

# **ROLLING IN MY SIX-FO'—DAA DAA DAA—WITH ALL MY NIGGAS SAYING: SWING DOWN SWEET CHARIOT STOP AND LET ME RIIIDE. HELL YEAH.**

By: Rion Amilcar Scott

The car was a Chevrolet. Big and boat-like. Old. Older than both of its occupants. 1964. Sliding into the darkness out ahead.

The driver reached across Doug's lap and rifled through the glove compartment. He pulled back a plastic cylinder. The contents click-clack-clicked. Letting go of the steering wheel, the driver held it steady with the side of his forearm, unscrewed the container's top and sprinkled some pills into his flat palm.

He seemed to lose interest in the highway and the car drifted to the right and rumbled as the wheels passed over the rough ridges of the shoulder. Tossing the pills into his mouth, he loudly crunched them between his teeth.

Ack, he said sticking out his tongue and swallowing hard.

Wide-eyed-nostril-flared-jaw-dropped horror took over Doug's face. The old Chevrolet zig-zag-zigged across two lanes before inching over the double yellow lines. The driver swerved the car back into its lane and looked over at his travel companion's tight jaw.

Relax, mon ami, he said. They're just vitamins.

They don't look like vitamins, Doug replied.

Sure they are, good buddy. Powerful vitamins. Vitamins like you ain't never tried before. Gotta keep my energy up as much driving as I do.

The car swayed and Doug eyed the speedometer's needle, which danced between ninety and ninety-five. He became aware that he was gripping the armrest in a steely vice grip. He didn't loosen it. He crumpled the seatbelt in his other hand.

The driver shook the bottle at Doug.

No thanks, Doug replied.

You sure?

Doug counted the breaths passing in and out of his nostrils. He felt his muscles—even the ones that had been tense—start to relax. Drowsiness was thick at his eyelids and he turned from the driver and rested his head against the window. Doug

drifted off and awoke a moment later when the car swerved, throwing him from side to side.

Relax brah, the man said. Go back to sleep. I got it steady.

Doug adjusted himself. He thought it unwise to nap in a stranger's car. The driver, after all, could be a lunatic. Then making it to somewhere, somewhere other than where he came from; maybe New York, maybe somewhere else; but somewhere, would become significantly more complicated.

Air swished over the car and threatened to lull him back to sleep. Doug started up a conversation to stay awake. He asked the driver to repeat his name.

Me? the driver replied. The name's James-my-man.

James, huh?

No. James-my-man. Gotta put the my-man after the James. That's what they call me on the Underground Railroad.

The what?

You ain't never heard of the Underground Railroad? James-my-man asked. I'm a re-enactor. Do it this time every year. There's literally hundreds of us taking these long trips from the South all the way up to the North. Yep. Recreating the slave's journey to freedom. That whole racial nightmare. I'm just one guy.

Then he started singing: Swing low sweet chariot. Coming forth to carry me hoooooome...

Doug looked at the driver's sturdy hands as they squeezed the steering wheel. They were huge hands. Big like lion paws. Thick hands. Fighter's hands. Doug imagined the hands crushing white chunks of ice. They were those kinds of hands.

James-my-man said other things, strange things. Doug threw in a word or two, but mostly he listened and wondered if the man was insane. James-my-man spoke about a wild, mythical party in a cotton-field that all Underground Railroad re-enactors would converge upon. A man he called the Lizard would be at the party. The Lizard could solve any problem, James-my-man said. Talking to the Lizard could even give one a boost of confidence, though he said he didn't need one, but if he did need one, which he didn't, he'd go to the Lizard. Doug was bewildered by his travel companion's words, but everything the man said came with a hilarious aside that made Doug forget the initial ridiculousness.

So you're really following the Underground Railroad? Doug asked.

Yeah, man, James-my-man said. I ain't bullshittin'. Do the shit every year. Sometimes twice, if I'm needed. Usually pick up a hitchhiker or three like I did with you, or I pick up a rider at a safe house. It humbles you to go through what our ancestors went through.

Our ancestors didn't have cars.

Yeah, he replied. I guess they didn't have cars.

James-my-man fiddled with the radio. Country music and static moved through the speakers. He turned the radio off. The pair listened to the soft, raspy groan of the engine and the gentle hum of the rubber moving along the road.

