

# THE FIRE THIS TIME

A New Generation  
Speaks about Race

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# Lonely in America

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I have never been particularly interested in slavery, perhaps because it is such an obvious fact of my family's history. We know where we were enslaved in America, but we don't know much else about our specific conditions. The fact that I am descended from slaves is hard to acknowledge on a day-to-day basis, because slavery does not fit with my self-image. Perhaps this is because I am pretty certain I would not have survived it. I am naturally sharp-tongued, suffer from immobility when I am cold, and am susceptible to terrible sinus infections and allergies. My eyesight is poor. Most of the time I don't think about how soft the good fortune of freedom has made me, but if I were to quantify my weakness of body and character I would guess that at least half the fortitude my enslaved ancestors must have possessed has been lost with each generation in the family line, leaving me with little more than an obtuse and metaphorical relationship to that sort of suffering.

I resist thinking about slavery because I want to avoid the overwhelming feeling that comes from trying to conceive of the terror, violence, and indignity of it. I do not like to think of it happening in my hometown, where I work, in

my neighborhood, or near any of the places where I conduct my life. My cultural memory of slavery, which I don't think is so unlike that of many other Americans, suggests that it was primarily a Southern phenomenon, one confined to the borders of plantations, which, if they haven't been transformed into shopping complexes or subdivisions, exist now only as nostalgic, sentimentalized tourist attractions. The landscapes associated with slavery, however, extend far beyond the South.

My home is in New England and in the winter my house feels slight against the wind as its windows tremble with every blustery gust, which makes me want to stay in bed, though I am not at all the type of person who likes to linger there once awake, unless circumstances are such that I am not alone, and then, even in that rare case, I can be restless and ready to set forth at sunrise. In the winter of 2006, I was not working at my regular job, which might have been a good thing had I not been prone to a melancholy obsession over recent personal disappointments. I began to notice pains in my body I had never felt before: a tendon pulling across the length of my leg when I sat down, a sharp twinge in my side when I stood up, and sometimes when I'd shower my skin was so sore I could barely stand to feel the water on it. I knew these pains were likely psychosomatic, evidence of how deeply I was suffering from loneliness. Because I suspected that the hope of escaping my loneliness was adding to my discomfort, I had been trying

to cure myself of optimism as a strategy to ward off future misery. The value of this approach was confirmed by a self-help book I kept on my nightstand. When I dared to open it, I could read only a single chapter at a sitting because each reiterated a simple point that I just could not seem to accept—that to become free from disappointment one must acknowledge the obvious, then learn to live with it.

By mid-January, the United States' war with Iraq was coming to the end of its fourth year, the war in Afghanistan was intensifying again, and the shortcomings of the federal government that had been noted after Hurricane Katrina were fading from media attention, which was now absorbed with a surge of reports that, come summer, another movie star couple would be expecting their first biological child. I found myself momentarily enthralled in speculation: How long would this new relationship last? What did his ex-wife think of the sudden pregnancy of his new girlfriend? Who would take time off from their career to care for the family? These questions, though deeply irrelevant to my own life, served to distract me from the obvious fact that an unpopular war, entered into on misinformation, was showing no signs of ending. I studied the news reports on the radio every morning, which covered many subjects: planned highway construction projects, politics, movie stars, pop music stars, television stars, impending diseases, lying politicians, local sports, bank robberies, soldiers killed in Iraq. I suppose I was hoping the radio would serve as a kind of personal oracle, that stories of real human struggle might release me from solipsistic self-pity and show me how to

leave my bungalow by entering the world with a sense of purpose, or at least a sense of direction.

It was with this ambition that I had gone to New Orleans to help my great-aunt Louise come to recognize that her home there had been destroyed, even though my gumption was clearly tainted with dread. Sitting in a cold house listening to the radio was painful enough, but the thought of actually walking through so much loss made me worry that I would have to face more of the obvious than I could be distracted from noticing. As our plane flew over the Gulf Coast it was hard to tell how bad things actually were on the ground. Muddy patches of brown and tan signaled the normally slow growth of a Southern winter. I saw the edge of Lake Pontchartrain, into which, during the early 1920s, my great-grandmother Susie had thrown her wedding ring when she needed to affirm a point that her husband would not accept. On our descent I began to see blue tarps stretched over large holes in people's roofs.

