

A NOVEL

PYM

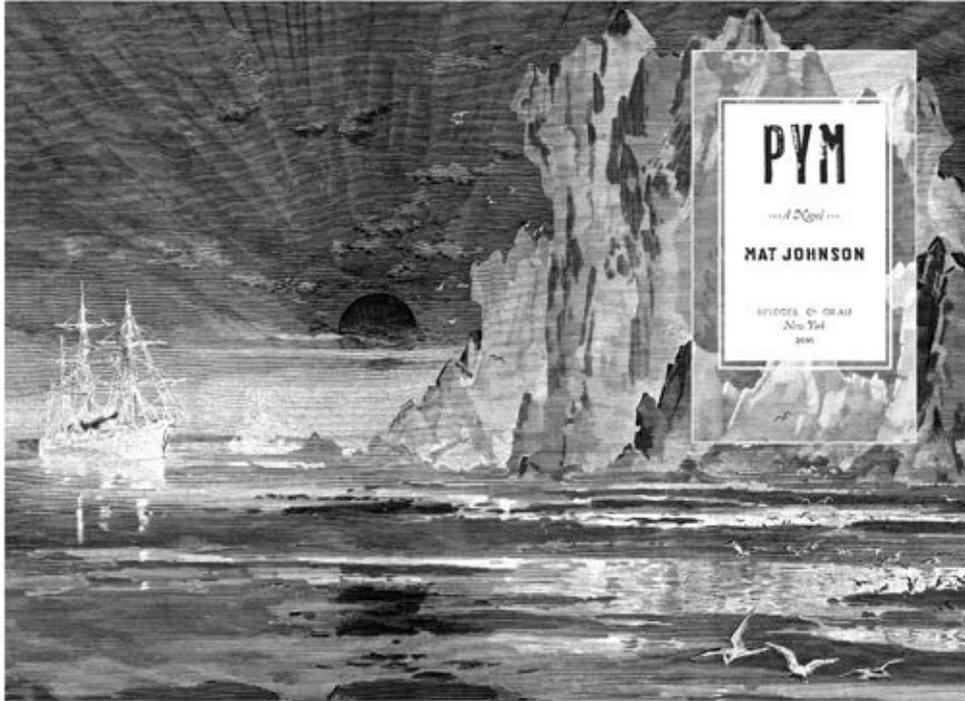
**“Blisteringly
funny.”**

—LAURA MILLER, *Salon*

**“Hilarious
and provocative.”**

—JONATHAN LETHEM,
Rolling Stone

**MAT
JOHNSON**





Pym is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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PREFACE

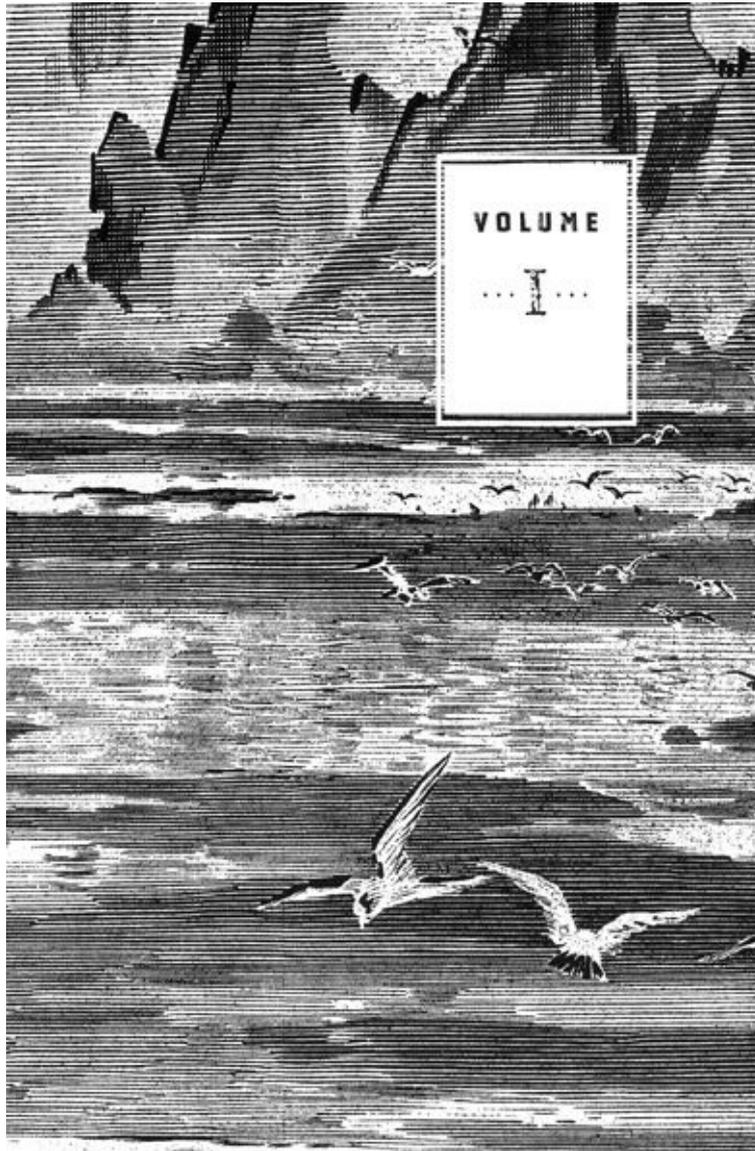
UPON my return to the United States a few months ago, after the extraordinary series of adventures in the South Seas and elsewhere, which you can read about on the pages that follow, I found myself in the company of several gentlemen in Richmond, Va., who were deeply interested in the regions I had visited, and who were constantly urging it upon me, as a duty, to give my narrative to the public. Yet here our intentions diverge (at crossroads travelers may meet, then move on in different, at times opposing directions). For sociological and historical purposes they wanted me to tell my story, to enlighten them about my experience. I had several reasons, however, for declining this request, some of which concerned me alone, others less so. One issue which gave me pause was that, since I took no pictures or recordings of consequence and barely cracked my laptop during the greater portion of the time in question, I might not be able to write solely from memory an account so airtight and accurate as to leave no doubt of its truth. Another reason was that the incidents to be retold were admittedly so outrageous that, without having proof (except a single corpse who was in life a drunken, two-hundred-year-old pickle), I could only hope for the trust of my audience, and specifically those of my past associates who have had reason, over the years, to have faith in my sincerity. I knew the chances were that the public at large would regard what I will now attempt to tell as little more than the rant of a paranoid. Adding to this, I must admit an insecurity in my own abilities as a writer, that this was one of the principal causes that prevented me from complying with the suggestion of my advisers sooner.