Doug thought about Cross River. Home seemed like such a distant memory. He hadn't been gone long, but already he forgot details. What was the name of that Caribbean bakery on the North-South Parkway right by the university?

He thought of Janice. It was amazing how little he missed her after all. James-my-man flipped through the radio stations, breaking Doug's thoughts.

Looking for some Gospel music and shit, James-my-man said. You'd think they'd have one good Gospel station.

You like Gospel?

Not really.

The drone of the open road passed between them.

So what you running from? James-my-man asked.

I ain't running from shit, Doug replied.

Everybody on the Underground Railroad is running from something. But you don't have to tell me. Whatever it is, I got your back, my nigga.

Thanks.

The Chevrolet left the highway and now passed through a residential neighborhood. It had narrow streets and identical white houses with brown front doors, big picture windows and black shingles. The needle hovered around 50, sometimes 60. After sometime, Doug recognized a dilapidated red brick schoolhouse with cracked windows. It bore a dingy sign that read Frederick Douglass Middle School. That it was missing the second S in Douglass caused the place to stick in his head. They had passed it twice before.

We lost? Doug asked.

Naw, man, James-my-man replied. Look up, chief. There go the North Star. I'm following that.

Doug couldn't see any stars. The black sky was radiant with the glow of streetlights, but no stars.

So watch, we gonna pass through this town, James-my-man said—his voice deep and resonant—where this black man used to stand on the side of the street with his face slathered in black grease, or what I thought was black grease at the time. All around his mouth was firetruck red like he was wearing bright ass lipstick. So even when he was frowning he looked like he was cheesing.

Doug listened and forgot that the car had been going in circles.

So this guy, James-my-man said, would wear white gloves and a top hat and when he removed his hat, he had beads in his head so knotty it was as if he had never passed a comb through them. He was out there every day no matter what the weather was like. And the man had this big-ass boombox and he'd be dancing by the side of the streets singing and swiveling his hips and shit. Everybody loved dude. Kids would be clapping and he'd do a jig to the rhythm and then make balloon animals for them when he was done. This guy made hundreds of dollars a day.

James-my-man stopped talking to crunch some more pills between his teeth. He became silent, gazing up to the empty sky for direction. He drove like that for half-a-minute, inching along, staring vacantly with his mouth slightly ajar until Doug's voice brought him back into the moment.

Yo, James-my-man, you aight?

Yeah, yeah man, James-my-man responded. Wade in the water, baby. Wade in the water. Keep your eye out for them slave catchers.

Uh, yeah...So what happened with the coon nigga and his little minstrel show?

Don't be so quick to judge, lil' bro, James-my-man said. Anyway, he went on dancing for months, entertaining people and shit. It was fun, but then the newspaper started writing about it. They had pictures on the front page, Coon W. Calhoun—that was his name—eating a big ass slice of watermelon with the headline: This is Entertainment?

Coon W. Calhoun? That nigga would get lynched where I'm from.

Shit, that's nearly 'bout what did happen to the nigga.

They stopped in a manicured suburban neighborhood. James-my-man knocked on the door of a plain white house with bushes on each side of the walkway and dirt caked on the siding. It was so small it could have been called a cottage and no one would have objected.

It's after midnight, Doug whispered. You sure it's OK to be knocking here?

Man, you gotta start thinking like a runaway slave, James-my-man replied. He was nearly shouting. Nighttime is when we travel. Slave catchers be out during the day. Besides, can't no one see our black asses in the dark.

As if in response, a police car sped by, sirens blazing. Doug flinched and moved closer to the house.

See? James-my-man said. Say, what should I call you?

Doug.

Doug?

James-my-man paused and looked upwards as if contemplating a deep truth.

That's no good, man.

What you mean? That's my name.

Don't nobody use their real name on the Underground Railroad. I didn't want to know that your name is Doug. How do you know when the slave catchers get me I ain't gonna give you up by name?

I never really thought about it like that.

See, what I mean about thinking like an escaped slave?

Well, you can call me Guapo.

Guapo, huh? I should have picked that one for myself.

James-my-man knocked again, this time harder. The house remained dark. He stepped back and started whispering loudly, calling out a woman's name. An old woman's voice responded.

Cut out all that noise, she replied in a whisper that wasn't a whisper. You'll get us lynched. Who's out there?

