I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou. Copyright © 1969, Renewed 1997 Maya Angelou. Maya Angelou ™ is a trademark of Caged Bird Legacy, LLC. MayaAngelou.com. “What you looking at me for? I didn't come to stay …” I hadn't so much forgot as I couldn't bring myself to remember. Other things were more important. “What you looking at me for? I didn't come to stay …” Whether I could remember the rest of the poem or not was immaterial. The truth of the statement was like a wadded up handkerchief, sopping wet in my fists, and the sooner they accepted it the quicker I could let my hands open and the air would cool my palms. “What you looking at me for …?” The children's section of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church was wiggling and giggling over my well-known forgetfulness. The dress I wore was lavender taffeta, and each time I breathed it rustled, and now that I was sucking in air to breathe out shame it sounded like crepe paper on the back of hearses. As I'd watched Momma put ruffles on the hem and cute little tucks around the waist, I knew that once I put it on I'd look like a movie star. (It was silk and that made up for the awful color.) I was going to look like one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody's dream of what was right with the world. Hanging softly over the black Singer sewing machine, it looked like magic, and when people saw me wearing it they were going to run up to me and say, “Marguerite [sometimes it was ‘dear Marguerite’], forgive us, please, we didn't know who you were,” and I would answer generously, “No, you couldn't have known. Of course I forgive you.” Just thinking about it made me go around with angel's dust sprinkled over my face for days. But Easter's early morning sun had shown the dress to be a plain ugly cut-down from a white woman's once-was-purple throwaway It was old-lady-long too, but it didn't hide my skinny legs, which had been greased with Blue Seal Vaseline and powdered with the Arkansas red clay. The age-faded color made my skin look dirty like mud, and everyone in church was looking at my skinny legs. Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten? My light-blue eyes were going to hypnotize them, after all the things they said about “my daddy must of been a Chinaman” (I thought they meant made out of china, like a cup) because my eyes were so small and squinty Then they would understand why I had never picked up a Southern accent, or spoke the common slang, and why I had to be forced to eat pigs' tails and snouts. Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil. “What you looking …” The minister's wife leaned toward me, her long yellow face full of sorry. She whispered, “I just come to tell you, it's Easter Day.” I repeated, jamming the words together, “Ijustcometotellyouit'sEasterDay” as low as possible. The giggles hung in the air like melting clouds that were waiting to rain on me. I held up two fingers, close to my chest, which meant that I had to go to the toilet, and tiptoed toward the rear of the church. Dimly, somewhere over my head, I heard ladies saying, “Lord bless the child,” and “Praise God.” My head was up and my eyes were open, but I didn't see anything. Halfway down the aisle, the church exploded with “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” and I tripped over a foot stuck out from the children's pew. I stumbled and started to say something, or maybe to scream, but a green persimmon, or it could have been a lemon, caught me between the legs and squeezed. I tasted the sour on my tongue and felt it in the back of my mouth. Then before I reached the door, the sting was burning down my legs and into my Sunday socks. I tried to hold, to squeeze it back, to keep it from speeding, but when I reached the church porch I knew I'd have to let it go, or it would probably run right back up to my head and my poor head would burst like a dropped watermelon, and all the brains and spit and tongue and eyes would roll all over the place. So I ran down into the yard and let it go. I ran, peeing and crying, not toward the toilet out back but to our house. I'd get a whipping for it, to be sure, and the nasty children would have something new to tease me about. I laughed anyway, partially for the sweet release; still, the greater joy came not only from being liberated from the silly church but from the knowledge that I wouldn't die from a busted head. If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult. 1 When I was three and Bailey four, we had arrived in the musty little town, wearing tags on our wrists which instructed—“To Whom It May Concern”—that we were Marguerite and Bailey Johnson Jr., from Long Beach, California, en route to Stamps, Arkansas, c/o Mrs. Annie Henderson. Our parents had decided to put an end to their calamitous marriage, and Father shipped us home to his mother. A porter