"She can always make some more," I said. "Maggie knows how to quilt."

Dee (Wangero) looked at me with hatred. "You just will not understand. The point is these quilts, *these* quilts!"

"Well," I said, stumped. "What would *you* do with them?"

"Hang them," she said. As if that was the only thing you *could* do with quilts.

Maggie by now was standing in the door. I could almost hear the sound her feet made as they scraped over each other.

"She can have them, Mama," she said, like somebody used to never winning anything, or having anything reserved for her. "I can 'member Grandma Dee without the quilts."

I looked at her hard. She had filled her bottom lip with checkerberry snuff and it gave her face a kind of dopey, hangdog look. It was Grandma Dee and Big Dee who taught her how to quilt herself. She stood there with her scarred hands hidden in the folds of her skirt. She looked at her sister with something like fear but she wasn't mad at her. This was Maggie's portion. This was the way she knew God to work.

When I looked at her like that something hit me in the top of my head and ran down to the soles of my feet. Just like when I'm in church and the spirit of God touches me and I get happy and shout. I did something I never had done before: hugged Maggie to me, then dragged her on into the room, snatched the quilts out of Miss Wangero's hands and dumped them into Maggie's lap. Maggie just sat there on my bed with her mouth open.

"Take one or two of the others," I said to Dee.

But she turned without a word and went out to Hakim-a-barber.

"You just don't understand," she said, as Maggie and I came out to the car.

"What don't I understand?" I wanted to know.

"Your heritage," she said. And then she turned to Maggie, kissed her, and said, "You ought to try to make something of yourself, too, Maggie. It's really a new day for us. But from the way you and Mama still live you'd never know it."

She put on some sunglasses that hid everything above the tip of her nose and her chin.

Maggie smiled; maybe at the sunglasses. But a real smile, not scared. After we watched the car dust settle I asked Maggie to bring me a dip of snuff. And then the two of us sat there just enjoying, until it was time to go in the house and go to bed.

who'd loved me to find what was significant and lasting in literature. My university training had both thwarted and prepared this understanding." Wideman had already published two well-received novels. After 1974, however, he was to publish the works for which he is best known, works rooted in the terrain of his childhood neighborhood, Homewood. But for Wideman the road back to Homewood was a difficult one: "In America, especially if you're black, there is a temptation to buy a kind of upward mobility. One of the requirements is to forget. Eventually, I felt impoverished by that act."

John Wideman was born on June 14, 1941, in Washington, D.C., the oldest of five children of Edgar and Betty French Wideman. Shortly before his first birthday, the family moved to Homewood, a black neighborhood on the eastern side of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Wideman was to spend the first ten years of his life there, where his great-great-great-grandmother, a fugitive slave, had found freedom in the mid-nineteenth century and where much of his extended family still lived. Wideman's father worked as a waiter, garbage man, and paperhanger. But although the family was poor, his parents, according to Wideman, "followed the traditional striving middle-class pattern." In 1951, the family moved to the predominantly white upper-middle-class neighborhood of Shadyside. There, Wideman attended Peabody High School, where he began to compartmentalize his life by associating with his white friends in the classroom and gym and his African American friends outside of school. Basketball star, senior class president, and valedictorian, Wideman won a Benjamin Franklin Scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania.

In college, Wideman played out what he has called a theatrical performance. As he described it later, in the autobiographical *Brothers and Keepers* (1984), "Just two choices as far as I could tell: either/or. Rich or poor. White or black. Win or lose. . . . To succeed in the man's world you must become like the man and the man sure didn't claim no bunch of nigger relatives in Pittsburgh." Wideman began with a major in psychology but switched to English when he discovered he was to study rats rather than psychoanalytic theory. He earned membership in Phi Beta Kappa, competed in track, and won all-Ivy status as a forward on the basketball team. In his senior year, he traded his dream of becoming an NBA star for that of becoming a writer. In 1963, John Wideman became only the second African American to win a Rhodes Scholarship (Alain Locke had been the first, fifty-five years earlier.) At Oxford University's New College, Wideman studied eighteenth-century literature. He also served as captain and coach of the university's basketball team, leading it to an amateur championship. In 1966, he was awarded a bachelor of philosophy degree and returned to the United States with Judith Ann Goldman, whom he had married in 1965.