When we arrived at Aunt Lou's tiny red-brick, railroad-style house, her nephew met us. Chester was a former long-shoreman. He had returned to the city a few weeks after the water had been pumped out and had been living in a FEMA trailer while he gutted his own house. Even though he had warned my mother and Aunt Lou on the phone that the house was in very bad condition, he wanted to make sure we understood this before we entered it, because from the outside, there appeared to be little structural damage. About four feet from the ground, a black, bathtub-ring-like watermark circled the exterior. Garbage and a broken ladder

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lay across the front lawn. When we opened the front door, dirt, mud, debris, and seaweed covered the hardwood floors and the sofa, which had floated over to the opposite wall from where it had been set. The house looked like someone had picked it up and shook it hard before setting it back down onto its cinder-block frame. We put on face masks and gloves, and booties over our shoes. A chifforobe sitting in water for weeks had gently exploded and still-wet clothes poked out of holes in the sides. Black and brown mud blotted the wall next to an antique brass bed. In the back room, the ceiling had caved in and wires and other debris hung low from what was left of the roof, like snakes in trees.

Aunt Lou said, *My house is tore up.*

Radio and television news reports about New Orleans mentioned that several of the city's cemeteries had been badly damaged by the flooding, and Chester's wife said coffins had been turning up all over the city. So I convinced my mother to drive over to Holt Cemetery, where our family crypt is situated, but she wouldn't get out of the car to check on it with me. Instead she shouted from its window, *Watch out for water moccasins!* as I walked through a rusty and twisted wrought-iron fence bolstered by rotten tree stumps into a field of tall, dead grasses and sun-bleached tombstones. Cypress trees sheltered the perimeter, branches reaching like veins across a heart.

Despite the fact that most of the graves at Holt are below-ground, unlike many cemeteries in New Orleans, it looked to me that Holt had kept hold of its dead better than the grave sites near the end of Canal Street, where mausoleums

appeared stained and tumbled over by water. In the early 1900s a portion of Holt was used as a "pauper's field" for the poor and indigent, and during segregation it was one place where blacks could be buried. Our family crypt had been there longer than anyone could remember, but its precise location was unknown; its marker had been stolen in 1969, just weeks after my great-grandmother was laid to rest. Up close I could see new grass, slender and gold-green, appearing in short tufts at the foot of the headstones, most of which were pitched in one direction or another toward the ground. Handmade markers in wood or cement were adorned with bottle glass, sea shells, or not at all, with the names and dates of the deceased written in by hand. Some had been decorated with Mardi Gras beads and silk flowers. I walked down the dirt path to the part of the cemetery where most of the stones were missing and called out to my ancestors. *I have no idea where you are. Tell me where you are.* But I heard nothing.

Ten years ago, when I last visited Holt, the grounds had not been well tended, and even then many of the grave markers were missing, in disrepair, or toppled down. Back then I had only a piece of scrap paper with a row and plot number written on it to guide me to the crypt's location. The ground, deeply sunken where bodies were buried, looked as if waves were passing through it in slow motion. On that visit I worried that I could not read the names of the people I was walking over to apologize directly for the disrespect of having done so. Hastily I laid some flowers and a note where I thought the crypt should be and left without ever

planning to return. On this visit, Holt felt strangely serene; unlike the rest of the city, it appeared not to have changed in any significant way. In fact, I might have wandered among the unknown dead for hours had I not heard my mother frantically shouting from the car. *Wendy, come on! We've got to get to Constantinople before dark!*

We picked up Aunt Lou from Chester's and drove over to Constantinople, a street in the Magazine district, to meet up with her childhood friend who had survived the flood trapped with her son in the attic of his house for a week before being rescued. Because none of the traffic lights were working, my mother was nervous and complained all the way there about how I had lingered too long in the cemetery. She chided me that one should let the dead rest. *That's right*, Aunt Lou said. I interrupted: *I just wanted to make sure that our people hadn't floated away.* They went quiet.

