



James Alan McPherson and David Hamilton at the Hamburg Inn in Iowa City on March 12, 2016. Photograph by Allen Gee.

Charlottesville

When James Alan McPherson joined our faculty in the early 1980s, I wished to get to know him. I'd learned of Jim several years before through his first book, *Hue and Cry*. A story from his second collection, *Elbow Room*, had appeared in *The Iowa Review* before I became its editor. Now I wanted to meet him. I knew we were about the same age, and it seemed likely that we could become friends. One way to manage that would be to work side by side. Jim was coming as a recent Pulitzer Prize winner and a MacArthur Fellow. He was in the first group awarded MacArthur Fellowships. It would be a coup to enlist him as guest editor for a special issue of fiction.

Jim agreed, but he had a condition. He didn't want to go it alone; he wanted me to dig into things with him. That meant meeting with him to cull our selections from the two-, three-, or four-dozen stories that arrived unsolicited every week. We had a student assistant. He and Jim met regularly. But finally, it came down to Jim and me going over our gleanings and deciding which stories would compose our issue.

We chose the River Room, a cafeteria in the student union across the street from our building with a long view of the river that runs through our campus and town. Crowded over the noon hour, it usually emptied out by two. We could always find a table with a view and with room to spread out manuscripts.

In hindsight, our meetings resembled that storied psychoanalytical hour when, after forty minutes of dancing around and avoiding the issue, you finally get down to business for the final ten. It is always possible, however, and even likely, that the real business came and went, perhaps not well observed, during those first forty minutes.

We made most of our selections during the final fraction of the hour or so we spent together. The greater portion of our time was like a slow, formal dance. Jim had come from Charlottesville where he had not been happy. In fact, he swore never to return. Twenty years before, as a graduate student, I had found it more than comfortable. Jim's home was Savannah, Georgia, a segregated city in a segregationist state. I grew up in rural Missouri, a border state with overwhelmingly Confederate sympathies. At its university, which I did not attend, and at UVA, fraternities waved the rebel flag at football games; and though I found that tactless, I had not overtly disowned it. We had both gone to segregated grade schools and high schools, although integration came to my school

while I attended, and it came peacefully. Generations before, however, there had been lynchings in my county, at least three I knew of. I never asked how many Jim knew of in and around Savannah. We had both spent a few years in Massachusetts, and that conjunction worked in our favor. I had also spent one long autumn at an artists' retreat a twenty-minute boat ride from Savannah. I loved my time on that island and in myriad small ways had prospered from it. Jim never mentioned having been there, and an invitation, such as I had been handed, would, most likely, never have come. Nor, not being a swimmer, would he have relished the boat ride out to the island. My Savannah was far from his Savannah. I had much to answer for.

Our dance was a test: Jim was testing how far he could trust me. A kind of twinned mythologizing took place as we lay our stories down, side by side, not just once but, with variations and improvements, every time we met. Of course, they were disjunctive, but they were complementary. Jim led and I followed, and it took me several sessions to realize we were going to swing through these moves, with variations, each time.

Jim told of his father who had been the first licensed African American electrician in Georgia, but who also landed in jail. Then of abuse from a grade-school teacher because his father was a con. He told also of submitting his first stories to a contest while in college and discovering the instructor, whose signature was required, had failed to pass his work on. Then how, in the following year, he got around that professor and got his work submitted. That led to his meeting his first editor in Boston, a man who took him out to lunch and coached him, among other things, not to write "motherfucker" more than a very few times. He always smiled telling me that.

Much else that Jim told me you can find in the stories and essays he has written, and it is not my place to retell them. I of course had to keep the conversation going without having written my share of stories, much less prizewinners. But I told of my rural background in Missouri, my father and uncle clearing bottomland and developing a farm and of the odd chance that I would have been accepted at Amherst College in the late fifties—a white kid from a small Missouri town—in an early effort at diversity.