Among those brothers outside of Virginia who expressed the greatest interest in my story, or really the part which related to my experiences in the Antarctic region, was Mr. Johnson, at the time an assistant professor of language and literature at Bard College, a historically white institution, in the town of Annandale, along the Hudson River. He strongly advised me (to the point of discomfort) to prepare at once a full record of what happened, and trust to the shrewdness and common sense of the folks to figure it out. To place it in nonthreatening story form for those who, even if they don't believe my story, would be willing to still take a bite and try to swallow it nonetheless. It was also Mr. Johnson's decision to present these revelations under the guise of fiction, and with this strategy I agree. For one, doing so provides a level of synchronicity with the seminal text that began my journey. Also, it keeps me from being sued by the ___ Cola corporation, and not being sued is always a good thing. And there are more ephemeral motivations as well. In this age when reality is built on big lies, what better place for truth than fiction?

This exposé being made, it will be obvious to those who would compare the few works of Mr. Johnson where his brief assistance in this narrative begins and ends. Regardless, it should be emphasized that I have approved the following manuscript

and in thought, intent, and theory I claim it as my own.

C. JAYNES. *Philadelphia, January 19, 2009*



CHAPTER I

ALWAYS thought if I didn't get tenure I would shoot myself or strap a bomb to my chest and walk into the faculty cafeteria, but when it happened I just got bourbon drunk and cried a lot and rolled into a ball on my office floor. A couple days of this and I couldn't take it so I ended classes a week early and checked into the Akwaaba Bed and Breakfast in Harlem to be among my own race and party away the pain. But mostly I just found myself back in that same ball some more, still on the floor, just at a more historically resonant address. My buddy Garth Frierson, he'd been laid off about six months before, and was nice enough to drive all the way from Detroit to help a childhood friend. This help mostly consisted of him sitting his bus driver ass on my rented bed, busting on me until I had enough shame to get off my own duff and try to make something of myself again.

By then the term was over, graduation done, campus vacant. I didn't want to see anybody. The only things worse than the ones who were happy about my dismissal were the ones that weren't. The sympathy, the condolences. It was all so white. I was the only black male professor on campus. Professor of African American Literature. Professional Negro. Over the years since my original hire I pushed away from that and insisted on teaching American literature in general, following a path toward my passion, toward Edgar Allan Poe. Specifically, I offered the course "Dancing with the Darkies: Whiteness in the Literary Mind" twice a year, regardless of enrollment. In regard to the number of students who chose to attend the seminar, I must say in my defense that the greatest ideas are often presented to empty chairs. However, a different theory on proper class size was cited in my denial letter from the president, and given as a reason to overturn the faculty's approval.

