars hurtling up Seventeenth Street toward the safety beyond the tree line, the occasional pedestrian. If you looked in just the right direction, you could see the hooded spire of the Washington Monument, its single red eye glaring down on the inner city that was then both shabby and black.

Mr. L, the sculptor, had the big, top floor studio with a ceiling that was mostly skylight. Ce lived beneath him on the third floor; for a long time, she was just this elegant figure—shadowy, seen from a distance—who drove a bad car. A Latvian refugee named Billie lived on the first floor. Nell and I speculated that she'd been involved with the CIA (though nothing she said had a thing to do with politics or espionage), created wild adventures for her as we sat on the fire escape late at night, and stopped talking about her completely after Nell saw the number tattooed on her wrist. Nell put me in the way of knowing them all; she was like that, refusing to be a stranger to the people she lived among.

I wasn't tight with Ce. She'd taught at Mission, not been just another literature graduate student, was then an instructor at a private college in Maryland. She was our senior and moved in circles far removed from ours, but every now and then she invited us up for coffee (she made that rich, creole coffee her mamma sent from down home—strong, sweet, brown, the roasted whole bean that Ce ground fresh herself). I saw in Ce what Nell saw in Mr. L: myself, down the road, you know; if I worked hard and did. . . . What? I wasn't sure. I had read my future in the present of Mission's female Victorianist, a big, paper-bag colored woman, who worshipped at the shrines of dead white men, wore tweeds and oxfords and hadn't married until her mid-forties.

I admired Ce for all the things we weren't supposed to back then: a mustard colored Jag sedan, not quite old enough to be classic; elegant clothes that didn't come off any rack; a coolly minimalist apartment, almost Zen in its sparseness, except for the small collection of black art covering the walls and that tub of *New Yorkers*. Once, she had talked me through the bronze miniatures and assemblages, postcard size oils by Mr. L that she owned, pointing out the repetitive features, the gapping angular knees of the stick figures, a blue the color of bronze patina daubed between them. In the most recent work, the figures were cast in no recognizably human posture, covered all over in that streaky green-blue. When she finished, I felt almost like I'd invaded his privacy, she made his quest seem so alive in the work.

She was that rich black brown that hinted gold when you expect red or even blue, with a profile the government should have coined. Tall, slim, with what they called when I was coming up "ass for days." But it wasn't just that Ce was always togged; Mission was known for its dressers, its raconteurs and characters, and Ce had achieved legendary status among them. Her dissertation was on some metaphysical poet, whom she could quote at will, ending with, "that line, chiiil', he *worked* that line!" Which always tickled me, to hear her speak of some dead Englishman in that raucous tone of voice. Oh, I knew by then literature wasn't for me, but I liked following a trail of ideas, piecing together stories from bits and hints, the way one thing can suggest ten or twenty others. I could have stayed in Founders for days at a time, just riffing through pages and papers, sampling sentences, paragraphs, thinking. Our people had left us a rich record; we didn't have to rely on the white man's mouth to verify ourselves, not if we would take the time to read. It seemed to me a worthwhile endeavor to help recover those records, for the revolution, for the greater good, because I liked the cool dark depths of Founders and the worlds I found there. I wanted to "be" a historian; I didn't too much know how one "did" history, but I knew it wasn't in me trying to organize enraged black women.

I had another radical boyfriend—not because I was so radical; I wasn't. Men, though I didn't know it, were my politics. The radical nationalists were simply the men who took me up. Ce, and a lot of that civil rights crowd, thought the nationalists, especially the political nationalists, like my friend, were silly. "A black nation? Where? Not in the New World! Not on the continent!" Joseph and his Brothers had to be our new text. Some of the

arts people Nell hung with thought they were fascist—though they'd never say this where it would be overheard. BrotherMan was to the extreme right of the NUART crowd—art that didn't make black people mad wasn't worth his attention. I saw that and more in them. The nationalists were dreamers, you know, weird visionaries who, it seemed to me then, just might make their shit work, which kind of awed me. I mean, what would it be like if black people ruled the earth? No worse than what white men had put us through. Except when it came to that killing shit—and that got to be a very big “except”—what they said made perfect sense to me. It put me on a tantalizing edge to contemplate this, gave me a giddiness that was part fear, part joy. I couldn't name this then; I handled most of my differences with others by not speaking of them.