From 1966 to 1967, as Kent Fellow at the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop, Wideman completed his first novel, *A Glance Away* (1967). Choosing to support himself through teaching while he continued to write, Wideman taught at the University of Pennsylvania from 1967 to 1974. His second novel, *Hurry Home*, was published in 1970. Both these early novels deal with African American characters, but the questions Wideman poses in them are not so much racial as existential. *A Glance Away* depicts a day in the lives of Eddie Lawson, an African American and a recovering drug addict, and Robert Thurley, a gay white English professor, as each struggles to understand himself. *Hurry Home* tells the story of Cecil Braithwaite, an African American law school graduate who, at the time the novel opens, is working as a janitor and who decides to travel to Europe and then to Africa in an attempt to somehow merge the two cultures to which he is heir—an attempt at which he ultimately fails. In his use of flashbacks, varying points of view, journals, letters, dreams, and puns, Wideman creates what critic John Leonard called "a rich and complicated novel." Because of the formally complex nature of his work, critics located Wideman in the tradition of Joyce, Eliot, and Faulkner.

Wideman was, at this time, unconnected to the black literary tradition, conceding in a 1968 *Negro Digest* article that he was not familiar with "that school of black writers which seeks to establish the black aesthetic." When two of his undergraduate students at the University of Pennsylvania asked him to teach a course on African American literature in 1968, Wideman at first declined. Then, in a crucial turnabout, he decided to take on the challenge. The course eventually led to the university's first African American studies program and for Wideman personally "awakened in [him] a different sense of self-image and the whole notion of a third world."

That different sense influenced Wideman's third novel, *The Lynchers* (1973), in which race and setting loom large. *The Lynchers* tells the story of a failed conspiracy by a group of black men in a Philadelphia ghetto to lynch one representative white policeman as vengeance for the thousands of black lives lost to lynching. The novel explores themes that would be important in Wideman's later work: relationships between black men and the significance of history, for it begins with a chronicling of lynchings in the United States. For Wideman, the novel's emphasis on pain, degradation, and hopelessness led to an impasse in his writing career. In 1973, wanting "to get away from that Ivy League competitiveness, the pressure to be somebody," he accepted a teaching position at the University of Wyoming at Laramie and moved west with his wife and three children.

In Wyoming, Wideman continued to read nineteenth- and twentieth-century African American writers, to study history and linguistics, and as he put it, "to forge a new language for talking about the places I'd been, the people important to me." That search for a new language, along with a personal event—his younger brother Robby was arrested, tried for murder, and sentenced to life in prison without parole—greatly affected his works of the 1980s and 1990s.

In nearly all of Wideman's subsequent work, he uses both the lyrical language he developed during these years and the technique, dream time, what critic Randall Kenana called Wideman's "own patented stream of consciousness, sliding easily through tense and point of view." *Damballah* (1981), *Hiding Place* (1981), and *Sent for You Yesterday* (1983) established Wideman's reputation as, according to Mel Watkins in the *New York Times Book Review*, "one of America's premier writers of fiction."

As Wideman notes in his preface to *The Homewood Trilogy*, "the tension of multiple traditions, European and Afro-American, the Academy and the Street, animates these texts." In an unusual move, Wideman decided to have each of his Homewood books published originally in paperback to reach more readers, particularly "the people and the world [he] was writing about." All three books revolve around the descendants of Sybela Owens, the great-great-great-grandmother who escaped slavery and settled in Homewood in the late 1850s with the help of her owner's son, who would later become her husband. *Damballah*, the first part of the trilogy, is a collection of twelve interrelated short stories spanning generations; the stories are imagined as "long overdue letters" to Wideman's brother Robby. *Hiding Place*, a novel, traces the life of Tommy, Sybela's great-great-great-grandson, who is wanted for a murder he didn't commit. Featuring the same characters, setting, and language, *Sent for You Yesterday*, the third part of the trilogy, travels back and forth from the 1920s to the 1970s to trace the lives of two Homewood families, the Frenches and the Tates. *Sent for You Yesterday* won the P.E.N./Faulkner Award in 1984.

