

Elizabeth Alexander

AT THE LAST

The dashboard doll recovered his voice on September 29, 1992, just as Leila Comer Fitzhugh was merging from Lemon Avenue onto Stemmons Expressway.

Tenderly—be not impatient, said the doll. Strong is your hold O—

“Damn damn double damn!” Leila narrowly averted a fatal collision with a pickup truck, which sliced the side-view mirror off her ancient sedan. She fumbled for the heart pills in her pocketbook. “I know you’re in there,” she told the medication as she fingered a coin purse, lipstick, tortoiseshell comb, and half-stick of chewing gum.

The weather was damp and blistering, more like mid-July than late September, so Leila had turned the cooling to Very High. The blunt dry air made her feel stiff and old enough to remember when cotton was king. Leila *did* remember when the bottom fell out of cotton and Inez Payne left high school to help her family make ends meet. She remembered the attack on Pearl Harbor and, eighteen months afterward, the Beaumont race riot. She remembered ration books; scrap iron drives; April 14, 1943 (when Travis shipped out); October 24, 1945 (when he returned); and the bittersweet postwar era when the bomb was not banned after all and thousands of little children were crippled by polio. She remembered ice cold Coca-Cola machines for white customers only.

The car scarcely flinched when its mirror was amputated. As usual, its mind was not on the road but in the garage of its former owners, Dr. and Mrs. Peter Kurilecz, at 4464 Rheims Place. The car loved that garage, which smelled of potting soil and newspapers and whose damp cement floor felt delicious on heat-swollen tires.

Coolant trickled sadly onto the expressway as the car thought of the Kurilecz children jostling against its doors, singing “The Ants Go Marching One by One,” and whispering naughty jokes. “*Did August’s front teeth come in straight?*” the car wondered. “*Did the stitches in Sophie’s chin come out?*”

“Easy!” Leila yelped as the carburetor bucked, hurling her toward the steering

wheel. “Settle *down*.”

The engine moaned.

“Good car.” Leila softened as she remembered the automobile’s travail. “It’s not your fault, that they got rid—”

Leila rubbed the horn with her thumb. “We can’t help getting old.”

When she was young, Leila was widely regarded as the most glamorous woman in Dallas. Not the prettiest—her nose was too prominent and expressive. But she walked like a model, her long slim legs preceding the rest of her, and her voice had a low confidential timbre. At seventy-four, Leila had kept her face and figure, but the years showed in her voice. It was smudged with a soft sad slur at dusk, and again at dawn, when the veil between the worlds is frayed.

On the back floorboard were Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* and a cassette tape with Randall Thompson’s setting of “The Last Invocation.” The poem made Leila weep, because of the stanza that the dashboard doll had quoted.

*Tenderly—be not impatient [, soul, to leave the body],
(Strong is your hold O mortal flesh,
Strong is your hold O love.)*

It always came down to love, which is not to say that love’s hold is always kind.

I warned you. Leila heard the voice of her nephew who, for months, had tried to dissuade her from driving on the highway period—much less halfway to Fort Worth. “Wiona Jefferson,” Leila reminded her nephew, “worked thirty-one years for the Fitzhugh family,” the implication being that Leila would get to Wiona’s funeral if it killed her.

“As,” she remarked to the dashboard doll after the brush with the pickup truck, “it very well might.”

What Leila did not mention to the doll, her nephew, or anyone else was her conviction that she and Wiona went *way* back, lifetimes beyond their most recent incarnations. How else to explain Wiona’s intuiting Leila’s need for hospital corners, her aversion to the color orange, and her allergy to eggs? How else to explain why Leila had a maid and Wiona was one? *A question that Wiona, who understood her job as a maid’s but her self as something altogether different and vast, would not have asked*

When Leila’s daughter Ann Elizabeth was growing up, all the mothers employed a maid. The children’s lives unfolded against the backdrop of the maid’s responsibilities. Her position in the household (evolving or devolving—never static)

played a mute and dreadful role in their enculturation.

On the one hand, the children were taught to say *please* and *thank you* to the maid, not to order her around, and not to traipse through the kitchen when she was mopping. On the other hand, the maid entered and left through the kitchen door. Everyone else used the front or garden door. The children called the maid *Wiona* or *Carmencita*. Every other grownup had a title.

Leila wanted a different relationship with her maid, but at first she did not know how to create one and as *how* began to present itself, she could not think of the words or they came out strained.

What Wiona Knew Intimately and Leila Minimized
“The cultivated hell the United States was for black Americans between 1900 and 1945”¹

Shortly after World War I, when Wiona was still a baby, the Klan trained its hollow eyes on residential areas that, due to a vagary in the zoning law, were not yet segregated. Although Wiona’s granddaddy did not live in such a neighborhood, the Klan targeted his home on North Haskell Avenue as arrogantly proximate to an all-white block.

Wiona grew up with no conscious memory of the bombing, but images of it slumbered in her mind. *The half-frame of her granddaddy’s spectacles retrieved from the storefront of the barbershop where the body had been dragged. His shattered arms.* In 1935, when the principal of Booker T. Washington High School fastened a gold merit chain around the valedictorian’s neck, Wiona felt a flare against her own chest and, looking down, saw a burning cross.