James-my-man and Guapo. Aunt Harriet, we tired and need to rest our hollow bones.

There was a moment of quiet followed by the muffled beeping of an alarm system and then the sound of several locks turning. The door opened a crack. Light bounced off the gold chain as it stretched in the doorway. A dark, wrinkled face peeked out.

Aunt Harriet, James-my-man pleaded. Can these dry bones live? Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.

Come from the four winds, O breath and breathe into these slain, that they may live, Aunt Harriet said and then she closed the door with a heavy thud.

There was a jangling of sliding chains and then the door opened up and the small woman stood with the darkness of her house radiating outward.

O my people, she said. I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them.

Doug and James-my-man awoke the next morning to a dining room table lined with fluffy waffles and golden brown fried chicken that enticed them with a craggy topography. Doug took a bite from the salty, spicy flesh. It shot a pleasant, and mercifully small, spot of grease into the corner of his mouth. He sank his canines into the meat and the skin crunched beneath his first, second and third maxillary and mandibular molars. The waffles melted away in the pocket of Doug's cheek and when swallowed, had the consistency of porridge.

Aunt Harriet sat at the table telling her visitors stories of running through the South, clutching a baby to her chest. But she didn't do that anymore. Too old, she said. She spoke slowly, deliberately, but the tales seemed to come at a rapid pace. None of them seemed true, Doug thought, but they all felt true. She'd tell a tale and cackle.

She cleared the table and was on, probably, her twelfth story, when she stopped and peered into Doug's face.

Boy, you look like somebody, I used to know, she said. You from Cross River?

Doug nodded.

I was there when they founded the town, you know. I was a teenager fresh from the boat, but I remember those were some hellafied times. I done forgot a lot of things, but I won't never forget them ol' days. I was crouching behind a barrel when them crazy niggers on the plantation was swinging them cutlasses—big things this long. She held her arms far apart. They took old-whiteman-what's-his-name's head clean off. That's

where they get the saying from, you know the one I'm talking about: Cross River niggers are the craziest! Doug repeated the last part of the phrase with the old woman. I came up with it you know, she said. Plenty folks take credit for it, but I made it up. I used to argue with folks over it, but all them folks is dead now. Aunt Harriet cackled. Ain't no one to argue with me about it no more. It's the truth though.

A man grabbed me by the hand, she continued, and led me off that plantation and we followed the Cross River and like that we was free and we settled the town. I was the one who said we should name it Cross River. That damn river looked powerful strong. It was angry, like it was ready to rise up and reclaim the town. It still like that?

Doug shrugged. I don't know, he replied. Sometimes.

Some stupid clown, she said, I think I see his goofy face now, wanted to name the town Heart City or some simple foolishness like that. He was one crazy boy; always talking a bunch of nonsense. Thought he could fly, jumped out of a tree and broke his neck and died one day.

She cackled again, her music shrill and amusing, causing Doug and James-my-man to chuckle along. Aunt Harriet's cackle went on for a long time and was punctuated by short gasps. Light sparkled off the gold that covered a few of her front teeth. That was the first time Doug had noticed the jewelry. She briefly lost control of herself, but then regained her composure.

But anyway, you remind me of the cutlass swinging nigger who took me by the hand that crazy night. You move like him, smile like him. It's like he still walking the earth so long as you here. Coulda been your great-great-great-granddaddy.

Her story resembled tales Doug's father used to tell, which were in turn passed down from his father and went all the way back to the ancestor who took part in the Great Insurrection that led to the founding of Cross River. Doug had heard them, or different versions of them, so many times before. Still, he sat there staring at Aunt Harriet as if her stories were brand new to him.

Aunt Harriet, you're just making all this up, Doug replied. For that to be true, you'd have to be over 200 years old.

She flashed her old, yellowish-brown teeth and cleared the dishes from the table.

When the sun went down there was a banging on the door. Aunt Harriet's face became dark and the smile disappeared. She turned out all the lights and removed a black pistol from the hallway closet. As the banging became louder, Doug felt his scrotum tighten. A wave of fear passed up through his stomach and chest, resting finally at the base of his skull.

Aunt Harriet, I'm tired and need to rest my hollow bones, a voice called. Can these dry bones live? My bones are dried up and my hope is gone; I am cut off.