Curing America's racial pathology couldn't be done with good intentions or presidential elections. Like all diseases, it had to be analyzed at a microscopic level. What I discovered during my studies in Poe's and other early Americans' texts was the intellectual source of racial Whiteness. Here, in these pages, was the very fossil record of how this odd and illogical sickness formed. Here was the twisted mythic underpinnings of modern racial thought that could never before be dismantled because we were standing on them. You don't cure an illness by ignoring it or just fighting the symptoms. A Kleenex has never eradicated a cold. I was doing essential work, work affecting domestic policy, foreign policy, the entire social fabric of the most powerful nation of the world. Work that related directly to the way we lived our daily lives and perceived reality itself. Who cared if a bunch of overprivileged nineteen-year-olds with questionable hygiene could be bothered to rise for the 8 A.M. class? Who cared if I chose to not waste even

more precious research time attending the toothless Diversity Committee?

“Just get your books, dog. And get out of there. Pack up your place, focus on what you can do. You want, you can come back with me to Detroit. It’s cheap, I got a big crib. Ain’t no jobs, but still.” Garth and I drove up the Taconic in the rain. I was still drunk, and the wet road was like lines on a snake’s back and my stomach was going to spill. Even drunk, I knew any escape plan that involved going to Detroit, Michigan, was a harbinger of doom. Garth Frierson was my boy, from when we were boys, from when I lived in a basement apartment in Philly and he lived over the laundromat next door. Garth didn’t even ask how many books I had, but he must have suspected.

Because I had books. I had books like a lit professor has books. And then I had more books, finer books. First editions. Rare prints. Copies signed by hands long dead. Angela walked out on me a long time ago and my chance of children walked with her, but I had multiplied in my own way. I’d had shelves built in my office for these books, shelves ten feet tall and completely lining the drywall.

The campus was dead. A vacant compound hidden from the road by darkness and hulking pines. The gravel parking lot was empty, but I made Garth park in the spot that said PRESIDENT—VIOLATORS WILL BE TOWED ON PRINCIPLE. When you get denied tenure at a college like this—intimate, good but not great—your career is over. A decade of job preparation, and no one else will hire you. If you haven’t published enough, people assume tenure denial means you never will. If you have published and were still denied, people assume you’re an asshole. Nobody wants to give a job for life to an asshole. And they didn’t have to in this economy. Outside of a miracle, after denial I would be lucky to scrounge up adjunct teaching at a community college somewhere cold, barren, and far from the ocean. A life of little health insurance, bill collector calls, and classrooms with metal detectors, all compliments of this college president, Mr. Bowtie. The least I could do was shit in his space for an hour.

We trudged. The building looked like an old church that had lost its faith, every step up the stairs a sacrilege. Garth huffed, but followed. I’d chosen an office in the back of the top floor to dissuade students, but my lectures had done a better job of this. My office was a narrow A-framed cathedral with a matching window. A shrine to the books that lined the walls and my own solitude.

“Bro, I’m not going to lie to you. I got a lot of books in here,” I said, letting him in first.

“You do?” Garth asked me. Because I didn’t.

It was empty. I should have been greeted with the hundreds of colored spines of literary loves, but there was nothing. My books were gone. My office had been cleared out. Everything was gone: my pictures, my lamp, my Persian rug, everything not school property or nailed down, gone. A chasm of vacant whitewashed bookshelves opened up before me.

I was breathless. Garth was out of breath, but for him, it was just all the stairs.

“They took my shit, man. They took my shit,” I kept repeating. I walked over to the desk and pulled out all the drawers. There were some chewed yellow pencils left, and a few folded Post-its and bent paper clips, but that’s not what I was looking for. I kept searching, desperate, sliding pencils and papers around, looking for more.

“Damn, dog. You didn’t have no porn in there, did you?” Garth already had his Little Debbie out and was chewing on it like it was his reward for making it up three floors of nineteenth-century stairs.

“Just a picture,” I told him.

“A picture of what?”

“Angela,” I admitted.

“Worse,” Garth said, head wagging.

I slammed the drawer shut, and it was loud. And I liked that sound, a moment of violence, but this time coming from me. So then I started banging on the empty shelves with my fists, and they vibrated. You could hear the echo in the room, then bouncing off into the empty building beyond us until Garth closed the door.

“That’s wrong, man. Disrespectful. Forget them, job’s over. That’s life, what you going to do?”

I was going to show up at the president’s house and kick his ass, it occurred to me. This act suddenly seemed like the only thing worth running away to Detroit for. I didn’t tell Garth this, because he would have stopped me. He was big enough to fill up the door. He was even bigger since he’d been laid off. I remembered when this man was skinny, ran track. Ran it poorly, but still. It was depressing looking at every extra pound on him, each a reminder that we were both moving swiftly into decline with little else as accomplishment.