*

Never had Leila felt so excruciatingly white as when she entered the sanctuary of Bethel AME Zion Church. Rarely had she felt white at all. From the stained glass window above the baptistry, Jesus’ nostrils flared with exasperation, whether toward Leila personally or toward Leila for insinuating herself into a black church or for a different reason altogether, she could not say. In any case, Leila resonated with churches, and the building sensed that, so it incorporated her, discomfiture and all, into something vast.

“I am the resurrection and the life!” the pastor read from the Gospel of John as he led Wiona’s son-in-law and daughter to their seats. “He that believeth in me, though he were DEAD, yet shall he LIVE.”

Spacious as prayer, the pastor, ascended the pulpit. An asthma inhaler lay in the inside pocket of his jacket. His breath smelled of fresh green mint. With an open gaze and a weary heart, he took the white lady in. “Holy God,” he began, “we are gathered together to celebrate the life of thy servant Wiona Jefferson and commend

her soul unto thee.”

You could hear the *plinks* of a passing rain shower on the roof’s copper flashing as the choir, their ivory robes billowing like sails against the soft blue walls, swung side to side. “There will be *peace*: peace in the *val-* ley. For *me*. Someday. There will be *peace*: peace in the *valley*. For *me*,” they sang.

“Lord have mercy.” Leila squeezed her eyes shut, covered them with her hands, peeked through her fingers, and repeated the process—to no avail. There in the tenor section stood the dashboard doll, clapping the syncopated rhythm. “*Peace*: peace in the *val-*ley,” he beamed.

*

You wouldn’t think, to look at him, that the dashboard doll was a poetry aficionado. He had been modeled on Ralph Yarborough. Leila helped get out the vote for the special election that sent “Smilin’ Ralph” to the Senate in 1957. She was never so jubilant as when the returns showed his victory over George H.W. Bush in 1964.

Leila’s mind got all tangled up when she thought of Yarborough. Going after the oil companies. Speaking out against the Vietnam War. Voting for every civil rights bill, when all the other Southern Senators pandered or caved. “They don’t make ‘em like that anymore,” she thought.

With the key of softness, unlock the locks, the dashboard doll replied.

The dashboard doll had kept a home in Dallas since 1841, when John Neely Bryan stood on the banks of the Trinity River, envisioned a city, and claimed 640 acres. The doll had a molar pulled by Doc Holliday, three weeks before the dentist was invited to leave town. He introduced roller skating at Lake Cliff Park. He drove the last spike in the Houston & Texas Central Railroad. He heard Blind Lemon Jefferson play at the corner of Elm and Central and planted yellow cosmos on his unmarked grave in the Wortham Negro Cemetery.

He didn’t remember how he arrived in Texas or where he was before. He didn’t know why he and Senator Yarborough (b. 1903) looked alike. Occasionally, seated in half lotus position, he pondered the question, *What was Yarborough’s original face before you were born?*

In each generation, the dashboard doll was assigned one or two people to emancipate—from systems that injured them, religions that shamed them, or their own harsh assessment of themselves. He mostly failed. Among the doll’s beneficiaries, some saw him as a daemon, others as a guardian angel. A few never saw him at all. Leila believed that the dashboard doll had come to her through her own initiative, when she bought him at the Five and Dime for \$3.98 plus tax.

Attaching himself to the human in his charge was strictly against the rules, but

the doll loved Leila: the gurgle in her laugh; the beauty mark on her right cheek; the way she pronounced *vodka*, with the *od* soft and plump like when a doctor says, “Open wide, and say “Ahhh.” He worried that Leila would lose her appetite, fall down, sink into depression, or develop Alzheimer’s disease. That she would die.

*

“Mrs. Jefferson is died,” a little girl in a grey taffeta dress with a pink satin bow announced from her grandmama’s lap.

“That’s right.”

“She was our friend.” The little girl turned, scratching her legs on her crinoline petticoat. She stroked the place on her grandmama’s chest where the pacemaker lay.

“That’s right. Now, hush.”

The pew behind them, where the white woman sat, trembled with muffled sobs.

*

Wiona entered heaven through the Hall of Negro Life at the Texas Centennial Exposition. It was an easy crossing; her mind had rested in the lobby for years, alongside the nesting stars of Aaron Douglas’ *Aspiration*. As death approached, the pastel stars in the mural shimmered. The people depicted below the mural stirred. “Dr. Dan” Williams warmed his stethoscope. Benjamin Banneker, whom Wiona loved for his numinous idiosyncrasies,² set his clock.

“You are not going to die,” Sojourner Truth reminded her. “You are going home.”

“Home,” Wiona repeated, knowing the truth of it yet wondering how all God’s children could be gathered up and reunited. The African ancestors and the sunken souls of those who drowned in the Middle Passage. The men and boys lynched during Wiona’s lifetime, all along the Brazos River from Waco to the Gulf of Mexico and in Harrison and Shelby counties, on the Louisiana border. The civil rights icons whom even white schoolchildren were taught to remember. *Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X*. The angelic troublemakers.³ *James Baldwin, Bayard Rustin, Audre Lorde*.