*But I took a walk around, and it looked like everybody was still tucked in tight.*

I returned from New Orleans more miserable than when I left. As much as I had wanted to come back from that trip with a sense of conviction, inspired to action that would distract me from my loneliness, I could not find a singular source of outrage on which to fixate—not poverty, racism, the failure of the federal government, a history of community self-destructiveness, a river, a lake, or a hurricane. Not a house without a roof, a felled tree across a path, a tumbled-down tombstone, or a wayward corpse. I was faced with



too much that was obvious about the way class and race work in America. More than I wanted to see. More than I was capable of seeing.

This is when I realized my loneliness had deeper roots than I had initially suspected, and that, in addition to personal disappointments, it came from having a profound sense of disconnection from what I thought America was, and who, in that context, I knew myself to be. My post-New Orleans loneliness seemed to emanate from a place that preceded my own memory and stretched across time into a future that extended far beyond my vision. It was as if I had been thrown overboard into the sea and was paralyzed by the shock of it. I could neither breathe nor drown. I could not sink or return to the surface.

Then early one morning in January as I was listening to Boston's public radio station, I heard a story about the 2003 discovery of a grave site in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. As city workers attempted to dig a manhole near the corner of Court and Chestnut streets in the seaside town, a pine coffin was discovered with leg bones sticking out. An independent archaeological firm had been brought in immediately to lead an exhumation. Eight coffins and the remains of thirteen people were removed. The report noted that a combination of forensic evidence and DNA testing had confirmed that at least four of the remains in question were of African ancestry, most likely slaves buried there during the 1700s. The archaeologists' report had just been released to the city of Portsmouth, which was engaged in public discussion about the most appropriate and respectful way to

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deal with those exhumed, as well as the fact that as many as two hundred people might still be buried at the site.

Perhaps if I had not already spent more than a couple of weeks being so down in the dumps, if talk about the expected duration of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan suggested a time frame other than the interminable, if images from my trip to New Orleans were not so powerfully present to me, then maybe the NPR report would have floated past me that morning. But something about hearing that Africans are buried beneath a public street in a small, coastal New England town gave me a new context to reconsider what is obvious and how one might learn to live with it. I knew I had to go there to see the people, even if they were still tucked in tight, if I was ever going to start letting go of the expectation that I could someday feel less lonely in America.

The first time I drove the two hours north from Providence to Portsmouth I had no idea what I was going to do when I got there. It was a Sunday in late February, the day after a large snowfall had dumped about six inches of snow along New England's southern coast. By morning, the roads were no longer wet and the snowdrifts at the side of the road glowed while ghostly wisps of fine powder swirled in the winnows of eighteen-wheelers trying to close the distance on Monday. From the interstate, I saw a sign for the Strawberry Banke Museum, which had been mentioned in the radio report, and I followed its direction.

The museum turned out to be a neighborhood of restored colonial houses at the edge of the Piscataqua River. The main entrance was closed, so I followed an elderly white couple into Stoodley's Tavern, which served as the museum ticket office on weekends. An older white woman with silver-bobbed hair sat at a table covered with pamphlets advertising local tourist attractions. *Are you here for the tour?* she asked. I nodded yes. *Ten dollars.* Charles, our docent, chatted about the weather with the five of us who waited for the tour to begin: me, the senior couple from Kittery, Maine, and a very young, blond couple just recently moved to Vermont from Tahoe, Nevada.