Wideman's next work, the popular *Brothers and Keepers* (1984), draws inspiration from Homewood but is the author's first venture into nonfiction, as he comes to terms in this autobiographical work with the very different lives he and his younger brother Robby have led. Some reviewers found Wideman's indictment of white society unjustified—especially given his own escape from the ghetto. However, Jonathan Yardley, in the *Washington Post Book World*, observed that in his

"effort to understand what happened, to confess and examine his own sense of guilt about his brother's fate (and his own)," Wideman has written "a depiction of the inexorably widening chasm that divides middle-class black Americans from the black underclass." Ironically, in 1986, Wideman's middle child, Jacob, confessed to the murder of his roommate at summer camp, and the eighteen-year-old was sentenced to life in prison.

Reuben, published in 1987, engages the judicial system through its portrayal of a lawyer to the poor and dispossessed black citizenry of Homewood. Though stark in its indictment of the judicial system, *Reuben* did not provoke critics as much as Wideman's next novel, *Philadelphia Fire* (1990), based on the 1985 bombing of the Philadelphia headquarters of MOVE, which was authorized by the city's first African American mayor and led to the deaths of eleven people and the destruction of much of the neighborhood. Against this background, Wideman sets the search by an African American writer named Cudjoe for a small boy reported to have escaped the flames. At the novel's climax, in what critic Rosemary L. Bray called an "act of almost unimaginable boldness," the young boy is transformed into Wideman's own son, Jacob.

Between these two novels, Wideman published his second collection of short stories, *Fever*. Although critics praised *Valaida*, in which a Jewish Holocaust survivor tries to reach out to his African American cleaning woman, and *Little Brother*, about the inability of whites and blacks to live together without mutual hurt, the title story, *Fever*, was considered the prize of the collection. For this story Wideman drew on historical accounts of blacks and whites working side by side during the yellow fever epidemic that hit Philadelphia in 1793.

Wideman's most recent work gathers two previous collections, *Damballah* and *Fever*, together with a new one, *All Stories Are True*. Published in 1992, *The Stories of John Edgar Wideman* arranges the collections in reverse chronological order, with *Damballah* as the anchor.

Wideman was recognized early as an important writer, and his reputation has grown. He has moved from working primarily within a white literary tradition to developing new literary elements based on African American history, literature, and life: a reinvention of black English; the technique, dream time; his engagement with the violence imposed on African Americans; and his contemporary rendition of the inner lives of historical characters, including members of his own family.

John Edgar Wideman currently teaches in the English department of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

From Brothers and Keepers

[*Robby's Version*]

At about the time I was beginning to teach Afro-American literature at the University of Pennsylvania, back home on the streets of Pittsburgh Robby was living through the changes in black culture and consciousness I was reading about and discussing with my students in the quiet of the classroom. Not until we began talking together in prison did I learn about that side of his rebelliousness. *Black Fire*[1] was a book I used in my course. It was full of black rage and black dreams and black love. In the sixties when the book was published, young black men were walking the streets with, as one of the *Black Fire* writers put it, dynamite growing out of their skulls. I'd never associated Robby with the fires in Homewood and in cities across the land, never envisioned him bobbing in and out of the flames, a constant danger to himself, to everyone around him because "dynamite was growing out of his skull." His plaited naps hadn't looked like fuses to me. I was teaching, I was trying to discover words to explain what was happening to black people. That my brother might have something to say about these matters never occurred to me. The sad joke was, I never even spoke to Robby. Never knew until years later that he was the one who could have told me much of what I needed to hear.

