

"I Have Seen
Black Hands"


RICHARD
WRIGHT
READER

Edited by (65)
Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre

Notes by Michel Fabre

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1968

Harper & Row, Publishers
New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London



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Designed by C. Linda Dingler

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Wright, Richard, 1908-1960.

Richard Wright reader.

CONTENTS: Introduction. Nonfiction: Black boy (excerpt) Joe Louis uncovers dynamite. Blueprint for Negro writing. Letters: Richard Wright/Burton Rascoe. Richard Wright/David L. Cohn. Richard Wright/Antonio Frasconi. Review: Wars I have seen by Gertrude Stein. There's always another café. Black power (excerpt) Pagan Spain (excerpt) 12 million black voices. Poetry: I have seen black hands. Between the world and me. Red clay blues. The FB Eye Blues. Haikus.—Fiction: Long black song. Fire and cloud. Lawd today [excerpt] Native son [excerpt] The man who lived underground. The outsider [excerpt] Savage holiday [excerpt] Big black good man. The Long Dream [excerpt]

I. title.

PS3545.R815A6 1978 813'.5'2 77-76690

ISBN 0-06-014737-7

ISBN 0-06-014736-9 pbk.

78 79 80 81 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

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Poetry

It should be remembered that Wright became known in left-wing circles as a poet and that it is through his revolutionary verse, published in Anvil, Left Front, and New Masses, that he first tried "to link white life with black, to merge two streams of common experience." The score of poems he published between 1935-40 are free-verse pieces dealing with political themes, the life of the poor or the plight of Black people in America. These early poems reflect such diverse influences as those of black folklore, Langston Hughes, Walt Whitman, Carl Sandburg, or T. S. Eliot. Yet most of them have distinct originality, like "I Have Seen Black Hands" (1934) and "Between the World and Me" (1935).

Later, Wright devoted more time to the blues, of which his "Red Clay Blues" (1939), written in collaboration with Langston Hughes, is an example. "Joe Louis Blues," his lyrics in praise of the black champion, was sung by Paul Robeson and recorded in 1941 by Count Basie's orchestra. When he

"I Have Seen Black Hands" originally appeared in *New Masses*, Vol. 11, June 26, 1934.

"Between the World and Me" originally appeared in *Partisan Review*, Vol. 2, July-August 1935.

"Red Clay Blues" originally appeared in *New Masses*, Vol. 32, August 1, 1939.

"The FB Eye Blues" originally was published as an unauthorized leaflet in New York, ca. 1949.

returned to the United States during the Cold War on his way to Argentina, he even wrote a satirical "F. B. Eye Blues."

In 1959, Wright discovered the Japanese haiku. He was entranced by the 17-syllable form and jotted down several thousands of the brief poems, mostly during his treatment at the hospital. "Maybe I'm fooling around with these tiny little poems, but I could not let them go. I was possessed by them," he wrote a friend in May 1960, just six months before his death. While keeping as closely as possible to the original genre, respecting not only the pattern and number of syllables but even the kireji, or "mood word," Wright was able to inject a deeply personal tone to these pieces. They represent some of his best efforts at writing poetry.

*The distance separating the revolutionary poems of the Thirties, vibrant with generous indignation and bristling with crude imagery, from the disciplined haikus may seem great, but the road traveled from the enthusiasm of the young Communist to the more serene mastery of the mature artist is no evidence of a lessening militancy. Wright simply confined the political statements of his later years to prose. There remains a definite separation between the ideological essays of *White Man Listen* (1957) and the sensitive lyricism of this intimate poetry.*

I Have Seen Black Hands

*I am black and I have seen black hands, millions and millions of them—
Out of millions of bundles of wool and flannel tiny black fingers have reached restlessly and hungrily for life.*

Reached out for the black nipples at the black breasts of
black mothers,
And they've held red, green, blue, yellow, orange, white,
and purple toys in the childish grips of possession.
And chocolate drops, peppermint sticks, lollypops,
wineballs, ice cream cones, and sugared cookies in
fingers sticky and gummy,
And they've held balls and bats and gloves and marbles
and jack-knives and sling-shots and spinning tops in
the thrill of sport and play,
And pennies and nickels and dimes and quarters and
sometimes on New Year's, Easter, Lincoln's Birthday,
May Day, a brand new green dollar bill,
They've held pens and rulers and maps and tablets and
books in palms spotted and smeared with ink,
And they've held dice and cards and half-pint flasks and
cue sticks and cigars and cigarettes in the pride of
new maturity . . .