had been charged with our welfare—he got off the train the next day in Arizona-and our tickets were pinned to my brother's inside coat pocket. I don't remember much of the trip, but after we reached the segregated southern part of the journey, things must have looked up. Negro passengers, who always traveled with loaded lunch boxes, felt sorry for “the poor little motherless darlings” and plied us with cold fried chicken and potato salad. Years later I discovered that the United States had been crossed thousands of times by frightened Black children traveling alone to their newly affluent parents in Northern cities, or back to grandmothers in Southern towns when the urban North reneged on its economic promises. The town reacted to us as its inhabitants had reacted to all things new before our coming. It regarded us a while without curiosity but with caution, and after we were seen to be harmless (and children) it closed in around us, as a real mother embraces a stranger's child. Warmly, but not too familiarly. We lived with our grandmother and uncle in the rear of the Store (it was always spoken of with a capital s), which she had owned some twenty-five years. Early in the century, Momma (we soon stopped calling her Grandmother) sold lunches to the sawmen in the lumberyard (east Stamps) and the seedmen at the cotton gin (west Stamps). Her crisp meat pies and cool lemonade, when joined to her miraculous ability to be in two places at the same time, assured her business success. From being a mobile lunch counter, she set up a stand between the two points of fiscal interest and supplied the workers' needs for a few years. Then she had the Store built in the heart of the Negro area. Over the years it became the lay center of activities in town. On Saturdays, barbers sat their customers in the shade on the porch of the Store, and troubadours on their ceaseless crawlings through the South leaned across its benches and sang their sad songs of The Brazos while they played juice harps and cigar-box guitars. The formal name of the Store was the Wm. Johnson General Merchandise Store. Customers could find food staples, a good variety of colored thread, mash for hogs, corn for chickens, coal oil for lamps, light bulbs for the wealthy, shoestrings, hair dressing, balloons, and flower seeds. Anything not visible had only to be ordered. Until we became familiar enough to belong to the Store and it to us, we were locked up in a Fun House of Things where the attendant had gone home for life. Each year I watched the field across from the Store turn caterpillar green, then gradually frosty white. I knew exactly how long it would be before the big wagons would pull into the front yard and load on the cotton pickers at daybreak to carry them to the remains of slavery's plantations. During the picking season my grandmother would get out of bed at four o'clock (she never used an alarm clock) and creak down to her kness and chant in a sleep-filled voice, “Our Father, thank you for letting me see this New Day. Thank you that you didn't allow the bed I lay on last night to be my cooling board, nor my blanket my winding sheet. Guide my feet this day along the straight and narrow, and help me to put a bridle on my tongue. Bless this house, and everybody in it. Thank you, in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, Amen.” Before she had quite arisen, she called our names and issued orders, and pushed her large feet into homemade slippers and across the bare lye-washed wooden floor to light the coal-oil lamp. The lamplight in the Store gave a soft make-believe feeling to our world which made me want to whisper and walk about on tiptoe. The odors of onions and oranges and kerosene had been mixing all night and wouldn't be disturbed until the wooded slat was removed from the door and the early morning air forced its way in with the bodies of people who had walked miles to reach the pickup place. “Sister, I'll have two cans of sardines.” “I'm gonna work so fast today I'm gonna make you look like you standing still.” “Lemme have a hunk uh cheese and some sody crackers.” “Just gimme a coupla them fat peanut paddies.” That would be from a picker who was taking his lunch. The greasy brown paper sack was stuck behind the bib of his overalls. He'd use the candy as a snack before the noon sun called the workers to rest. In those tender mornings the Store was full of laughing joking, boasting and bragging. One man was going to pick two hundred pounds of cotton, and another three hundred. Even the children were promising to bring home fo' bits and six bits. The champion picker of the day before was the hero of the dawn. If he prophesied that at the cotton in today's field was going to be sparse and stick to the bolls like glue, every listener would grunt a hearty agreement. The sound of the empty cotton sacks dragging over the floor and the murmurs of