Stop all that damn hollering, Aunt Harriet replied.

She opened the door and yanked him inside.

You Nigger Jim? The man nodded. You're late.

He was wearing ragged burlap pants, a tattered blue polyester shirt and a straw hat. Nigger Jim was shoeless and his feet bled.

You gonna say the rest? he asked.

She waved her hand, sucked her teeth and walked away.

Oh Lord, James-my-man mumbled toward Doug. Here come one of these crazy niggas who think you gotta keep everything one hundred percent accurate to recreate the Underground Railroad. These fools are like Civil War re-enactors or some shit; no understanding that the past is the present.

Doug was only half listening. He stared at the bleeding feet of the walking absurdity before him.

Sometime after midnight Aunt Harriet went off to bed, the three men climbed the stairs into the cramped attic. Each man claimed a patch of insulation as his bed. Doug felt the cold nipping at his fingertips and he buried them between his head and the fluffy pink padding.

Fellas, James-my man said. That cotton field party is gonna be some big shit this year.

Think I'll be able to get some brains at this party? Nigger Jim asked.

There'll be head for everyone, James-my-man replied. The Lizard of God will see to it. Head and love. The Lizard of God got an army of women to give us head and love. Our cold metal hearts gonna start beating again. Watch.

You know what I like about the Lizard? James-my-man continued. Don't shit scare him. The nigga's unflappable. Got a lot of courage. I wish I could be like that. I asked him how I could be like him. You know what this nigga said? Get a gun. Dude said he gonna sell me one at the party. Ain't that something?

The comment was so strange that both Doug and Nigger Jim embraced silence.

Doug felt the urge to talk to his new roommate so as not to appear rude. He called out: Say Nigga Jim—

Excuse me, Guapo, this is a small thing, but it's Nigg-er with an er, not with an ah, Nigger Jim replied. Nigg-er, Nigg-er, Nigg-er...

And that's how Doug drifted off to sleep that night.

Some hours passed—Doug was not sure how many—and he was woken from his sleep by heavy feet stamping up the stairs. He sprung from the depths of his slumber, gasping deeply as he sat up. The door swung open and slammed against the floor. A shadowy head peeked up through the entrance.

Y'all gotta go! A voice shouted. Y'all gotta go now!

It was Aunt Harriet, her head in the attic's entrance, floating there like a dark balloon.

Wha-What's going on? Doug asked.

James-my-man gathered his clothes, scurrying about in the tiny attic.

Look alive guys, he said. We gotta bounce.

Nigger Jim snatched his straw hat from the floor and slapped it onto his head. Doug slipped his red boots onto his feet. Before long the three men were in James-my-man's Chevrolet as it zig-zag-zigged through the neighborhood.

The men's hearts pounded. James-my-man crunched pills as if they were peanuts. He jiggled the bottle about as an offering and both Nigger Jim and Doug shook their heads.

Relaxation escaped Doug, even after several hours. He tried to sleep, but his blood churned like angry German shepherds were on his heels. James-my-man shook the bottle of pills at him again, but Doug refused. Suit yourself, James-my-man replied.

Sometime during the ride Doug asked where they were heading and James-my-man said the next stop was the big party in the cotton-field at the edge of the town in which Coon W. Calhoun had once made a living dancing in the streets.

Nigger Jim gently snored from the backseat while James-my-man told a story about the Quakers who put him up for a month one trip through the Underground Railroad when his planning went awry and he ran out of money. Those Quakers were always the last stop before Canada, James-my-man said.

This story led to one about a Quaker he went to high school with.

He was a cool dude, James-my-man said. The Quakers always been helping us out on the Underground Railroad since way, way back. We used to have a saying in high school: Quakers ain't crackers—

James-my-man, Doug said. This is a really shitty story.

They're all shitty stories, James-my-man replied, but they're all true. He paused. It's not like you have any stories to tell. Oh yeah, I never finished the one about Coon W. Calhoun. Where was I?

Nigger Jim woke for a moment and said: You telling him about Coon Calhoun? That was some fucked up shit.

So the newspapers started writing about him all the time. They had essays and editorials calling for his head. Then there was one, I'll never forget it, the headline was: Coon Calhoun Needs to be Lynched. It was in big bold letters! Man, I couldn't believe the newspaper would be so blatant.