We walked across the street into the original settlement founded in 1630, known as Puddle Dock. The Old Mainer wanted to know: *Where were the borders of the marsh before the houses were built? Where had the water been pushed back to?* He was wearing a cap that said *USS Indianapolis*. Charles asked him if he was on the ship during WWII and he said yes. Charles said, *Were you on it when it went down?* The Old Mainer told us that he had gone ashore at Pearl Harbor just before the ship had set sail for Guam. Charles enthusiastically told us the story of how the ship went down, as if its history illuminated an unseen aspect of the tour. On July 30, 1945, the ship, en route from Guam to the Gulf of Leyte, was torpedoed by the Japanese. More than nine hundred sailors were hurled into cold, choppy water. Although they radioed U.S. forces for help as they went down, no one came for four days. By August 8, at the end of the rescue effort, only 317 men of the 1,196

originally on board had survived. The rest had been picked off by sharks or drowned.

After looking through a few of the houses in Puddle Dock, the Old Mainer, his wife, and I fell behind the guide and the young couple, who kept bragging about the beehive stove in an eighteenth-century farmhouse they were thinking of buying and restoring. They asked questions about the interior design of every home we toured. I took copious notes on Portsmouth's history and in this, felt my dour mood lightening. Details were comforting. Charles told us that Portsmouth was an Anglican, not Puritan, settlement and that among its original inhabitants were seventy-two Africans and eight Danes. Many of the wealthiest families in town made their fortunes in "the trade" first by shipping food, lumber, livestock, and other goods to British colonies in the West Indies and then by carrying captured Africans to the Caribbean, Virginia, and Portsmouth from the late seventeenth century through much of the eighteenth. Throughout the tour Charles occasionally used the word "servant" but never the word "slave."

In an alcove at the top of a staircase in a house built in 1790, the Old Mainer said to me, *I'd never live in one of these old houses. They're too cold.* There were two pictures on the mantel over the fireplace in the dining room. One called *An Emblem of Africa* featured a black woman walking with a feathered headdress next to a tiger in the background. The other picture, *An Emblem of Europe*, featured a white woman with a globe at her feet holding a book and a horn of plenty filled with fruit and flowers at the crook of her arm.

When the young couple asked about the role of the Native population in the development of Portsmouth, Charles explained that they were not a factor: *Most died out before the town became sizable, after catching diseases from their contact with the Europeans*, he said.

At the end of the tour, I returned to Stoodley's Tavern to ask for directions to the slave graves mentioned in the radio report. Charles told me, *You can't see anything. There's nothing there.* I thought he meant that the site had not been commemorated or officially rededicated, but his reaction made me wonder if there was even a historical marker indicating the graveyard's boundaries. The woman who had sold me a ticket said, *They've been reinterred.* I told them I still planned to go and asked if Chestnut Street was close, since Portsmouth's downtown area is quite small. *Or should I drive?* I said. She responded tersely, *It doesn't matter. It's just an intersection.*

It was sharply cold and the wind was picking up when I arrived at Chestnut Street near the corner of Court. Several restored colonials now serving as lawyers' and doctors' offices lined its east side. On the west side there was a beauty salon and a sign indicating a "Drug Free School Zone." Other than these buildings, it seemed that there *was* nothing to see. As I rounded the corner at Chestnut and State, I noticed a brass plaque affixed to the clapboards of a house: *In colonial Portsmouth, segregation applied in death as in life. City officials approved a plan in 1705 that set aside*

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*this city block for a 'Negro Burial Ground.'* It was close to town but pushed to what was then its outer edge. By 1813, houses were built over the site. I got back in my car to write notes about what I found. This is when I realized my car was probably sitting on top of people. I knew I should feel something about that, but all I felt was a familiar loneliness creeping in on me.

The trip to Portsmouth had not elicited much outrage in me, even after I discovered that one of the oldest known grave sites of blacks in New England was neither green nor sacred space. I accepted the reality that the historic colonial houses—now the business residences of attorneys, hair-stylists, insurance agents, and doctors—were considered by most people to be more valuable than the bodies down below them. But while I had thought that my lack of feelings while standing on people would allow me to forget that I had been standing on people, it didn't. I had no intuition about how these dead Africans might have felt about being paved over, no feelings of ancestral connection to those buried below, and I heard no discernible voices calling to me from the depths of that darkness. I wondered if the woman at the museum had been right. Maybe the corner *was* just an intersection.

