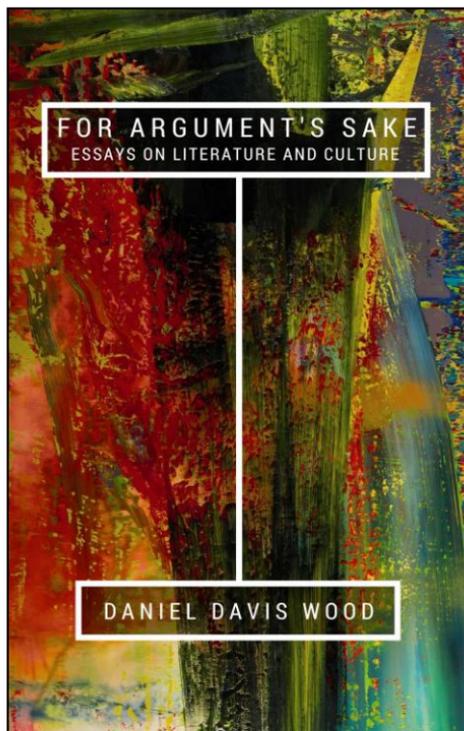


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BEYOND CITY LIMITS

EDWARD P. JONES' UNCOLLECTED SHORT FICTION

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JUST BEFORE AND DURING HIS TIME IN THE MFA PROGRAM AT the University of Virginia, and more than a decade before he made his *début* with *Lost in the City*, Edward P. Jones published three short stories which have not been reproduced since they first appeared. These stories might be classified as juvenilia, but with certain qualifications. They are all fully developed and polished, and are not in any sense *juvenile*. Each one exhibits the sophistication of a remarkably mature writer, combining a lyrical prose style with an achronological narrative structure and nuanced, sympathetic characterisation. They are, however, less adventurous than Jones' later work and less conceived as part of a larger project. None of them employs the assured prolepsis and analepsis that have come to typify Jones' fiction, and none of them offer more than a cursory glance at African American life in urban spaces outside the expanses of the rural South. As I read them, they stand apart from the rest of the Jones *oeuvre* while at the same time anticipating its eventual development.

The first story, 'Harvest,' was published in *Essence* in November 1976 (84, 108-110, 112, 114-115, 128). It begins in 1928. Fifteen-year-old Regina lives an impoverished life on an unproductive tobacco farm with her father, mother, brother, and sister. One day, "unmarried and therefore doomed" (84), she discovers that she is pregnant. Her parents are enraged, although more so by the economic problems posed by the impending birth of a child than by any moral problems associated with its conception. "The daddy's took off," Regina's father growls, "leavin' everything on us, like some dog runnin' from a chicken carcass he done ravaged" (108). He and his wife then attempt to procure an abortion for Regina, first failing to dispel the moral objections of the elderly local midwife and then successfully appealing to a practitioner of folk medicine. When the matter is settled, Regina develops an uncompromising hatred of her father. Then, jumping forward in time to 1943 and 1974, the story concludes with the ageing Regina reflecting on the children she has

since conceived and raised, and considering whether her hatred for her father has diminished as he lays dying.

'Harvest' contains some of the quintessential elements of Jones' later fiction. As a month-long deluge floods the tobacco farm, for example, Jones conveys the state of mind of Regina's father with a certain stylistic lyricism underpinned by Southern folk sensibilities. "[T]hroughout that month," Regina says, "my father, who never complained out loud though we all knew that each day the world was watered delayed his plowing and planting, would stand quietly at the window, watching as if in absolute disbelief that any God could be so cruel in preventing him from doing what was his life and his pleasure" (84). And when Regina visits the octogenarian Amelia Jackson, the woman who refuses to assist with the abortion, Jones allows us a glimpse of the transmission of African American folk culture down through the generations. "For many years," Regina says, "we had been told by the old who were younger than she about the stories she always told, the stories she had brought out of slavery. We had also been told that when the twentieth century came in, she had put away the stories and had not spoken of them again" (110). Jones' prolepsis and analepsis also appear in the story, albeit with far weaker omniscient overtones than in his later work. Aside from the tripartite temporality of the story, opening in 1928 and then leaping ahead to 1943 and 1972, the first section looks back to "[j]ust a little more than two years [earlier]" (112) and then briefly looks ahead to "[m]ore than four years later" (112) and "[f]or several years following" (128) before it returns to 1928.

