

IFA BAYEZA

FROM THE TILL TRILOGY

INTRODUCTION

IN THREE INTERCONNECTED PLAYS, *The Till Trilogy* is an imagined, speculative exploration of the epic of Emmett Till and the birth of the modern Civil Rights Movement, the events as seen from the perspective of the youth, himself, in his final days of life, as a specter during the trial of his killers and a shadowed presence in the aftermath.

I have written numerous dramas exploring pivotal intersections of race in American history, bearing witness to the role played by the African American struggle for full humanity in the making of this nation. I chose the ancient form of the trilogy to imbue this modern story with gravitas and nobility, to juxtapose the promise of America with its tragic and tortured past. As a child of the Civil Rights Movement, I elected to enter this world from the perspective of the youth himself, and to explore the agency he played and plays in the saga that bears his name.

The Till Trilogy is a story that in many ways remains a mystery. While based on actual events and primary research, the work is not in documentary or docudrama but history as metaphor and “found poetry,” exploring the story on multiple levels: past and present, temporal and metaphysical, black and white. Finding the right blend of the factual and speculative remained a challenge throughout. Research and efforts to shape the story and hone the form required many years and numerous fellowships, workshops, and regional productions of the work’s components—and, finally, in finding the right collaborative team to realize the vision.

For dramatic exigency, some characters have been composited and some events compressed, and, as this is still a story in living memory, these choices were at times difficult. After various test cast structures, I settled on an ensemble of ten actors, in different constellations, to inhabit the three plays. Because of the scope of the work, *The Till Trilogy* premier at Mosaic Theatre was only made possible by an award for full production from The Roy Cockrum Foundation.

FROM THE BALLAD OF EMMETT TILL

The Ballad of Emmett Till explores the life and afterlife of Emmett Till, a Chicago teenager who takes a fateful trip to Mississippi in the summer of 1955.

He goes by the nickname Bo or BoBo and he stutters. Like the African bata “talking drum,” his stammer is percussive, a rapid-fire repetition, without hesitation. His is not a stammer of insecurity but a physical disability which he has chosen to ignore and even to exploit. He is in a hurry to say everything. He whistles in a variety of ways. These moments in the script are indicated with variations of the sign ((o)). He is both a youth who never ages and an old soul, longing for death.

He is accompanied by a troupe of fellow travelers, a quintet composed of two women and three men, a chorus of shape-shifters, trapped between life and after. Lost souls, who cannot find their way, they cling to life and the shadows of it, awaiting trial, release, a hearing, justice, judgment.

As they wait, Emmett entertains the group with scenes from his brief life, the group taking on the roles of his family, friends, tormenters—any souls that, like the quintet, have been drawn into his sphere.

It feels like a coffin, the waiting. The landscape is cold, barren, the darkness close. The overlapping chorus of voices shifts easily from idle babble around a campfire or kitchen table to the tight, shape-note harmonies of a Negro spiritual. From the bent blues harmonies of a juke joint to the fast-moving currents of river water, a humming becomes a song, a psalm, a ballad.

Time: August 1955 and the present

Place: Chicago, Illinois, and the Mississippi Delta

The Ballad of Emmett Till runs approximately 90 minutes with no intermission.

CHARACTER BREAKDOWN

WHILE THE ACTOR who plays Emmett has a singular role, the other five actors in the ensemble will play varied roles evoking his memory of family members, friends and enemies. The ensemble plays the following characters in order of appearance:

EMMETT "BO" TILL, a boisterous 14-year-old from Chicago, Illinois, an angel. **MAMIE TILL-BRADLEY**, 33, Emmett's mother, who lives and works in Chicago. **MAMOO**, Emmett's fair-skinned grandmother, Mamie's mother.

WHEELER PARKER, 16, Emmett's cousin and best friend from Argo, Illinois.

MOSE WRIGHT, Emmett's great uncle, 64, Mississippi sharecropper.

CURTIS JONES, 14, Emmett's second cousin from Argo.

HELUISE WOODS, 15, Emmett's friend from Argo.

SIMEON "SIMMY" WRIGHT, 12, Mose's youngest and favorite son.

MAURICE WRIGHT, 16, Mose's middle son, second oldest by his second wife.

LIZABETH "AUNTY LIZ" WRIGHT, Mose's second wife, Mamoo's sister.

RUTHIE MAY CRAWFORD, 16, a neighbor of the Wrights.

JOHNNY B. WASHINGTON, an unemployed farm laborer, checker player.

