

*The
Journal
Of
Leroy
Carter*



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Dedication

to Bibliotherapy
and its potential for healing

Introduction

Set in 1926, this novella is in the form of a journal, written by one named Leroy Carter, a member of the legendary "Harlem Hellfighters," one of the African American regiments of World War I. As well as celebrating this unit, the novella also pays homage to Sadie Delaney, a monumental figure in bibliotherapy and librarianship, whose pioneering work healing with books, was deeply respected by the medical staff, as well as the soldiers, at the Tuskegee Veterans Hospital, in Alabama.

It is written for all those who suffered from what was known initially known as "shell shock" and later on, war neurosis.

Acknowledgements

To Bill Jeffway, of the the Dutchess County Historical Society, for all his support. Nadine Williams, for time spent discussing therapies and mental health and for technical assistance. Kiki "Dada" Shervington, for redesigning the African School website and updating it with The Sadie Delaney Project: Black Bibliotherapy. Memela Cavanagh, for the gift of the bibliotherapy course. And to the following, sources of information; The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes, edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel; Encyclopedia of the Harlem Literary Renaissance - Lois Brown; From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers In France – 1840-1980 - Michael Fabre; The Tuskegee Veterans Hospital And Its Black Physicians: Early Years - Mary Kaplan; Journal Of The National Medical Association; Abyssinian Baptist Church; Black Past ; American Psychiatric Association; United States Department Of The Interior; Smithsonian Magazine; Mail Online; Inside Sounds/Memphis Archives; Wikipedia; Britannia; American National Biography; University of Michigan; The New York Institute For Special Education; The Imperial War Museum; The Army Museum; YouTube and Wikipedia.

A special thank you to Walter Patrice, a World War II veteran, for the front cover photograph of Sadie Delaney, from his personal collection. He was a member of the Dutchess County Historical Society.

I know bibliotherapy works, as last year, during a time of deep personal sadness, it was my books on African Art, that helped me through.

The Journal of Leroy Carter

One

Whether they run their course, or are interrupted, they come and go as they wish and there is nothing we can do about them. No one wants the Nightmare Man to come visiting, partly because he comes without warning. He's a highway robber, kidnapping the mind of the unsuspecting sleeper. The ward is quite, except for the loud snorer, the one who coughs and the mumblor in his sleep. Then screams are heard, because the Nightmare Man is visiting. You must have witnessed the scenario, where a baby or child starts crying, which sets off the other little blessings. So it is here, when Nightmare Man steps in. A few of the guys will begin to get agitated, restless and the midnight peace vanishes. He is the bully in the prison who everyone fears. He feeds on victims, targeting whoever he wishes, especially the vulnerable: he controls the ward, like the heavy on the wing.

As soon as the tired one enters slumber, Nightmare Man invites himself in. The habitual gatecrasher, taking what he wants: the instigator of fragility. He stays until disruption, then goes. His goal is mayhem, so as soon as the objective has been reached, he moves on elsewhere, for the night is young and there are many minds to tamper and play with. He does not know remorse and redemption is in someone else's vocabulary.

You cannot wait in ambush for him, because no one knows when he'll come. He is the facilitator of screams and everyone on this ward has screamed.

One night, as Gerry told me the following day," You tried to scream the place down, brick by brick!" He got out of bed, gently raised me up, held my two hands in his and recited three times, like a mantra, the words to '*My People*,' by Langston, which carries the first two lines

The night is beautiful,
So the faces of my people.

Two

I remember that I'd expected therapies and medicines, but I was given poetry also. In 1924, in this veteran's hospital, I was prescribed Langston Hughes. Two years later, it seems like a sacred formula.

The treatments are on scheduled time, but I can pick up Langston when I want to: when I need to. Some of the other guys have a Bible beside their beds: I also have the *Weary Blues*.

I'd never been one for books, until the librarian here, Sadie Delaney, introduced me to the power of them: their beautiful power. Until that time, I thought remedy came via the medic and the pharmacist; would never have guessed that librarians could offer healing also. And every day since I met her, I've given thanks for bibliotherapy.