It was a crazy summer. The summer of '68. We fought the cops in the streets. I mean sure nuff punch-out fighting like in them Wild West movies and do. Shit. Everybody in Homewood up on Homewood Avenue duking with the cops. Even the little weeny kids was there, standing back throwing rocks. We fought that whole summer. Cop cars all over the place and they'd come jumping out with night sticks and fists balled up. They wore leather jackets and gloves and sometimes they be wearing them football helmets so you couldn't go upside they heads without hurting your hand. We was rolling. Steady fighting. All you need to be doing was walking down the avenue and here they come. Screeching the brakes. Pull up behind you and three or four cops come busting out the squad car ready to rumble. Me and some the fellas just minding our business walking down Homewood and this squad car pulls up. Hey, you. Hold it. Stop where you are, like he's talking to some silly kids or something. All up in my face. What you doing here, like I ain't got no right to be on Homewood Avenue, and I been walking on Homewood Avenue all my life an ain't no jive police gon get on my case just cause I'm walking down the avenue. Fuck you, pig. Ain't none your goddamn business, pig. Well, you know it's on then. Cop come running at Henry and Henry ducks down on one knee and jacks the motherfucker up. Throw him clean through that big window of Murphy's five-and-dime. You know where I mean. Where Murphy's used to be. Had that cop snatched up in the air and through that window before he knew what hit him. Then it's on for sure. We rolling right there in the middle of Homewood Avenue.

That's the way it was. Seem like we was fighting cops every day. Funny thing was, it was just fighting. Wasn't no shooting or nothing like that. Somebody musta put word out from Downtown. You can whip the niggers' heads but don't be shooting none of em. Yeah. Cause the cops would get out there and fight but they never used no guns. Might bust your skull with a nightstick but they wasn't gon shoot you. So the word must have been out. Cause you know if it was left to the cops they would have blowed us all away. Somebody said don't shoot and we figured that out so it was stone rock 'n' roll and punch-up time.

Sometimes I think the cops dug it too. You know like it was exercise or something. Two or three carloads roll up and it's time to get it on. They was looking for trouble. You could tell. You didn't have to yell pig or nothing. Just be minding your business and here they come piling out the car ready

1. *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (1968), edited by LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) and Larry Neal.

to go ten rounds. I got tired of fighting cops. And getting whipped on. We had some guys go up on the rooves. Brothers was gon waste the motherfuckers from up there when they go riding down the street but shit, wasn't no sense bringing guns into it long as they wasn't shooting at us. Brothers didn't play in those days. We was organized. Cops jump somebody and in two minutes half of Homewood out there on them cops' ass. We was organized and had our own weapons and shit. Rooftops and them old boarded-up houses was perfect for snipers. Dudes had pistols and rifles and shotguns. You name it. Wouldna believed what the brothers be firing if it come to that but it didn't come to that. Woulda been stone war in the streets. But the shit didn't come down that way. Maybe it woulda been better if it did. Get it all out in the open. Get the killing done wit. But the shit didn't hit the fan that summer. Least not that way.

Lemme see. I woulda been in eleventh grade. One more year of Westinghouse left after the summer of '68. We was the ones started the strike. Right in the halls of good old Westinghouse High School. Like I said, we had this organization. There was lots of organizations and clubs and stuff like that back then but we had us a mean group. Like, if you was serious business you was wit us. Them other people was into a little bit of this and that, but we was in it all the way. We was gon change things or die trying. We was known as bad. Serious business, you know. If something was coming down they always wanted us wit them. See, if we was in it, it was some mean shit. Had to be. Cause we didn't play. What it was called was Together. Our group. We was so bad we was having a meeting once and one the brothers bust in. Hey youall. Did youall hear on the radio Martin Luther King[2] got killed? One the older guys running the meeting look up and say, We don't care nothing bout that ass-kissing nigger, we got important business to take care of. See, we just knew we was into something. Together was where it was at. Didn't nobody dig what King putting down. We wasn't about begging whitey for nothing and we sure wasn't taking no knots without giving a whole bunch back. After the dude come in hollering and breaking up the meeting we figured we better go on out in the street anyway cause we didn't want no bullshit. You know. Niggers running wild and tearing up behind Martin Luther King getting wasted. We was into planning. Into organization. When the shit went down we was gon be ready. No point in just flying around like chickens with they heads cut off. I mean like it ain't news that whitey is offing niggers. So we go out the meeting to cool things down. No sense nobody getting killed on no humbug.