“Wait in the car, man. I just have to check my mail,” I told him. Garth did it. I’m a bad liar, but he was tired and it was really cold outside, and brothers don’t like the cold.* It was late spring, but it had been raining for a week and upstate New York was frigid in a way which was more gothic and empiric than the Philly chill we’d grown up with.

“You drunk. I’m tired as all hell. The sooner you get your ass out of here, the sooner you get to get your ass out of here,” Garth offered, but he left. So then I walked over to the president’s house to punch him and maybe kick him a few times too.

In my head, I was getting “gangsta,” which I’ve always felt showed greater intent than getting “gangster” in that it expresses a willful unlawfulness even upon its own linguistic representation. I was going to show him how we do where I’m from, go straight Philly on him, and I knew all about that because, although I had never actually punched someone in the face before, as a child I myself had been on the receiving end of that act several times and was a quick study.

The president's house was at the other end of the campus, but it was a small liberal arts campus. An empty space, dorms and buildings deserted, solar streetlamps popping on and off for just me. While I was walking, stoking my anger, thinking of all the work I'd done and all that security I was now being denied, I came to the administration building, and I saw that there was a light on. Downstairs, in the back, in the president's office. No one just left interior lights on, the environmental footprint too massive, the cost too high, and with every attack the prices went even higher. So he was in there. The outside door opened, and I knew he was in there.

And then there was this overwhelming emotion. It was not rage or anger. It was something even more illicit, unwanted. It was hope. Here we were, two men alone. Society vacated, and now just two men and a problem, one that somehow in my stupor seemed workable. There was a guy down the hall, a Romanticist, who had been denied tenure ten years ago. Approved by the faculty committee, just as I was, only to be shot down by the same president in the same manner. And he had, in his grief, approached the all-powerful boss man, and he had repented all of his sins, real and imagined, and was granted a permanent teaching gig. It made sense too, for as Frederick Douglass's narrative tells us, it is more valuable to a master to have a morally broken slave than to have a confident one. That Romanticist's story had always seemed humiliating to me before this moment, but suddenly it became inspirational. At the president's door, I paused, prepared myself for what could be simply the final test before I overcame my troubles. I took a deep breath to prepare for a performance of dignified groveling. Then I heard the music coming from inside.

What I saw scared me. Took me out of my confidence, my momentum. What do you make of a Jew sitting in the dark listening to Wagner in this day and age? I could think of no more call to the end of the world than the one I was looking at. Random violence on the news had become background noise to me at that point, but this scene genuinely scared my ass. Still in his bow tie and tweed jacket at this time of night, it was disgusting. He hit his keyboard quickly, and suddenly the sound became Mahler, but I knew, I knew what I'd heard. As the sound cleansed the room, the bald man just looked at me, drink in hand. As drunk as I was, I could still smell the sweet singe of alcohol hanging in the air.

"My shit!" it came out. It lacked the eloquence of a planned rebuttal, but he understood.

"Packed by movers, delivered to your listed residence. A thank-you, really, for your service. Thank you." He said the last bit as if I should be saying this to him, but still it robbed me of a bit of my momentum. I had been surviving on righteous indignation and self-pity for weeks, I realized once the supply seemed threatened. But then I remembered I'd been canned and my fuel line kicked in once more.

"Is it because I refused to be on the Diversity Committee?" I demanded. I was loud, the halls were empty. The echo enhanced my argument.

“Well, that certainly would have ...,” he began, but seeing that I was hearing every word, already planning my deposition for my discrimination lawsuit, he stopped himself. “Your file was examined as a whole. You were hired to teach African American literature. Not just American literature. You fought that. Simple.”

“So you want the black guy to just teach black books to the white kids.”

“We have a large literature faculty, they can handle the majority of literature. You were retained to purvey the minority perspective. I see nothing wrong with that.” He shrugged, poured a second drink in a second glass and pushed it forward to me with the base of the bottle.

“You have academics going off the farm all the time. Yeats scholars who end up following their way to Proust. You have a film professor who was hired as a German linguist.”

“A Guggenheim, a Fulbright, and a Rhodes scholar. Mr. Jaynes, you ... you have accomplished no such honor or distinction. I do not mean that as an insult, just an unfortunate reality.”

A big part of me hurt a lot hearing this said aloud, in a big way. I blushed, and as pale as I was I blushed possibly as no black man had done before me. Staring at him, I settled myself staring at his bastard tie. Look at it. That bow tie was hypnotizing. Usually men of power have useless fabric tied around their necks, but his was smaller, and tied at a different angle. No big phallic thing for this guy. No, it was even worse, it was “Look at me, I have an itty-bitty micro-phallic tie around my neck, and yet I still have all this power over you.”