CAROLINE BRYANT, 21, a storekeeper and wife, former local beauty queen.

ROY BRYANT, 24, Caroline's husband, a storekeeper and truck driver.

J. W. "BIG" MILAM, 36, Caroline's brother-in-law, Roy's half-brother, storekeeper.

H. L. LOGGINS, field hand and mechanic, one of "Milam's Boys."

Cast assignments are as follows:

BO OR EMMETT TILL

WOMAN 1 PLAYS MISS MAMIE, SIMMY

WOMAN 2 PLAYS MAMOO, HELUISE, AUNTY LIZ

MAN 1 PLAYS UNCLE MOSE, JOHNNY B., H. L. LOGGINS

MAN 2 PLAYS CURTIS, WHEELER, BO II, ROY BRYANT

MAN 3 PLAYS BO III, MAURICE, RUTHIE MAY, J. W.

The ensemble also creates various group tableaux: people on the train, dancers in the juke, random folk in Chicago and Mississippi.

SETTING: Minimalist and fluid single environment. Scene changes suggested by actor transformations and light. Scattered about, vestiges of Southern agrarian life—bales, boxes, old suitcases, crates, pails, paint buckets, a wheelbarrow, sacks, ladders and tarps, tree stumps,

tools, machine parts. Palette: beige, brown, bark; shades vs. color, dust to dust. Fabric: cotton, linen, denim. Floor of wood, dirt, cotton seed.

SOUND: *The Ballad* is laced with the song of African American vernacular culture, an *a capella* soundscape reflecting the optimism, faith, and coherence of post–World War II Black America: Doo-wop to the R&B, work song to juke joint blues, gospel chant to the Negro spiritual. As Miss Brooks wrote, “it always appeared as a ballad.”

PROLOGUE

(In the shadow-light, Ensemble enters from various points, all whispering “Emmett Till” or phrases from the song. When they collect together, they begin to sing . . .)

ENSEMBLE

Come on let me tell yuh bout the tale of Emmett Till,
Come on let me tell yuh bout the tale of Emmett Till,
They tried to break his body, but they could not break his will,
Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, couldn’t break his will.

Come on let me tell yuh bout the tale of Emmett Till,
Come on let me tell yuh bout the tale of Emmett Till,
They tried to break his body, but they could not break his will,
Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, couldn’t break his will.

They put his body down (huh!), but couldn’t break his soul,
I said, they put his body down, but couldn’t break his soul.
They sank him in the river, on the third day he rose,
On the third day he rose.

Come on let me tell yuh bout the tale of Emmett Till,
Come on let me tell yuh bout the tale of Emmett Till,
They put his body down, but his soul is risin’ still,
His soul is risin’ still.

You’re gonna hear his story, someday, some way, somewhere,
I know you will.
Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, I know you will.
I know you will.

ENSEMBLE (*whispered, echoing*)

Emmett Till, Emmett Till, Emmett Till . . .

MAN 1

Time was,

ENSEMBLE

Time was,

MAN 1

When the death of one black boy counted for somethin' . . .

SCENE 1. PREENING—"BRIM UPTURNED"

(Emmett as "Bo" turns. He is perhaps by himself, looking in the bathroom mirror, or on the street corner with his buddies.)

BO

New suit . . . traveling shoes

The rumble of the el

The sounds of the city

Awakening

Call me Bo! Bub-BoBo!

Emmett Louis Till, fir-first class!

The birds announce my arrival Thou didst make me

Show me my rival!

Brim upturned

Blonde Panama straw

With a green exotic feather

Still say caw, CAW, cuh CAW!

Cuh-CAW!

New pants

Never been worn

White buck shoes!

Not a scuff on em

New shoes! Man!

White bucks! D m!

Uncle Mose say, “Uh uh uh Mississippi?
This is someone you should know.
This my nephew, Buh-BoBo!”

“So, so, so,” she say.

“So so how long you gonna be around?”

Uh cuh-cuh—Uh Uh ck-cuh-uh ck-cuh cuh, uh ck-ck uh uh uh ck cuh
cuh-cuh—

((o))

A couple of weeks . . .

Okay, okay, Oh oh oh oh KAY!

So you're short and you stutter.

Duh-deal with it or let it get in your way.

SCENE 6. DOO-WOP—“DUH-DON'T LOOK.”

(Bo and his cousins Wheeler and Curtis at the fair, girl-watching.)