The ambivalence the folks at the Strawberry Banke Museum expressed for those buried beneath Portsmouth's downtown was all the more surprising when I later learned that the first bodies exhumed from the African Burying

Ground had been housed at the museum before they were transported to the temporary laboratory. I assumed that my own lack of feeling was due, in part, to the randomness with which I had selected Portsmouth as the place to try to make sense of the remains of slavery in America. I had no personal connection to New Hampshire, no familial bond to any of the people buried there, and I became certain that was the reason I couldn't feel anything while standing on those Africans. I thought maybe I needed to visit a slave grave site more closely related to my life if I was going to experience some true cathexis.

So once back in Rhode Island, I went to a talk given by Theresa Guzmán Stokes at Newport's Redwood Library about that city's largest African burial ground, called God's Little Acre, a cemetery founded in 1747. For more than twenty years, without city support, she had been maintaining its grounds out of personal respect for those buried there, clearing away litter and weeds and eventually establishing a fund to protect it. She runs a website about the cemetery, and she and her husband, Keith Stokes, former executive director of the Newport County Chamber of Commerce, are writing a book on the subject.

While introducing his wife, Stokes assured the small audience, *We're not interested in slavery. It's emotional and it separates people.* But the absurdity of slavery means it is practically impossible for anyone to contain all the contradictions that arise when speaking of it. So despite his promise seconds earlier to refrain from talk of slavery, Stokes started by explaining how often the term "servant" is used as

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a euphemism for “slave” in New England and how there is a presumption that Africans here were somehow “smarter” and treated better than those in the South. *This misperception*, he pushed, *is because people don’t want to remember the dehumanization*. Without hesitating, he went on to say, *Slavery is violent, grotesque, vulgar, and we are all implicated in how it denigrates humanity*.

According to a series of articles by Paul Davis running that same week in the *Providence Journal*, Newport was a hugely significant port in the North Atlantic slave trade, and from 1725 to 1807 more than a thousand trips were made to Africa in which more than a hundred thousand men, women, and children were forced into slavery in the West Indies and throughout the American colonies. Ms. Guzmán Stokes explained how African people built many of the prominent colonial houses throughout New England, including those in Newport, and while many of those buildings remain restored in one form or another, just a handful of graves of Africans who made this contribution to the town’s development can be found.

On my way to God’s Little Acre, I came upon the tiny Newport Historical Cemetery #9, which Theresa Guzmán Stokes had also mentioned during her talk, but I could not figure out which graves belonged to Africans and which belonged to whites. A white woman was taking pictures of stones, so I asked her if she knew. She pointed to two graves in the corner. *These over here*, she said and then explained



she had looked for information on African graves on the Web before she left her home in Seattle. The woman told me she was originally from Connecticut, but when she decided to marry an African American man in the 1970s, her family disowned her. She had four children with him, none of whom ever met her parents. She had brought her youngest daughter back east to visit historical sites for a vacation and confessed that she was glad she no longer lived in New England. *I couldn't take all of this "in your face" history. Like Thames Street, the blue stones*, she said, referring to the pavers on a road that edges Newport's harbor. *Each one of those stones represents an African. Every stone was from the ballast of a slave ship and was carried by a slave as he or she debarked.* When I called the Newport Historical Society to confirm this, the reference librarian and genealogist Bert Lippincott III, C.G., insisted that stones like that were used as ballast on all ships coming into Newport, not just slave ships. He added, *Many Newporters bankrolled ships in the trade, but Newport was not a major destination for slave ships.* When I mentioned the article in the *Providence Journal* that claimed most Africans in colonial Newport were slaves, he said, *Many were third-generation Americans. Most were skilled, literate, and worked as house servants.*

At God's Little Acre on the edge of Newport, three stones stand erect, three others appear jackknifed into the ground at a forty-five-degree angle. One lies level to the ground. Only these seven tombstones remain in the graveyard that commemorates the contributions of Africans to the city's early history. While surrounded on three sides by larger, crowded

cemeteries and an eight-foot wrought-iron fence facing Farewell Street, God's Little Acre is comparatively pastoral, and most of the grave markers are missing as a result of vandalism or landscaping contractors running tractor mowers through it for many years. The inscriptions on those few slate stones still standing are fading due to the way weather and pollution wear on them. Many are now just barely legible.