“Please, listen to me,” I pleaded. “My work, it’s about finding the answer to why we have failed to truly become a postracial society. It’s about finding the cure! A thousand Baldwin and Ellison essays can’t do this, you have to go to the source, that’s why I started focusing on Poe. If we can identify how the pathology of Whiteness was constructed, then we can learn how to dismantle it. The work I am doing, it’s just books, sure, but it’s important, essential research. You’re going to fire me for refusing to sit on the campus Diversity Committee?”

“You could have compensated for your lack of national presence by embracing our role locally, but alas,” he told me and looked away. “Everyone has a role to play.”

I put my hand out to him, and before he could meet my palm with his own I reached higher and grabbed the tie on his neck. It was a clip-on and came off easily, barely shook him when I yanked it off in my fist. I was right about it being his power source. He was totally quiet after it was taken from him. I didn’t hear a peep behind me as I ran from the confrontation.

. . .

When I got to the car, I told Garth that my academic career was probably over, but since I’d been saying the same thing for a couple days he just tuned me out as he tuned in the radio.

“Take me to this place, before we go. It was done at a park about two miles from your house. I already Googled it,” he said, reaching across me to get into the glove compartment. Garth pulled out this print of a painting, all scrolled up, and dropped it in my lap. I unraveled it and saw a syrupy sweet landscape of the Catskills, the kind of vista painted on how-to shows in a half hour. The kind of painting Garth adored, done by that artist he idolized.

“It’s called *Stock of the Woods*,” he said. “It’s a Thomas Karvel Hudson Valley School Edition. A tribute to the painters they used to have here. I have an original signed print. That’s part of my nest egg, and you’re there laughing at it. Look at it. Really look at it, you need to. Don’t it make you all peaceful just looking into that world?”

“Looks like the view up a Care Bear’s ass.”

“I got stress!” Garth turned and started yelling at me, his tree air fresheners dancing over the dashboard from the wind. “I got no type of job. I got no savings. The whole world’s hell. The world is pollution and terrorism and warming and whatever, I don’t know, whatever gets dropped next. I drive a bus! Or I used to. I’m a thirty-eight-year-old man who drives a bus and I ain’t even got that now. I got stress!” Garth pushed past me to get another Little Debbie snack cake from the box beneath my legs, and calmed down eating it.

“My man, you’re like a home experiment in type 2 diabetes. Your picture, it’s real nice, okay? And I’ll take you wherever. But you need to calm the hell down,” I told him, and he did. So we took to the road the last few miles to my home.

He was stressed. I understood. I understood even before we got to my house and saw all my books sitting there, on the front porch. Not in boxes, just stacked there. Hundreds of them. My books, my treasure. Sitting in the rain, bloated with a week’s worth of water and dirt and mold. Pages bursting open like they were screaming. Some lug nut from the physical plant had just left them there and driven off again. Tens of thousands of dollars, years of collecting. Destroyed. Irreplaceable. Gifts, inscriptions, ruined. I picked one up, threw it down, started screaming. Jumping. When I finished, Garth held out one of his Little Debbie cakes to me, cellophane already pulled back for convenience. Poking closer and closer to my face till I took it from him.

“Come on, take a bite of the white girl. It will make you feel good.”

“I’m going back to campus. I’m going back to campus and I’m going to get that bastard.”

“Damn dog. You already got his bow tie.”

. . .

I went to the bar. Garth was tired from driving and so stayed back. On the way I made a call to my lawyer, and one hopefully to my antiquarian as well. The latter told me he had something special, something signed, first edition, and I caught myself almost smiling in response. Life would move on, I tried to remind myself. Presumably, it would take me with it.

There was one bar in town and there was a black guy sitting in it, and this I

took as a divine miracle, maybe even another sign of my impending turn of fortune. It was a town of only 1,163, just eight miles north of the campus. Aside from a handful of students during term, there were no black people in the area. In the summer tourism months, on occasion you could spot a black woman with her white partner passing through, but often these visitors were particularly disinclined to coethnic bonding. This brother wasn't, though. When I walked in he looked up and smiled at me like he knew me and I gave him the nigga-nod and he hit me right back so I knew we were cool. I sat down next to him.

"Mosaic Johnson. Hip-Hop Theorist." Of course he was an academic. Of course I was. There was no other reason for two obviously educated black men to be there. And it was obvious, even of him, dressed as he was in his carefully selected baggy jeans, hat to the side, and other matching oversize pop culture juvenilia. But he was a professor of music, so allowances could be made for the styling.