BO

Okay, I promise, I won't look at them . . . Look, my eyes are closed.
“Duh-Don't look.” Mah-mama duh-don't know. I'm from Chicago!
Girl watchin'—in the summuh? ((o)))! Wear a brother out! You die and
go to heaven every day! Ow! A national pastime—the girls bloom like
flowuhs inna summuhtime! Man! You got—two-lips!

MAN 2 AS WHEELER

Roses.

MAN 3 AS CURTIS

Daffodils.

BO

Bluebells.

WHEELER

Buttercups.

BO

Venus fly traps!

(Woman 2 enters as Heluise Woods, church girl, a bit older than Bo but excited. Bo reminisces, re-creating the scene.)

BO

I step out. Hair pressed flat, pants line pat. A ripple and a sheen, with a dip that's mean! . . . I met this guh-guh-girl, last May. Of of of of all play-places, Argo! Church went up to a carnival . . .

WOMAN 2 AS HELUISE

Heluise, Heluise Woods.

BO

Hello-oh-oh Heluise! Okay, okay, okay, I bought a ticket at the carnival to ride on the thing. We was standing in line, getting on two by two, Noah's ark. I'm movin' right along beside her, counting to make sure we we we end up together in the same car. And!

CURTIS

Curtis, baby!

BO

I mean Curtis?!

WHEELER

Jumps the line.

(Bo pushes past both, bumping Heluise.)

BO

I-I-I push past him n just make it—puh-POW!

(As the cousins retreat, Bo and Heluise settle in the Ferris wheel chair.)

BO

And I'm sittin' right next to her! Our own Kah, an aerial carriage. Chains rattle the seat. Then then then it started started up. Up up up we went,

up up up we goin'. She draws close. One hand round my, round my girl and you're praying yes, yes, yes and it stops at the very top. The stars out, carnival lights below, the Kah swinging in the breeze. Wooo-weeee! Just her and me—and—

(Just as Bo puts his arm around Heluise, Mamie appears, a pop-up between them.)

MAMIE

Mama.

BO

Wants to go on a road trip. I tell you, I had to write the girl a letter.

BO AND HELUISE

Dear Heluise. I am not coming out in Argo Saturday because my mama—

BO

Want(s) me to go tuh tuh—

MISS MAMIE AND BO

To Detroit.

BO *(As Mamie fades from view)*

I liked when I was out there and we went out to that carnival. Cutest little thing. Beautiful brown skin. Like a piece uh milk chocolate. Long pretty hair.

(Bo improvises a song, debonair in his mind, singing to Heluise as she starts to walk away. His cousins Wheeler and Curtis join in as back-up singers.)

BO

Met a little girl named Heluise,
Wrote her a letter to be my squeeze,
Sorry baby, I can't come to town,
But I sure wanna see you girl, the next time I'm around.

Remember M, remember E,
Put 'em both together, you'll remember me.
You're the last thing I'll see,
Hey, pretty baby, remember me.

E-M-M and a E-T-T,
Hey, pretty baby, re-re-re-remember me.

Emmett Louis Till from Chicago,
Buh-buh-but you can call me Buh-Buh-Buh-BoBo
Shoo-bee-doo-wah, shoo-bee-doo-WAH!

BO

. . . Wanna know the truth?

HELUISE

We finished the ride, I stood up there. All he could say was—

BO AND HELUISE

Bye.

BO

Now how how how not not cool could you be? Haven't heard back from her yet. Only been three months. But I will. Put two carnival tickets in the envelope.

HELUISE

Labor Day weekend.

BO

Church picnic. You know a cat's got nine lives.

SCENE. 29. THE TRIAL: TWO MAMIES, HER PUBLIC FACE AND HER PRIVATE SELF, TESTIMONY AND MEMORY.

WOMAN 1 AS MAMIE I
ON THE WITNESS STAND.

The first time I saw it, it was still in the casket. Then I saw it later after it was placed on a slab. I positively identified the body.

I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt.

I looked at the face very carefully. I looked at the ears, and the forehead, and the hairline, and also the hair.

And I looked at the nose and the lips and the chin.

This is a picture of the body as I saw it, yes.

This is the way I saw him the second time. He had his clothes put on his body then. When I saw him the first time he didn't have on any clothes.

Was the first view I had of my son there before the clothes were put on the body like in the photograph shown here.

The face, yes.

Was it the same as when I saw him the first time when he had no clothes on?

WOMAN 2 AS MAMIE 2—
HER INTERIOR THOUGHTS.

I said, What is this, some kind of creature from outer space?

I don't want that body. That can't be mine.