Charlottesville was a more delicate topic. Jim had gone through a divorce there and felt ill-treated. A few years later, as we got to know each other better, he asked me to write a character reference to the court where an adjustment to the decision was pending. In any event, I did, eventually, get around to admitting that my own time in Charlottesville had been pleasant, insofar as graduate study is ever pleasant, and so to

Dicky, my landlord, and a summer I spent working for him, which leads back, in a roundabout way, to making my way with Jim.

For as I came to know Dicky, I learned that he had started to construct a bomb shelter in his basement, a project soon overwhelmed by its implications. He had broken through the cement, chunks of which lay around, some shoved back against a wall. He'd dug into the earth as well, and most of that had been carried outside; but the hole was irregular, nowhere squared off, and its depth inadequate even as a fox-hole. No more than a couple of people could have lain down. And had they covered it with plywood or a tarp, they wouldn't have been able to raise their heads.

It was the summer of 1963, nine months or so after the Cuban Missile Crisis. Dicky had begun a bomb shelter for his family. I'm sure he wasn't alone, though his is one of only two I ever saw. One trouble was his family of six—himself, his wife, and their four children. It would take quite some excavation to contain them all, and they weren't the parent birds to push the least from their nest. That would have been a dear little rascal still toddling, a boy his two older sisters doted on. No, I'm sure the ludicrous nature of the project dawned on Dicky by the time he had carted away a few bucket-loads of that raw, red Virginia soil. Soil that shocked me. I'd never seen red earth as farmland before and couldn't believe it would nurture anything. Not like the black earth of the Midwest. But corn grew quite well in Virginia too, I would discover after getting used to the red smudges on the rim of these diggings, on my shoes, and on cement chunks stacked beside a basement wall.

Dicky's sizeable family only began the problem. His farm wasn't large, most of it a long pasture that swept up a hill to the east of their house with timber running along it on both sides. His homestead though was the informal center of a hidden neighborhood. Several African American families lived in small houses along the road and on side roads running up draws to the north and south of his pasture and woods. Several of those men worked for Dicky, a few regularly, others when extra work sought them out. What if, under sudden attack, they all came streaming in? Dicky saw the futility of his project soon enough. He probably carted out a few more buckets of earth before admitting it to his wife. The best answer, should the alarm come, would certainly be, as others have said, to pour that last fine bourbon and kick back with one's feet up on the front porch.

A summer later, I worked for Dicky. By then I had completed a year of graduate school and had an MA in hand, but if I was to continue for a PhD, I needed summer work. I was young and married, and soon enough, my wife and I would start our family. We already lived on his

grounds, and Dicky made a place for me on his crew from the neighborhood.

His chief business, besides managing whatever farm holdings he had, was fence construction. Many landowners, both rural and urban in Albemarle County, wanted to fence their land. There were plenty of white board fences, as are familiar in horse country. Split-rail fences were another popular option. Then there were standing or woven slats that formed a shield. Dicky oversaw the installation of such fences in Charlottesville and around the county.

He had a standing crew of four: Speedy, Charlie, Brownie, and James. Speedy, the eldest, was not a steady worker. He seemed to show up when he wished. I suppose he was semiretired. Short, graying, and wiry, his special skill was with the manual posthole digger. It wasn't just that he could plunge its open jaws into the earth, draw them closed, and extract the red earth of Virginia faster than the rest of us: it was the precision of his cuts, the neat verticality of the sides, the very few bits of crumble at the bottom. When Speedy finished a hole, it looked like a bucket in which you could store water.

Charlie was the foreman, though he never ordered Speedy around and more than once deferred to his quiet voice. "You get morning sickness?" he asked when my wife became pregnant with our first child. "I always do," he rejoined calmly when I recoiled with surprise and said something like, "Of course not." I still don't know whether he was pulling my leg. If so, he didn't betray himself. It seems more likely that he really did share his wife's discomfort, and I could learn about empathy from him.

I was twenty-five that summer and Charlie significantly older, probably closer to forty than fifty. He oversaw loading the truck, setting up whatever job, and assigning tasks, although long habit made most of that unnecessary. Brownie and James reminded me of a couple of guys who joined our high school football team a year or two after the Brown decision: Charlie, a different Charlie, and Shag. The year before, they'd been bussed to a high school thirty miles away, since our town only provided an eighth-grade education for them. Anyone who wished to continue could, but they had to ride that bus every day to the segregated school in a larger town. Now, with their hometown school open to them, they joined us. I never got to know them well, though we were teammates for three years, and both had to endure the only negative public moment I witnessed.