"Chris Jaynes. Americanist." And our fists bumped in blackademic bliss. Mr. Johnson was a younger man than I, in both years and manner. Dressed like he was straight out of Compton, but clearly straight out of a postdoc instead. Just arrived in town to start teaching the following term, coming in the summer because his lease in Chicago was up and this was his future. Eager. Earnest. Through drunken eyes, I looked at Mosaic Johnson and I saw myself there. I saw myself showing up in this town, seeing it as foreign territory I was hopeful to invade. Twenty-one years of academic training culminating in permanent entrenchment on the business side of the classroom. Theory finally turned into practice, a practice of yapping about theory. Just like me. I wept for this bastard.

"Don't join the Diversity Committee," I told him when the third round hit. We'd been talking well, for a minute, mostly me bemoaning the history of Dutch slavery in the area, but he hung with me. A squat dude whose only thinness was his mustache, Mosaic seemed to roll a bit away from me when I said this, but I leaned closer because he needed to hear it.

"These historically white institutions, they get that one black professor, they put him or her on something they call the 'Diversity Committee.' Don't let them put you there. It's a slave hold. They'll fight you: they'll really want you on the Diversity Committee because if there aren't any minorities on the committee, the committee isn't diverse."

"Man, in my work, I deal with the ghetto. The real shit, you know what I'm saying? Reality," he told me, motioning around the room with a silver-ringed hand as if our present setting was mere computer simulation. "I'm not trying to run from the folks. I want to be on that committee. I'm a fighter. I want to be on that committee, to bring the fight here." The hand in the air formed into a fist. I looked around the room, at the twenty or so white liberals taking him in on the sly. They loved it. They loved that fist. If I was still here tomorrow, they would come up to me and ask why I never raised the black power fist like the new guy. Undaunted, I continued.

“No, you don’t, and I’ll tell you why. The Diversity Committee has one primary purpose: so that the school can say it has a diversity committee. They need that for when students get upset about race issues or general ethnic stuff. It allows the faculty and administration to point to it and go, ‘Everything’s going to be okay, we have formed a committee.’ People find that very relaxing. It’s sort of like, if you had a fire, and instead of putting it out, you formed a fire committee. But none of the ideas that come out of all that committeeing will ever be implemented, see? Nothing the committee has suggested in thirty years has ever been funded. It’s a gerbil wheel, meant to ‘Keep this nigger boy running.’ ”

“Ellison.” He smiled. I knew a black author reference would get to him. “Now that cat was straight hip-hop,” he continued. I would have corrected the hip to be, but what’s a difference of black American musical traditions among kin?

“Chris Jaynes. You know, I’ve read some of your early work, your Ellison theory. That had the beat. Why don’t you bring it like that no more?” he asked me, and I glowed at this. Old musicians asked to play their classic songs, they must get this feeling. You’re tired of it, sure, but at least somebody cares. I thanked him, told him how I’ve developed, how I’ve been drawn toward nineteenth-century fiction, Edgar Allan Poe.

As I’m getting up to hit the john, right as I’m turned away, Mosaic Johnson says, “Man, nobody cares about the Poe thing.” And I laughed back at him and told him thanks for getting my pain and in moments I was off to pissing.

In the can, standing in front of the urinal, I was still for the moment. It felt like it was the first time I was truly still since this whole disaster had started. Even when I was pulled into a ball on the floor, I was rocking and reeling internally. But this bathroom, this empty bathroom, it was like a temple. Utterly serene. And within that silence, clarity came to me. I started thinking about my past, and my new friend. And I started to think about everything he had said, and all of his responses. And I was surprised to find a previously undetected negative tone there. Not in his words, but in the little performances in his demeanor. His last statement being the irrefutable proof of this.

“You’re not in the music department are you?” I said to him on my return. I didn’t even sit down. I was standing. I was shaking. My voice was cracking a little bit too, which was beyond my control.

“No, I am not. My instrument is the QWERTY keyboard,” he admitted. Took the last swig from his Hennessy, and then swiveled to face me.

“You’re here to replace me, aren’t you? You’re here to take my job. To take my office. That’s why you’re in this bar tonight, isn’t it?”

“Man, just relax. Ain’t nothing personal. Yes, I’m the new hire. Yes, it was your tenure line. I never said I was a music prof. I said I was a hip-hop theorist, okay? That’s my school of literary criticism, right? I’m here to bring the beat to the text, that’s it. It’s all good. And hell yes I will represent myself as the strong black man I am on this campus.”

“Right. You’re here to be the Diversity Committee.”