Nigger Jim farted in his sleep as if to comment on James-my-man's story and then he started to snore again.

So anyway, James-my-man continued as he crunched pills between his teeth. He go out there one morning, a Thursday morning. Dancing like usual; a big ass smile on his niggerlips, singing some little kiddie song or something and all the children and their mothers are standing around. People are putting money into his hat and his greasy black face is sweating, his chest is moving fast up and down because he's out of breath. Then there's some commotion. Somebody's yelling some shit. There's a guy in a blue robe and a blue pointy hood with two eyeholes cut out. Those were the meanest, most soulless eyes I ever had the misfortune of seeing. He walks right up to Coon Calhoun and blaow! Pops a hole right in the man's chest.

Damn, Doug said.

Yeah, they never caught the dude neither. I'll never forget his ashy brown hand wrapped around that big black gun. And Coon Calhoun lying there in this big ass pool of blood. And then the gang war started right after that.

Gang war?

Yeah, man. Well, obviously the dude that shot him was from the Krip Klux Klan, but that's Southside Willie Lynch Mob territory. You can't roll up on another gang's turf and start popping niggas. Plenty people got lynched over the death of Coon W. Calhoun. They was cutting Krip Klux Klan and Willie Lynch Mob niggas down from trees for weeks. It wasn't safe around there for a real long time. I thought I was a tough guy,

but you ain't see me out there a lot during that time. I wasn't scared or nothing, mind you, but I kept my head down.

Nigger Jim tossed in the backseat, contorting his body into awkward positions as his straw hat tipped from his head and fell to the floor. He talked in his sleep, mumbling something about oral sex.

James-my-man continued: But the same newspaper that was saying Coon W. Calhoun need to be lynched then turned around and was like, Stop the violence. It was absurd man. They ain't even miss a beat; ain't acknowledge that they was the main ones calling for Coon Calhoun's head, inciting violence and shit. They said he was a beloved street entertainer. Crazy.

Nigger Jim, who now sat with his back flat against the seat and his eyes closed, mumbled, Man, you forgot to tell Guapo about the funeral.

Oh yeah, that's the best part. So, there had been all this commotion about him wearing blackface and shaming our people and all that shit, but that's just how he was.

What you mean?

His face. He ain't have no makeup on it, no burnt cork or lipstick or nothing, that's what the nigga really looked like. That's who he was.

What? You shitting me, man.

I kid you not, chief, James-my-man said reaching for the glove compartment. He took out three photographs. In them, a man in a tuxedo lay in a casket, his arms resting across his chest. White gloves covered his fingers and his face was black as newly laid tar, his lips red as fresh-spilled blood with a smile as wide as a watermelon chunk.

I keep this shit in here to show people, James-my man continued. I be telling folks, but don't no one believe me. See with your own eyes though.

This ain't real.

You should have seen his kids, Guapo. They looked just like him. His wife, too. Eyes all bugged out and shit. It was the craziest thing. She said that's what people look like where they're from.

Stop playing games, Doug said. Be serious.

I am being serious. I wouldn't believe it either if I ain't seen it myself, but look at the photos.

This is ridiculous.

It was more than ridiculous. It was sad, really. He was the only income that family had. He was doing what he knew how to do. Some negroes was like good when Coon got shot, but damn, that's some cold-blooded shit to say when you look at them little tar-faced children.

Man, get this shit out of here! Doug said, throwing the photos to the floor. You expect me to believe this? You must think I'm a fool.

It's true, Guapo, James-my-man said with a wink. Every word of it. Even the parts I made up. Especially the parts I made up.

When they got to the party, Doug's joints felt stiff and ached from the long ride, as did Nigger Jim's and James-my-man's.

Music played in the distance. Nigger Jim adjusted his straw hat and wondered aloud if this was the place to get some good brain. James-my-man smiled and nodded, kicking at the yellow dust beneath their feet and dropping pills into their hands. They walked in the direction of the plantation and its glowing cotton field.

Let these vitamins take away your drowsiness and pain, James-my-man said. My friends, here we are in the promised land. A place to get some love for a creaky heart and some cranium on the side. Now to find the Lizard.

