THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

Zora Neale Hurston

Introduced by Zadie Smith,
and with an afterword by
Sherley Anne Williams

virago

VIRAGO

Published by Virago Press 1986

Reprinted 1987, 1990, 1992 (twice), 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2004 (twice), 2005, 2006, 2007

First published by J. B. Lippincott Company

This edition published by arrangement with Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., New York

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-86068-524-1

Papers used by Virago are natural, recyclable products made from wood grown in sustainable forests and certified in accordance with the rules of the Forest Stewardship Council

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc
Paper supplied by Hellefoss AS, Norway

Virago Press
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
Brettenham House
Lancaster Place
London WC2E 7EN

A Member of the Hachette Livre Group of Companies

www.virago.co.uk

TO
HENRY ALLEN MOE

Introduction

When I was fourteen I was given *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by my mother. I was reluctant to read it. I knew what she meant by giving it to me and I resented the inference. In the same spirit she had introduced me to *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The Bluest Eye*, and I had not liked either of them (better to say, I had not *allowed* myself to like either of them). I preferred my own freely chosen, heterogeneous reading list. I flattered myself I ranged widely in my reading, never choosing books for genetic or socio-cultural reasons. Spotting *Their Eyes Were Watching God* unopened on my bedside table, my mother persisted:

'But you'll like it.'

'Why, because she's *black*?'

'No – because it's really good writing.'

I had my own ideas of 'good writing'. It was a category that did not include aphoristic or overtly 'lyrical' language, mythic imagery, accurately rendered 'folk speech' or the love tribulations of women. My literary

defences were up in preparation for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Then I read the first page:

> Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men.
>
> Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly.

It was an aphorism, yet it had me pinned to the ground, unable to deny its strength. It capitalised Time (I was against the capitalisation of abstract nouns), but still I found myself melancholy for these nameless men and their inevitable losses. The second part, about women, struck home. It remains as accurate a description of my mother and me as I have ever read: *Then they act and do things accordingly.* Well, all right then. I relaxed in my chair a little and lay down my pencil. I inhaled that book. Three hours later I was finished and crying a lot, for reasons that both were, and were not, to do with the tragic finale.

I lost many literary battles the day I read *Their Eyes*

Were Watching God. I had to concede that occasionally aphorisms have their power. I had to give up the idea that Keats had a monopoly on the lyrical:

> She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-nearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid.[1]

I had to admit that mythic language is startling when it's good:

> Death, that strange being with the huge square toes who lived way in the West. The great one who lived in the straight house like a platform without sides to it, and without a roof. What need has Death for a cover, and what winds can blow against him?

[1] But I still resist 'limp and languid'.

My resistance to dialogue (encouraged by Nabokov, whom I idolised) struggled and then tumbled before Hurston's ear for black colloquial speech. In the mouths of unlettered people she finds the bliss of quotidian metaphor:

> 'If God don't think no mo' 'bout 'em than Ah do, they's a lost ball in de high grass.'

Of wisdom lightly worn:

> 'To my thinkin' mourning oughtn't tuh last no longer'n grief.'

Her conversations reveal individual personalities, accurately, swiftly, as if they had no author at all:

> 'Where y'all come from in sich uh big haste?' Lee Coker asked.
>
> 'Middle Georgy,' Starks answered briskly. 'Joe Starks is mah name, from in and through Georgy.'
>
> 'You and yo' daughter goin' tuh join wid us in fellowship?' the other reclining figure asked. 'Mighty glad to have yuh. Hicks is the name. Guv'nor Amos Hicks from Buford, South Carolina. Free, single, disengaged.'
>
> 'I god, Ah ain't nowhere near old enough to

have no grown daughter. This here is mah wife.'

Hicks sank back and lost interest at once.

'Where is de Mayor?' Starks persisted. 'Ah wants tuh talk wid *him*.'

'Youse uh mite too previous for dat,' Coker told him. 'Us ain't got none yit.'