Soon as we got outside you could see the smoke rising off Homewood Avenue. Wasn't that many people out and Homewood burning already, so we didn't really know what to do. Walked down to Hamilton and checked it out around in there and went up past the A & P. Say to anybody we see, Cool it. Cool it, brother. Our time will come. It ain't today, brother. Cool it. But we ain't really got no plan. Didn't know what to do, so me and Henry torched the Fruit Market and went on home.

Yeah. I was a stone mad militant. Didn't know what I was saying half the time and wasn't sure what I wanted, but I was out there screaming and

2. African American clergyman and civil rights leader (1929–1968), advocate of nonviolent resistance.

hollering and waving my arms around and didn't take no shit from nobody. Mommy and them got all upset cause I was in the middle of the school strike. I remember sitting down and arguing with them many a time. All they could talk about was me messing up in school. You know. Get them good grades and keep your mouth shut and mind your own business. Trying to tell me white folks ain't all bad. Asking me where would niggers be if it wasn't for good white folks. They be arguing that mess at me and they wasn't about to hear nothing I had to say. What it all come down to was be a good nigger and the white folks take care of you. Now I really couldn't believe they was saying that. Mommy and Geral[3] got good sense. They ain't nobody's fools. How they talking that mess? Wasn't no point in arguing really, cause I was set in my ways and they sure was set in theirs. It was the white man's world and wasn't no way round it or over it or under it. Got to get down and dance to the tune the man be playing. You know I didn't want to hear nothing like that, so I kept on cutting classes and fucking up and doing my militant thing every chance I got.

I dug being a militant cause I was good. It was something I could do. Rap to people. Whip a righteous message on 'em. People knew my name. They'd listen. And I'd steady take care of business. This was when Rap Brown and Stokely and Bobby Seale and them on TV. I identified with those cats. Malcolm and Eldridge and George Jackson.[4] I read their books. They was Gods. That's who I thought I was when I got up on the stage and rapped at the people. It seemed like things was changing. Like no way they gon turn niggers round this time.

You could feel it everywhere. In the streets. On the corner. Even in jive Westinghouse High people wasn't going for all that old, tired bullshit they be laying on you all the time. We got together a list of demands. Stuff about the lunchroom and a black history course. Stuff like that and getting rid of the principal. We wasn't playing. I mean he was a mean nasty old dude. Hated niggers. No question about that. He wouldn't listen to nobody. Didn't care what was going on. Everybody hated him. We told them people from the school board his ass had to go first thing or we wasn't coming back to school. It was a strike, see. Started in Westinghouse, but by the end of the week it was all over the city. Langley and Perry and Fifth Avenue and Schenley. Sent messengers to all the schools, and by the end of the week all the brothers and sisters on strike. Shut the schools down all cross the city, so they knew we meant business. Knew they had to listen. The whole Board of Education came to Westinghouse and we told the principal to his face he had to go. The nasty old motherfucker was sitting right there and we told the board, He has to go. The man hates us and we hate him and his ass got to go. Said it right to his face and you ought to seen him turning purple and flopping round in his chair. Yeah. We got on his case. And the thing was they gave us everything we asked for. Yes . . . Yes . . . Yes. Everything we had on the list. Sat there just as nice and lied like dogs. Yes. We agree. Yes.

3. Nickname for Geraldine, Robby's first wife.
4. Leaders in the Black Power movement of the late 1960s. Brown (b. 1943), Southern Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) leader. Stokely Carmichael (b. 1941), SNCC leader. Seale (b. 1937), member of the Black Panthers. Malcolm X (1925–1965), powerful political and religious leader, author of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965). Eldridge Cleaver (b. 1935), member of the Black Panthers, author of *Soul on Ice* (1968). Jackson (1941–1971), author of *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (1970).