Skin, white, white as snow and this thing gigantic, but . . . I can't . . . look. Look!

At his feet and and and I can identify his ankles. Those are my ankles. Those are my knees. I know those knees.

Castrated? But no . . . I should be grateful for that? . . . Naked . . . His face . . . Look for his ear. Sort of curled up and not attached to the face. We have the same ears. You can use that for a clue.

His . . . face . . . Bo!

Mouth open. Teeth, the few left, those are Emmett's teeth. His nose just—

all busted up, his head gapped gaped gapped open, and and and . . .

No, sir. This is the way I saw him the second time. The first time I saw him, he had a hole in his head up here and that was open. And he had another scar over the left or right eye. I can't remember just now. And he had a gash in his jaw and his mouth was open and the tongue was out. That is the first time when I saw him without clothes on. But from this picture here, it seems like his mouth has been closed and that gash was sewn up and that place in his forehead up there has been closed up. That is the way it looks to me. The photograph here is a better picture of him than the way it was when I first saw him, that's right. When I first saw him, he had been shot through the left side.

Yes, sir. Daylight . . .

His face . . .

Pieces, I could only find him in pieces.

No, sir, no.

His left eye gone, and the right eye just lying down on his cheek. But the one eye that's left, that's definitely his eye. I could tell by the color . . . that that that that that that that's ssss . . .

Emmett's?

This . . . is This is . . . my son.

Then a light come in through the window. As if the sun had just broke through the clouds . . .

On the right side . . .

I could see daylight . . .

FROM THAT SUMMER IN SUMNER

THAT SUMMER IN SUMNER is the middle drama in *The Till Trilogy*, a three-play cycle exploring the epic saga of Emmett Till and the birth of the modern Civil Rights Movement. While the first play, *The Ballad of Emmett Till*, is the story of the boy, *That Summer in Sumner* explores the 1955 trial of his killers. While drawing upon trial transcripts, contemporaneous news accounts, and abundant photographic and media imaging, the play is not a docudrama but an imagined interpretation of behind the scene events from the perspective of three African American journalists covering the trial and from Emmett, himself, his ghost, his cipher, his *Kah*, coming to grips with what has happened to him.

In *The Ballad*, Emmett's world is an all-Black universe, reflecting the coherent, insular, safe world of his childhood, a world that is violated by the sudden intrusion of terror. In *That Summer in Sumner*, we are introduced to an integrated story and cast and thus a faint stirring of possibility, of a new America. Yet and still, like the Confederate statue in the town square, the nation's historical compact with the injustice of enslavement looms over every choice and move.

This play is inspired by actual events. The nature of live theater, however, has required condensation. While the actual trial involved hundreds of individuals, the characters as delineated are my best effort at composites, representing essential forces at play.

CHARACTERS

JACKSON "JAX" HICKS, 33, *JET Magazine* stringer reporter and photographer.

CLOYTE MURDOCK, *Ebony Magazine* fashion and lifestyle reporter, new to the *JET* team

SIMEON BOOKER, 37, lead investigative reporter for the *JET/Ebony* team.

MIKE SHEA, freelance white photographer on the *JET/Ebony* team.

WEBSTER, local redneck

JOE BOY, Webster's slow older brother

DEPUTY SHERIFF COTHAM, newly elected lawman from LeFlore County.

CHORUS, autopsy team, 2005

MAMIE TILL MOBLEY, mother of Emmett Till

BO, Emmett Louis Till, a murdered youth, his shapeshifting Kah, its light, and shadow.

WE RISE, BY IFA BAYEZA

And the mama stood up!
And the preacher stood up!
And the people stood up!
And they was all thrown down!

But the boy himself stood up,
And said bring Old Pharaoh down!
I say, the ch-i-i-i-ld stood up,
And said, I'm bringing Pharaoh down,

You think you stole my life,
But I rise, I rise, I rise!
I go and return to my place,
Till they acknowledge my offense and seek my face.

You think you stole my life,
But I rise, I rise, I rise!

Because the mother stood up!
Then the young preacher stood up!
And then the people stood up!
And would not be thrown down!

Yes, the young folks stood up,
And the old folk they stood up,
And all the people stood up,
They could not be thrown down,

Cuz the boy himself stood up,
And said, bring Old Pharaoh down!
I say, the ch-i-i-i-ld stood up,
And said, I'm bringing Pharaoh down,

“We’ll go and return to this place,
Till you acknowledge the offense
And seek our face.”

You think you stole his life,
But for him we rise, we rise, we rise!