Above all, I had to let go of my objection to the love tribulations of women. The story of Janie's progress through three marriages confronts the reader with the significant idea that the choice one makes between partners, between one man and another (or one woman and another) stretches far beyond romance. It is, in the end, the choice between values, possibilities, futures, hopes, arguments (shared concepts that fit the world as you experience it), languages (shared words that fit the world as you believe it to be) and lives. A world you share with Logan Killicks is evidently not the same world you will share with Vergible 'Tea Cake' Woods. In these two discreet worlds, you will not even think the same way; a mind trapped with Logan is freed with Tea Cake. But how can we talk of freedoms? In practical terms, a black woman in turn-of-the-century America, a woman like Janie, or like Hurston herself, had approximately the same civil liberties as a farm animal: 'De nigger woman is de mule uh de world.' So goes Janie's grandmother's famous line – it hurt my pride to read it. It hurts Janie,

too; she rejects the realpolitik of her grandmother, embarking on an existential revenge which is of the imagination and impossible to restrict:

> She knew that God tore down the old world every evening and built a new one by sun-up. It was wonderful to see it take form with the sun and emerge from the gray dust of its making. The familiar people and things had failed her so she hung over the gate and looked up the road towards way off.

That part of Janie that is looking for someone (or something) that 'spoke for far horizon' has its proud ancestors in Elizabeth Bennet, in Dorothea Brooke, in Jane Eyre, even – in a very debased form – in Emma Bovary. Since the beginning of fiction concerning the love tribulations of women (which is to say, since the beginning of fiction) the 'romantic quest' aspect of these fictions has been too often casually ridiculed: not long ago I sat down to dinner with an American woman who told me how disappointed she had been to finally read *Middlemarch* and find that it was, 'Just this long, whiny, trawling search for a man!' Those who read *Middlemarch* in that way will find little in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to please them. It's about a girl who takes some time to find the man she really loves. It is about the discovery of self in and through another. It suggests that

even the dark and terrible banality of racism can recede to a vanishing point when you understand, and are understood by, another human being. Goddamnit if it doesn't claim that love sets you free. These days 'self-actualisation' is the aim, and if you can't do it alone you are admitting a weakness. The potential rapture of human relationships to which Hurston gives unabashed expression, the profound 'self-crushing love' that Janie feels for Tea Cake, may, I suppose, look like the dull finale of a 'long, whiny, trawling search for a man'. For Tea Cake and Janie, though, the choice of each other is experienced not as desperation, but as discovery, and the need felt on both sides causes them joy, not shame. That Tea Cake would not be *our* choice, that we disapprove of him often, and despair of him occasionally, only lends power to the portrait. He seems to act with freedom, and Janie chooses him freely. We have no power; we only watch. Despite the novel's fairytale structure (as far as husbands go, third time's the charm), it is not a novel of wish-fulfilment, least of all the fulfilment of *our* wishes.[2] It is odd to diagnose weakness where lovers themselves do not feel it.

After that first reading of the novel, I wept, and not only for Tea Cake, and not simply for the perfection of

[2] Again, *Middlemarch* is an interesting comparison. Readers often prefer Lydgate and are disappointed at Dorothea's choice of Ladislaw.

the writing, nor even the real loss I felt upon leaving the world contained in its pages. It meant something more than all that to me, something I could not, or would not, articulate. Later, I took it to the dinner table, still holding on to it, as we do sometimes with books we are not quite ready to relinquish.

'So?' my mother asked.

I told her it was basically sound.

At fourteen, I did Zora Neale Hurston a serious critical disservice. I feared my 'extra-literary' feelings for her. I wanted to be an objective aesthete and not a sentimental fool. I disliked the idea of 'identifying' with the fiction I read: I wanted to like Hurston because she represented 'good writing', not because she represented me. In the seventeen years since, Zora Neale Hurston has gone from being a well-kept, well-loved secret amongst black women of my mother's generation, to an entire literary industry – biographies[3] and films and Oprah and African-American literature departments all pay homage to her life[4] and work as avatars of black woman-ness. In the process, a different kind of critical disservice is being done to her; an overcompensation in the opposite direc-

[3] The (very good) biography is *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* by Valerie Boyd. Also very good is *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, collected and edited by Carla Kaplan.