You'll have a new principal. I couldn't believe it. Didn't even have to curse them out or nothing. Didn't even raise my voice cause it was yes to this and yes to that before the words out my mouth good.

We's so happy we left that room with the Board and ran over to the auditorium and in two minutes it was full and I'm up there screaming. We did it. We did it. People shouting back Right on and Work out and I gets that whole auditorium dancing in they seats. I could talk now. Yes, I could. And we all happy as could be, cause we thought we done something. We got the black history course and got us a new principal and, shit, wasn't nothing we couldn't do, wasn't nothing could stop us that day. Somebody yelled, Party, and I yelled back, Party, and then I told them, Everybody come on up to Westinghouse Park. We gon stone party. Wasn't no plan or nothing. It all just started in my head. Somebody shouted party and I yelled Party and the next thing I know we got this all-night jam going. We got bands and lights and we partied all night long. Ima tell you the truth now. Got more excited bout the party than anything else. Standing up there on the stage I could hear the music and see the niggers dancing and I'm thinking, Yeah. I'm thinking bout getting high and tipping round, checking out the babes and grooving on the sounds. Got me a little reefer and sipping out somebody's jug of sweet wine and the park's full of bloods[5] and I'm in heaven. That's the way it was too. We partied all night long in Westinghouse Park. Cops like to shit, but wasn't nothing they could do. This was 1968. Wasn't nothing they could do but surround the park and sit out there in they cars while we partied. It was something else. Bands and bongos and niggers singing, *Oh bop she bop* everywhere in the park. Cops sat out in them squad cars and Black Marias, but wasn't nothing they could do. We was smoking and drinking and carrying on all night and they just watched us, just sat in the dark and didn't do a thing. We broke into the park building to get us some lectricity for the bands and shit. And get us some light. Broke in the door and took what we wanted, but them cops ain't moved an inch. It was our night and they knew it. Knew they better leave well enough alone. We owned Westinghouse Park that night. Thought we owned Homewood.

In a way the party was the end. School out pretty soon after that and nobody followed through. We come back to school in the fall and they got cops patrolling the halls and locks on every door. You couldn't go in or out the place without passing by a cop. They had our ass then. Turned the school into a prison. Wasn't no way to get in the auditorium. Wasn't no meetings or hanging out in the halls. They broke up all that shit. That's when having police in the schools really got started. When it got to be a regular everyday thing. They fixed us good. Yes, yes, yes, when we was sitting down with the Board, but when we come back to school in September everything got locks and chains on it.

We was just kids. Didn't really know what we wanted. Like I said. The party was the biggest thing to me. I liked to get up and rap. I was a little Stokely, a little Malcolm in my head but I didn't know shit. When I look back I got to admit it was mostly just fun and games. Looking for a way to get over. Nothing in my head. Nothing I could say I really wanted. Nothing

5. Blacks, term of intimacy used by some African Americans.

I wanted to be. So they lied through their teeth. Gave us a party and we didn't know no better, didn't know we had to follow through, didn't know how to keep our foot in they ass.

Well, you know the rest. Nothing changed. Business as usual when we got back in the fall. Hey, hold on. What's this? Locks on the doors. Cops in the halls. Big cops with big guns. Hey, man, what's going down? But it was too late. The party was over and they wasn't about to give up nothing no more. We had a black history class, but wasn't nobody eligible to take it. Had a new principal, but nobody knew him. Nobody could get to him. And he didn't know us. Didn't know what we was about except we was trouble. Troublemakers; and he had something for that. Boot your ass out in a minute. Give your name to the cops and you couldn't get through the door cause everybody had to have an I.D. Yeah. That was a new one. Locks and I.D.'s and cops. Wasn't never our school. They made it worse instead of better. Had our chance, then they made sure we wouldn't have no more chances.