You think you stole his life,
But we rise, we rise, we rise!
We rise, we rise, we ri-i-i-ise!

ACT 1, SCENE 5. SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 17, NEAR DUSK, ROUTE 49

(On a dusty southern road in a beat-up rusty car ride a team of reporters. Three Negroes, Jackson “Jax” Hicks, photographer, at the wheel; Simeon Booker on the passenger side; and Cloyte Murdock, who sits between them in the back seat, her eyes perusing a folded rumpled map with a flashlight. Photographer Mike Shea, white, is asleep, his head plastered against the back window.)

CLOYTE

What was that?!

SIMEON

Just backfire, Cloyte, relax.

JAX

First time to Mississippi?

CLOYTE

How’d you guess?

JAX

That you? Puttin’ your foot on the brake from the back?

CLOYTE

You coulda found a car not quite so beat-up, Jax.

JAX

Best to look local. Not draw attention.

SIMEON

And unless you want to get eaten alive by mosquitos, dump the perfume.

CLOYTE (*sits back, then shifts forward again*)

You can't smell it after all this time. Besides, that's your idea of local, Simeon Booker? Bowtie? Really? And hornrims? Round here, people probably don't even own a pair of glasses. Shanty shacks, like the Civil War. There's a story here.

JAX

Let's hope we live to tell it.

CLOYTE

Or at least get somewhere. Cotton on one side, swamp on the other.

SIMEON

Tomorrow, I want to swing by Money, see if we can set up an interview with the boy's uncle, Mose Wright, and get some shots of that store.

CLOYTE

And the river where they found the body.

SIMEON

You're down here to cover local color, big picture landscapes like y'all do. We'll do the crime stuff. Mike got the white.

CLOYTE (*ignoring him*)

There's no Money on the map.

SIMEON (*throws his hand back, palm up, over the seat*)

Give it here.

JAX

Mike, wake up.

MIKE

What I'm sleep. I can't help it, if I'm not drivin', it makes me sleepy.

CLOYTE

There's no Money on the—

JAX

Wake your ass up, man, or lay down on the seat.

SIMEON

Give it.

CLOYTE

I see Sumner, where the trial's gon be, but there's no—oh here.

(She hands Simeon the wrinkled map and sits back, folding her arms.)

SIMEON (*holding the map close to his glasses*)

. . . Money . . . It doesn't seem to indicate a location.

CLOYTE

What did I just say?

JAX

Mike, seriously, sit up. Lest people think we drivin' round with a dead white man.

MIKE

I'm Black Irish. That don't count? . . . All right. All right.

JAX

I'm the one been drivin' all day.

SIMEON

I told you I would drive.

(*They all just look at him with a "no comment."*)

JAX

Let's just get to Mound Bayou and get settled. Doc Howard can give us some directions.

CLOYTE

Give me the map. Give it . . .

(*Simeon hands it to her, she folds and scans.*)

Mound Bayou. I see it. We're on 49, right? East or west?

SIMEON

It's "BAH-oh, they say "bah-oh" down here.

CLOYTE

BAH-oh, then. Road signs would be nice. To go with your pronunciation key.

SIMEON

There's Parchman. State penitentiary. We're almost there.

MIKE

That's reassuring. State prison for a landmark.

CLOYTE

. . . Trial's in Sumner, we can't find rooms less than an hour away? *Brown vs. the Board of Ed.*'s been over a year now. How long before you expect the news to trickle down here? Restroom, restaurant, hotel, motel, school, church, swimming pool, even graveyards, all segregated. Want a damn sandwich, "Go round back!"

JAX

Chicago's no different.

MIKE

"No Negroes in Cicero."

SIMEON

DC is worse! Simeon Booker, Nieman Fellow, Harvard grad! First colored reporter to integrate the *Washington Post*. Couldn't even eat downtown and forget about a taxi. Act like they're doing me a favor to let me in the press gallery. And when they finally deem to give me an assignment? "First Sighting of Ragweed Pollen."

CLOYTE (*leaning forward, elbows astride the front seat*)

Nobody told you to go over there to the white folk. You know their ways. (*before Mike can protest*) Present company excluded.

JAX

Had to come back home. To the source, the line, the grapevine. *Readers Digest* of the Negro world. The world of blackness distilled to fit in your back pocket. So black—

CLOYTE, JAX, AND MIKE

They call it *JET*!

CLOYTE

I don't know why Mr. Johnson took you back.

SIMEON

I'm one of the best investigative reporters in the country, that's why, and I don't know why he consented for you to come down here.