A white woman with a backpack was taking pictures of the scant stones. She told me she teaches courses on American graveyards at a school in Connecticut. Pointing to one of the graves, she said, *He must have been loved by his "family" because stones were very expensive back then.* I wanted to say, *So were people.* And then I remembered reading an inventory from the estate of Joseph Sherburne, whose house has been preserved at the Strawberry Banke Museum. The linens were listed as worth forty dollars while the African woman who washed and pressed them had a line-item value of fifty dollars.

My trip to Newport made me realize that I knew almost nothing about the lives of blacks in Portsmouth during slavery and I wondered if *that* was the reason I was so unmoved by my visit. So I drove back up to New Hampshire to walk the Black Heritage Trail, put together by a retired schoolteacher and local historian, Valerie Cunningham, in order to learn about the experiences of Africans and African Americans in Portsmouth. Some of the sites on the Black Heritage Trail highlight historic accomplishments of blacks in

Portsmouth such as the *New Hampshire Gazette* printing office where Primus, a skilled slave, operated a press for fifty years; the Town Pump and Stocks, where black leaders were elected in a ritual following loosely from the Ashanti festival tradition of Odwira; and St. John's Church, where the records indicate that Venus, most likely a poor but free black woman, received a gift of one dollar from the church in 1807 on Christmas Day.

I sat on a bench overlooking the Memorial Bridge, which crosses the Piscataqua River from Kittery, Maine, to where captive Africans would have first encountered Portsmouth, the wharf at what is now Prescott Park. The first known African captive arrived in Portsmouth around 1645 from Guinea, and slave ships started landing regularly as early as 1680 carrying small loads of mostly male children and adolescents. I tried to imagine what it felt like to come into this swiftly moving river harbor after a long journey across the Atlantic in the cargo hold of a ship—after having been starved, beaten, shackled, and covered in the feculence of the living and dead. Did seeing the flat, tidy fronts of buildings outlining this colonial settlement for the first time make them feel hopeful? So many rectangles. How far away the rest of the world must have seemed.

I ended my walk at the Portsmouth Public Library, which held no significance on the trail, but, according to the first news story I heard about the burial ground, had in its collection a copy of the archaeologists' report on the burial site.

When I asked a reference librarian if I could see it, she hesitated and wanted to know if I planned on making copies. I told her I was not sure if I wanted to make copies because I hadn't yet seen the report. She then consulted with the head reference librarian, who told me that the burial site is a very sensitive issue for the city and that he needed to consult with the city attorney's office before releasing it. He took down my information—name, city of residence, and school affiliation—then asked me to wait while he placed the call.

The librarian was worried about how I might represent Portsmouth in a piece on the subject, because he cared about the town. I liked the town, too. It is pretty, easy to navigate, and surprisingly friendly for New England. I felt guilty and ashamed about my affinity for the town because at the time I could not muster more than a diffuse intellectual identification with the people who were buried just a few streets over.

Before copying the report, I remembered how easy it was for me to ignore what was already obvious, so I wrote down some details to remind myself of what I shouldn't forget: people were carried like chattel on ships to America; they were sold to other people; they were stripped of their names, spiritual practices, and culture; they worked their entire lives without just compensation; they were beaten into submission and terrorized or killed if they chose not to submit; when they died they were buried in the ground at the far edge of town; and as the town grew, roads and houses were built on top of them as if they had never existed.

I spent the long summer with my friends at the beach,

drinking Bloody Marys and eating lobster rolls on the open-air deck of a clam shack in Galilee, Rhode Island, while the Block Island Ferry, serried with tourists, made its lethargic heave past the docked commercial fishing boats. Once school started, I turned my attention back to the spiritless tedium of lesson planning and grading papers. In all that time I did not once touch the archaeologists' report.