[4] *Dust Tracks on a Road* is Hurston's autobiography.

tion. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie is depressed by Joe Starks's determination to idolise her: he intends to put her on a lonely pedestal before the whole town and establish a symbol (The Mayor's Wife) in place of the woman she is. Something similar has been done to Hurston herself. She is like Janie, sat on her porch-pedestal ('Ah done nearly languished tuh death up dere'), far from the people and things she really cared about, representing only the ideas and beliefs of her admirers, distorted by their gaze. In the space of one volume of collected essays, we find a critic arguing that the negative criticism of Hurston's work represents an 'intellectual lynching' by black men, white men and white women; a critic dismissing Hurston's final work with the sentence, '*Seraph on the Suwanee* is not even about black people, which is no crime, but *is* about white people who are bores, which is'; and another explaining the 'one great flaw' in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: Hurston's 'curious insistence' on having her main character's tale told in the omniscient third person instead of allowing Janie her 'voice outright'. We are in a critical world of some banality here, one in which most of our nineteenth-century heroines would be judged oppressed creatures, cruelly deprived of the therapeutic first-person voice. It is also a world in which what is called the 'Black Female Literary tradition' is beyond reproach:

> Black women writers have consistently rejected the falsification of their Black female experience, thereby avoiding the negative stereotypes such falsification has often created in the white American female and Black male literary traditions. Unlike many of their Black male and white female peers, Black women writers have usually refused to dispense with whatever was clearly Black and/or female in their sensibilities in an effort to achieve the mythical 'neutral' voice of universal art.[5]

Gratifying as it would be to agree that black women writers 'have consistently rejected the falsification' of their experience, the honest reader knows that this is simply not the case. In place of negative falsification, we have nurtured, in the past thirty years, a new fetishisation. Black female protagonists are now too often unerringly strong and soulful; they are sexually voracious and unafraid; they take the unreal forms of earth mothers, African queens, divas, spirits of history; they process grandly through novels thick with a breed of greeting-card lyricism. They have little of the complexity, the flaws and uncertainties, depth and beauty of Janie Crawford and the novel she springs

[5] All the critical voices quoted above can be found in *Zora Neale Hurston's* Their Eyes Were Watching God: *Modern Critical Interpretations*, ed. Harold Bloom.

from. They are pressed into service as role models to patch over our psychic wounds; they are perfect[6]; they overcompensate. The truth is, black women writers, while writing many wonderful things[7], have been no more or less successful at avoiding the falsification of human experience than any other group of writers. It is not the Black Female Literary Tradition that makes Hurston great. It is Hurston herself. Zora Neale Hurston – capable of expressing human vulnerability as well as its strength, lyrical without sentiment, romantic and yet rigorous, and one of the few truly eloquent writers of sex – is as exceptional amongst black women writers as Tolstoy is amongst white male writers.[8]

It is, however, true that Hurston rejected the 'neutral universal' for her novels – she wrote unapologetically in the black-inflected dialect in which she was raised. It took bravery to do that: the result was hostility and disinterest. In 1937, black readers were embarrassed by the unlettered nature of the dialogue and white readers

[6] Hurston, by contrast, wanted her writing to demonstrate the fact that 'Negroes are no better nor no worse, and at times as boring as everybody else'.

[7] Not least of which is Alice Walker's original introduction to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. By championing the book she rescued Hurston from forty years of obscurity.

[8] A footnote for the writers in the audience: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was written in seven weeks.

preferred the exoticism of her anthropological writings. Who wanted to read about the poor Negroes one saw on the corner every day? Hurston's biographers make clear that no matter what positive spin she put on it, her life was horribly difficult: she finished life working as a cleaner, and died in obscurity. It is understandable that her reclaiming should be an emotive and personal journey for black readers and black critics. But still, one wants to make a neutral and solid case for her greatness, to say something more substantial than: 'She is my sister and I love her.' As a reader, I want to claim fellowship with 'good writing' without limits; to be able to say that Hurston is my sister and Baldwin is my brother, and so is Kafka my brother, and Nabokov, and Woolf my sister, and Eliot and Ozick. Like all readers, I want my limits to be drawn by my own sensibilities, not by my melanin count. These forms of criticism that make black women the privileged readers of a black woman writer go against Hurston's own grain. She saw things otherwise: 'When I set my hat at a certain angle and saunter down Seventh Avenue . . . the cosmic Zora emerges . . . How *can* anybody deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me!'

This is exactly right. No one should deny themselves the pleasure of Zora – of whatever colour or background or gender. She's too delightful not be shared. We all deserve to savour her neologisms ('sankled',

'monstropolous', 'rawbony') or to read of the effects of a bad marriage, sketched with tragic accuracy:

> The years took all the fight out of Janie's face. For a while she thought it was gone from her soul. No matter what Jody did, she said nothing. She had learned how to talk some and leave some. She was a rut in the road. Plenty of life beneath the surface but it was kept beaten down by the wheels. Sometimes she stuck out into the future, imagining her life different from what it was. But mostly she lived between her hat and her heels, with her emotional disturbances like shade patterns in the woods – come and gone with the sun. She got nothing from Jody except what money could buy, and she was giving away what she didn't value.

