Handout 1.8: “The Walking Boy”

The following is excerpted from an essay published on The American Conservative website by writer and humanities professor Alan Jacobs:

All I can say in my defense is that I never hurled a stone at him, or shouted abuse. But I stood by, many a time, as others did those things, and I neither walked away nor averted my eyes . . . . I watched it all, gripping a rock in my hand as though I were preparing to use it—so that no one would turn on me with anger or contempt — and I always stood a little behind them so they couldn’t see that I wasn’t throwing anything. I was smaller and younger than the rest of them, and they were smaller and younger than him. In my memory he seems almost a full-grown man; I suppose he was eleven or twelve.

We called him Nigger* Jeff. I have never doubted that Jeff was indeed his name, though as I write this account I find myself asking, for the first time, how we could have known: I never heard any of the boys speak to him except in cries of hatred, and I never knew anyone else who knew him. It occurs to me now that, if his name was Jeff, there had to have been at least a brief moment of human contact and exchange—perhaps not even involving Jeff, perhaps one of the boys’ mothers talked to Jeff’s mother. But we grasp what’s available for support or stability. It’s bad to call a boy Nigger Jeff, but worse still to call him just Nigger. A name counts for something.

Arkadelphia Road is a major artery on the west side of Birmingham, Alabama, becoming Highway 78 for a while before 78 veers off to the northwest and heads for Memphis, but for me it was simply a liminal space, a mighty boundary. My house on 11th Court West sat three blocks off Arkadelphia, and when I visited Snappy’s Service Station at the corner to buy soft drinks and candy, I could gaze across the four lanes of charging traffic into another world, a world inhabited solely by black people. Often I passed in an automobile through that world, but my feet had never touched its ground, and I knew no one who lived there . . . . [T]hose dark strangers could sometimes be seen hanging clothes on the clotheslines of our neighborhood, or taking the clothes in to iron them . . . . But really, neither side passed to the other: when they came to labor for us they always left something essential behind; maybe everything essential. I stood sometimes on the hot pavement of the gas station, straddling my bike, and while I drank my coke I would look across the blaring four-lane gulf. Then I would drain the bottle and ride back towards home.

Just past my house, the pavement ended, and a red dirt path, big enough for a single car, extended into fields of high grass that, when my father was a boy, were cotton

* We have chosen to include this word in order to honestly communicate the harshness of the bigoted language. We recommend that teachers review “Discussing Sensitive Topics in the Classroom” on page X before using this document in class.
fields. When I was very young a tiny cinder-block shack a quarter-mile down the path housed a radio station; I remember looking through my bedroom window as the tall antenna was pulled down, frightening the few cows in the field. Soon the cows were gone too, and the grasses grew higher. A hundred yards farther along stood the remains of an old greenhouse, with broken glass and a scattering of plastic pots. And a little further down still, on the other side of the path, stood a ramshackle old house. Jeff and his family lived there. There were no other houses, no other people.

But Jeff’s house I never cared to pass, or even to approach. I don’t know whether he lived with both parents or one, though I seem to remember references to his mother, who probably worked in some white lady’s home. If he had any siblings I never saw them. All I knew was that sometimes, especially in the hot summer days, he would set off along the red dirt path, in his old dungarees and his bare feet, towards our neighborhood.

As I continue to recall these events, I am more and more troubled by my ignorance. Did Jeff go to school? If so, it would have had to be at the all-black school — on the other side of Arkadelphia, of course, up the hill towards Center Street. . . . But I never saw Jeff walking to school. Did his family have a car? I never saw one, and I feel sure that I would have noticed if they had such transportation. . . .

But that’s just one question among many. If they didn’t have a car, when and where and how did they get their groceries? Where did his mother, or his mother and father work, and how did they get there? Did they receive mail? Perhaps they always headed in the other direction, west towards Bush Boulevard: a longer walk, but less likely to find conflict or even attention. I have no idea how these people lived, how they sustained themselves. I must have missed a great deal; there must have been many events to which I was oblivious, as children of course can be — and yet my obliviousness bothers me, because there are some things I remember so well. . . .

Especially I remember Jeff moving at his habitual level pace towards our world, a small world so comfortable to us but surely like some wall of flame to him. Of course we knew where he was going: not to us but through us, through our neighborhood to the one on the other side of Arkadelphia, where there must have been friends glad to see him and houses where he was welcome. But first there were the three blocks of our territory. And when we saw him coming we picked up our rocks.

When he caught sight of us, Jeff would stoop and collect a handful of good throwing-size stones for his own use. In another part of Birmingham, at this very time, Martin Luther King’s followers were practicing nonviolent resistance to the water cannons and police dogs of Bull Connor, but Jeff was no pacifist. Yet he never initiated conflict: he had somewhere to get to, and all he wanted was the quickest and most uneventful passage possible. If we threw our rocks he returned fire, and since he was bigger and stronger than any of us, that was something to be reckoned with. So often my friends
inadvertently and unwittingly imitated me by simply holding their missiles in their hands; they contented themselves with curses and mockery. And Jeff, then, would simply walk on down the middle of the otherwise quiet little street, slowly and steadily. He never ran, and would only vary his even pace when he had to stop to launch a rock or two—though sometimes he had to walk backwards for a while to be sure we didn’t start pelting him when his head was turned.

We could have surrounded him, of course, but we were too cowardly for that. We were pretty sure that, as long as we huddled in a small group, he wouldn’t attack; but if we separated he might go for one of us. So we gathered like a Greek chorus to curse, and Jeff kept walking. Eventually his solitary figure grew smaller, and our throats grew tired of launching insults. We dropped our rocks and returned to our children’s games.

Sometimes I would be playing alone in my yard, and would look up to see Jeff walking by. My heart would then buck in my chest, but he never turned his head to acknowledge my presence. At the time I wondered if he knew that I never threw rocks at him, that I didn’t curse him—for, if my memory is not appeasing my conscience, I avoided that crime as well. But now I realize that he neither knew nor cared about the individual members of our cruel impromptu assembly: with rocks in our hands we were just mobile, noisy impediments to his enjoyment of some of the blessings of life—friendship, comfort, safety—but when unarmed and solitary we posed no threat and therefore, for Jeff, lacked significant substance. He kept his eyes on that day’s small but valued prize, and kept on walking.

Why didn’t I throw rocks at him? Why didn’t I curse him? Well, obviously, because I felt sorry for him. But not sorry enough to walk away, or to turn my back on the scene; and not nearly sorry enough to stay a friend’s hand or demand his silence. I was young, and small, and timid. I saw one valid option: to stand as a member of the chorus, grasping the rock that was the badge of our common identity. There’s no point now in trying to distinguish myself from the others. But I can't help it.

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