waking people were sliced by the cash register as we rang up the five-cent sales. If the morning sounds and smells were touched with the supernatural, the late afternoon had all the features of the normal Arkansas life. In the dying sunlight the people dragged, rather than their empty cotton sacks. Brought back to the Store, the pickers would step out of the backs of trucks and fold down, dirt-disappointed, to the ground. No matter how much they had picked, it wasn't enough. Their wages wouldn't even get them out of debt to my grandmother, not to mention the staggering bill that waited on them at the white commissary downtown. The sounds of the new morning had been replaced with grumbles about cheating houses, weighted scales, snakes, skimpy cotton and dusty rows. In later years I was to confront the stereotyped picture of gay song-singing cotton pickers with such inordinate rage that I was told even by fellow Blacks that my paranoia was embarrassing. But I had seen the fingers cut by the mean little cotton bolls, and I had witnessed the backs and shoulders and arms and legs resisting any further demands. Some of the workers would leave their sacks at the Store to be picked up the following morning, but a few had to take them home for repairs. I winced to picture them sewing the coarse material under a coal-oil lamp with fingers stiffening from the day's work. In too few hours they would have to walk back to Sister Henderson's Store, get vittles and load, again, onto the trucks. Then they would face another day of trying to earn enough for the whole year with the heavy knowledge that they were going to end the season as they started it. Without the money or credit necessary to sustain a family for three months. In cotton-picking time the late afternoons revealed the harshness of Black Southern life, which in the early morning had been softened by nature's blessing of grogginess, forgetfulness and the soft lamplight. 2 When Bailey was six and I a year younger, we used to rattle off the times tables with the speed I was later to see Chinese children in San Francisco employ on their abacuses. Our summer-gray pot-bellied stove bloomed rosy red during winter, and became a severe disciplinarian threat if we were so foolish as to indulge in making mistakes. Uncle Willie used to sit, like a giant black Z (he had been crippled as a child), and hear us testify to the Lafayette County Training Schools' abilities. His face pulled down on the left side, as if a pulley had been attached to his lower teeth, and his left hand was only a mite bigger than Bailey's, but on the second mistake or on the third hesitation his big overgrown right hand would catch one of us behind the collar, and in the same moment would thrust the culprit toward the dull red heater, which throbbed like a devil's toothache. We were never burned, although once I might have been when I was so terrified I tried to jump onto the stove to remove the possibility of its remaining a threat. Like most children, I thought if I could face the worst danger voluntarily, and triumph, I would forever have power over it. But in my case of sacrificial effort I was thwarted. Uncle Willie held tight to my dress and I only got close enough to smell the clean dry scent of hot iron. We learned the times tables without understanding their grand principle, simply because we had the capacity and no alternative. The tragedy of lameness seems so unfair to children that they are embarrassed in its presence. And they most recently off nature's mold, sense that they have only narrowly missed being another of her jokes. In relief at the narrow escape, they vent their emotions in impatience and criticism of the unlucky cripple. Momma related times without end, and without any show of emotion, how Uncle Willie had been dropped when he was three years old by a woman who was minding him. She seemed to hold no rancor against the babysitter, nor for her just God who allowed the accident. She felt it necessary to explain over and over again to those who knew the story by heart that he was born that way." In our society, where two-legged, two-armed strong Black men were able at best to eke out only the necessities of life, Uncle Willie, with his starched shirts, shined shoes and shelves full of good, was still the whipping boy and butt of jokes of the underemployed and underpaid. Fate not only disabled him but laid a double-tiered barrier in his path. He was also proud and sensitive. Therefore he couldn't pretend that he was crippled, nor could he deceive himself that people were not repelled by his defect. Only once in all the years of trying not to watch him, I saw him pretend to himself and others that he was one day, I saw a dark car in our front yard. I rushed in to find a strange man and woman (Uncle Willie said later they were schoolteachers from Little Rock) drinking Dr Pepper in the Store. I