The brother had been on me about organizing some women. This day we were up at the New School, they had a storefront on Georgia Avenue. I got so tickled thinking about Paulette and Nell out there marching—they would be enraged all right—that I slipped and told him I was a scholar not an organizer, that I wanted to teach at Mission or some other major black college. He walked over to the three-shelf library and pulled down a book called *The Black Historians*, published in the late fifties. He opened it up to the table of contents, held the book so I could see it, and ran his finger down the page, all the while looking at me. He turned the page and ran his finger down the leaf; he stopped halfway down the next page. There was only one woman in the entire book. She was listed under “Lay People.” He turned to the entry which filled less than a third of the page. Laura Eliza Wilkes. His finger underlined “teacher in the public schools of the District,” or words to that effect. Neither of us had said a word through all of this. When I finally looked at him, he snapped the book closed. “Better go on and get you that teaching credential, earth woman; our young people need strong sistas in the classroom.” I didn't say anything. After a while, I got my books and left.

It was the middle of the day but I walked from Georgia Avenue damn near to Connecticut and arrived at the apartment, sweaty and tired as well as mad. Ce was just coming in, impeccable, incredibly cool, not even a shine in all that heat. She looked at me, and looked at me again, then invited me up for coffee.

Ce's place made you forget that it was in the middle of the ghetto; sitting there, drinking coffee out of real china cups, all homeboy's mess seemed

just that: reactionary claptrap I didn't need to concern myself about. Ce had been the first black homecoming queen at Tubman Institute, that bastion of blue-veined black women. (Ce turned her head when she said this, as though it were something to be ashamed of and I never quite caught that. Was she embarrassed for herself or the institution?) She was what brothers in *Ebony* and on the block said they wanted and couldn't find: a beautiful, intellectual sister, who could get down without getting dirty, who knew how to use the right fork, when to play Mozart *and* Monk. And Celeste was black, hair nappy as steel wool under her perm, and beautiful. I thought we had changed our tune forever and even someone as brown as me might be pretty.

Except I kept flashing back on Ms. Wilkes, the final line in the entry: she complained bitterly to Woodson because he wouldn't review her work in the *Journal of Negro History*. I wouldn't let myself really *read* that entry until I came west, but her complaint stuck in my mind. I asked Ce if it were true that she'd gotten a raw deal at Mission. I almost had to put her answer together like you do the meaning of a poem. It seemed to me that what she described was an almost willful veiling in awful imitations of white people and self-satisfied mediocrity, too much like a novel to be funny. This was what the nationalist had been telling me all along: the negroes at Mission were not ready.

By this time, we were into what she called a very soft—something or other, almost like a German October wine, but drier. It looked like sunshine in a glass. We were both smashed. She didn't miss a beat when she said her husband had left her for some white woman and I didn't even blink. I mean, I thought it was—what? sad? regrettable?—but Ce was always with some suave brother. And sometimes you had to look very close to see the brother in them—and even then couldn't be sure. I thought it uncouth to ask, though again, Nell and I sat in the sycamore leaves and speculated, scandalized and intrigued, about the white men who must be dying to get into her drawers. Fine as she was I knew she wouldn't be alone forever or even for long.

Go on and get your degree, Ce told me that day, you've put in too much time to quit over some little boy. I hadn't said a word about the conversation with my radical friend, but after this, I figured I wouldn't try anymore to hold onto things I just liked; since grief was inevitable, I would only be shot through the grease for things I craved or loved.

“And, and—”

Assured that it was safe by waiters probably anxious to go home, Amah and Horace had walked the few blocks back to the hotel, strolled really, arms touching, now and then holding hands—when Amah wasn’t gesturing. Returned to the present, she looked at Horace slant-eyed. He had stopped in front of the hotel; they were framed now in its lighted doorway. “And what?” she asked him.

“Well, you’re not going to leave it there, are you? That’s not the end of the story.”

Amah turned and entered the lobby, aware suddenly of how much she had talked, how much she had left unsaid and anxious now simply to file Celeste under “My Favorite Character.” They crossed the lobby in silence and she saw them as others must: a balding, pony-tailed white man, a greying dreadlocked sister: aging relics of a bygone era of integration.

Horace prodded her in the side. They had the elevator to themselves. He leered playfully at her and mimed talking with one hand. She roused herself. The end of the story. “I went south that summer; Nell went to jail; Ce stayed on in the District. The next time I saw her, she was talking ‘that line, chiiil’, check out that line’ about Richard Wright and ghosting speeches for the Movement. Eventually she finished the dissertation on Baldwin. Sounds almost allegorical doesn’t it? Her journey from a seventeenth century white poet to a gay black novelist writing on the edge of the twenty-first century? But most of us tripped like that; Martin’s murder scared us, pushed us all toward the root. A lot of the sister literati took up ‘Jimmy,’ as they called him; he, at least, had not written black women out of his stories.”