Our coach, a burly man with curly red hair, had us all indoors on the gym floor before a blackboard. He was diagramming a play. The Xs and Os of offense and defense, the lines from one player to another assigning the blocks, the path the back, possibly Shag, would take on an off-

tackle slant and, if everyone did his job, continue for a touchdown. But something was wrong. A defender had been left unblocked. Coach had missed something, and he stood there scratching his head. His back was turned to us as he muttered, more to himself than to us, “There’s a n----- in the woodpile somewhere.”

It’s not that we were unaware of the expression, but there was an audible gasp and suddenly thickened silence. Coach turned around, puzzled at first, then, scanning our faces, caught on. “I’m sorry,” he said. “Never again.” And as far as I know, neither he nor any of his assistants uttered another slur. Both Charlie and Shag were formidable players over the next three years, a good deal better than I. Shag went on to play in college.

After the Brown decision, Charlottesville stalled longer on integration than my town had; then for several months in 1959—which was a couple of years after Charlie, Shag, and I had been through school and graduated—the governor ordered its high schools closed rather than suffer the inevitable. The courts and the resolve of particular African American families soon corrected that, but it could well have been the end of Brownie and James’s schooling. Perhaps they managed no more than eighth grade anyway, since in Charlottesville, too, it was assumed “natural,” at least natural enough, for black youth to put away their books at that point and get on with adult lives. Quite a few white kids dropped out of school at that age too, in both towns. In the small country schools dotted around the Midwestern county I came from, boys and girls dressed up smartly for their eighth-grade graduation—it might prove their only one.

I expect it would have been for Brownie and James. They were fine workers and could handle any pick, shovel, tractor, hammer, or saw. Over time, we shared much of that, one of us holding a plank or a rail for the other, or steadying a post in its new hole while the other filled in the earth around it and began to tamp it down. We’d all sit in the shade together with our lunch boxes. I would listen more than talk but seek ways to join in. A graduate student and white, I was the odd man in, sure enough. Once I ran into them downtown, quite by accident, and stopped to greet them, but their lowered glances, deferential manner, and quick readiness to part, more than underscored that.

That accidental crossing of paths reminded me of a time, a few years before, when on spring break, I had driven with two college friends, all three of us white, to New Orleans and back. We started from Massachusetts and gave a ride, on the first leg of our trip, to one of the few African Americans in our college. He was from Nashville, right on our way, so we could get him home for the holidays. We started with the

weekend and drove all Saturday night to arrive for Sunday dinner. His family welcomed us to their ample table of fried chicken, mashed potatoes with gravy, collard greens—my first exposure to those—and pie; and as we sat with them we learned that his father, the comptroller of Fisk University, had spent his morning bailing students out of jail. And not for the first time. Fisk students were being arrested daily, sitting-in at segregated lunch counters downtown.

A day later, my white pals and I stopped in Oxford, Mississippi, Faulkner country, and as I strolled alone down a sidewalk in the early afternoon, a black man approached from the opposite direction. He was older than I, but as we met, he stepped carefully to the side, one foot off the walk, and would not meet my eyes. I was shocked. That had never happened before, not in my hometown and certainly not in Massachusetts, but Brownie and James acted a bit like that when we met in downtown Charlottesville. I'm sure had I not stopped to greet them, they would have passed on with, at best, a slight wave. During my five years there, it never happened another time.

Nor did it ever occur to me to wonder, much less ask, what my pay was compared to theirs. It's hard for me to imagine that Dicky paid me more than Charlie. But what about Brownie and James? And what did they know or suspect? That is all hidden by a half century, now, of never facing the question.