Most of us were from New York, especially the Harlem area. I had just split up with my fiancée; fed-up, restless and just turned eighteen: then came the Selective Service Act. Suddenly we were allowed in the Forces: well sort of. We were weren't allowed in the Marines and only designated employment in the other units. We jumped for joy, for the chance to prove ourselves; then came the later realisation, that comparatively, only a few of us would be given that chance: I was amongst the few.

Restlessness fuelled by love sickness, sent me to Camp Whitman. It was light training, so didn't tax me much - I've always been a reasonably fit guy. Its kind of fitting though, that the county where I received my first military training, was also the one where the librarian went to school: Dutchess County. She learnt in Poughkeepsie and I learnt in Beekstown, which wasn't far from where she was taught. I think she must have been a lighthouse even then: first steps along the causeway to iridescence. I can easily imagine her shedding comfort's light, when her friends were tangled in peer pressure – and when the church lost a beloved elder. People must have been glad when she walked through the door: I know I am.

From New York, to further training in South Carolina. That's where the real business began, in Camp Wadsworth. In New York, we'd basically learnt how to salute and march; in Spartanburg – where Camp Wadsworth was located – we began real combat training. It was also my first taste of Southern life.

One of the highlights of my time there - where racism stared me constantly in the face without a whisper of acknowledgement - was seeing Pink Anderson perform. You see, before the coming of Ms. Delaney and the advent of books, music had been my outlet; my go to, when the fuel level was low. A melody could always take me away. I knew of Louis Armstrong and Buddy Bolden; she introduced me to Paul Dunbar and Claude McKay. I don't think Pink Anderson had recorded any music by then, but his name was around the place and still a teenager, sixteen or seventeen. I went, had a great night and felt sure he had a great future ahead of him.

I remember one time, not long after she came here in '24, on a day when my pacing was constant because stillness was elsewhere, she simply came up to me, with that gentle face emanating goodness and recited '*The Negro Speaks Of Rivers*.' And she knew I loved rivers, because I'd spoken of boyhood skimming on the Harlem River and picnics by it with my fiancée. It sent a sensation of beauty through me, that calmed the storm: I ceased the

constant motion. I had never sensed such instant remedy. But did you ever hear such a wonderful fusion of word and rhythm, in such a short time? When floundering, has Langston ever come swimming towards you, taken you in one arm, while propelling you forward with the other, towards the approaching shoreline? The poem lulled me, as the Congo did in the fourth sentence. And when she had finished, I asked her to recite it again, so I could hear again those lines *'I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.'* Before she left to soothe another, she wrote out the poem for me; next day I went to the library and borrowed *'Weary Blues,'* recently published.

After she left, I sat and reflected on my river time and blue heron moments. You see, the heron – the taller ones – have been like an omen to me, a kind of spirit bird; whenever I see one, something good usually happens. I thought of the elegance of the poem and of the bird. I thought of the eternity of water and eternity of man. I'd lulled myself to rest before, via my river reverie, but that was a first for me, with the aid of poetry.

Three

Sometimes in the daytime, the heaviness of night comes in, because the Dark Dreamer takes up residence. And the black shroud of the moonless evening is not there to cover you. Sun is shining and although its warmth may not be appreciated, it sheds light on you as on everyone else: spotlight time. The bed covers and pillow don't offer as much protection during the day - and everyone can see you clearly under the bed. And although empathy and support is there amongst the others guys, who wants to be howling like a werewolf at midday? The Dark Dreamer appears when the sun is high in the sky: he doesn't care for the coming of the full moon. Anytime between sunrise and sunset, he may come stomping through, bringing the daydream that no one wants.

I remember one time, in the aftermath, when exhaustion and edginess bugged me, I thought of all the guys here and the Langston poem of two verses called '*Walls*'.

Four walls can shelter
So much sorrow...

Feeling to be on my own, I picked up a last year copy of Survey Graphic, went outside and seeking a bench, sat on one, reading and contemplating, his '*Walkers With The Dawn*,' which contains the line '*Being walkers with the dawn and morning...We are not afraid of night, nor days of gloom...*

I sat and thought about the poem, until Jerry came out to see how I was.