I could make something up about why I let the report sit in a manila folder on my desk for nine months without ever once attempting to read it—something about wanting to let the dead rest or about how loneliness swells and recedes—but I won't. The reason is not clear to me even now. What I do know is that holding the copy I had made of the report near the Xerox machine by the dimly lit front door of the Portsmouth Public Library that previous spring made me feel more than I had felt during any of my grave-site visits, like a balloon in my chest was expanding and taking up all the space I normally used to breathe.

*Intense discomfort*, I had thought. *Maybe that's enough.*

But by January I was driving back up to Portsmouth, irritated with myself for not reading the copy of the report I had already made but even more irritated with myself for not being able to let it go unread. The once tattered and gloomy public library had moved to a brilliant new building a few streets over, and as I walked around the landscapers installing the brick steps, I caught the sign on the door that said, "Welcome to Your New Library." In the breezeway, three junior high school girls gathered around a computer terminal and giggled. A woman in a purple cardigan greeted

me from behind the circulation desk with a smile and thin wave. Seduced by all of it, I thought, *I love my new library.*

When I asked the reference librarian about the report, he told me it was now shelved in the local history section in the regular stacks. I thought, *Now it's all out in the open. Now there's nothing to hide.* I grabbed it off the wall, took a seat at one of the new blond reading tables, and thumbed through it lightly as if it were a mere tabloid magazine. I took notes from the acknowledgments, introduction, and background chapters, but when I got to the section describing the removal of the coffins—those same pages I had copied nearly a year before—a shrill noise came up from the back of my throat at the pitch of a full teakettle in a rolling-boil whistle. I cleared my throat and went back to reading, but my din started again. It was sharp enough for anyone to hear, so I decided I had better leave—but not before making a fresh copy of the report to take with me.

When a story is unpleasant, it is hard to focus on details that allow you to put yourself in the place of the subject, because the pain of distortion starts to feel familiar. Paying attention often requires some sort of empathy for the subject, or at the very least, for the speaker. But empathy, these days, is hard to come by. Maybe this is because everyone is having such a hard time being understood themselves. Or because empathy requires us to dig way down into the murk, deeper than our own feelings go, to a place where the boundaries between our experience and everyone else's no longer exist.

Archaeologists removed the remains of thirteen people from beneath the intersection of Chestnut and State streets with the help of some machinery, but they did most of the digging by hand. Once in the laboratory, they used potters' tools and paintbrushes to remove excess soil from the bones and teeth. The exact dates associated with each burial remain unknown, but it is assumed that all were interred during the eighteenth century. Four males and one female could be identified by sex, but they found it impossible to determine the sex of the other eight, though most were believed to be in early adulthood, between the ages of twenty-one and forty years. Heads of the deceased generally faced west, suggesting a burial in the Christian tradition. In no cases were all the bones of an individual represented, perhaps due to the commingling of remains during previous installations of gas and sewer lines, the stacking of coffins, or a high water table in the soil. Thus no cause of death could be determined for any of those recovered. Archaeologists noted, however, that the lack of visible traumatic defects, cut marks, fresh or healed fractures does not rule out the presence of trauma. The teeth of each person, which in several cases constituted the entirety of the remains, appeared to be better preserved than their bones, which were found wet, free of flesh, colored gray or black, and, in the case of long bones, often missing the ends.

Pieces of the skull, portions of the upper and lower limbs, shoulder girdle, ribs, spine, and pelvis of a male person between the ages of twenty-one and thirty years represent Burial 1. An excavator operator noticed his leg bones stick-

ing out from the bottom of his coffin, which was made of white pine and was hexagonal in shape. All of his mandibular and some of his maxillary teeth were present, but like most of those recovered at the site, his teeth exhibited traces of enamel hypoplasia, a sign of previous infection or nutritional stress. His bones revealed a calcified blood vessel in his right lower leg and prolonged shin splints. A pumpkin seed of unexplained significance was found in his coffin as well as a metal object, probably a shroud pin, suggesting he was naked at burial.

