

MICHAEL S. HARPER

Pull-ups at PS 25 *

for Elroy Clark

Where are you, *king*
of chins, who, on any
given day, could pull
your *gibbon* trunk,
your spindly legs
50 consecutive times
on the mastings of the **flag**
someone else raised,
mornings and evenings
in military calm?

“*Orang*,” the bicuspid blonde
with looping earrings
expelled, under her breath,
and without the long *reddish*
hair, you could have leaped
into the *arbor* of trees
if the fire escape landing
had not broken your *rhythm*.

As the toughest thug
on the block,
and in charge of the **flag**
squad, you once
walked the four floors,
equivalent to the gymnasium,
in **handstand** position;
it was rumored,
without any evidence needed,
that you had *fathered children*,
only an eighth-grader,
of *indeterminate* age,

but with lats and *deltoids*
like Sampson,
if *Delilah* was near,
and bicuspid was nearer
and you were our *myth*
of an antsy class,
heavy in transition,
before **gangfighting**
took over; and I was
on my own, after school,
free on a pass from flagsquad
because you had arranged
your pull-ups, and my flight
off the campuses of the world
into the underground BMT, IRT
and a pass to the Staten Island Ferry
on every jewish holiday,
which we both took off,
for I was your deputy in crime and truancy,
doing your homework and math for nothing.

And this *flag* I raise to you,
escape-artist, 50 colonies, (*E. Pluribus Unum*)
for saving my ass from the trees.

[Public School 25 at Lafayette and Sumner, in Brooklyn, New York, was across the street from my great aunt, Edith Braxton Ford, a retired school-teacher trained at Hunter College in New York City. She was a native New Yorker, oldest of five children, two girls and three boys—my grandmother, Alice Elizabeth Braxton Johnson, the youngest—was famous for her “rose garden,” which she cultivated at 816 & 902 Lafayette Avenue, Brooklyn.

Aunt Ede’s first and only assignment, as a grammar school teacher, was the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, seat of “Murder Incorporated,” and the Dutch Schultz mob. She taught her students how to read, compute, and comport themselves, properly.

Mrs. Ford taught for more than four decades, and was fearless: as I remember her stature she was 5' 1" and known to flash her cane to stop a bus while crossing "her street" in front of 816 Lafayette. Edith lived at one of two brownstones her father, James Randolph Braxton, a slave from Orange Courthouse, Virginia, had purchased for cash. Alice, the second daughter, and the youngest, lived in the other brownstone, where she resided after her marriage in 1910. In the Braxton family the girls were provided with domiciles; the boys were expected to fend for themselves.

My mother and her two siblings were born at 902 Lafayette Avenue, delivered by my mother's father, a Canadian physician, Roland Rufus Johnson, M.D.

At 816 Lafayette Avenue, my Aunt Ede and her husband, "Uncle Jack," resided. John William Ford, DDS, a dentist, born in Orange Courthouse, VA, practiced dentistry in Newark, N.J. Dr. Ford was trained at Howard University, School of Dentistry, in Washington, D.C. and had worked on railroads while organizing the Union of Sleeping Car Porters, when he was on the road. His stories of Los Angeles enthralled my mother; both my parents loved warm weather, palm trees, oranges in the backyard.

"Uncle Jack's" best friend was Jack Nail, brother of Grace Nail, wife of James Weldon Johnson, author of *God's Trombones* and many seminal works including *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, a novel, and not an "autobiography."

James Weldon Johnson died in 1938, the year I was born, in a traffic accident in Maine, while on vacation from Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, where he was "poet in residence." He remains a role model for me because of his motley career: lawyer, musician, librettist, anthologist, novelist, memoirist, diplomat, author of *Black Manhattan*—his favorite job: reading to the cigar-makers in his native Florida. His appearances, sermons, and poetry readings across the Nation, and at the 11th hour on Sunday in Black American Churches, were one-of-a-kind. He was our everyman.

The Johnsons gave my grandmother, Alice Braxton Johnson, a rocking chair for a wedding present, which is still in the family. One should remember Louis "Pops" Armstrong's seminal tune by the same name: "Rocking Chair." The wedding was in 1910 and the newspapers reported that Bert Williams, the vaudevillian, had an eye on her, and once greeted her in Manhattan while riding a horse. My father, W. Warren Harper, caught much of the tone of

Brooklyn during the Depression and during and after World War II in his memoir, *I'm Katherine* [a memoir], 1993, privately published.

Contrary to so much "American History," a poem written by me about the 16th St. bombing on Sunday morning in Birmingham, Alabama, where four black girls were killed in Sunday School, September 15, 1963, history, badly reported or unrecorded, and therefore primal, as John Coltrane's dirge "Alabama" testifies, is transformed from momentous event into art. Art always celebrates the victory.

My father wrote his memoir as a family history and labor of love: it was a love story, a life-long affair with my mother, and written down.

"It is a wise blues that knows its father."]

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