“Look, cuz, unlike you, clearly, I believe in trying to change things. Fighting against racism where I see it. I don’t back down, and I don’t apologize for that either. Hell yeah, I’m down for the damn committee. I’m down for the fight, know what I’m saying?” A Ph.D. can’t manage a lot of menace, but we are good at reading between the lines. I knew exactly what he meant, no footnotes needed. Still, I stepped in closer.

“You know what I think? I think that when you fight the same battles, with the same tactics, you don’t get any further. That unless you address the roots of the problem, it will continue to grow.”

This was fairly eloquent for me. Given that it was off the cuff. No peer review or rewrites. And I was proud that I had thought it there and not later via *l’esprit de l’escalier*. It was the arrogance brought on by this success that made me pause two steps into my exit, turn, and continue.

“And the white folks here know that. And they like it that way. You’re hired to be the angry black guy, get it? You’re not fighting Whiteness, you’re feeding its perversion. You’re here so you can assuage their guilt without making them actually change a damn thing. They want you to be the Diversity Committee. Because every village needs a fool.” Still, I felt I was sticking to my thesis closely, not diverting off into too much bullshit. If Mosaic Johnson had kept his mushy buttocks on the stool instead of getting in my face then, it would have made a decent closer.

“Oh I get it. I get it now, why you love Poe. You two share one big thing in common. Neither one of you is a damn bit relevant anymore.”

“This college can really use you,” I returned, preparing myself to hoof it. “Every good zoo needs a caged gorilla.”

It was an inflammatory statement. I lit that shit on fire too, just to watch him burn. Even I was offended, to tell the truth, and that’s why I chose that level of toxic phraseology to hit him. He hit me back, though. First in the gut and then, when I went down to the floor, in several other places.

Mosaic Johnson could definitely bring the beat. To me personally, he brought the beat down.†

“Poe. Doesn’t. Matter,” he said as he pummeled. I respected him for that, though. He guessed correctly his weak suburban mini-mall kung fu punches might not be enough to hurt me.

“Tekeli-li!” I laughed, as the crowd pulled Mosaic Johnson from my body.

“Tekeli-li!”

* Matthew Henson excluded.

† Not to be confused with the “downbeat.”

CHAPTER II

TEKELI-LI. Tekeli-li, Tekeli-li. I got that from *Pym*. I got that from Poe. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* by Edgar Allan Poe, specifically. *Pym* that is maddening, *Pym* that is brilliance, *Pym* whose failures entice instead of repel. *Pym* that flows and ignites and *Pym* that becomes so entrenched it stagnates for hundreds of words at a time. A book that at points makes no sense, gets wrong both history and science, and yet stumbles into an emotional truth greater than both.

The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym was Edgar Allan Poe's only novel. It shows. A self-proclaimed "magazinish" who plied his trade mostly with Virginia's *Southern Literary Messenger*, Poe attempted the long form only because that's what the editors at Harper & Brothers were looking for. Poe was broke, his relationship with the *Messenger* soured, his intended entrée into New York literary society failed in drunken spectacle. Spiraling into the wreck he became known for, Edgar Allan Poe was barely writing anything new and couldn't find buyers for a collection of his short stories. The novel was a novelty, a lucrative one, so he cashed in. As for the idea of a book in "which a single connected story occupies the whole volume," Poe went along grudgingly, belligerent.

We start the story as Pym and his best friend, the ace sailor Augustus, joyride on a small boat at their home port in Nantucket, only to have Augustus pass out drunk not long after they set sail into the night. The two get rescued and, having escaped near dismemberment and drowning, decide the sea is the life for them. The novice Pym can't get passage on one of whalers headed out of town, so Augustus stows his boy away in a large crate in the hold, placing a mattress, a bit of water, and a few snacks inside with him. The plan is that Pym will spring out after a few days at sea and reveal himself to the crew when it's too late to turn back and dump him. Problem is, Augustus never comes back for him. We don't know why, and neither does our impish hero. As a result, Pym starts starving to death, dehydrating in the dark hull, where the oddly jumbled cargo threatens with each wave to fall over and crush him.

Then Pym is attacked by a lion (an African lion, in the darkness: begin trend here). Except it's not a lion, it is Tiger, Arthur Pym's exceptionally beloved canine companion, who just happens to be in the hold with him. "For the presence of Tiger I tried in vain to account," Pym tells us, and we agree, because for the thirty-odd pages that led up to this point, not one goddamn line was mentioned about any dog, a narrative error Poe tries to compensate for by telling us how much he really really really loved this pet. Eventually, after an extended period of time and pages during which even the reader

becomes claustrophobic, we get word from Augustus about what has happened: the Negroes have uprisen.