Doug's limbs were heavy and if he rested them, he would sleep the whole night. He popped some pills into his mouth and chewed as James-my-man had done over and over. The pills tasted bitter. Doug lit a cigarette to blunt the taste and offered Nigger Jim one.

Nigger Jim swallowed his pills and screwed his mouth into a disgusted frown and shook his head at Doug.

What I look like smoking them things? Nigger Jim said. We used to pick it, now they want us to smoke it?

Our ancestors used to pick cotton, too, Doug replied.

I don't wear no damn cotton.

Standing near bursting cotton buds, the world began to shift and rock for Doug. The cotton spoke to him, but that was absurd so he didn't listen. Music blared from speakers. People in glistening blackface and shimmering red lips passed and greeted him with wide coon smiles. Are they wearing makeup, Doug asked himself, or is their blackface natural like Coon Calhoun's? But that was a silly thought so he let it escape from his head. He looked all around, his expression changing from amusement to shock to horror. One coon, a woman, handed Doug a large 40 ounce bottle of malt liquor,

Crazy Ninja. He smiled and took the heavy bottle into his hand, wondering if, this time, he'd drink it all, or would he surrender somewhere in the middle, right where the alcohol, as usual, filled up his bladder. Doug began to feel tired so he popped a few more pills into his mouth and swallowed, washing them down with malt liquor. Soon he lost track of Nigger Jim and James-my-man. He looked around for them, but quickly lost interest upon seeing the strange people that populated the party.

Standing next to him was a skinny East African man who stood about 6 feet, but slowly, he grew to 8 or 9 feet; a drunk, short dark-skinned man with an impish smile and pointy elf's ears; and a tallish guy with an oblong, football shaped head that became longer and longer each time Doug looked at it.

Doug watched the men, he couldn't look away. It must be the pills, he thought. The man with the oblong head turned to Doug, You alright, man? Doug nodded, standing still to look as normal as he could. The man's head grew. Doug took a sip from his forty.

The short, drunken man, pointed to a far off stage where a group of rappers performed. He screamed like a lunatic: Man, I can do better than that:

*There's some bitches in this bitch  
lotsa titties in this bitch  
there's some ass in this bitch  
I want to fuck that bitch.*

The man's friends laughed, their smiles turning grotesque, bending out of shape until their faces resembled snarling wolf muzzles. Doug didn't laugh. Some things, like the silly songs on the radio, were too ridiculous to parody. Doug shook his head at the outlandishness of it all, hoping he'd never be as pathetic as this ludicrous munchkin. The man's friends joined the chant.

Nothing looked as it should. Doug's brain, the back of the left side, wildly throbbed. He closed his eyes, placed his right hand on his forehead so that the bottom of his palm rested on his shut eyelids and rubbed his hand back and forth, producing a small yawn, but no ease to the pain.

He felt he had control over his high and the visions would soon stop. Doug put down the forty. It couldn't be helping. He heard a voice, a soft female voice that sounded vaguely like creaking guitar strings, ask him if he was alright. Doug looked up and there was a woman who, before his eyes, turned into a giraffe. He maintained a straight face and ignored her transformation, telling himself it wasn't real. Anyway, she was a pretty giraffe, a graceful giraffe, not awkward like many he had seen at the zoo or on nature shows. He marveled at her as she spoke, but the woman didn't seem to notice at all, instead she chattered quickly, rapidly flapping her giraffe muzzle, telling Doug all about herself. She said she had gotten a degree in biology from Howard

University and had hoofed her way to a middle manager position at some corporation somewhere.

She stopped speaking and twisted her muzzle into a frown and whispered, These parties are becoming so low class.

Naked children, dusky little Sambos—their hair uncombed birds' nests, pancake lips flapping behind them as they ran and their skin as black as a midnight sky—swept by like a breeze. They ran round and round and round until they became a blur and then dissolved into a black puddle. The giraffe shook her head, but Doug could barely see it way up there.

Do you understand what I'm talking about? the giraffe asked touching a hoof to the crook of his arm. Doug nodded, though he had heard very little of what she had said. I find it very hard to explain that I'm different. Know what I mean?

Then she frowned and pointed a hoof at the elf and his friends who were still chanting.

