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color

Essays on Race, Family, and History

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I began writing essays when my brother, Paul, died of alcoholism in 1982. By then, I had published six books of poems and had found poetry to be a safe harbor for my enthusiasms. Before 1982, I didn’t like sentences; they tended to go awry, and I wasn’t, in all honesty, self-confident enough in my own announcements to assail prose. Yet Paul’s death changed everything. In fact, I have only composed one poem since his loss—and it, interestingly, had to do with September 11, 2001, which, of course, was another great tragedy, with enormous resonance for me, a displaced New Yorker.

After Paul’s death, something inexorably perished in me. It was the sense that the world could continue in the same vein, that what I had done before could survive. Herefore, poetry for me was a sacred calling: the highest of the Arts. My difficult love for my brother—and it was blustery, indeed—involved the same spiritual anchoring. With his death went my desire to compose poetry. And yet I am a writer. And as a writer, I can only understand the world, alas, by writing about it.

Walls, my first collection of essays, appeared in 1991. It took seventeen years to complete this second book. During the interim, both of my parents died of Alzheimer’s disease,
the world grew meaner, and I kept trying to write the best I could. Some people climb mountains, others reimagine the laws of physics; a writer, simply, writes. And for a black writer, authorship takes on even more salience. Historically, black people in much of the United States were not permitted to learn to read or write. Indeed, writing was a crime, and slaves were often murdered for attempting to master the alphabet. But we, as Frederick Douglass beautifully affirms, wrote ourselves into personhood, and often with a grace unmatched in American letters. And so, in every class I teach at Cornell, I tell my students—white and black alike—to write, write, write. It is not a matter of choice: it is a matter of existence.

There are essays here about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s visit to our cottage in Martha’s Vineyard, my mother’s odyssey to have her racial designation changed on her birth certificate, and my father’s difficult struggle as a black student to gain admittance to medical school in the 1930s, even though he graduated second in his class, in three years, from Boston University, with a major in chemistry. There is a reminiscence about teaching the profoundly handicapped at a superb public school; an essay about my parents’ mutual drift into Alzheimer’s disease; a paean to my parents’ love for musicals; a disquisition on affirmative action; and a love note to the great poet A. R. Ammons, who taught me much.

All of these essays concern race, although they, like the human spirit, wildly sweep and yaw. Since many of these essays were written as discrete pieces, they demand, as any self-reliant organism must, much contextual foregrounding; and so you will read about my father’s life, from numerous vantage points, in various essays. If they work, these essays attempt to celebrate how experience triangulates: how life, like a diamond, is the sum of its facets, each experience presenting a discrete shimmering, each, in some particularized way, amending and refracting the overall luminosity. For this reason, I often withhold bits of the narrative, for example, when
I discuss my father’s medical school experience. In one essay you learn a great deal about his travail; in another, there’s an added insight, a slightqualification, a detail previously withheld. Some of this is intentional, having to do with narrative force and drama; some of this, truthfully, has to do with my own penchant for self-involvement. And some of this, of course, celebrates how the memory works. I hope these moments of narrative recapitulation are not too distracting.

Memory, of course, refines and recalibrates, and this is a book about recollection, which is to say, it is a book about inference. To have two parents die of Alzheimer’s is to understand—and powerfully—the constitutive value of memory. We exist, largely because we insist on it. When my mother and father began to forget where we lived, what we had done together, and how each of us intermeshed as a family, I understood how wondrous, and needed, the connective tissue of memory is—and I learned, just as dramatically, that where they failed to provide concrete detail, I would interpolate. If I am here, so are they.

All of these essays were published elsewhere. And I especially want to thank Robert Fogarty at the Antioch Review for printing five of them and for being such a generous editor. I would also like to thank Michael Koch for publishing three pieces in Epoch, which, of course, originates at my university, Cornell. He, too, has been a godsend. Four of these essays were listed as “Notable Essays” in The Best American Essay volumes, so I may have done something right.

If anything, my parents taught me the value of love and witness. My parents, whatever their foibles, loved me—and it was a great love, a messy love, an overabundant love. Few people have suffered from an excess of love; millions, in the world, have perished from the lack of it. If these essays are generous, it is simply my parents’ gift returned.