Amah looked away, wishing she had not sounded so bitter. What in the world had she thought she was getting into with this tale? Some hip little parable that suggested everything and told nothing? And look who she’d told it to. The elevator doors opened; they stepped out into the empty hallway. “I saw Ce in Elmira that time I told you about, but our paths rarely cross now.” It sounded lame. “Ce moves in the world of the old negro middle class—you should see her house in the District—and I—”

“You’re like me,” Horace said, taking her hand again, “part of the world created by civil rights, northern, urban, now.” He lifted her hand to his face; she let him press it hard against his stubbled cheek.

IV

Amah lay awake listening to Horace's regular breathing, wishing she'd never mentioned Celeste. Horace would see her old friend as an adolescent crush, a "role model," in the hip parlance, not the figure of an epic quest who haunted Amah's imagination. She closed her eyes. On her rare visits to the District, Amah sometimes called Celeste and once or twice had stayed overnight in the townhouse, but they moved always on the edge of each other's worlds, brought together on those occasions by Afro-American studies where Amah was now the more widely known. She and Celeste had taught one winter at nearby colleges in upstate New York. Celeste invited Amah to talk to several of her classes. One still stayed, in those days, with the people who'd ask you to speak on campus, usually the lone sister or brother at some previously all-white college trying to plant the discipline of black studies and keep faith with black students brought in from the inner city. Now there was seldom time for more than litanies and platitudes from black people when one lectured or did a seminar. Whatever could not be laughed at would only be talked of at infrequent single-sex gatherings that no longer sufficed to purge the terror of swimming in milk or clarify a collective vision. In those days rap still meant to talk with someone and one still thought talk would do some good. You listened late into the night as your hosts talked about their work, the research that was slowly changing American history, that would, however grudging, secure their tenure in the grove heart; talked, too, about the campus and its town, what they did to survive there.

Horace erupted into soft snores. Give him his due; Amah shook him, none too gently, without turning. Survival would not have been possible without Horace and others like him who had been caught by—what? The Negro Problem? The Black Experience? Or nothing more than some trail of ideas about the country and its changing character. Some of them had to be committed to that. Horace turned over without rousing, his breathing subsiding quickly into regularity again. Thank god she hadn't mentioned Celeste catching McClellan with a white woman when she went to deliver one of those ghosted speeches. Amah choked back a laugh, seeing Celeste stretched out in the middle of the lobby of the Rock Creek Hilton, flailing her arms, hammering her heels into the floor. That would never make it into the official biographies of the Movement—even if it were true. The

brother who'd told her of the incident swore to its veracity, but he loved scandalous stories and couldn't stand civil rights negroes. God knows she had wanted to lie in the middle of some public place and scream at the injustice of it, the disappointment, the hurt. Not because she had a thing for the man—the good reverend had been married to the same sister almost fifty years and Amah would bet Celeste's mother was at least on nodding terms with the reverend's missus. It was the white woman; the black thing.

Amah turned on her side, her back to Horace. What had she told him and his rowdy friends about that night in Elmira? That she and Celeste had pondered the questions of the decade? That history had clustered in the shadows of that bedroom? Surely the ghosts of Sojourner and Harriet had listened as Celeste troubled the waters about her last lover, a brother who had been one of the hawkish young intellectuals around Malcolm there at the last (which suited Amah's rather idealized memory of her; Celeste would always have some brother, an artist, someone high up in the Movement or urban politics). These were Amah's ideas of a prince. Celeste, so the wind said, had dated them all and was, that night, as bereft as anyone Amah had met on her circuits. It was not, she told Amah, that brothers were faithless, sisters mean. Most of her arguments with Kenny were meaningless; those that weren't were easily settled because they were about something—who would take out the trash, would they go to that fundraiser or this opening. The other arguments were merciless and usually ended with him shaking her by the shoulders, screaming, What do you want? That's what sisters had been asking brothers for years. What do you want? And now here he was asking me: What more do you want? Shaking me, shaking me. Why can't you just take what I got to give? It was so funny, Celeste had said, because I thought that was just what I was doing.