At work, they had little choice but to accept me; after all, Dicky could hire whomever he liked. The surprise was that they accepted me so readily. I had difficulty understanding their speech at first. Their dialect differed from my own. They, of course, had no trouble understanding me. Charlie, more gregarious than the others, had a gentle teasing streak. That helped. I had jeans and old shirts, good enough work clothes, and I even had work shoes, ankle-high lace-ups of a brownish orange cast with thick, blond rubber soles that showed evidence of previous wear. "Where did you get them boots," Charlie asked. "Don't tell me you wear 'em to class."

No, I did not. The uniform of University of Virginia students in my day, still a white male preserve, was a sport coat and tie with chinos or slacks. I had enough of a supply to allow a little variation through the week. But my Midwestern home was a farm. I had done my share of fieldwork. I could drive a pickup and soon showed that I could swing the little Ford tractor around in reverse and line up its mounted auger precisely over the place for the next post hole. I could clean out the hole too, with the two-handled digger, clear away brush with an axe, wield a shovel, a hammer, or saw. I enjoyed driving the tractor. Ours had been much larger John Deeres, and the little Ford was fun, but I made sure

not to hog it and to stand at the ready with the manual digger so no deference need be shown. Still, Charlie rather liked getting me up on that tractor. Then when lunch breaks came, we all flopped down in whatever shade, shared the water jug, and I began to share their talk.

In fact, they all made allowance for me with considerable grace. Surely I was positioned to brush aside our differences more easily than they. But the muted voices of the two younger men, my peers in age, and for a long time their hesitation with eye contact, suggested that accommodating me was a struggle. At home after work, they no doubt told other stories, and I expect I should be glad not to have heard some of that. All in all though, I took comfort in supposing they could also say, "He's not bad. He's not afraid of work." Or maybe even, "He's competent," which had it come from my uncle, back on our farm, would have been significant praise. On the other hand, I may not have been as competent at I like to think, and at home, they may have pointed that out. They must have had some laughs at my expense.

As aware as I was of trying to join these men, I was inevitably a worker apart, a fact Dicky reinforced by a separate task he gave me. His enterprises included contracting for the installation of private swimming pools. A good number of families scattered around the county went to the effort, and cost, of having an outdoor pool installed at home. Dicky himself had one, and his wife spent a good part of her summer there, as did their four children. My wife and I, who lived in a converted grain shed no more than a couple-of-hundred yards away, were invited to make free with it as well. That invitation was not extended generally. Certainly not to the men with whom I worked.

I was familiar with pools. Swimming had long been part of my life. Ineffective as a competitive swimmer in college, I had learned to swim well. I became a certified Red Cross Water Safety Instructor, a lifeguard at my hometown pool, and had for one summer directed its instructional program. I'd grown up swimming in that pool, a WPA project of the 1930s, and at a Boy Scout camp on the Lake of the Ozarks. In a sense, a pool was home ground. My hometown pool had closed down one summer, right after the Brown decision, when African Americans showed up at its door. As far as our park board was concerned, that was one step too far, too soon. But the white kids, too, wanted their pool. The following summer it reopened, for everyone.

The private pools of Albemarle County were another matter. Once installed, maintenance was necessary. That meant skimming leaves and other debris off the surface. A rectangular net with a long aluminum handle was left with each pool for that purpose. You could maneuver

around and reach anywhere with it. Then you needed to check the pH level of the water and sometimes add chlorine.

This was an awkward job for any man, and for an African American, it could be worse. You couldn't tell whom you might run into at whatever home, in whatever state of aloneness or dress. Therefore, Dicky himself checked up on most of the pools he had contracted. In another year or two, his teenage son would be ready for the job. That summer, however, it fell to me, and I did not resist. In fact, in retrospect, it seems probable that pool maintenance was the chief reason Dicky hired me. That I could fill the rest of my time with his crew was a bonus, but it wasn't as if I was needed there.