It was fun while it lasted. Some good times, but they was over in a minute and then things got worser and worser. Sixty-eight was when the dope came in real heavy too. I mean you could always get dope but in '68 seems like they flooded Homewood. Easy as buying a quart of milk. Could cop your works in a drugstore. Dope was everywhere that summer. Cats ain't never touched the stuff before got into dope and dope got into them. A bitch, man. It come in like a flood.

Me. I start to using heavy that summer. Just like everybody else I knew. The shit was out there and it was good and cheap, so why not? What else we supposed to be doing? It was part of the fun. The good times. The party.

We lost it over the summer, but I still believe we did something hip for a bunch of kids. The strike was citywide. We shut the schools down. All the black kids was with us. The smart ones. The dumb ones. It was hip to be on strike. To show our asses. We had them honkies scared. Got the whole Board of Education over to Westinghouse High. We lost it, but we had them going, Bruh. And I was in the middle of it. Mommy and them didn't understand. They thought I was just in trouble again. The way I always was. Daddy said one his friends works Downtown told him they had my name down there. Had my name and the rest of the ringleaders'. He said they were watching me. They had my name Downtown and I better be cool. But I wasn't scared. Always in trouble, always doing wrong. But the strike was different. I was proud of that. Proud of getting it started, proud of being one the ringleaders. The mad militant. Didn't know exactly what I was doing, but I was steady doing it.

The week the strike started, think it was Tuesday, could have been Monday but I think it was Tuesday, cause the week before was when some the students went to the principal's office and said the student council or some damn committee or something wanted to talk to him about the lunchroom and he said he'd listen but he was busy till next week, so it could have been Monday, but I think it was Tuesday cause knowing him he'd put it off long as he could. Anyway, Mr. Lindsay sitting in the auditorium. Him and vice-principal Meers and the counselor, Miss Kwalik. They in the second or third row sitting back and the speakers is up on stage behind the mike but

they ain't using it. Just talking to the air really, cause I slipped in one the side doors and I'm peeping what's going on. And ain't nothing going on. Most the time the principal whispering to Miss Kwalik and Mr. Meers. Lindsay got a tablet propped up on his knee and writes something down every now and then but he ain't really listening to the kids on stage. Probably just taking names cause he don't know nobody's name. Taking names and figuring how he's gon fuck over the ones doing the talking. You. You in the blue shirt, Come over here. Don't none them know your name less you always down in the office cause you in trouble or you one the kiss-ass, nicey-nice niggers they keep for flunkies and spies. So he's taking names or whatever, and every once in a while he says something like, Yes. That's enough now. Who's next? Waving the speakers on and off and the committee, or whatever the fuck they calling theyselves, they ain't got no better sense than to jump when he say jump. Half of them so scared they stuttering and shit. I know they glad when he wave them off the stage cause they done probably forgot what they up there for.

Well, I get sick of this jive real quick. Before I know it I'm up on the stage and I'm tapping the mike and can't get it turned on so I goes to shouting. Talking trash loud as I can. Damn this and damn that and Black Power and I'm somebody. Tell em ain't no masters and slaves no more and we want freedom and we want it now. I'm stone preaching. I'm chirping. Get on the teachers, get on the principal and everybody else I can think of. Called em zookeepers. Said they ran a zoo and wagged my finger at the chief zookeeper and his buddies sitting down there in the auditorium. Told the kids on the stage to go and get the students. You go here. You go there. Like I been giving orders all my life. Cleared the stage in a minute. Them chairs scraped and kids run off and it's just me up there all by my ownself. I runs out of breath. I'm shaking, but I'm not scared. Then it gets real quiet. Mr. Lindsay stands up. He's purple and shaking worse than me. Got his finger stabbing at me now. Shoe's on the other foot now. Up there all by myself now and he's doing the talking.

Are you finished? I hope you're finished cause your ass is grass. Come down from there this instant. You've gone too far this time, Wideman. Get down from there. I want you in my office immediately.