The story contains some autobiographical elements, too. It is set in the vicinity of South Boston, Virginia, where the young Edward P. Jones used to spend his summer vacations with his mother's family. More notably, it ends with Regina's mother having recently died, much as Jones' own mother had recently died at the time of the story's composition, and also with Regina's father on his deathbed after suffering two strokes, which was what happened to Jones' mother just before she died (128). Yet, as well as looking back to Jones' past, 'Harvest' also looks to the future with a hint of the sort of stories that would eventually populate *Lost in the City*. "One snow-

falling day more than six years after that month [in 1928],” Regina recalls, “I climbed onto a soot-filled train that took me to Washington” (128). She ends up where most of Jones’ characters find themselves; although, before Jones ventures so far from South Boston as Washington, DC, ‘Harvest’ looks ahead to its successors, ‘The Farmers Palace’ and ‘Island,’ insofar as elements of ‘Harvest’ reappear in both those stories.

‘Harvest’ offers ‘The Farmers Palace’ the backdrop of the Great Depression. “The land was good to my father that year,” Regina says, “[and f]or several years following the land continued to be generous. But the tobacco he hauled into South Boston each winter to sell brought less and less money. ... Returning from that town, he would bring stories of what ‘that there Depression’ was doing to his world” (128). In ‘The Farmers Palace,’ published in *Callaloo* 11/13 in 1981 (1-13), Jones focuses on the tail end of the Depression in 1938 and the following years, and offers a portrait of rural African Americans struggling to endure absolute destitution. The story revolves around Hezekiah and Miriam Battle and their efforts to establish a small rural store and meeting place — the ‘Farmers Palace’ of the title — with the inheritance Hezekiah has received from his recently deceased aunt. Jones uses two narrative strands to weave the story, detailing the events at the Farmers Palace one idle Saturday and recurrently flashing back to Hezekiah’s relationship with his aunt. The two narrative strands are braided together at the end when a man in the Farmers Palace expresses an inconsolable grief over the way he treated his dead family — a grief that arouses Hezekiah’s own grief over his treatment of his aunt. The man in the Farmers Palace is Robert Adams, whose wife and children were killed in a house fire from which he escaped with only minor burns. When Robert begins loudly to mourn his family, he is shouted down by his father-in-law, Calvin Simms, and given a room in the Farmers Palace to sleep away his troubles. Hezekiah, meanwhile, reflects on his long-ago failure to intervene when the aunt who helped to raise him was repeatedly denigrated by his abusive father, and he remains chastised by her decision — despite his failures — to bequeath him the very inheritance with which he purchased the Farmers Palace. At the end

of the day, after the Farmers Palace has been closed up, Hezekiah quietly approaches the sleeping Robert. "Strangely," Jones writes, "he found that he wanted to say something to the sleeping man, perhaps the same words he wanted someone now to say to him. But he turned and made his way up the stairs" (13). Robert thus gives Hezekiah a sort of outlet for his grief, or the possibility of consolation, even as Hezekiah decides to keep his grief bottled up in a way that denies the other man an outlet in return.

As with 'Harvest,' many of the quintessential elements of Jones' later fiction appear in 'The Farmers Palace.' An inherited folk culture colours the thoughts of his characters as they move through the world: "Dew covered the porch," he writes, "and [Hezekiah] was struck by how beautiful the sun shone upon [it], made everything gleam in such a peaceful way and made him think it would be a sin ever to walk upon it" (5). The intertwining of the narrative strands entails another use of prolepsis and analepsis, and, once again, the story contains a dash of autobiography. "You all the mother I ever knowed," Hezekiah says to his aunt the last time they are together, and then, after her death, he takes a "train trip up to Philadelphia [where she had been living], regretting that he would not ever lay eyes on her again" (3). Even though Jones' mother lived and died in Washington, DC, he too took a train trip up to Philadelphia in the aftermath of her death. Finally, by taking Hezekiah from his hamlet in North Carolina up into one of the cities of the North, 'The Farmers Palace' contains the first recognisable kernel of Jones' later short stories. "There had been nightmares for two nights after his return," Jones writes, "dreams about being lost in that city" (5).