Four

After completion of training, we were sent from America to France: from Spartenburg to Brest. We thought we were going to the real deal, to the proving ground, but we were sent to the labouring zones, cleaning toilets and unloading ships: the best trained stevedores. The training seemed like time wasted and we were denied that test of manhood. Then the French came to our rescue! Due to lack of Allied manpower and American political manouvering – of Wilson and Pershing - we of the 15th New York National Guard Regiment, became the 369th Infantry Regiment, under French control.

What never happened in America, happened in France: white combatants stood and saluted us. I'd never heard of Brest before, but that word will forever remain in my vocabulary. Part of the reason for the salute, was our rendition of 'La Marseillaise': jazz style. I don't think they'd ever heard jazz before – not live anyway - but on first hearing, they appeared to become devotees! And with both James Reese Europe and Noble Sissle in the band - Europe was a lieutenant and Sissle a sergeant - they heard the new genre at its best.

Europe and Sissle were like a great double act. They had performed together in one of the orchestras founded by Europe: I had seen them at the Carnegie. It was these two who organised our regimental band, which had enraptured the French, when we disembarked at Brest: ambassadors from ragtime embassy.

Our famous lieutenant had faced what we had: he'd been hospitalised after a gas attack. We felt proud, at the reception they received everywhere, when they toured France, entertaining the troops: French, English and American. One of the places they performed at, was the Red Cross Hospital in Paris. As Ms. Delaney offers daily respite to me and hundreds of others, so Jim Europe gave a needed boost, to civilians as well as combatants. And after the war, it was good to hold the recordings he made for Pathe – such as '*On Patrol in No Man's Land*' – undersigned with the words '369th U.S Inf. "Hell Fighters" Band.' For those of you who may not know, "Hell Fighters" was the name the Germans gave us: giving us respect for our fighting abilities. 1919, the year of the Pathe recordings in France, was the year of the Red Summer here, when cities exploded and many veterans were assaulted, physically as well as verbally: and a few were killed. The two highlights for me of that year, after returning from distant battlefields to the homeland ones, was the Parade – which I'll no doubt come to later – and the holding of those discs, recorded by my regimental band. I showed them to everybody! From hospital to hospital, I took them, playing them whenever I can.

Jim was a natural leader: a strong face and an inspirational speaker. I loved to hear him speak. He spoke of digging into our own creative sources, rather than wasting talent making copies of others. He liked to perform music made by other Negro composers, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Henry Burleigh: he was their champion also. Before Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway, there was James Reese Europe. No regiment had a finer lieutenant. I cried the day I heard of the fatal stabbing and cursed the angry assailant: cried again, when Harlem came out to say farewell. He was the first Negro given a public funeral in New York: he is buried in the Arlington National Cemetery.

One evening I was dwelling on the killing of Jim, getting more and more agitated. That he'd survived everything the enemy could throw at him, then died by the hand of a fellow

musician. Just as anxiety was beginning to stomp, Ms Delaney walked in. She'd heard that

I was faltering and on her way to see me, had gone to the library and picked up an old copy of the Crisis: she'd also bought me a lemonade. After asking me to sit down, she offered me the drink and asked if she could read something to me. Receiving my reply, she began to read a poem by Langston, called '*Aunt Sue's Stories*.' Here are the first and last verses...

Aunt Sue has a head full of stories.
Aunt Sue has a whole heart full of stories.
Summer nights on the front porch
Aunt Sue cuddles a brown-faced child to her bosom
And tells him stories.

The dark faced child is quiet
Of a summer night
Listening to Aunt Sue's stories.

I felt a bit like that child, as she read to me: her voice and her demeanour, kind of cocooned me. It sent me back to the Anansi story telling of my housemother, at the Coloured Orphan Asylum. Even though I was only in my mid-twenties, those evenings of orange and starlight, seem like aeons ago. But as well as the feeling of comfort, I thought of those depicted in the second, longer verse, which took me away from that killing in New York; I thought of someone else's story, which is the saga of the masses. As the pool was beginning to whirl, the chosen words and her presence, whispered "hush"