In this dark time of war and human perfidy, to be loved is an awesome thing. I have been blessed with many friends who
have taken me seriously and who have honored my often abject lack of normal human intercourse. To my distress I did not collect my mother’s ashes from the funeral home until three years after her death. I simply left her remains there, as if they were wheat chaff. To this day, I sing the praises of the honorable mortician who—when confronted with my wife and me—simply offered his great unstinting solace. His generosity was an act of near-Augustinian forbearance.

Of course, there were good reasons for my departure from good taste. My mother’s illness had removed her from me, well before the flesh had perished. But it is just as truthful to state that I am a very odd person, whose abhorrence of civic decorum, sadly, is often profound.

As James Baldwin reminds us, we all travel down the same streets, however extraordinary they appear to us. Yet I hope, in this small volume, among the commonplace, I may invest the world with a particular taint, a peculiar angling. If these essays are at times ungainly, I hope they are always honest. If they are not, then I have done something inexcusable, for I have failed to honor family, history, and the sacred act of human witness.

Yet above all else, I dedicate this book to my wife, Rochelle, who makes me know—in word and quiet gesture—that mercy, tenderness, and hope exist.

I am now fifty-seven years old, and I have never imagined myself as a hopeless romantic, but I am. And how sweet, in this dark time, to feel the wind sweep through the willow, my lovely wife near me.

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Shadow Boxing

For my father

At age seventy-nine, my father has a remarkable way of remembering things. In his full-blooded narratives, he is often dutifully beating up someone who has been unfair to my mother, has threatened my sister, or has been contemptuous of someone—or something—he deems worthy of his protection. These stories are glorious in their intricacies, the delicious how and why buttressing the fateful moment when my father “knocked the man’s teeth out,” or “broke his jaw,” or “wrestled him to his knees.”

My father has always told good stories, since he delights in the heroic and loves the way an expectation can bedevil an outcome. In the past, of course, these stories were more earthly—that is, most of the tales were true: one could believe
the bone, though the gristle, perhaps, was porous. Still, then as now, when my father becomes truly animated, he is often brought to his full standing height, his hands purposeful, free-floating, before he settles back—a bemused, contented look on his face. At this moment, no one could be more pleased with himself. And yet, no matter how wonderful my father’s pugilistic yarns, none of these events ever took place. Once, many years ago, my father did hit someone, but that was in the most extraordinary of circumstances. He could have punched others; he is certainly strong enough. But he, by nature and temperament, is not combative.

Like most of us, my father is fundamentally decent and principled. His recent fantasies underscore his pain, although the rest—the blood and fisticuffs—is pure invention. For, above all else, my father is simply relating what he felt in a particular situation, that he wanted to act, and that had he been someone else, fists would fly. And considering the magnitude of the gore amassed in his recent stories, it is a good thing, for had my father pummeled everyone at his exponentially growing rate of recollection, there would not be anyone in Harlem, or in New York City, for that matter, who still possessed his original pearly whites.

In actuality, my father is remarkable for his generosity and lack of bitterness. Although he struggled against much racial prejudice, he remained doggedly optimistic, which is why, I imagine, he was able to become a successful African American physician in a terribly difficult time. He, to this day, is pleased with his life, whatever its involvements and misfortunes—and they have been many, the death of an alcoholic son, the intimate challenge of parenting a brain-damaged daughter, and the loss of his wife of fifty-seven years to Alzheimer’s disease.

During his youth in Boston, Massachusetts, in the 1920s, my father attended public schools controlled by the Irish, many of whom had little use for him or his family. Often, his
classmates would call him names: few, if any, ever spoke to him. At times, my father thought his middle name was “Nig-ger.” In fact, he was not initially permitted to graduate from his high school, although he was a brilliant student, because the principal would not sign his graduation release form. Though mild-mannered, my father believed in himself; he did not take nonsense from anyone. Proud to be black, he felt—as did his father before him—that he was as good as anyone else, which made him, in the principal’s words, “an uppity nigger.” Indeed, my father was “paper certified” only after my grandfather’s threat of a legal suit, his degree coming to him six months late.