Amah opened her eyes to the darkness. Had she misread Celeste all those years before? Go on and get your degree, Celeste had said the day Olufemi (slave name Michael Carter; she could very well have said his name—she had heard of him only once in all these years) told her she didn't need a PhD to organize black women. She'd thought Celeste meant that Olu was too small-minded to deal with a really smart sister, the way she called him little boy and dismissed the Action League's plans for black rebellion as romantic. Maybe, Amah thought now, all Celeste was saying was what old folks told young ones: Get that education, you'll always have that. Sending us off after intangibles, while other women got the men, the house and

kids. Not that she grudged anyone their children, she smiled grimly. Especially not now when motherhood seemed eternal. But she had regretted the “plumbing,” the lost uterus that for too long had made her feel like half a woman. Finally she had realized in its absence how the womb had held her captive, the monthly filling with blood, the dangerous seeds it could hold sprouting into people whose lives you were supposed to value more than you did your own. No, it wasn’t kids she missed, but the sharing, the knowing of another person almost as well as you knew yourself.

Horace reached for her, though still asleep, throwing his arm across her waist, his hair and face brushing against her back. That was real; not just Horace’s arm, but Horace’s hair, slick, fine, soft, making her conscious as his arm did not that this was not a brother beside her.

“What was the real story behind the ‘Lost Literati Expedition?’”

Amah balled up a napkin and half-heartedly threw it toward Horace. “Pest.” They were at breakfast again, a meal he insisted on eating. She had insisted on the gallery; they sat across from each other in watery sunlight, wrapped in the thick terry cloth robes the hotel provided, overlooking a courtyard planted in dense tropical greens.

Horace leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head. “I feel like I’m on the trail of some modern monomyth.”

He was sharp but he was bluffing, of course, would later be the main one to act as if race were only now and then present at the table. And now he thought he could read this. “Ce looking for love.” She grinned without humor.

“Or Amah,” he said softly, “or Alice, Barbara, Deborah.”

Lois and they were right: the country had reduced them all to a single story, its way of managing memory. Which was why it gave them no ease to hear new details, why they didn’t want to hear about Celeste. “Let’s give Ce’s story a rest,” wishing for her shades in the silvery light, but she could not bring herself to move.

“Tribal secrets? ‘A black thang,’ right?” He was, she saw, as intense as she. “Don’t you know, I won’t let you hide behind race?” As always he spoke softly. Gingerly, he touched her shoulder. “Maybe I won’t understand, but we’ll never know unless you try me.”

“Careful what you wish for.” Keep it light she thought a bit wildly. What could they load this baggage onto, good sex and an apocryphal story? She pulled the robe close around her. He watched her; if they could stay like this, the two of them, the sunlight, the half-eaten meal, this moment.

“Ce, in your story,” Horace said, “she used to be Mason’s lady? What was her name, Celeste?” So much for *defs*, Amah thought sourly; he cheesed rather cheekily. “She has a memorable way of expressing herself and you do a pretty fair impression of her voice.” He paused. “You know Mason was better than most of that crowd.”

“You know Kenny?” He would, she thought; he was as much a part of this world as she.

“Only enough to say hello to. My ex-wife,” he continued when she said no more, “used to work in social welfare with one of Rankin’s wives. She wore dark glasses to work a lot. Allison, my ex, thought Rankin went in for physical abuse.”

He was trying to pacify her, she realized, offering her Rankin, discredited, reduced to cult status, for Kenneth Mason, the urban theorist who had now been taken up by black British intellectuals. As though what they spoke of was just another deal. But it wasn’t just Mason. “Lonnie Fellows was from Indianapolis. I grew up with one of his cousins. He recommended me for my first Fulbright.”

They were speaking of the men who had articulated NUART, the principles and theories that had helped to spawn the bardic poetry of black power, the forerunner of rap, the shoestring flicks that had step-fathered the current wave of black cinema, powered a heady racial affirmation that, briefly, at the tail end of the sixties, had been almost religious. Fellows had intuited the early decline of black nationalism, forsworn it as a form of separatism and now headed African Studies at Harvard.

“You think Lonnie sold out?”

“What did we have to sell?” she asked, thinking of the sixties, all those broken dreams.

“A lot of black people in academia owe him their present positions.”

“And I’m one of them.” If they had lived in that kind of world, she would have been one of Lonnie’s House, a freeholder within his sway, for he really had become a kind of godfather in the grove and black arts, benevolent, patriarchal. She guessed this was the Fellows Horace knew; maybe he knew the other stories, the ones that bad-mouthed Lonnie’s lion’s

heart, ridiculed his person. But Horace would not, she thought, be the first to tell them. A chill breeze lifted strands of his hair. Shivering a little, Amah turned away unable to repeat Lonnie's advice to young brothers: get white women; black women knew nothing about supporting a brother's mind, had no connections in the arts. But she could not resist prodding Horace. "I always wondered if maybe Mason didn't go in for a little verbal abuse, try to pull intellectual rank on you."