Doug felt people looking over their shoulders at him. Some stared outright. If the giraffe had noticed, she didn't let on as she continued speaking rapidly. He looked at the men who suspiciously eyed him; they went through millions of years of evolutionary history before his eyes. They turned into apes, except they had wings. And soon Doug realized what science hadn't figured out yet: that humans, apes and birds all shared a recent common ancestor that still roamed the earth and what he was seeing was the undiscovered missing link. What made them eye him so angrily? Doug wondered. Perhaps the giraffe was someone's girlfriend or wife. Doug stepped away, telling the giraffe he needed to find his friends and that he'd soon return, but she followed along as if she hadn't heard him. The apes passed stealthily overhead, dipping between the clouds, blending with the night sky, but since they had been spotted, to Doug, they were as conspicuous as a swarm of swooping and screeching bats. Maybe they were police, watching him, waiting to dive in, snatch him and fly him off to jail. As long as he didn't let on that he saw everything as it was, Doug thought, they wouldn't risk bothering him.

He crunched some more pills and eyed the giraffe, admiring her long, soft neck, but really he looked for Nigger Jim and James-my-man. He wondered if they had found the Lizard.

There was some commotion in the audience, cheering and clapping in the direction of the stage. Doug turned to see some women in thongs and little else shaking their bare rippled asscheeks to music that was so loud it sounded not like music, but like slaps against flesh and fists smashing bone. Doug didn't take his eyes from the stage, because the women were the only things that weren't distorted versions of themselves. And to be honest, he enjoyed the music, though he told himself he shouldn't.

The gyrating women didn't change into anything else while everything around him morphed into something irrational, but true. Doug closed his eyes and when he opened them, the women had become enormous asses atop legs. There was a disembodied pair of breasts floating between the asses. The music ended and the body parts left the stage.

The host of the show was a comedian who hadn't made a funny remark in years. He looked into the crowd, saying nothing, just clutching the microphone in front of his mouth as if he was about to speak. A hush fell over the crowd waiting for him to address them. His lip curled and then he said this: You disgust me. A cheer went up from the crowd. They calmed and he continued. What the hell is wrong with you? I'm embarrassed by yooooohoooo! There was more cheering and laughter, he paced back and forth, his monologue becoming more and more incoherent.

Educate 'em, brother, educate 'em! a voice screamed from the crowd.

Eventually the comedian gave up speaking and began spitting into the audience. Some cheered. The giraffe waved her hoofed limbs in approval.

Doug's head felt as if it was falling apart piece by piece. A voice told him to crunch more pills, so he did.

Some winged gorillas took the stage. They were decked in diamond-studded nooses that hung from their necks and grazed the floor. As they performed, roaming about, chanting nonsense, the elf and his two friends stood behind Doug cackling.

Man, you can do better than that, the East African said to the elf. The guy with the oblong head urged the elf to sing his verse again, which he did:

*There's some bitches in this bitch  
lotsa titties in this bitch  
there's some ass in this bitch  
I want to fuck that bitch.*

The giraffe shot the elf an angry glance. To which he responded, Why you wanna look so angry, ma? You not havin' a good time?

She craned her neck around, lowering it so that she was eye to eye with the elf. You little ignorant no-class bastard, she said. I swear, some people are so savage they deserve to be in chains.

The East African and the guy with the oblong head took up the chant while the elf and the giraffe screamed over one another. The voices of the elf, the giraffe, the East African and the man with the oblong head turned into a single stabbing noise that increased the throbbing inside of Doug's skull. He wanted the noise to stop. He wanted

everything to stop. Nigger Jim and James-my-man appeared at Doug's side just as the noise had reached a peak.

Where you been at? James-my-man asked.

Chief, what the fuck did you give me? Everything looks strange. Is this how you see the world, my-man?

James-my-man threw his head back and slammed his hands together.

That's some good-ass shit, right? James-my-man said. We're just beginning to see the world as it's supposed to be seen, Guapo. I got a whole trunk of the shit. If it was up to me, everybody would see through all the bullshit. There'd be no reason to lie anymore. I'm gonna sell as much as I can here and then we gonna move the rest of the stuff over in Canada. Everyone will experience what we know, for a price.

What? That's what this is all about? I followed you. You was leading me.

I am leading you. I'm showing you the way. Who told you I got to be broke to lead you, man?

You can't serve the people and my-man at the same time.