The visual imagination on display in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* shares its clarity and iconicity with Christian story-telling – many scenes in the novel put one in mind of the bold-stroke illustrations in a children's bible: young Janie staring at a photograph, not understanding that the black girl in the crowd is her; Joe Starks atop a dead mule's distended belly, giving a speech; Tea Cake bitten high on his cheekbone by that rabid dog. I watched the TV footage of Hurricane Katrina with a strong sense of déjà vu, thinking of Hurston's flood rather than

Noah's: 'Not the dead of sick and ailing with friends at the pillow and the feet . . . [but] the sodden and the bloated; the sudden dead, their eyes flung wide open in judgment . . .'

Above all, Hurston is essential universal reading because she is neither self-conscious nor restricted. Raised in the real Eatonville, Florida, an all-black town, this unique experience went some way to making Hurston the writer she was. She grew up a fully human being, unaware that she was meant to consider herself a minority, an other, an exotic, or something depleted in rights, talents, desires and expectations. As an adult, away from Eatonville, she found the world was determined to do its best to remind her of her supposed inferiority, but Hurston was already made, and the metaphysical confidence she claimed for her life ('I am not tragically colored') is present, with equal, refreshing force, in her fiction. She liked to yell 'Culllaaaah Struck!'[9] when she entered a fancy party – almost everybody was. But it is of fundamental significance to her writing that Hurston herself was not. 'Blackness', as she understood it and wrote about it, is as natural and inevitable and complete to her as, say, 'Frenchness' is to Flaubert. It is also as complicated, as full of blessings and curses. One can be no more removed from it than from one's arm, but it is no more the total

[9] See chapter 16 for a sad portrayal of a truly colour-struck lady, Mrs Turner.

measure of one's being than an arm is. It begins a million of your songs – it ends none of them.

But still after all that there is something else to say – and the 'neutral universal' of literary criticism pens me in and makes it difficult. To write critically in English, even to write a little introduction, is to aspire to neutrality, to the high style of, say, Lionel Trilling or Edmund Wilson. In the high style, one's loves never seem partial or personal, or even like 'loves', because white novelists are not white novelists but simply 'novelists', and white characters are not white characters but simply 'human', and criticism of both is not partial or personal but a matter of aesthetics. Such critics will always sound like the neutral universal, and the black women who have championed *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in the past, and the one doing so now, will seem like black women talking about a black book. When I began this introduction, it felt important to distance myself from that idea. By doing so, I misrepresent a vital aspect of my response to this book, one that is entirely personal, as any response to a novel shall be. Fact is, I *am* a black woman[10], and a slither of this book goes straight in to my soul, I suspect, for that reason. And though it is, to me, a vulgar absurdity to say, 'Unless you are a black woman, you will never fully comprehend this

[10] I think this was the point my mother was trying to make.

novel', it is also disingenuous to claim that many black women do not respond to this book in a particularly powerful manner that would seem 'extra-literary'. Those aspects of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that plumb so profoundly the ancient build-up of cultural residue that is (for convenience sake) called 'Blackness'[11] are the parts that my own 'Blackness', as far as it goes, cannot help but respond to personally. At fourteen I couldn't find words (or words I liked) for the marvellous feeling of recognition that came with these characters who had my hair, my eyes, my skin, even the ancestors of the rhythm of my speech.[12] These forms of identification are so natural to white readers – (Of course Rabbit Angstrom is like me! Of course Madame Bovary is like me!) – that they believe themselves above personal identification, or at least that they are identifying only at the highest, metaphysical levels (His soul is like my soul. He is human; I am human). White readers often believe they are colour-blind.[13] I always thought I was a colour-blind reader –

[11] As Kafka's *The Trial* plumbs that ancient build-up of cultural residue that is called 'Jewishness'.

[12] Down on the muck, Janie and Tea Cake befriend the 'Saws', workers from the Caribbean.

