

## COMMENTAIRE COMPOSÉ DE LITTÉRATURE ANGLAISE ET COURT THÈME

### I : COMMENTAIRE

We lived with our grandmother and uncle in the rear of the Store (it was always spoken of with a capital s), which she had owned some twenty-five years.

Early in the century, Momma (we soon stopped calling her Grandmother) sold lunches to the sawmen in the lumberyard (east Stamps) and the seedmen at the cotton gin (west Stamps). Her  
5 crisp meat pies and cool lemonade, when joined to her miraculous ability to be in two places at the same time, assured her business success. From being a mobile lunch counter, she set up a stand between the two points of fiscal interest and supplied the workers' needs for a few years. Then she had the Store built in the heart of the Negro area. Over the years it became the lay center of activities in town. On Saturdays, barbers sat their customers in the shade on the porch  
10 of the Store, and troubadours on their ceaseless crawlings through the South leaned across its benches and sang their sad songs of The Brazos while they played juice harps and cigar-box guitars.

The formal name of the Store was the Wm. Johnson General Merchandise Store. Customers could find food staples, a good variety of colored thread, mash for hogs, corn for chickens, coal  
15 oil for lamps, light bulbs for the wealthy, shoestrings, hair dressing, balloons, and flower seeds. Anything not visible had only to be ordered.

Until we became familiar enough to belong to the Store and it to us, we were locked up in a Fun House of Things where the attendant had gone home for life.

Each year I watched the field across from the Store turn caterpillar green, then gradually frosty  
20 white. I knew exactly how long it would be before the big wagons would pull into the front yard and load on the cotton pickers at daybreak to carry them to the remains of slavery's plantations.

During the picking season my grandmother would get out of bed at four o'clock (she never used an alarm clock) and creak down to her knees and chant in a sleep-filled voice, 'Our Father,  
25 thank you for letting me see this New Day. Thank you that you didn't allow the bed I lay on last night to be my cooling board, nor my blanket my winding sheet. Guide my feet this day along the straight and narrow, and help me to put a bridle on my tongue. Bless this house, and everybody in it. Thank you, in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, Amen.'

Before she had quite arisen, she called our names and issued orders, and pushed her large feet  
30 into homemade slippers and across the bare lye-washed wooden floor to light the coal-oil lamp.

The lamplight in the Store gave a soft make-believe feeling to our world which made me want to whisper and walk about on tiptoe. The odors of onions and oranges and kerosene had been mixing all night and wouldn't be disturbed until the wooded slat was removed from the door and the early morning air forced its way in with the bodies of people who had walked miles to reach the pickup place.

35 'Sister, I'll have two cans of sardines.'

'I'm gonna work so fast today I'm gonna make you look like you standing still.'

'Lemme have a hunk uh cheese and some sody crackers.'

40 'Just gimme a coupla them fat peanut paddies.' That would be from a picker who was taking his lunch. The greasy brown paper sack was stuck behind the bib of his overalls. He'd use the candy as a snack before the noon sun called the workers to rest.

In those tender mornings the Store was full of laughing, joking, boasting and bragging. One man was going to pick two hundred pounds of cotton, and another three hundred. Even the children were promising to bring home fo' bits and six bits.

45 The champion picker of the day before was the hero of the dawn. If he prophesied that the cotton in today's field was going to be sparse and stick to the bolls like glue, every listener would grunt a hearty agreement.

The sound of the empty cotton sacks dragging over the floor and the murmurs of waking people were sliced by the cash register as we rang up the five-cent sales.

50 If the morning sounds and smells were touched with the supernatural, the late afternoon had all the features of the normal Arkansas life. In the dying sunlight the people dragged, rather than their empty cotton sacks.

Brought back to the Store, the pickers would step out of the backs of trucks and fold down, dirt-disappointed, to the ground. No matter how much they had picked, it wasn't enough. Their wages wouldn't even get them out of debt to my grandmother, not to mention the staggering bill that waited on them at the white commissary downtown.

The sounds of the new morning had been replaced with grumbles about cheating houses, weighted scales, snakes, skimpy cotton and dusty rows. In later years I was to confront the stereotyped picture of gay song-singing cotton pickers with such inordinate rage that I was told even by fellow Blacks that my paranoia was embarrassing. But I had seen the fingers cut by the mean little cotton bolls, and I had witnessed the backs and shoulders and arms and legs resisting any further demands.

Some of the workers would leave their sacks at the Store to be picked up the following morning, but a few had to take them home for repairs. I winced to picture them sewing the coarse material

65 under a coal-oil lamp with fingers stiffening from the day's work. In too few hours they would  
have to walk back to Sister Henderson's Store, get vittles and load, again, onto the trucks. Then  
they would face another day of trying to earn enough for the whole year with the heavy  
knowledge that they were going to end the season as they started it. Without the money or credit  
70 necessary to sustain a family for three months. In cotton-picking time the late afternoons  
revealed the harshness of Black Southern life, which in the early morning had been softened by  
nature's blessing of grogginess, forgetfulness and the soft lamplight.

Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969)

## II : COURT THÈME

Il marchait toujours nu-tête, comme je me suis aussi fait critiquer pour le faire ; ses pieds racornis se passaient de sandales. Ses vêtements de jours ordinaires se distinguaient à peine de ceux des vieux mendiants, des graves métayers accroupis au soleil. On le disait sorcier, et les villageois tâchaient d'éviter son coup d'œil. Mais il avait sur les animaux de singuliers pouvoirs. J'ai vu sa vieille tête s'approcher prudemment, amicalement, d'un nid de vipères, et ses doigts noueux exécuter en face d'un lézard une espèce de danse. Il m'emmenait observer le ciel pendant les nuits d'été, au haut d'une colline aride. Je m'endormais dans un sillon, fatigué d'avoir compté les météores. Il restait assis, la tête levée, tournant imperceptiblement avec les astres.

Marguerite Yourcenar, *Mémoires d'Hadrien* (1958)