Doug didn't know where these last words came from. He stumbled away. Everything he had seen burnt holes in his eyes. The elf and the giraffe were locked in an eternal battle of wills. The giraffe didn't notice that Doug had wandered from her.

James-my-man followed Doug and slipped his arm around his shoulder.

Man, for now, screw any petty beef we got, James-my-man said. We got bigger fish to fry. I found the Lizard of God. Soon we'll be calling Nigger Jim Sigmund Freud for the way he gets brains. And we can get love to get our old tin hearts going, but me and Nigger Jim can't do it alone. We're short on dough and the Lizard of God has some top-notch hoes. I could sell some vitamins, but that would take time and we need the money now. So, if you throw in some cash we can takes these birds into the cotton field and have a real party.

When Doug turned to look at the person James-my-man had identified as The Lizard, he didn't look like a lizard at all or even a man. He looked instead like a snake, a giant cobra with a broad purple hat and protruding poisonous platinum fangs. He wore a paisley zoot suit flanked by a cape. The snake even had the audacity to have a pair of brown snake-skin shoes sitting there underneath that part of his snake-belly that hoisted him off the ground as if he had feet. A pair of disembodied hands clad in white gloves floated in front of him. The right one held a scepter, the left one an oversized diamond-studded golden chalice. The Lizard of God was surrounded by disembodied, floating female fancy parts.

In the name of God the Father, his Son and the Holy Ghost, I say unto you, Guapo: Make your next move your best move, the Lizard said pointing his scepter at Doug. Don't stand there clicking your heels, Dorothy. I say, come unto me and you'll find a home with the Lord. Pay no attention to my earthly exterior for I speak with His voice. Give unto the Lord what is His. Do this and I will provide for you prosperity, salvation and everything else you seek, starting with my flock here. Pick any color you like. The Lizard pointed to the floating female body parts, which shifted pigmentation before Doug's eyes. What you want to do, barbeque or mildew?

This is a nightmare. I need to wake up, Doug mumbled to himself turning from the Lizard who at that moment was ascending toward an opening in the clouds, propelled upward by a panoply of floating breasts, which he held onto by strings that dangled from the rising tits. I can't get out of this damn nightmare!

Doug's head felt as if it had crumbled. He shook it side to side. The pain ricocheted around his skull. His brain was too big for its casing. In front of him appeared the spirit of Coon W. Calhoun in full top hat, tuxedo with tails, white gloves, greasy blackface and red niggerlips.

Doug, Coon said. Lay your body on the broken machinery that keeps this whole mad circus going until it stops moving, until it snaps apart. Let the damn gears and springs fall all over the damn place!

Coon, Doug replied. I'm one man and them law-enforcing apes is watching. I can't let them know that I see things as they are and not the façade.

He looked at James-my-man and then at Nigger Jim, their faces had turned grotesque, pitch-black with hideously swollen crimson lips. They now wore tuxedos with tails, top-hats and white gloves. The same was true of the giraffe and the three drunken hecklers.

Doug looked at the faces of the people that milled about, they too had grown monstrous and slate black, their lips twisted in ugly, pained grins. The gorillas flying overhead also seemed to be wearing blackface, their lips reddened and protruding. Everyone all around Doug was now in blackface and ill-fitting tuxedos, from those that calmly strolled by to the folks at the bar getting drinks to the people that jigged about to the music, making their gloved hands shake so that the dance area looked like a sea of fluttering white butterflies.

Falling to his knees, Doug held his ears as the pain shot back and forth between them and he screamed an anguished, horrid, piercing scream.

At that moment, he felt everyone staring at him as if he was the absurdity. Their eyesockets were widened so that their eyeballs protruded from their heads as if they were cartoon characters.

Doug felt his own eyes widen as he glanced at his hands, they were covered in white gloves and, as much as he tried, he couldn't remove them. A top-hat rested atop his head. A poorly fitting tuxedo smothered his joints, high-water pants choked his crotch and the jacket's tails flapped about with every movement.

Doug dashed across the plantation, struggling to pull off the jacket or the hat, but they wouldn't come off. He ran, moving stiffly, careful not to split his new pants.

He burst through the Big House doors and stumbled into the great room where he peered into a huge mirror that hung from the far wall. Staring back was a face like fresh tar, bulging white eyes and protruding red lips twisted into a smile not his own.