[13] Until they read books featuring non-white characters. I once overheard a young white man at a book festival say to his friend, 'Have you read the new Kureishi? Same old thing – loads of Indian people.' To which you want to reply, 'Have you read the new Franzen? Same old thing – loads of white people.'

until I read this novel, and that ultimate cliché of black life that is inscribed in the word 'soulful' took on new weight and sense for me. But what does *soulful* even mean? The dictionary has it this way: 'expressing or appearing to express deep and often sorrowful feeling.' The culturally black meaning adds several more shades of colour. First shade: *soulfulness* is sorrowful feeling transformed into something beautiful, creative and self-renewing, and – as it reaches a pitch – ecstatic. It is an alchemy of pain. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, when the townsfolk sing for the death of the mule, this is an example of *soulfulness*. Another shade: to be soulful is to follow and *fall in line* with a feeling, to go where it takes you and not to go against its grain.[14] When young Janie takes her lead from the blossoming tree and sits on her gate-post to kiss a passing boy, this is an example of *soulfulness*. A final shade: the word *soulful*, like its Jewish cousin, schmaltz[15], has its roots in the digestive tract. 'Soul food' is simple, flavoursome, hearty, unfussy, with spice. When Janie puts on her overalls and joyfully goes to work in the muck with Tea Cake, this is an example of *soulfulness*.[16]

[14] At its most common and banal: catching a beat, following a rhythm.

[15] In the *Oxford English Dictionary*: '***Schmaltz*** **n**. informal. excessive sentimentality, esp. in music or movies. ORIGIN 1930s: from Yiddish *schmaltz*, from German *Schmalz* "dripping, lard."'

[16] Of course, there are few things less soulful than attempting to define soulfulness.

This is a beautiful novel about soulfulness. That it should be so is a tribute to Hurston's skill. She makes 'culture' – that slow and particular[17] and artificial accretion of habit and circumstance – seem as natural and organic and beautiful as the sunrise. She makes 'black woman-ness' appear a real, tangible quality, an essence I can almost believe I share, however improbably, with millions of complex individuals across centuries and continents and languages and religions . . .

Almost – but not quite. Better to say, when I'm reading this book, I believe it, with my whole soul. It allows me to say things I wouldn't normally. Things like: *She is my sister and I love her.*

Zadie Smith
Rome, June 2007

[17] In literary terms, we know that there is a tipping point in which the cultural particular – while becoming no less culturally particular – is accepted by readers as the neutral universal. The previously 'Jewish fiction' of Phillip Roth is now 'fiction'. We have moved from the particular complaints of Portnoy to the universal claims of Everyman.

1

Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men.

Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly.

So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead. Not the dead of sick and ailing with friends at the pillow and the feet. She had come back from the sodden and the bloated; the sudden dead, their eyes flung wide open in judgment.

The people all saw her come because it was sundown. The sun was gone, but he had left his footprints in the sky. It was the time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences

all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment.

Seeing the woman as she was made them remember the envy they had stored up from other times. So they chewed up the back parts of their minds and swallowed with relish. They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty. A mood come alive. Words walking without masters; walking altogether like harmony in a song.

'What she doin' coming back here in dem overhalls? Can't she find no dress to put on?— Where's dat blue satin dress she left here in?— Where all dat money her husband took and died and left her?— What dat ole forty year ole 'oman doin' wid her hair swingin' down her back lak some young gal?— Where she left dat young lad of a boy she went off here wid?— Thought she was going to marry?— Where he left *her*?— What he done wid all her money?— Betcha he off wid some gal so young she ain't even got no hairs – why she don't stay in her class?—'

When she got to where they were she turned her face on the bander log and spoke. They scrambled a noisy 'good evenin'' and left their mouths setting open and their ears full of hope. Her speech was pleasant

enough, but she kept walking straight on to her gate. The porch couldn't talk for looking.

The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt. They, the men, were saving with the mind what they lost with the eye. The women took the faded shirt and muddy overalls and laid them away for remembrance. It was a weapon against her strength and if it turned out of no significance, still it was a hope that she might fall to their level some day.

But nobody moved, nobody spoke, nobody even thought to swallow spit until after her gate slammed behind her.

Pearl Stone opened her mouth and laughed real hard because she didn't know what else to do. She fell all over Mrs Sumpkins while she laughed. Mrs Sumpkins snorted violently and sucked her teeth.

'Humph! Y'all let her worry yuh. You ain't like me. Ah ain't got her to study 'bout. If she ain't got manners enough to stop and let folks know how she been makin' out, let her g'wan!'