MIKE

Hey, play nice.

CLOYTE

I was making a joke, Simeon, Jesus! You got no sense of humor at all. And I don't need a man's consent. I'm here to cover the story for *Ebony*, just like you're here for *JET*. If *Ebony* magazine is to compete with *Life* and *Look* and *Time*, we can't just write up the latest singer's house do-over or the up-and-coming whoever or "local color landscapes." People want the news, unblemished. People are hungry for the truth. Your spread in *JET* proved that.

SIMEON

150,000 copies hit the stands yesterday, sold out this morning, first second printing ever!

CLOYTE

And Jax's photo!

MIKE

That photo, man, that did it.

SIMEON

And the excellent, first-on-the-scene coverage. I can't believe Mr. Johnson let the image get away from us like that. How'd the picture get in every colored paper in the country when we just went to print?!

CLOYTE

The way you angled the shot, Jax, as if the boy was standing up looking out in disbelief, that last moment of terror frozen on his face—woke everybody up. You could see every moment of the torture written on him. We're not coming down here just to "cover this story," we're coming to get justice!

SIMEON

You in Mississippi, Cloyte. You'll be lucky to get the time of day. Talkin' about justice. Jax and I were down here last April. It was dangerous then. And it's worse now.

JAX

Brown vs. the Board of Ed. done drove these white folks crazy.

SIMEON

With the Till boy, that's three killings since May, another near fatal. George Lee. Mouth shot off, tongue split in half, severed jugular.

CLOYTE

Stop.

SIMEON

Ran his car into a tree and then a house, stumbled out of the car. Passing taxi tried to get him to the colored hospital.

MIKE

Remind me why I came on this assignment again.

SIMEON

Died on the way. Official cause of death. You know what they said?

SIMEON AND JAX

Concussion.

JAX

Said the pellets they found in his skull were fillings from his teeth, knocked out in the crash.

SIMEON

Lamar Smith, shot dead, broad daylight—in front of—the courthouse. Other fella, shot three times and *didn't* die. This work is too dangerous for a woman like—

CLOYTE

Like what?—The real fact of the matter is—

SIMEON

That's redundant. Real fact. A fact is real, by its very nature.

CLOYTE

The fact of the matter is—I don't need your consent, Simeon Booker. It's 1955! The boy's mother was the start of it all. She's not a woman? It was her insisting that they have an open casket funeral, bringing in Jax to photograph the body. A woman's the reason we're here. One little woman standing up to the whole state of Mississippi. I can't wait to meet her.

SIMEON

That's my interview!

CLOYTE

You know what—

SIMEON

Jax and I were with her when the body arrived and at the funeral home. And the weekly takes precedence over the monthly anyway.

CLOYTE

On whose dance floor?

JAX

Will you two cut it out? We're a team, remember? *JET*, *Ebony*—all the news of the known Negro world? Plenty of stories to go 'round.

CLOYTE

We just want the truth. Justice.

MIKE

And the American way!

CLOYTE AND JAX

Shut up, Mike.

SIMEON

And listen, Mike, when we get to town, make yourself scarce, so you can cozy up to the white folks, their side of the story.

MIKE

Whatever you say, boss.

SIMEON

And for god-sakes, don't call me boss!

(to the others' silent reaction)

. . . Sorry . . . This whole thing's got me all—we just gotta get this right.

CLOYTE

Little girl in Kansas just wanna go to her neighborhood school.

MIKE

Kid from Chicago just wanna have a good time.

JAX

. . . And the children shall lead them.

CLOYTE *(reaching over the seat for Jax's Bible sitting beside him.)*

You quoting scripture now.

JAX *(puts his hand over the book)*

Don't—touch that . . . my pistol's inside.

SIMEON

I thought I told you not to bring that.

JAX

You know I don't pay you no mind.

CLOYTE AND MIKE

Amen.

(Camera bulb flash morphs into a photo of the wide-eyed crew.)

ACT 2, SCENE 1. MANHUNT—WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

(Mike, Simeon, Jax, and Cloyte are seated in the car. Simeon is driving, Cloyte beside him. In the back seat, as Mike periodically checks the road behind them, Jax holds a handkerchief to his eye.)