Twice a week, I took Dicky's pickup and a half-day or more off from fence building to make the rounds of pools scattered around the county. Crozet, Earlysville, White Hall, Free Union, Ivy, Shadwell, Keene, Covessville, and Keswick were village names I swept through, usually on my way to a nearby farm. No stop took long. I'd skim the leaves, check the chlorine balance, and hop back in the pickup for my next stop. I'd have my lunchbox with a sandwich, an apple or orange, and a small thermos of milk. I drank coffee by then, but it wasn't the staple it has since become. And whenever I could, before returning to the crew, I'd stop at a small country store for a Fudgsicle.

Fudgsicles hadn't always been my favorite summer treat. All manner of ice cream had been, especially Dairy Queen soft serves with strawberry toppings. But that summer it was Fudgsicles, a chocolate concoction of something-like-ice-cream draped on a stick that I savored all the way down to the stick without, I'd hope, spattering too much on my shirtfront, not so easy to accomplish, driving those back roads slowly with the windows down. Then, that stolen pleasure over, I'd haul on home and join the crew, wherever they were, to man a shovel or a post hole digger, or maneuver the little Ford tractor. The guys always seemed to welcome me back, often with some joshing about where I'd been and what I'd been up to.

Not that I merited any thanks for it, but they were all aware, much more than I, of what I saved them from. What awkwardness, or worse. Which leads to an extension of my story that I couldn't tell Jim those first times we met since it hadn't happened yet. But a few years later, long departed from Charlottesville and in charge of our widely, if thinly distributed literary magazine, I received a submission from Yusef Komunyakaa. He sent several poems tucked into an envelope with his SASE. We hadn't entered the era of digital submissions, so everything came in envelopes, and self-addressed, stamped envelopes came with them. Every week new stories and poems arrived, several dozen of each.

Several dozen envelopes, usually several dozen doubled, sometimes tripled, and, usually, three to five poems in each.

We had not heard of Mr. Komunyakaa, but when his envelope came, I found a poem called "Work." It told of a young man mowing the lawn of a country home and of his resisting the temptation to look at a woman, nude, in a hammock beside the pool, a pitcher of lemonade sweating beside her. The speaker sweats too, and not just from his labor. "I won't look at her," he says and repeats that several times in a narrow poem that in most magazines would take up most of two pages.

It's a garden scene, a fallen garden. Faulkner's ghost hovers nearby. Johnny Mathis, one of the first African American crooners to become popular with white audiences, sings "like a whisper" to the nude, white woman. Komunyakaa revels in the sensuality of the scene. "Bumblebees nudge pale blossoms." The worker breathes in the "Scent of honeysuckle" and "the insinuation of buds / Tipped with cinnabar." His final image is a "bed / Of crushed narcissus / As if gods wrestled there," which they did, the gods of desire resisting those of temptation, while toying with it. It didn't take long for me to remember my summer with Charlie, Speedy, Brownie, and James and to accept the poem with a silent nod to them. And I was especially glad to learn that Komunyakaa is, indeed, African American.

An easier story to tell, and one that happened sooner, was of how news of the integration to come arrived in our segregated high school. I was a freshman, in an English class, and our teacher was fulminating over what would soon befall us. "It's wrong," she said, "just wrong. I won't stand for it!" I did have the wit to imagine, well, what would she do, sit? "It'll lead to miscegenation," she went on. I'm not sure I had heard the word before, but I could guess from the context. Ever eager to continue our education, she helped us out: "God made the races separate and so He meant for them to stay." That's when a seatmate, a girl I doted on, raised her hand and when recognized offered, "Maybe God has changed his mind."

"Ah," Jim smiled, "already an Omni-American," which I suppose he meant only half seriously, but at least she had grasped something of Albert Murray's message long before his book of that name came out. Jim spoke warmly of Murray, who worked closely with Ralph Ellison, and of both as mentors. Omni-America was their subject, with the African American always here and integral to the story, whether whites acknowledged that or not. Soon I would accept an interview with Ellison, and did so thinking of Jim's admiration for him, particularly when Ellison felt sure he had caught whispers of African American music in "The Waste Land." Whispers he assumed Eliot had picked

up as a youth in St. Louis, along our midland river, a river whose main tributary I had grown up beside.