Really, the mutineers are just the lower classes of the ship's staff, led by a massive black cook.* Among this group is a man described as a half-breed Indian (the other half is given no race, so European ancestry—nonracial norm that it is—is the implied assumption). His name is Dirk Peters. Odd, however, is the description of this Peters:

He was short in stature—not more than four feet eight inches high—but his limbs were of the most Herculean mould. His hands, especially, were so enormously thick and broad as hardly to retain a human shape. His arms, as well as legs, were *bowed* in the most singular manner, and appeared to possess no flexibility whatever. His head was equally deformed, being of immense size, with an indentation on the crown (like that on the head of most negroes)... The mouth extended nearly from ear to ear; the lips were thin, and seemed, like some other portions of his frame, to be devoid of natural pliancy, so that the ruling expression never varied under the influence of any emotion whatever.

Negro what? Brothers and sisters, pause to check the backs of your skulls. Notice the primitive dwarfish size, bowed legs, and mouth ever conspicuous. Then compare Peters's description to some of the other *darkies* haunting Poe's collected works:

He was three feet in height... He had bow-legs and was corpulent. His mouth should not be called small, nor his ears short. His teeth, however, were like pearl, and his large full eyes were deliciously white.

—*Describing Pompey, in "A Predicament"*

They had never before seen or heard of a blackamoor, and it must therefore be confessed that their astonishment was not altogether causeless. Toby, moreover, was as ugly an old gentleman as ever spoke—having all the peculiar features of his race; the swollen lips, large white protruding eyes, flat nose, long ears, double head, pot-belly, and bow legs.

—*Describing Toby, in "The Journal of Julius Rodman"*

These big-mouth animalistic pygmies with pairs of legs shaped like fallen over Cs, they are of the same nightmarish breed. Dirk Peters, we're told, is not a Negro but a half-breed Indian probably of the "Upsaroka," which we can assume is Poe's reference to the Absaroka people. Or as we commonly call them, the Crow (darkness!). Narratively, Dirk Peters needs to be half Indian despite his Negroid traits because there is no such thing as a half Negro, according to the American "one drop" social reality. Either you are a Negro, containing some African ancestry, or you are not; half whiteness is not allowed. Peters must be at least half white because it is his shred of white

decency that leads him to abandon the mutineers and assist Augustus in taking back control of the ship. To save the day, Pym imitates a ghost by covering himself entirely in white powder, then jumping out and startling the black-hearted mutineers. True to metaphor, the superstitious Negro mind is no match for the Enlightenment European intellect, and the three heroes regain control of the ship.

Shortly after this, as luck would have it, the *Grampus* is destroyed by inclement weather. These things happen. For another near third of the book, the sole survivors—Pym, Augustus, Dirk, and a guy named Richard Parker—cling to the driftwood that the capsized ship has become, steadily starving and dying of dehydration. The first imagined hope for rescue comes in the form of blackness, with a black ship moving toward them across the horizon, a man with “very dark skin” on deck nodding and “smiling constantly so as to display a set of the most brilliantly white teeth.” On arrival, it turns out to be just a decayed, blackened corpse, his smile the result of his lack of lips and his nodding the result of the fact that there is a seagull actively gorging on chunks of the dead man’s head, the bird’s “white plumage spattered all over with blood.”

Before long, the boys are forced to soil their own whiteness with gore as well. To fight starvation they must partake of the ultimate act of savagery: cannibalism. Not surprisingly, Parker, the least fleshed out character and a former participant in the mutiny, is the one who recommends this culinary choice, only to go on to literally draw the short straw. The line, the definitive line that separates civilized man from the primitive, is crossed. This is the sin that kills off Augustus, who poetically dies on the first of August despite his feast of man-meat. With little fanfare, this once central character melts away from the novel as if he never existed.

Why not eat the dog first? you might ask. Well, the dog is missing, having gone AWOL immediately after the mutiny. We know this not because we’re told but because we are not: no fate is given, Tiger’s simply gone, vanished from Poe’s mind without a mention despite his before stated importance. Not that this is simply an act of animal cruelty, because from the moment Augustus dies (a death we are at least informed of), Augustus too receives no mention for the rest of the book, which is only half completed by this point. Serial publication minded, Poe seems to have had little concern for the past or for continuity in this text. The work veers inconsistently from straight prose chapters to a dated journal finale. The only thing that appears to matter to him is the chapter at hand.

Before the doomed Parker can even be properly digested, rescue arrives in the form of the merchant ship the *Jane Guy*. By this time Pym and Peters, now the best of buddies it seems, discover that they have sunk far into the Southern Hemisphere. And they will be going farther, continuing down as the *Jane Guy* sails off to the South Seas for trading.

This is where things start to get interesting (really, they haven’t been tremendously until now). Here’s where things start to get surreal, where Poe