CLOYTE *(going off, in her replay of events, playing all the roles, wildly switching volume, pitch, and rhythm as she navigates the road)*

Do you *believe* this? Do you BELIEEEEEVE this?! Doc Howard calls a meeting, right—and announces that HE has *discovered* what WE already *knew*! There are *witnesses*, he says. Yeah, we KNOW, says Jax who-just-goes-off-on-his-own whenever-he-feel-like-it! Sheriff's two colored fella, two colored fellas he's got holed up in his jail. But no, no, no no! says *Ruuube*, Miss Ruu-Bee Hur-Lee, that-everybody-knows-but-me. There are other witnesses who saw the, the *two colored fellas* in a *truck* out in DREW. But we can't go to the sheriff cuz he's already done something to the first two. SO! Here's what we're gonna do? Doc says, We go DI-RECT-LY to the special prosecutor and the JUDGE! And how-do-you-propose-to-do THAT? . . . *Simeonnn* has the great idea. Go through his guy, MONROE!—SAINT JAMES! We can trust him, Cuz he *knows* me. We went to *Harvard* together and he got us some *chairs*! But Doc says, nononoNO! He has *his* man, his *own* WHITE MAN! A *good* man, outta MEM-PHIS! I *know* him, I *trust* him. WHY?! DID YOU GO ON SAFARI TOGETHER?!!

(The quartet veers forward as the car comes to abrupt stop. As the men freeze, Cloyte collects herself and addresses the audience.)

CLOYTE

Seriously, lest you believe that I, a professional Black woman, would comport myself in such a manner, let us reset the scene.

(The players rotate seats counter-clockwise so now Cloyte is driving and Simeon is in the back next to Mike with Jax riding shotgun, the handkerchief still to his eye.)

SIMEON

And so Doc makes his CALLLLLL to his man, right, who shows up with UH-NOTHER MF—AND MONROE—beCAUSE, he says, they *happened-to-be-in-the-ROOM* when DOC's mannn got the CALL!—IT'S A PUBLIC CALL STATION! They set up a WHOLE ROOM for the WHITE REPORTERS! Teletype machines, long-distance phone lines. Western UNION! Every newscaster in the COUNTRY is up in there—EX—CEPT US! Uh-uh-UHSSSS!

MIKE

You guys need to calm down. You sound hysterical.

SIMEON AND CLOYTE

After four hundred years of this shit, why wouldn't we be?!

JAX

You just had to stay with the car, man. You didn't see.

MIKE

What?!

SIMEON

We get out there and everyone is gone. The people are gone—everybody, plantation to plantation, ghost towns. No light. Not even a winduh light. Pitch black. Everywhere. Nothin' but darkness.

JAX

Branch nearly took my eye out.

SIMEON

Not even a winduh light. Our witnesses . . . we don't know where they are or . . . who got to them or who got 'em, if they even . . .

CLOYTE

I don't like leaving Miss Ruby like that.

SIMEON

She's gonna keep looking. We got our marching orders.

JAX

I know those two fellas are in that jail.

SIMEON

"Tell mah sistuh to come git me."

JAX

But I couldn't get near 'em, couldn't even get close—

MIKE

Yo, Jax.

JAX

Uh-huh.

MIKE

There's headlights behind us.

CLOYTE

I see. It's a car or a truck or—!

(Screech of tires on rough gravel, truck doors slam, glaring flashlight on the quartet, blinding them. Chorus 7 and Chorus 9 as redneck thugs, Webster and Joe Boy, appear at first as shadows behind the lights.)

CHORUS 7 AND CHORUS 9

Get out the car! Get out! GET OUT THE GODDAM CAR!

JAX (*to Cloyte*)
Stay in the car.

(Jax, Mike, and Simeon exit the car.)

JAX
Stay in the car, Cloyte.

CHORUS 9
Hands where I can see em!

JAX
If you have to, put your foot on the pedal and drive like hell.

CHORUS 7
Lemme see your hands!

JAX
It's my eye, it's just my eye.

SIMEON
We we we—

CHORUS 9
Shut up! Git out! Hands above your heads! Hurry up!

MIKE
Now just a minute—

CHORUS 7
Or what! . . . You a white man or colored?

SIMEON
If you can't tell the difference, what difference does it make?

CLOYTE
Lawd, Jesus! We fittin tuh die.

(Cloyte reaches for the Bible beside her.)

CHORUS 7

Shut up, shut up in there. Git out. I said, git out!

JAX

Suh, suh. No need to bring her intuh this.

CLOYTE

JEEsus! Lemme hold my Bible!

CHORUS 7

No, now, git, git—You! Git out the goddam car. Put the book down!

(Cloyte, holding on to the book, exits the car.)

CLOYTE

Pray fuh yuh soul.

JAX

Cloyte.