sensed a wrong gness around me, like an alarm clock that had gone off without being set. I knew it couldn't be the strangers. Not frequently, but often enough, travelers pulled off the main road to buy some soft drinks in the only Negro store in Stamps. When I looked at Uncle Willie, I knew what was pulling my mind's coattails. He was standing erect behind the counter, not leaning forward or resting on the shelf that had been built for him. Ere ct. His eyes seemed to hold me with a mixture of threats and appeal. I dutifully greeted the strangers and roamed my eyes around for his walking stick. It was nowhere to be seen. He said, “Uh … this this … this … uh, my niece. She's … uh … just come from school.” Then to the couple—“You know … how, uh, children are … th-th-these days … they play all d-d-day at school and c-c-can't wait to get home and pl-play some more.” The people smile d, very friendly. He added, “Go on out and pl-play, Sister.” The lady laughed in a soft Arkansas voice and said, “Well, you know, Mr. Johnson, they say, you're only a child once. Have you children of your own?” Uncle Willie looked at me with impatience I hadn't seen in his face even when he took the thirty minutes to loop the lace over her high-topped shoes. “I … I thought I told you to go … go outside and play.” Before I left I saw him lean back on the shelves of Garret Snuff, Prince Albert and Spark Plug chewing tobacco. “No, ma'am … no ch-children and no wife.” He tried a laugh. “I have an old m-m-mother and my brother's two-children to l-look after.” I didn't mind his using us to make himself look good. In fact, I would have pretended to be his daughter if he wanted me to. Not only did I not feel a loyalty to my own father, I figured that if I had been Uncle Willie's child I would have received much better treatment. The couple left after a few minutes, and from the back of the house I watched the red cars, like dust and dishes, appear toward Magnolia. Uncle Willie was making his way down the long shadowed aisle between the shelves and the counter—hand over hand, like a man climbing out of a dream. I stayed quiet and watched him lurch from one side, bumping to the other, until he reached the coal-oil tank. He put his hand behind that dark recess and took his cane in the strong fist and shifted his weight on the wood supports. He had pulled it off. I'll never know why it was important to him that the couple (he said later that he'd never seen them before) would take a picture of a whole Mr. Johnson back to Little Rock. He must have felt guilty tire of blame. The high-toned shoes and the cane, his uncontrollable muscles and thick tongue, and felt clout, and for one afternoon, on a part of an afternoon, he was not of the first which ite love. Although I enjoyed Stamps, I met and fell in love with William Shakespeare. Hamlet, Julius Caesar, Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet, Othello, and the Merchant of Venice. I read and reread Poe, Du Bois' “Litany at Atlanta,” Kipling, Poe, Butler, Thackeray and Henley, I saved my young and loyal passion for Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson and W.E. B. Du Bois' “Litany at Atlanta.” But it was Shakespeare who said, “When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes.” It was as a state with which I felt myself of Venice, but in this whiteness by saying that after all he had been dead so long it couldn't matter to anyone. I remember Mr. Bailey saying, “Put some more in that sack, child. Don't you ever realized that Momma would question us about the author and that we'd have to tell her that Shakespeare was dead and that he was not. 3 Weighing the half-pound of flour, we were ready to go into the store. So we chose “The Creation” by James Weldon Johnson instead. 3 Weighing the half-pound of flour, we were ready to go into the store. So we chose “The Creation” by James Weldon Johnson i an eye for measuring how full a silver-looking ladle of flour, and to be a sacks held a simple kind of adventure for me. I developed absolutely accurate our appreciative customer's use to a dime indicator over to eight ounces or one pound. When I was omen would say, “Put some more in that sack, child. Don't you ever ildrens.” If I was off in the Store's favor, the eagle-eyed w he fine was no silver-wrapped Kisses, the sweet cocoa-tea drop that I loved but Bailey. And maybe canned pineapples. My obsession wit h pineapples nearly drove me mad. I dreamt of the days when I would be gro self alone. Although the syrupy golden rings sat in their exotic cans on our shelves yellow as rounds, we only tasted them during Christmas -black fruit cakes. Then she lined heavy soot-encrusted i ron skillets with the pineapple ring's for rich upside-down cake. Bailey and I mine around for hours, shredding off the fruit until nothi ng was left except the perfume on my fingers. I'd like to think that