"Aw, come on," he said good-naturedly, "Celeste wouldn't stand for that."

"Love," she said flatly, "makes you do foolish things."

She thought he would try to stare her down but he grinned sheepishly. "Anyway, maybe he was just better on paper than in person. Lots of people are, including yours truly."

"Not entirely," she said lightly and laughed when, after a moment, he caught her meaning and blushed.

"Come see the New Year in with me, Amah," he said suddenly. He took her hands.

This was the touchiest man, she thought, but she held still. "And miss hopping john?" She felt rather breathless and, when he didn't respond, withdrew her hands to cut her cantaloupe and concentrated on that. "I'm surprised you haven't heard of the 'lost nigger expedition.'" She would give him what he'd asked for: this last piece of the Celeste trope. "A troop of buffalo soldiers—the black cavalry—lost out on the desert for nearly a month. Officially, the negroes didn't know where they were going; that's how History tells it. The truth is they were experienced fighters and, if anybody was lost, it was their young white captain." They laughed and she relaxed.

"So Celeste was following the white man's book and the rest followed because she was the leader?"

Any second now, Amah realized, she would ask him a question she really didn't want to know the answer to, that she did not want to answer herself—not in words. Not in words. "Going into New York that Sunday wasn't about leading or following. You remember that first Summer Institute in Black Studies?"

"The one that 'deconstructed' the pecking order in black studies?" he smiled wryly. "You were there?"

Good; that paid him back for knowing Kenny. “Not at the Institute; I lectured on oral histories.”

“People still talk about that seminar in code,” he said a bit enviously. “‘Politics,’” he grimaced, “always in quotes; THEORY; TEXT.”

“Celeste and a bunch of other sisters from the seminar met me at the airport, decked out just like Lois said, everything from head wraps to rumpled linen; me in my draw-string pants. They greeted me like I was their savior, which kind of took me aback. I mean, my first book really wasn’t History—at least according to my colleagues—just an old woman reminiscing about her daddy who had founded the only all-black town in California. I was still working on the story of the town, which is why I was buried in California. But every sister there acted like she knew me or wanted to, and Ce treated me as a peer. I was pretty impressed with myself.

“It wasn’t really me, of course. It was being in that college town in the middle of summer. We stuck out like flies in a glass of buttermilk. The bright colors and the tanned young faces of the white students give you some camouflage during the school year. But in the summer, that summer, I felt like we were the only people of color for miles around. Oh, I know that clown built his replica of a medieval campus right in the middle of the ghetto, but to walk that campus or the streets around there, you wouldn’t know it. So the sisters greeted me like a long lost someone; I was another body on their side when they ran the gauntlet of white eyes outside the dorm doors. As we did that next day, trying, unsuccessfully, to find someplace where we could linger over brunch and not cause a commotion. That’s why we took off for New York. *Seven Black Women in Search of Music*—as solace for our lost men and mission.”

“Lost—?”

“The instructors. . . .” Amah hesitated.

“Had white wives? Everyone figured that’s what the tension was about.”

“The instructors,” Amah said evenly, “prided themselves on talking about the literature without mentioning ‘black’ or ‘negro’; literature was good because it was literature, not because it had any relation to black life.”

“Well. . . .” Horace looked uncomfortable. He was one of the new critics, though nothing she had read of his took the arrogant, patronizing tone of some of that school. “The *theory* makes a certain sense.”

“Oh, the sisters thought it was a pretty apt description of the lives of most black male scholars. Anyway,” she shrugged, “the brothers had pretty much relegated what sisters were teaching to amateur status.”

“You make everything too personal, Amah.” He took her arms and faced her.

“It is my life, Horace.” She touched his face, felt his hands open. She should slip away; he would slip away and she would let him go; she had been here before. But neither of them moved. “How else am I to take it?” She opened her hands on the table. “I always do Kwanzaa, the last night anyway, with some friends. Why don’t you come see me for Valentine’s Day?” If I looked into the mirror now, she thought, I would see Celeste in Elmira, putting coffee bean finger to cinnamon lips to make sure I watch, saying softly, “They don’t love us.” Which ended their conversation in Elmira. She’d said what Amah’d felt in her heart for a long while. “They” were black men. Coming from Celeste, Amah thought it was profound.