'She ain't even worth talkin' after,' Lulu Moss drawled through her nose. 'She sits high, but she looks low. Dat's what Ah say 'bout dese ole women runnin' after young boys.'

Pheoby Watson hitched her rocking chair forward before she spoke. 'Well, nobody don't know if it's anything to tell or not. Me, Ah'm her best friend, and *Ah* don't know.'

'Maybe us don't know into things lak you do, but we all know how she went 'way from here and us sho seen her come back. 'Tain't no use in your tryin' to cloak no ole woman lak Janie Starks, Pheoby, friend or no friend.'

'At dat she ain't so ole as some of y'all dat's talking.'

'She's way past forty to my knowledge, Pheoby.'

'No more'n forty at de outside.'

'She's 'way too old for a boy like Tea Cake.'

'Tea Cake ain't been no boy for some time. He's round thirty his ownself.'

'Don't keer what it was, she could stop and say a few words with us. She act like we done done something to her,' Pearl Stone complained. 'She de one been doin' wrong.'

'You mean, you mad 'cause she didn't stop and tell us all her business. Anyhow, what you ever know her to do so bad as y'all make out? The worst thing Ah ever knowed her to do was taking a few years offa her age and dat ain't never harmed nobody. Y'all makes me tired. De way you talkin' you'd think de folks in dis town didn't do nothin' in de bed 'cept praise de Lawd. You have to 'scuse me, 'cause Ah'm bound to go take her some supper.' Pheoby stood up sharply.

'Don't mind us,' Lulu smiled, 'just go right ahead, us can mind yo' house for you till you git back. Mah supper is done. You bettah go see how she feel. You kin let de rest of us know.'

'Lawd,' Pearl agreed, 'Ah done scorched-up dat lil meat and bread too long to talk about. Ah kin stay 'way from home long as Ah please. Mah husband ain't fussy.'

'Oh, er, Pheoby, if youse ready to go, Ah could walk over dere wid you,' Mrs Sumpkins volunteered. 'It's sort of duskin' down dark. De booger man might ketch yuh.'

'Naw, Ah thank yuh. Nothin' couldn't ketch me dese few steps Ah'm goin'. Anyhow mah husband tell me say no first class booger would have me. If she got anything to tell yuh, you'll hear it.'

Pheoby hurried on off with a covered bowl in her hands. She left the porch pelting her back with unasked questions. They hoped the answers were cruel and strange. When she arrived at the place, Pheoby Watson didn't go in by the front gate and down the palm walk to the front door. She walked around the fence corner and went in the intimate gate with her heaping plate of mulatto rice. Janie must be round that side.

She found her sitting on the steps of the back porch with the lamps all filled and the chimneys cleaned.

'Hello, Janie, how you comin'?'

'Aw, pretty good, Ah'm tryin' to soak some uh de tiredness and de dirt outa mah feet.' She laughed a little.

'Ah see you is. Gal, you sho looks *good*. You looks like youse yo' own daughter.' They both laughed. 'Even wid dem overhalls on, you shows yo' womanhood.'

'G'wan! G'wan! You must think Ah brought yuh somethin'. When Ah ain't brought home a thing but mahself.'

'Dat's a gracious plenty. Yo' friends wouldn't want nothin' better.'

'Ah takes dat flattery offa you, Pheoby, 'cause Ah know it's from de heart.' Janie extended her hand. 'Good Lawd, Pheoby! ain't you never goin' tuh gimme dat lil rations you brought me? Ah ain't had a thing on mah stomach today exceptin' mah hand.' They both laughed easily. 'Give it here and have a seat.'

'Ah knowed you'd be hongry. No time to be huntin' stove wood after dark. Mah mulatto rice ain't so good dis time. Not enough bacon grease, but Ah reckon it'll kill hongry.'

'Ah'll tell you in a minute,' Janie said, lifting the cover. 'Gal, it's *too* good! you switches a mean fanny round in a kitchen.'

'Aw, dat ain't much to eat, Janie. But Ah'm liable to have something sho nuff good tomorrow, 'cause you done come.'

Janie ate heartily and said nothing. The varicolored cloud dust that the sun had stirred up in the sky was settling by slow degrees.

'Here, Pheoby, take yo' ole plate. Ah ain't got a bit of use for a empty dish. Dat grub sho come in handy.'