my desire for dn't allow myself to steal a can (which was possible) and eat it alone out in the garden, but I'm certain that I must have the capacity for have the nerve to attempt it. Until I was thirteen and left Arkansas for good, the Store was my favorite place to be. And no resent from a stranger. Opening the front doors was pull ing the ribbon off the unexpected gift. The light would come in soft f mackerel, salmon, tobacco, thread. It fell flat on the big vat of lard and by noontime the ring the sun mmer the grease had s ore in the afternoon, I sensed that it was tired. I alone co uld hear the slow pulse of its job half done. But just before d argued over their bills, or joked about their neighbors, or just dropped in “to give Sister Henderson a ‘Hi y'all,’” the p read itself over the family in washed life waves. Momma opened boxes of crispy crackers and we sat around the e m ea t b lock at th e rear of the St iced onions, and Bailey o eir juice of oil and fishing boats to ooze down and a ro un d t he sid es. T hat wa s supper. In the evening, when we were co ve na ny indication that he had an “affliction.” It seemed t ha t t he p eace of a day's ending wa surance that he could dis h wa s still in effect. Throwing scoops of corn to the chic ke ns a nd mix ing s our dr y mash with er food and oil ly dis h wa and I sloshed down twilight tr ails to the p ig pen s, an d s ta nd in g on the first f ence rungs w ed down the u nap pea lin g c er pink snouts down into the slop, and rooted a nd gr un te d t he ir sa tisfa ction. We alwa ys gru reply only hal f in jest. We w ere oncoctions to our grateful hogs. They mashed their tend es and had only gotten the e vil-s melling sw ill on o ur s ho es, s tock ings, feet an d han e one day, as we were attending to the pigs, I heard a horse in the front yard (it really should have been called a drivey ay, ex cept that there was no thing to nto it), and ran to find out who had come riding up on a Thursday evening when even Mr. Steward, the quiet, bitter man who owned a riding horse, would be resting b y h is w arm fire until the morning ca lled him out to turn over his field. The used-to-be sheriff sat rakishly astraddle his horse. His nonchalance was meant to convey his authority and power over even d um b an imal s. How much more capable he would be with Negroes. It went without saying. His twang jogged in the brittle air. From the side of the Store, Bailey and I heard him say to Momma, “Annie, tell Willie he better lay low ton ight. A crazy nigger messed with a white lady today. Some of the boys'll be coming over here later.” Even after the slow drag of years, I remember the sense of fear which filled my mouth with hot, dry air, and mad e my body lig ht. The “boys”? Those cement faces and eyes of hate that burned the clothes off you if they happened to see you lounging on the main street downtown on Saturday. Boys? It seemed that youth had never happened to them. Boys? No, rather men who were covered with graves' dust and age without beauty or learning. The u gliness and rottenness of old abominations. If on Judgment Day I were summoned by St. Peter to give testimony to the used-to-be sheriff's act of kindness, I would be unable to say anything in his behalf. His co nfidence that my uncle and every other Black man who heard of the Klan's coming ride would scurry under their houses to hide in chicken dropings was too humiliating to hear. Without waiting for Momma's thanks, he rode out of the yard, sure that things were as they should be and that he was a gentle squire, saving those deserving serfs from the laws of the land, he condoned. Immediately, while his horse's hoofs were still loudly thudding the ground, Momma blew out the coal-oil lamps. She had a quiet, hard talk with Uncle Willie and and me into the Store. We were told to take the potatoes and onions out of their bins and knock out the dividing walls that kept them apart. Then with a tedious and fearful e Willie gave me his rubber-tipped cane and bent down to get into the now-enlarged empty bin. It took forever before he lay down and then we covered him nd onions, layer upon layer, like a casserole. Grandmother knelt praying in the darkened Store. It was fortunate that the “boys” our yard that evening omma open the Store. They would have surely found Uncle Willie and just as surely lynched him. He moaned the whole night through fact, been guilty me. The heavy sounds pushed their way up out of the blanket of vegetables and I pictured his mouth pulling down on the right wing into the eyes of new re like dew drops for the warmth of morning. 