Then, four years later, after my father had graduated Phi Beta Kappa, in three years, from Boston University’s College of Liberal Arts, he was admitted to Boston University’s College of Medicine but only after the most tortuous of journeys. At the time, no Boston medical school would accept black students, and my father, as the child of a poor minister, could ill afford to go elsewhere. To insure their subterfuge—which depended upon their unanimity—the Boston medical schools (Harvard, Tufts, and Boston University) had a “gentlemen’s agreement” whereby they would collectively direct all their black applicants to black medical schools in the South. Yet, as is so often the case in the machinations of those who are truly despicable—those who, in Albert Camus’s phrase, wish to be “innocent murderers”—the Boston medical schools could effectively neutralize these unwanted potential doctors through bureaucratic sleight of hand; in reality, these applications were never officially reviewed. Black applicants were not “refused” at Harvard; they were “referred” to Howard. All the poor “successful” applicants knew was that, in a few months’ time, they were offered admission to a school to which they had not applied.

For a year, my father remained in limbo. Then, after much intrigue—and with the great help of Dr. Solomon
Carter Fuller, a distinguished African neurologist—my father inveigled an interview at Boston University’s College of Medicine. It was an astonishing encounter, to say the least. The medical school’s faculty literally looked my father over, trying, one surmises, to ascertain if he were “too black” to trouble the white patients, a consideration not unusual in those days. Indeed, my father wonderfully recounts how the distinguished physicians all huddled around the door of the Boston University Hospital like prairie dogs, as my father, albeit timidly, moved through them on his way to the admissions interview. No one spoke to my father; the doctors simply shot him quick glances as they “busied themselves,” trying en masse to enter the elevator before he discerned their enterprise. My father, of course, was not fooled.

Still, one can well imagine these bespectacled gentlemen all gathered in the small lobby, trying to look inconspicuous. And to this day, my father heartily laughs when he details the actions of the chairperson of the admissions committee who made the mistake of dropping his keys in the hospital’s lobby. My father naturally picked them up, presented them to the doctor, and was suitably thanked. Yet, it was quite a day for that hapless doctor when, lo and behold, he had to lead the questioning of a young man whom he—and the others—had ostensibly never met before. The doctor never mentioned their exchange in the lobby; my father, of course, remained silent. And in two days, to the astonishment of many, my father was admitted, with little fanfare, to the School of Medicine, the first black accepted in twenty-five years.

Yet in the 1960s, it was not my father but his children who were angry. I saw my father’s hurt; I wanted retribution. My father simply believed in being a good doctor, a good provider, and a decent man. The problems he had with Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, the fact that he was the only physician without private patient privileges and the ability to admit his own charges, under his own name, was certainly dis-
cussed, but it was not the focus of his life. My father was more interested in his patients and their unusual ailments, treating the legion who couldn’t pay. Nothing was more important to him than getting a diagnosis correct—in his office he treated leprosy and, amazingly, identified one of the rarest diseases in the world (a strain of hyperthyroidism), one of the twenty-five cases then listed in the medical literature. Nothing was more crucial to him than providing black people with the best care imaginable, and nothing dwarfed his monumental love for my mother, my sister, my brother, and me.

When I was young, it was rare for me to see my father: he worked from nine in the morning till nine at night, six days a week. But on Sunday—the week’s grandest day—the entire family would take the Staten Island Ferry across and back, which is still one of the most magical rides in the world, no matter how many miles I travel and how many wonderful places I visit. My father would always remember that my brother, Paul, loved licorice; my sister, Adrienne, a chocolate milk shake; my mother, a short, small remembrance—a piece of taffy or a bright red kerchief; and I, cashews.

In a phrase, my father was a gentle man, but he was not soft. I recall when I was seven and he and I had gone down to Macy’s department store in lower Manhattan. At that time, few black people frequented the most elegant stores: black people rarely worked in midtown; they certainly were not warmly encouraged to visit. Macy’s, Saks, and the others were exclusive, which inevitably meant, in our national double-peak, that blacks were not wanted.

Nevertheless, we both had traveled downtown from our Harlem brownstone to purchase a radio for my mother’s birthday. I remember how proud I was of our selection; we bought my mother a large cathedral-shaped radio, with eye-catching, globe-like dials. When we entered the elevator, I carried the enormous radio, which was a real treat for me, small and determined as I was. And then we began the slow,
three-floor descent through the perfumes, the hand-stuffs, and, finally, to the lobby, which opened like an irrepressible, garish mouth. That day, we shared the elevator with five white men and one white woman, all of whom possessed that studied nonchalance that one perfects in cities. Rule of thumb: one never looks as if one notices anything; one, however, can tell you everything about one’s environment, from the size of the man to your left, to the price of his not-so-new raincoat.