In Burial 2, the remains of another male person between twenty-one and twenty-six years of age were found in good condition despite the fact that part of his skull had been unintentionally crushed by the excavator, leaving only his mandible and several teeth. A gas line running through the foot portion of his coffin meant that many bones in his right foot also were missing. His body was slumped to the left side, probably due to his coffin being tipped during burial, and his hipbone was broken in several places. His right hand lay over his thigh. Further analysis of his bones showed signs of repetitive forearm rotation and possible inflammation of the right leg, presumably from heavy shoveling, lifting, or other strenuous work. Salt, either used as a preservative before burial or for some other ritual, and a single tooth of unknown origin found between his knees, further distinguished his remains.

Burial 3 contained the remains of a person of indeterminate sex, thought to be approximately thirty to fifty years of age with the head facing east, perhaps toward Mecca.



Archaeologists recovered only extremely fragile fragments of the cranium and major long bones. The part of the mandible that was still intact suggests participation in a West African puberty ritual as there is a long-healed-over gap where lower and lateral incisors would have been. Stains in the soil represented most of the coffin wood. Only thirty teeth, small fragments of bone, some twenty wood and coffin nails accounted for the person of twenty-one to forty years of age in Burial 4. Those remains were extremely damaged by erosion and the unintentional intrusion of the excavator.

Pipe laid around 1900 across the bottom of the coffin of the male person aged twenty-one to forty in Burial 5 eventually disintegrated his lower extremities. Shovel marks on the coffin base indicate where a crew member either hit his coffin accidentally or attempted to cut through it.

The head of the female person in Burial 6 was located under the sidewalk, which had to be caved in to allow for her removal. Only the upper portion of her coffin was found intact. Her lower legs, cut off where they intersected with a utility trench and a ceramic sewage pipe installed around 1900, revealed evidence of a bone infection and severe inflammation of the shins. Her left arm appeared to be laid across her torso, and her cranium, now missing the face, pointed to the right side of the coffin. Her upper central incisors were shaved, possibly according to a West African cultural tradition, and represent the earliest documented case of such dental modification in North America.

The person in Burial 7 was a child between the ages of seven and twelve, of unknown sex, whose remains were

damaged by heavy rain and a redirected sewer line that flooded the grave shaft during excavation. Decades of a sewer pipe lying across the child's midsection also contributed to this poor state, despite the fact that the coffin was found to be in relatively good condition. Directly beneath that body were the remains of a male person between twenty-one and forty years of age in Burial 12 whose bones were very soft also due to the high water table of the soil. At present, it is impossible to tell if these two people were buried at the same time or possibly even generations apart. The coffinless remains of persons in Burials 2B, 3B, 4B, 5B, and 7B were discovered beneath the sidewalk. Dental fragments and hand bones from a person not presently attributed to Burial 2 but found nearby are all that exists of the person in Burial 2B. Twelve teeth represent the person in Burial 3B. One tooth each indicates persons in Burials 4B and 5B, and a femur shaft fragment resting atop the child's coffin in Burial 7 is all that was found of the person in Burial 7B.

The boundaries of Portsmouth's African Burying Ground are still a mystery, as they have been for more than one hundred years, but plans to build a formal memorial are under way. Public discussions led by the state's archaeologists have asked city residents to consider whether a part of either street should be closed to vehicular traffic. Some Portsmouth residents have submitted samples of their DNA to see if they are in any way related to those people whose remains, now stored in Ethafoam, 0.002 mil polybags, and

acid-free archival storage boxes in a municipally provided laboratory space, await reinterment.

Because I worried that I would lose track of the archaeologists' report among the bills, magazines, and student papers that littered my desk, for many months I kept it beside my bed, on the floor beneath my nightstand. Each morning the radio woke me with news of the war, a pop star's addiction, dismal predictions for the American economy. Later, I put the report in my backpack, its pages flat against my spine. At some point, I am not sure when, I grew accustomed to its weight and stopped noticing I was carrying it around.