4 What set s one Southern town apart from another, or from a Northern town or hswer must be the experience shared betwee e unknowing majority (it) and the knowing minority (you) nd labeled in that early environment. In later years they could. All of childhood's unanswered questions must finally be passed back to the answered the ere. He asks the question, at the time of my knowing him, gotten to his high school and college days, are first en coun ter ed a who lived in the big rambling house next to the Store, wa hange faces, places and maybe races, tactics, intensities and goals, but the penetrable mystery had n ot, at hat me n's clothes were sold like that and c od. Mr. McElroy's hands or feet. He was the only Negro I knew, except for t s very tall and broad, and although the years had eaten away the flesh of a man, a seldom smile, and to his c redit was as the fact that alled s uits, I re iked to ta lk he school principal and the visiting teachers, who wore matching pants and jackets. Whenever I le able t o stare down, espec ially li ving next do or to e men look less manly, less threatening and a little more like women. Mr. Roy never laugh ed, and t, to b religion, from the perch of a giant black Z (he had been crippled as a child), e, I s etwe en Mr. McElroy was nd I thought also proved he was a very courageous person. How great it ow up like tha nchant ed with him, although he seemed to be an understanding b ulled by th e nt of expecting him to do anything at any time. I never tired of this, or bored or dise polis of Stamps. The re seemed to be a stare of disapproving b y the bit ter aroma of its fruit and I fr o medicine and tonics to the less sophisticated people in towns (villages) metro yard, surrounded by greeting a day was all that could be e xpec ted fr o he never chased us off his land. In summer's late sunshine I often sat u erry tr ee in hi s insec ts. One ll around the house. And him be hind the house esc apin g in a g wing on his porch, rocking in his brown three-piece, his wide Panama n ith the whir of own b y the w ell, or r ange into n indep endent Black nea r a n d afternoon, child,” he never said a word, even if I met him again on the road. I was sure got offa me dhood. A man who owned his land and the big many-windowed house is hou se or d ides a ll aroun d the h ouse. A hat it m ade me want to live. Mr. McElroy After his “Good morning, child,” or “Good afternoon, child,” my world. And the fact that he was my brother, my only brother, and I h ad clung to its s share rs to such good fortune t hat it m ade me is velvet-black skin. Mr. McElroy was the greatest person in an life just to show God that I was grateful. Where I was big, elbowy and grating, he was small, graceful and smooth. When I was scri bed by our p laymat es as b eing sh it colo r, he was laude d for h ack ski n. His hair fell down in black curls, and my head was covered with black steel wool. And yet he loved me. When our elders said nd t hing s abou t my fe atures (my family was handsome to a point of pain for me), Ba iley would wink at me from across the room, and I knew that it was a matter of time before he would take revenge. He would al low t he old ladies to finis h wond ering h ow on earth I c ame ab out, then h e w ould ask, “Dizzy Fr zeriz Coleman, how is your son? I saw him the other day, and he looked sick enough to die. ” Agha st, the ladies would ie? Fr ne before, he'd answer with a straight face, “From the Uglies.” I would hold my lau gh, bit e my tongue, grit my teeth and very seriously erase even the touch of a smile from my face. Later, behind the house by the black-walnut tree, we'd laugh and laugh and howl. Bailey could count on very few punishments for his consistently outrageous behavior, for he was the pride of the Henderson/Johnson family. His movements, as he was later to describe those of an acquaintance, were activated with oiled precision. He was also able to find more hours in the day than I thought existed. He finished chores, homework, read more books than I and played the group games on the side of the hill with the best of them. He could even pray out loud in church, and was apt at stealing pickles from the barrel that sat under the fruit counter and Uncle Willie's nose. Once when the Store was full of lunchtime customers, he dipped the strainer, which we also used to sift weevils from meal and flour, into the barrel and fished for two fat pickles. He caught them and hooked the strainer onto the side of the barrel where they dripped until he was ready for them. When the last school bell rang, he picked the nearly dry pickles out of the strainer, jammed them into his pockets and threw the strainer behind the oranges. We ran out of the Store. It was summer and his pants were short, so the pickle juice made clean streams down his ashy legs, and he jumped with his pockets full of loot and his eyes laughing a “How about that?” He smelled like a vinegar barrel or a sour angel. After our early chores were done, while Uncle Willie or Momma minded the Store, we were free to play the children's games as long as we stayed within yelling distance. Playing hide-and-seek, his voice was easily