The poet Paul Laurence Dunbar removed Wiona’s mask. This took some doing. It had been soldered on since Monday, September 16, 1963, when Wiona had to go to work and pretend like nothing was wrong as she walked Ann Elizabeth Fitzhugh to and from Oran M. Roberts Elementary School, fed her a snack, and supervised her homework. As though four little girls had not been killed one day before, in the racist bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham.

Emerging as light from the stained glass window, Jesus himself closed the casket on Wiona's body.

"*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,*" sang the choir.

Wiona heard a different song.

"... I *looked* over Jordan, and *what* did I *see* (*Com-in'* for to *carry* me *home*)?"

Her spirit was wafted gently past the yellow gold stars on the periphery of the celestial sphere toward the infinite blue deep.

"A *band* of *an-gels* *com-in'* after *me* (*Com-in'* for to *carry* me *home*)."

"My babies," Wiona whispered. Charles Harlan. Clifford Nathaniel. Benjamin Ray.

"Ann Elizabeth?" Leila asked, perceiving *something* but not quite.

The dashboard doll sighed. He had covered this ground so many times before.

"Ann Elizabeth was your baby, not Mrs. Jefferson's."

"But Wio— Mrs. Jefferson and I were close."

The dashboard doll demurred. "You were connected."

Leila's eyes teared with the realization that the doll spoke truth. To keep herself from weeping aloud, she focused on the little girl in front of her, the child in the gray taffeta dress.

Time had diminished Leila's recall, but at that little girl's age she had a knack for recitation and a ready audience at Shelby's First Christian Church. "For by grace are ye saved through faith and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast," pronounced four year-old Leila, held up to the pulpit by her adored Sunday School teacher, Miss Becky Martin. Miss Martin promised the children that God would use each Bible verse they learned by heart to talk with them personally whenever they were lonely or afraid.

"If that had worked," Leila reflected, as the pallbearers positioned themselves alongside Wiona's casket, "I would be hearing Jesus right about now, and he would be saying something like, 'Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.'" Instead Leila heard the protagonist of a contemporary novel.

"I feel like an unfinished poem," Pelagia said.

*

Nine months after Wiona was buried, Leila's heart gave out. *Strong is your hold, O love*, the dashboard doll implored her. But Leila could not take it in.

With her death, the doll's beloved Dallas became exsanguine. Unable to rest in the wings of the Flying Red Horse on the Magnolia Building; to muddy Mayor Thornton's reflection in the pool at the Hall of State; or to lose himself in the Spanish

Mass at the Cathedral Santuario de Guadalupe, the doll thumbed a ride to Ft. Worth where he caught the Union Pacific to Chicago. In the fall of 1993, drawn farther east by the Atlantic tides and an inexplicable craving for maple sugar candy, he boarded the jet stream at Montrose Beach. The winds deposited him in the basement apartment of an 1858 brownstone on Pembroke Street, in Boston's South End.

The crisp burnt yellow and orange leaves against the blue New England sky made the doll feel pink and new, but the matching crispness of the humans unnerved him. Their severely pleated skirts and trousers. Their curt remarks. "*Dallas, eh? You killed my friend, Jack Kennedy.*"

Leila's battered sedan had itself towed to 4464 Rheims Place. "No way, Jose," Dr. Kurilecz said. Then he saw August's face. "Alright, *alright*," he grouched, "but this junk heap will remain in the garage and be used strictly as a . . . clubhouse or something." When August turned sixteen, he rebuilt the engine.

At the Last

At that juncture between worlds when your life replays like a movie and you see a bright white light or the face of God or the pantheon in the Negro Hall of Fame, and you are rocked in the bosom of Abraham or embraced by infinite compassion or you are reunited with your babies who died in infancy—at that juncture, Leila stiffened. The effect was like stiffening your arm before an injection: the shot hurts so much more than if your muscle were relaxed, and you may repel the needle altogether so that the serum can't get in.

She felt a rain of shattering glass. She saw the front end of a car entering hers, a gap where the passenger door had been.

Against the advice of all who had preceded her, Leila chose at the gate of heaven to act as her own judge.

The angels wept when she consigned herself to hell.

1 Jerry W. Ward, Jr.

In that period, Texas ranked third among the states in lynchings of black Americans. See John R. Ross, "LYNCHING," *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/jgl01>), accessed April 29, 2011. Published by the Texas State Historical Association. Also see [Lynching, Whites & Negroes, 1882 -1968](#) in the Tuskegee University Archives Repository (http://www.tuskegee.edu/libraries/archives_museums.aspx).

2 'On many nights, Banneker would wrap himself in a great cloak, lie under a pear tree, and meditate on the revolutions of the heavenly bodies. He would remain there through the night and take to his bed at dawn.'
Scott W. Williams, "Benjamin Banneker 1731-1806,"
<http://www.math.buffalo.edu/mad/special/bannekerbenjamin.html#bannekerletter> (July 2001).

3 "Every community needs a group of angelic troublemakers." - Bayard Rustin