II

I am black and I have seen black hands, millions and
millions of them—
They were tired and awkward and calloused and grimy
and covered with hangnails,
And they were caught in the fast-moving belts of
machines and snagged and smashed and crushed,
And they jerked up and down at the throbbing machines
massing taller and taller the heaps of
gold in the banks of bosses,
And they piled higher and higher the steel, iron, the
lumber, wheat, rye, the oats, corn, the cotton, the
wool, the oil, the coal, the meat, the fruit, the glass,
and the stone until there was too much to be used,
And they grabbed guns and slung them on their
shoulders and marched and groped in trenches and

fought and killed and conquered nations who were
customers for the goods black hands had made.
And again black hands stacked goods higher and higher
until there was too much to be used,
And then the black hands held trembling at the factory
gates the dreaded lay-off slip,
And the black hands hung idle and swung empty and
grew soft and got weak and bony from
unemployment and starvation,
And they grew nervous and sweaty, and opened and
shut in anguish and doubt and hesitation and
irresolution . . .

III

I am black and I have seen black hands, millions and
millions of them—
Reaching hesitantly out of days of slow death for the
goods they had made, but the bosses warned that
the goods were private and did not belong to them,
And the black hands struck desperately out in defence of
life and there was blood, but the enraged bosses
decreed that this too was wrong,
And the black hands felt the cold steel bars of the prison
they had made, in despair tested their strength and
found that they could neither bend nor break them,
And the black hands lifted palms in mute and futile
supplication to the sodden faces of mobs wild in
the revelries of sadism,
And the black hands strained and clawed and struggled
in vain at the noose that tightened about the black
throat,
And the black hands waved and beat fearfully at the tall
flames that cooked and charred the black flesh . . .

IV

*I am black and I have seen black hands
 Raised in fists of revolt, side by side with the white fists
 of white workers,
 And some day—and it is only this which sustains me—
 Some day there shall be millions and millions of them,
 On some red day in a burst of fists on a new horizon!*

Between the World and Me

*And one morning while in the woods I stumbled
 suddenly upon the thing,
 Stumbled upon it in a grassy clearing guarded by scaly
 oaks and elms.
 And the sooty details of the scene rose, thrusting
 themselves between the world and me. . . .*

*There was a design of white bones slumbering forgottenly
 upon a cushion of ashes.
 There was a charred stump of a sapling pointing a blunt
 finger accusingly at the sky.
 There were torn tree limbs, tiny veins of burnt leaves, and
 a scorched coil of greasy hemp;
 A vacant shoe, an empty tie, a ripped shirt, a lonely hat,
 and a pair of trousers stiff with black blood.
 And upon the trampled grass were buttons, dead matches,
 butt-ends of cigars and cigarettes, peanut shells, a
 drained gin-flask, and a whore's lipstick;
 Scattered traces of tar, restless arrays of feathers, and the
 lingering smell of gasoline.
 And through the morning air the sun poured yellow
 surprise into the eye sockets of a stony skull. . . .*

*And while I stood my mind was frozen with a cold pity
 for the life that was gone.
 The ground gripped my feet and my heart was circled by
 icy walls of fear—
 The sun died in the sky; a night wind muttered in the
 grass and fumbled the leaves in the trees; the woods
 poured forth the hungry yelping of hounds; the
 darkness screamed with thirsty voices; and the
 witnesses rose and lived:
 The dry bones stirred, rattled, lifted, melting themselves
 into my bones.
 The grey ashes formed flesh firm and black, entering into
 my flesh.*

*The gin-flask passed from mouth to mouth; cigars and
 cigarettes glowed, the whore smeared the lipstick red
 upon her lips,
 And a thousand faces swirled around me, clamoring that
 my life be burned. . . .*

*And then they had me, stripped me, battering my teeth
 into my throat till I swallowed my own blood.
 My voice was drowned in the roar of their voices, and my
 black wet body slipped and rolled in their hands as
 they bound me to the sapling.
 And my skin clung to the bubbling hot tar, falling from
 me in limp patches.
 And the down and quills of the white feathers sank into
 my raw flesh, and I moaned in my agony.
 Then my blood was cooled mercifully, cooled by a
 baptism of gasoline.
 And in a blaze of red I leaped to the sky as pain rose like
 water, boiling my limbs.
 Panting, begging I clutched childlike, clutched to the hot
 sides of death.
 Now I am dry bones and my face a stony skull staring in
 yellow surprise at the sun. . . .*