identified, singing, “Last night, night before, twenty-four robbers at my door. Who all is hid? Ask me to let them in, hit 'em in the head with a rolling pin. Who all is hid?” In follow the leader, naturally he was the one who created the most daring and interesting things to do. And when he was on the tail of the pop the whip, he would twirl off the end like a top, spinning, falling, laughing, finally stopping just before my heart beat its last, and then he was back in the game, still laughing. Of all the needs (there are none imaginary) a lonely child has, the one that must be satisfied, if there is going to be hope and a hope of wholeness, is the unshaking need for an unshakable God. My pretty Black brother was my Kingdom Come. In Stamps the custom was to can everything that could possibly be preserved. During the killing season, after the first frost, all neighbors helped each other to slaughter hogs and even the quiet, big-eyed cows if they had stopped giving milk. The missionary ladies of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church helped Momma prepare the pork for sausage. They squeezed their fat arms elbow deep in the ground meat, mixed it with gray nose-opening sage, pepper and salt, and made tasty little samples for all obedient children who brought wood for the slick black stove. The men chopped off the larger pieces of meat and laid them in the smokehouse to begin the curing process. They opened the knuckle of the hams with their deadly-looking knives, took out a certain round harmless bone (“it could make the meat go bad”) and rubbed salt, coarse brown salt that looked like fine gravel, into the flesh, and the blood popped to the surface. Throughout the year, until the next frost, we took our meals from the smokehouse, the little garden that lay cousin-close to the Store and from the shelves of canned foods. There were choices on the shelves that could set a hungry child's mouth to watering. Green beans, snapped always the right length, collards, cabbage, juicy red tomato preserves that came into their own on steaming buttered biscuits, and sausage, beets, berries and every fruit grown in Arkansas. But at least twice yearly Momma would feel that as children we should have fresh meat included in our diets. We were then given money—pennies, nickels and dimes entrusted to Bailey-and sent to town to buy liver. Since the whites had refrigerators, their butchers bought the meat from commercial slaughterhouses in Texarkana and sold it to the wealthy even in the peak of summer. Crossing the Black area of Stamps which in childhood's narrow measure seemed a whole world, we were obliged by custom to stop and speak to every person we met, and Bailey felt constrained to spend a few minutes playing with each friend. There was a joy in going to town with money in our pockets (Bailey's pockets were as good as my own) and time on our hands. But the pleasure fled when we reached the white part of town. After we left Mr. Willie Williams' Do Drop Inn, the last stop before whitefolksville, we had to cross the pond and adventure the railroad tracks. We were explorers walking without weapons into maneating animals' territory. In Stamps the segregation was so complete that most Black children didn't really absolutely know what whites looked like. Other than that they were different, to be dreaded, and in that dread was included the hostility of the powerless against the powerful, the poor against the rich, the worker against the worked for and the ragged against the well dressed. I remember never believing that whites were really real. Many women who worked in their kitchens traded at our Store, and when they carried their finished laundry back to town they often set the big baskets down on our front porch to pull a singular piece from the starched collection and show either how graceful was their ironing hand or how rich and opulent was the property of their employers. I looked at the items that weren't on display. I knew, for instance, that white men wore shorts, as Uncle Willie did, and that they had an opening for taking out their “things” and peeing, and that white women's breasts weren't built into their dresses, as some people said, because I saw their brassieres in the baskets. But I couldn't force myself to think of them as people. People were Mrs. LaGrone, Mrs. Hendricks, Momma, Reverend Sneed, Lillie B, and Louise and Rex. Whitefolks couldn't be people because their feet were too small, their skin too white and see-throughy, and they didn't walk on the balls of their feet the way people did—they walked on their heels like horses. People were those who lived on my side of town. I didn't like them all, or, in fact, any of them very much, but they were people. These others, the strange pale creatures that lived in their alien unlife, weren't considered folks. They were whitefolks. 