CHORUS 7

Put the Book down!

CLOYTE

Okay, okay . . .

JAX

Cloyte.

CHORUS 7

SHUT UP!

JAX

Don't.

CLOYTE

Lord, have mercy!

JAX

Cloyte, don't.

CHORUS 9

Put it down.

CLOYTE

I can't put the good book on the ground!

JAX

Don't.

CHORUS 10

SHUT UP!

CLOYTE

If you gon kill us, lemme read somethin from a passage first!

CHORUS 9

PUT IT DOWN!

CLOYTE

Okay, okay, I'm putting it down.

MIKE

Listen, uh, guys. We're reporters. Here to cover the trial. (*holding up his camera, ready to shoot*) Whatever you think you're going to do to us, the whole world is going to see it.

(The men pause, then burst out laughing.)

CLOYTE (*to Jax*)

Honey, hold the Bible n pray wid me. Pray wid me.

CHORUS 9

That's a good idea. Git on your knees.

CHORUS 7

ON YOUR KNEES!

(As the trio joins Cloyte already on her knees.)

CHORUS 9 *(relishing each word)*

. . . Pick a good verse.

(Cloyte opens the book. Just as she is about to retrieve the pistol, a police car siren and lights.)

CHORUS 7

Shit.

DEPUTY *(with flashlight)*

. . . What's to do here? Webster, zat you? Joe-Boy?

CHORUS 7

Deputy.

DEPUTY

Everything all right here?

CHORUS 9

We was just joogin'.

DEPUTY *(recognizing Jax)*

You again.

JAX

We got lost.

DEPUTY

Yuh think? . . . Webster, I'm sure these kind folks appreciate your help. I'll take it from here. Tell Mama Delphine I'll be by for some of that butter roll . . .

CLOYTE

When this is over, I'm moving to Sweden.

ACT 2, SCENE 13. RETURN

(Full Ensemble forms an arc in an imagined medical gallery, a body on the table before them. Ensemble alternates lines in a rapid formal speech, as if being recorded.)

CHORUS 9

June 1, 2005

CHORUS 8

The remains interred at the Burr Oak Cemetery in a grave marked to be that of Emmett Louis Till were exhumed.

CHORUS 6

Cook County Medical Examiner

CHORUS 1: Autopsy

CHORUS 4

Extensive and dramatic fractures of the skull, metallic fragments identified in the cranium

CHORUS 7

A vertical symphyseal fracture of the thyroid cartilage

CHORUS 9: Distal femur fractured

CHORUS 6

Subtle fracture of the right capitate bone

CHORUS 3

In the right wrist

CHORUS 2

Fracture also of the left lunate bone of the left wrist

CHORUS 6

Four lead fragments were found to be consistent with deformed shot pellets

CHORUS 4

Either 7½ or number 8 lead shot pellets manufactured for the Army Air Force to be utilized by aircraft combat crews

CHORUS 5

Bullet fragments

CHORUS 2

Multiple comminuted skull fractures

CHORUS 4

Glass seal and conditions of the coffin have yielded excellent mummification.

CHORUS 3

Where there was no eye, they've put a piece of cloth

CHORUS 6

So he will forever look out into the netherworld.

CHORUS 5

In the afterlife, tending his garden.

CHORUS 8

His skin has turned to amber.

CHORUS 2

Like Tutankanen!

ALL

The Boy King!

(Bo enters.)

BO

“When I was alive
I was blind, I limped, I stuttered
But now my eyes distinguish

My ears hear
I can move easily
My voice is clear
If I can remember that
I won't be lost"*

(Ensemble alternating lines)

CHORUS 8

No damage to the legs.

CHORUS 5

The original pigmentation blanched white by the water.

CHORUS 1

You can see here. His feet arched and pointed. Ligaments still remarkably intact.

CHORUS 4

Feet arched, pointed

CHORUS 7

On his toes

CHORUS 9

Like he's swimming or

CHORUS 5

Ready to dance

CHORUS 3

Dance dance dance

CHORUS 2

From the DNA database, we can definitely say

ALL

Who this is

BO

“I have amazing powers
I can go where I wish in the time it takes to open Or close my hand
I see my house and my friends As if in a dream
I call out: Hello, I’m here No answer
My mind wanders like a lost feather I’m here.
Don’t cry.
I’m here.”*

MAMIE

Bo?

(Bo turns toward the sound of his name.)

ENSEMBLE

Bo . . .

BO

So, it is true. I am—

ENSEMBLE

Beautiful!

NOTE

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