They's all three up now, Mr. Lindsay and Miss Kwalik and Meers, up and staring up at me like I'm stone crazy. Like I just pulled out my dick and peed on the stage or something. Like they don't believe it. And to tell the truth I don't hardly believe it myself. One minute I'm watching them kids making fools of theyselves, next minute I'm badmouthing everything about the school and giving orders and telling Mr. Lindsay to his face he ain't worth shit. Now the whiteys is up and staring at me like I'm a disease, like I'm Bad Breath or Okey Doke the damn fool and I'm looking round and it's just me up there. Don't know if the other kids is gone for the students like I told them or just run away cause they scared.

Ain't many times in life I felt so lonely. I'm thinking bout home. What they gon say when Mr. Lindsay calls and tells them he kicked my ass out for good. Cause I had talked myself in a real deep hole. Like, Burn, baby burn. We was gon run the school our way or burn the motherfucker down. Be our school or wasn't gon be no school. Yeah, I was yelling stuff like that and I was remembering it all. Cause it was real quiet in there. Could of heard a pin drop in the balcony. Remembering everything I said and then starting to figure how I was gon talk myself out this one. Steady scheming and just about ready to cop a plea. I's sorry boss. Didn't mean it, Boss. I was just kidding. Making a joke. Ha. Ha. I loves this school and loves you Mr. Lindsay. My head's spinning and I'm moving away from the mike but just at that very minute I hears the kids busting into the balcony. It's my people. It's sure nuff them. They bust into the balcony and I ain't by myself no more. I'm hollering again and shaking a power fist and I tells Mr. Lindsay:

You get out. You leave.

I'm king again. He don't say a word. Just splits with his flunkies. The mike starts working and that's when the strike begins.

Your brother was out there in the middle of it. I was good, too. Lot of the time I be thinking bout the party afterward, my heart skipping forward to the party, but I was willing to work. Be out front. Take the weight. Had the whole city watching us, Bruh.

1984

Damballah[1]

Orion[2] let the dead, gray cloth slide down his legs and stepped into the river. He picked his way over slippery stones till he stood calf deep. Dropping to one knee he splashed his groin, then scooped river to his chest, both hands scrubbing with quick, kneading spirals. When he stood again, he stared at the distant gray clouds. A hint of rain in the chill morning air, a faint, clean presence rising from the far side of the hills. The promise of rain coming to him as all things seemed to come these past few months, not through eyes or ears or nose but entering his black skin as if each pore had learned to feel and speak.

He watched the clear water race and ripple and pucker. Where the sun cut through the pine trees and slanted into the water he could see the bottom, see black stones, speckled stones, shining stones whose light came

1. In *The Homewood Trilogy* (1985), of which *Damballah* is a part, Wideman quotes from Maya Deren's *Divine Horsemen: The Voodoo Gods of Haiti*:

Damballah Wedo is the ancient, the venerable father; so ancient, so venerable, as of a world before the troubles began; and his children would keep him so; image of the benevolent, paternal innocence, the great father of whom one asks nothing save his blessing. . . . There is almost no precise communication with him, as if his wisdom were of such major cosmic scope and of such grand innocence that it could not perceive the minor anxieties of his human progeny, nor be transmuted to the petty precision of human speech.

Yet it is this very detachment which comforts, and which is evidence, once more, of some original and primal vigor that has somehow remained inaccessible to whatever history, whatever immediacy might diminish it. Damballah's very presence, like the simple, even absent-minded caress of a father's hand, brings peace. . . . Damballah is himself unchanged by life, and so is at once the ancient past and the assurance of the future. . . .

Associated with Damballah as members of the Sky Pantheon, are Badessy, the wind, Sobo and Agarou Tonerre, the thunder. . . . They seem to belong to another period of history. Yet precisely because these divinities are, to a certain extent, vestigial, they give, like Damballah's detachment, a sense of historical extension, of the ancient origin of the race. To invoke them today is to stretch one's hand back to that time and to gather up all history into a solid, contemporary ground beneath one's feet.

One song invoking Damballah requests that he "Gather up the Family."

2. Hunter of Greek myth. Drunk, he raped Merope, to whom he was betrothed. Her father blinded him, but his vision was restored by the sun's rays. Upon his death, Artemis turned him into