5 “Thou shall not be dirty” and “Thou shall not be impudent” were the two commandments of Grandmother Henderson upon which hung our total salvation. Each night in the bitterest winter we were forced to wash faces, arms, necks, legs and feet before going to bed. She used to add, with a smirk that unprofane people can't control when venturing into profanity, “and wash as far as possible, then wash possible.” We would go to the well and wash in the ice-cold, clear water, grease our legs with the equally cold stiff Vaseline, then tiptoe into the house. We wiped the dust from our toes and settled down for schoolwork, cornbread, clabbered milk, prayers and bed, always in that order. Momma was famous for pulling the quilts off after we had fallen asleep to examine our feet. If they weren't clean enough for her, she took the switch (she kept one behind the bedroom door for emergencies) and woke up the offender with a few aptly placed burning reminders. The area around the well at night was dark and slick, and boys told about how snakes love water, so that anyone who had to draw water at night and then stand there alone and wash knew that moccasins and rattlers, puff adders and boa constrictors were winding their way to the well and would arrive just as the person washing got soap in her eyes. But Momma convinced us that not only was cleanliness next to Godliness, dirtiness was the inventor of misery. The impudent child was detested by God and a shame to its parents and could bring destruction to its house and line. All adults had to be addressed as Mister, Missus, Miss, Auntie, Cousin, Unk, Uncle, Buhbah, Sister, Brother and a thousand other appellations indicating familial relationship and the lowliness of the addressor. Everyone I knew respected these customary laws, except for the powhitetrash children. Some families of powhitetrash lived on Momma's farm land behind the school. Sometimes a gaggle of them came to the Store, filling the whole room, chasing out the air and even changing the well-known scents. The children crawled over the shelves and into the potato and onion bins, twanging all the time in their sharp voices like cigar-box guitars. They took liberties in my Store that I would never dare. Since Momma told us that the less you say to whitefolks (or even powhitetrash) the better, Bailey and I would stand, solemn, quiet, in the displaced air. But if one of the playful apparitions got close to us, I pinched it. Partly out of angry frustration and partly because I didn't believe in its flesh reality. They called my uncle by his first name and ordered him around the Store. He, to my crying shame, obeyed them in his limping dip-straight-dip fashion. My grandmother, too, followed their orders, except that she didn't seem to be servile because she anticipated their needs. “Here's sugar, Miz Potter, and here's baking powder. You didn't buy soda last month, you'll probably be needing some.” Momma always directed her statements to the adults, but sometimes, Oh painful sometimes, the grimy, snotty-nosed girls would answer her. “Naw, Annie …”—to Momma? Who owned the land they lived on? Who forgot more than they would ever learn? If there was any justice in the world, God should strike them dumb at once!—“Just give us some extry sody crackers, and some more mackerel.” At least they never looked in her face, or I never caught them doing so. Nobody with a smidgen of training, not even the worst roustabout, would look right in a grown person's face. It meant the person was trying to take the words out before they were formed. The dirty little children didn't do that, but they threw their orders around the Store like lashes from a cat-o'-nine-tails. When I was around ten years old, those scruffy children caused me the most painful and confusing experience I had ever had with my grandmother. One summer morning, after I had swept the dirt yard of leaves, spearmint-gum wrappers and Vienna-sausage labels, I raked the yellow-red dirt, and made half-moons carefully so that the design stood out clearly and masklike. I put the rake behind the Store and came through the back of the house to find Grandmother on the front porch in her big, wide white apron. The apron was so stiff by virtue of the starch that it could have stood alone. Momma was admiring the yard, so I joined her. It truly looked like a flat redhead that had been raked with a big-toothed comb. Momma didn't say anything but I knew she liked it. She looked over toward the school principal's house and to the right at Mr. McElroy's. She was hoping one of those community pillars would see the design before the day's business wiped it out. Then she looked upward to the school. My head had swung with hers, so at just about the same time we saw a troop of the powhitetrash kids marching over the hill and down by the side of the school. I looked to Momma for direction. She did an excellent job of sagging from her waist d