At about the time I met Jim, I was spending a week each summer in Mobile, Alabama, running a workshop for college teachers, and lived alone, through that week, in a house on a golf course outside town. Every morning, I walked down a side road to a clubhouse with a small restaurant. I had bacon, eggs, grits—I really got into the grits, warm with butter melting onto them—toast, and coffee, and read the morning paper. There were rarely any other customers at the hour, but my stay crossed with what must have been break time for groundskeepers. Usually four or five would come in for a late breakfast. They were a mixed group, black and white, and had no trouble sitting together. There they'd be, a distinctly integrated crew of young adults, chatting, laughing in the deepest South. Omni-America was showing itself. I suspect though that it did not extend to their going out together on Saturday nights.

One graduate student I had worked with came from Colorado but had family in Mississippi. As a child, she spent summers there, with her grandmother, and for her thesis she wrote of having returned, the summer before, and appealing to her grandmother to visit the African American woman who had cared for her during those distant summers. That woman, now elderly, no longer worked for her grandmother but lived not far away. Her grandmother balked. A visit wasn't possible. But our writer nagged until her grandmother found a way. They would take a walk together, grandmother and granddaughter. They would wear warm-ups, satin pants and jacket, so it was clear they were out for exercise, not to socialize. But they could just happen to walk by the other woman's house. A knock on the door would do no harm, and so a brief visit, one woman standing on her porch, the other two on the road that ran beside it.

When I told of Dicky's bomb shelter and his hypothetical resort to fine bourbon, Jim smiled and said he and his pals had equally extravagant thoughts about those final moments, but they had nothing to do with bourbon. What I learned through our sessions, above all else, was how easy it was for me to not think about race, whereas it was always on Jim's mind. Jim worked hard at being an Omni-American. That was the work of his life. It wasn't mine. In Jim's later years we formed a habit of occasional Sunday brunches after which, often, we'd take a drive in the country. We might stop somewhere for an ice cream cone. Jim would often remark with surprise that I seemed to know the names of birds and trees, something he had never had the inclination or time for. But on the ground that most mattered between us, Omni-America and how

we experienced it, I was always catching up to truths that Jim had long pondered.

Through telling and retelling our stories, Jim and I earned a degree of friendship that endured through the remainder of his days. It would be presumptuous for me to assume it was more than it was, which at best, perhaps, amounted to a courtesy Jim extended almost as if, indeed, we were friends. At courtesy, civility, and negotiating the right distance, Jim was subtler than my former student's grandmother. In any case, we put our issue together, collaborated another time or two, and kept on seeing each other until he died. All that while, we spoke least of Charlottesville, though it was never distant from our thoughts.

One exception was my telling of a Joan Baez concert there. The hall was long and narrow and Ms. Baez her own, lonely accompaniment. In fact, the stage was bare, just a backless stool under a light. She took her place on that stool, played her guitar, and sang. One song after another. The long aisle lifted away from the stage so that we looked down on her. She seemed immensely vulnerable. A glass of water stood on a second backless stool beside her. As her concert came to an end, she took the chance of singing "We Shall Overcome." There was that hushed moment between numbers and no announcement of what would come next. Baez just plucked the chord and began. A hush fell over the house. She gestured for us to join in but most held back. A few angry murmurs arose around us. Approval of this anthem was not yet widespread, certainly not in Charlottesville. I would love to say my wife and I were among the first to join her, but we weren't. But a few did, then a few more, and as sides were being drawn, we added our voices. So with help from about a quarter, maybe a third of the house, Joan Baez prevailed with her song. Then she had to make her exit by walking up that long aisle. In fact, she had to be escorted, and I felt I read both worry and defiance in her features as campus security hustled her out.

When the issue Jim guest edited appeared in 1984, it happened to coincide with the centennial of *Huckleberry Finn*. I commissioned a woodcut for our cover. The artist, one of our graduate students, made a clever one of Huck sitting on a dock with a pipe in his mouth, reading our magazine. There's a smile. Meanwhile, a steamboat passes by, one of those old paddlewheelers emblematic of the era. Of course, Jim, Huck's Jim, isn't in the picture, and it never occurred to me to make that suggestion.