'Island,' published in *Ploughshares* 9.2/3 in 1983 (53-71), opens with an image it receives directly from 'Harvest.' In 'Harvest,' Regina remarks on her father's unwillingness to leave his farm in light of her mother's eagerness to travel around:

Those days when the rain was not so heavy, my mother, face greased and with a starched green bonnet sitting prettily on her head, would go rushing off in the buggy to various farms that surrounded ours. ... Watching them ride off with hands dug

deep into the back pockets of his overalls, my father would say to himself, 'I won't ever understand why a woman gonna tempt death in a mud drownin' or pneumonia just to drink somebody else's coffee, listenin' to things done and dead long before any of us was thought about.' (84)

In 'Island,' a woman climbs into her mule-drawn buggy and, much to the bemusement of her husband, rides off to the nearest town. "Except when he took his crops to market or went to church," Jones writes, "he rarely ventured beyond his own land, but traveling, moving, was something she had discovered over the years was in her blood" (54). His name is Absalom, her name is Hortense, and 'Island' tells the story of how her compulsion to travel has brought her to this point in her life. The impetus for her journey to town is a need to buy medicine for her sick son. She has two children — a son and a daughter — but, as we learn at the end of the story, only the younger child, the girl, is also the child of Absalom. Like Regina in 'Harvest,' Hortense fell pregnant at a young age, but, unlike Regina, Hortense did not abide the dictates of her father. "She could see herself walking on that road that day," Jones writes,

walking away from home, from her father and brother, walking all those miles whenever she couldn't get a ride in a buggy or on a wagon, seeing more of the world than she had in all her days. Walking until the fruit and ash cakes she had eaten along the way began to turn her stomach, walking until she found herself standing in Absalom Stuart's yard and looking at his door like it was salvation itself. (64)

Hortense literally shows up on Absalom's doorstep and is taken in as his wife, as he agrees to help her raise her unborn child. "The bridge and the creek gave the area where they lived its name, The Island, though it was far from that," Jones writes:

Absalom had lived there alone until the day she came, a day not unlike today. Hungry and cold to the bone, she had pounded at his door until her hand was scratched and bleeding slightly.

When he had finally opened the door and she saw him, calm and as expressionless as an egg, she knew he had heard her from the first knock. (55)

The subtext of this scenario is that theirs is an amiable relationship but, ultimately, a loveless one, and this subtext is brought to the surface of 'Island' when Hortense arrives in town and there encounters the one-time lover with whom she conceived her son. She recognises him — despite his evident prosperity, his new car, his flashy suit, his "diamond stick pin in his tie" (69) — but he does not recognise her, and so she is left to ponder the life she might have lived if she had built her life with him. Jones makes it clear and unambiguous that this man still has a grip on her heart and that she would leave Absalom to be with him if she could do so. Ultimately, though, Hortense has few options — as does her lover, who wilts away when he is hassled by a white police officer who does not seem to believe that the car he drives belongs to him — and she rides home to Absalom, silently suppressing any outward signs that her passions have been stirred and reawakened by the encounter.

Autobiography hovers at the margins of 'Island,' as in the previous two stories. The vicinity of South Boston, Virginia, is again the setting of the story, and when Hortense meets an old woman on her way to town, the old woman speaks longingly of her wayward children in a way that anticipates the northward migrations of Jones' Washingtonians in his later short story collections. "Where are they now, your children?" Hortense asks, to which the woman replies:

Here and there, this place and that place. ... [One son] in Philadelphia. Been there now goin on fifteen years. ... I got anotha boy in Washington, D.C., where the president lives, and my girls they in Detroit. My youngest son's in Boston, or California, I can't memba which. (59)

At this stage in Jones' literary career, of course, further investigation of his juvenilia remains strictly the province of his devotees, but it may yet prove fruitful if he were to return to the South in later

works of fiction. “If I do a third book of stories,” he told Dan Rivas just before the publication of *All Aunt Hagar’s Children*, “I hope to do Southern ones and the people in them will be connected with those in the first two books of stories” (‘10 Questions’). If you squint, you can catch glimpses of connections to those two books in the three Southern stories that preceded them. As a result, a certain irony now underpins those stories. Written, published, and then forgotten as minor aspects of Jones’ literary past, they may in time reveal themselves as having foreshadowed what lies in his future.

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