Suddenly, as if possessed, the white woman began yelling at my father, and slapped him in the face, screaming that he had pinched her. The elevator was in chaos: the white men and I had not seen anything. Yet I knew that my father would never fondle any woman; he respected my mother far too much to participate in any such odiousness. But then, with no hesitation, my father took his hand and slapped the woman across the mouth, telling her, in no uncertain terms, that he had not touched her, that she must be crazy, and that he had no intention of being hit by anyone for something he had not done.

Now the elevator was in a panic, the white men demanding that my father apologize. For his part, my father simply glared at them, holding on to me, his eyes reassuring but defiant. I still did not know what had fully transpired, but children, as if by osmosis, understand that this is a cruel world and that their parents—no matter how inexplicably they sometimes act—are all they have to protect them. So I, by instinct, just held close to my father: he would explain everything, as he always had. Then, after what seemed like hours, the elevator hit the ground floor, and my father told the men that he would be willing to fight them, one at a time, if that is what they desired. I still remember him chiding: “Just come on now, since you all are so certain I touched this woman. Come on. I only ask that this be a fair fight.”

The white men hesitated. Then my father, now conscious of his power and relishing it, rose to his full six-foot
height and kept asking—demanding—one of them to fight, his anger deepening, his voice more and more menacing. Thankfully, no one moved. After a few long moments, my father led me out of the store, and we drove home. He was silent, contemplative, victorious. I was scared, yet proud.

For any black person in this country, there is always the possibility of racial insult and the resulting impetus for rage. My father, like all of us, had patiently tried to construct a universe in which he could live his life without recourse to violence. In fact, I can only recall one other instance when he was driven to a place where good cheer and sensitivity could not save him. It was again in New York City, again in midtown, when we hoped to hail a taxi. Cab drivers in New York rarely stop for blacks; they do not like to go to Harlem, for reasons real and fanciful. Yes, it is true that they are often picked upon; but much of this, I suggest, stems from the fact that so few cabs ever venture to Harlem, and far too many Harlemites have suffered from a cab driver’s callous dismissal. There is nothing more insulting—in a world full of insults—than having a cab driver—a hired, public servant—slow down, peer into your face, and race off. I don’t know if white people have ever felt the anger and dread of anticipating—or even imagining—one’s denial. But it is deadly: it makes one want to die; it makes one ready to kill.

That July day, my father and I were looking for a cab and, finally, one came. My father was wearing his best summer suit—he had just come from the hospital—and I was stifling in my private-school clothes, a rigid blue blazer, tie, and gray pants. We certainly did not look impoverished. My father, I would hazard, probably had more money in his pocket than that cab driver made in a month. And we were—at least in our own eyes—worthy of a cab ride up to our house, no matter where it was located.

The cab driver slowed up, and we began to let ourselves in. Yet as soon as the driver saw that my father was black, he
immediately sped off, my father’s arm, like something immaterial, still stuck in the door. I had never seen my father so angry. He kicked at the cab, trying to break the window, and then—in a very strange yet poignant gesture—my father put his hand into his coat pocket, as if to find a gun. Thankfully, it was an empty act. My father had never owned a gun; guns were anathema to him. And yet at that moment, my father had wanted to send that cabby’s brains spiraling across the pavement: he wanted to kill something, anything. That he didn’t have a weapon is something for which I am forever grateful.

As I mentioned, of late my father tells stories—some familiar, others not—where he does the noble thing, hitting this or that miscreant. He, to my knowledge, has only struck one person, that absurd woman on the elevator. And yet his stories point to a serious truth. He, like all black people, has been hurt by this country, and those bludgeoned teeth, however imaginary, are testimony to the reality that pain festers. For no matter how honorable my father is, the terrible thing about this world, the terrible thing about America, is that one is often made to hate and to want to smash something—be it yourself, your children, or, God forbid, some misbegotten soul who, in a different time and place, might have been your friend.