Pheoby laughed at her friend's rough joke. 'Youse just as crazy as you ever was.'

'Hand me dat wash-rag on dat chair by you, honey. Lemme scrub mah feet.' She took the cloth and rubbed vigorously. Laughter came to her from the big road.

'Well, Ah see Mouth-Almighty is still sittin' in de same place. And Ah reckon they got *me* up in they mouth now.'

'Yes indeed. You know if you pass some people and don't speak tuh suit 'em dey got tuh go way back in yo' life and see whut you ever done. They know mo' 'bout yuh than you do yo' self. An envious heart makes a treacherous ear. They done "heard" 'bout you just what they hope done happened.'

'If God don't think no mo' 'bout 'em then Ah do, they's a lost ball in de high grass.'

'Ah hears what they say 'cause they just will collect round mah porch 'cause it's on de big road. Mah husband git so sick of 'em sometime he makes 'em all git for home.'

'Sam is right too. They just wearin' out yo' sittin' chairs.'

'Yeah, Sam say most of 'em goes to church so they'll be sure to rise in Judgment. Dat's de day dat every secret is s'posed to be made known. They wants to be there and hear it *all*.'

'Sam is *too* crazy! You can't stop laughin' when youse round him.'

'Uuh hunh. He says he aims to be there hisself so he can find out who stole his corn-cob pipe.'

'Pheoby, dat Sam of your'n just won't quit! Crazy thing!'

'Most of dese zigaboos is so het up over yo' business till they liable to hurry theyself to Judgment to find out about you if they don't soon know. You better make haste and tell 'em 'bout you and Tea Cake gittin' married, and if he taken all yo' money and went off wid some young gal, and where at he is now and where at is all yo' clothes dat you got to come back here in overhalls.'

'Ah don't mean to bother wid tellin' 'em nothin', Pheoby. 'Tain't worth de trouble. You can tell 'em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat's just de same as me 'cause mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf.'

'If you so desire Ah'll tell 'em what you tell me to tell 'em.'

'To start off wid, people like dem wastes up too much time puttin' they mouf on things they don't know nothin' about. Now they got to look into me loving Tea Cake and see whether it was done right or not! They don't know if life is a mess of corn-meal dumplings, and if love is a bed-quilt!'

'So long as they get a name to gnaw on they don't

care whose it is, and what about, 'specially if they can make it sound like evil.'

'If they wants to see and know, why they don't come kiss and be kissed? Ah could then sit down and tell 'em things. Ah been a delegate to de big 'ssociation of life. Yessuh! De Grand Lodge, de big convention of livin' is just where Ah been dis year and a half y'all ain't seen me.'

They sat there in the fresh young darkness close together. Pheoby eager to feel and do through Janie, but hating to show her zest for fear it might be thought mere curiosity. Janie full of that oldest human longing – self revelation. Pheoby held her tongue for a long time, but she couldn't help moving her feet. So Janie spoke.

'They don't need to worry about me and my overhalls long as Ah still got nine hundred dollars in de bank. Tea Cake got me into wearing 'em – following behind him. Tea Cake ain't wasted up no money of mine, and he ain't left me for no young gal, neither. He give me every consolation in de world. He'd tell 'em so too, if he was here. If he wasn't gone.'

Pheoby dilated all over with eagerness, 'Tea Cake gone?'

'Yeah, Pheoby, Tea Cake is gone. And dat's de only reason you see me back here – cause Ah ain't got nothing to make me happy no more where Ah was at. Down in the Everglades there, down on the muck.'

'It's hard for me to understand what you mean, de way you tell it. And then again Ah'm hard of understandin' at times.'

'Naw, 'tain't nothin' lak you might think. So 'tain't no use in me telling you somethin' unless Ah give you de understandin' to go 'long wid it. Unless you see de fur, a mink skin ain't no different from a coon hide. Looka heah, Pheoby, is Sam waitin' on you for his supper?'

'It's all ready and waitin'. If he ain't got sense enough to eat it, dat's his hard luck.'

'Well then, we can set right where we is and talk. Ah got the house all opened up to let dis breeze get a little catchin'.

'Pheoby, we been kissin'-friends for twenty years, so Ah depend on you for a good thought. And Ah'm talking to you from dat standpoint.'

Time makes everything old so the kissing, young darkness became a monstropolous old thing while Janie talked.