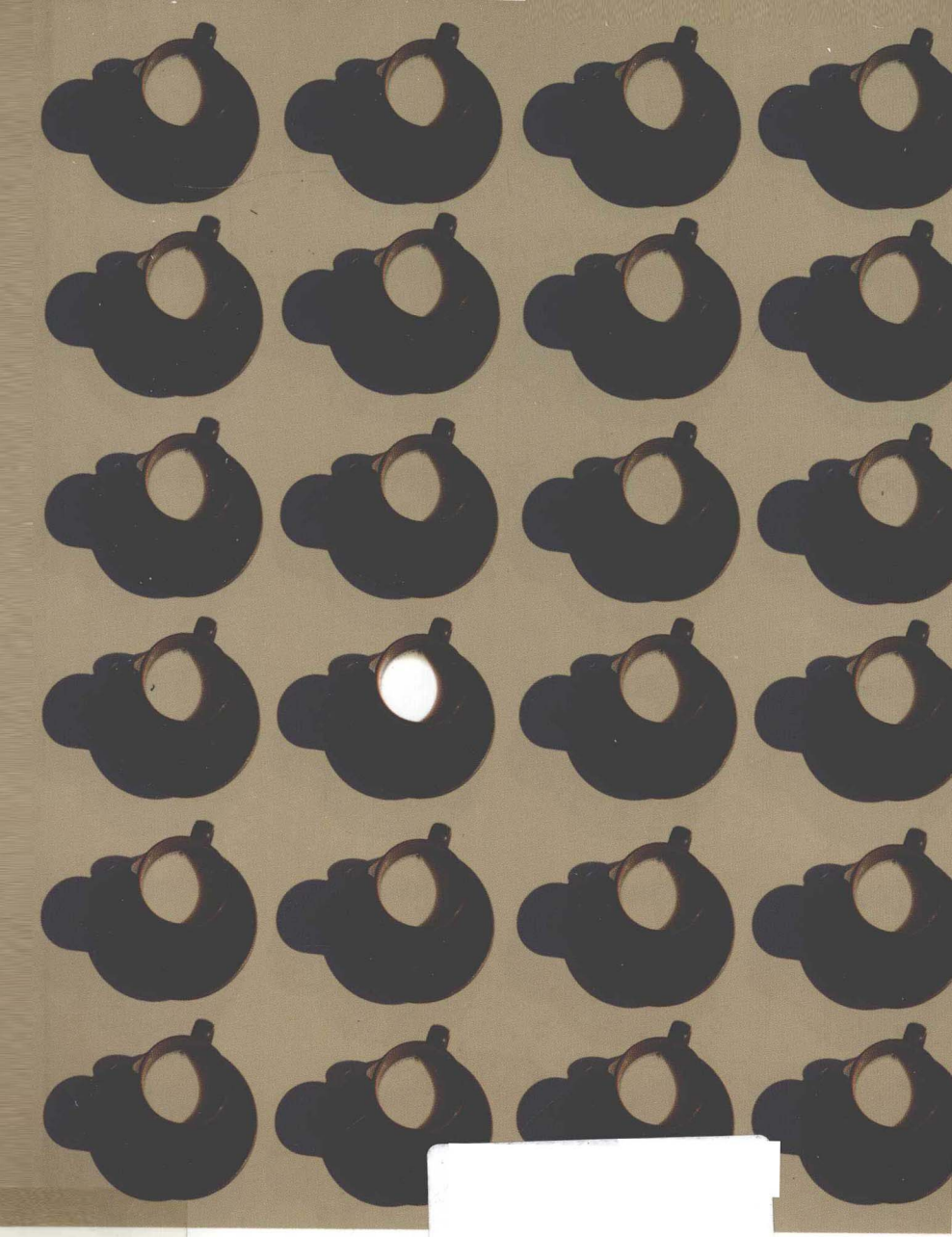

DRINKING COFFEE ELSEWHERE ZZ PACKER

"The kind of brilliance for narrative that should make her peers envious an her readers very, very grateful." **Zadie Smith**

Drinking Coffee Elsewhere

ZZ PACKER

CANONGATE

First published in Great Britain in 2004 by
Canongate Books Ltd, 14 High Street,
Edinburgh EH1 1TE

Originally published in the United States of America in 2003
by Riverhead Books, a member of Penguin Putnam Inc.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available
on request from the British Library

ISBN 1 84195 478 0

Book design by Stephanie Huntwork

Printed and bound by Creative Print and Design, Ebbw Vale, Wales

www.canongate.net

Drinking Coffee Elsewhere

To my mother,

Rose Northington Packer,

who "made a way out of no way"

Acknowledgments

This collection would not have been possible without support from the Rona Jaffe Foundation, the Mrs. Giles Whiting Foundation, the Wallace Stegner/Truman Capote Fellowship program, and the MacDowell Colony. Much love to my two families, the Northingtons and the Packers, both of whom raise storytelling to an art.

Many thanks to my mentors at the Iowa Writers' Workshop: Frank Conroy for his ever-vigilant eye; Marilynne Robinson for her infinite wisdom; Stuart Dybek for his unflagging support and friendship; and James Alan McPherson, who is an example to us all.

I am forever in the debt of Connie Brothers, Deb West, and Paul Meintel, all of whom preserved my sanity and made Iowa a happier, brighter place. John Barth, Stephen Dixon, and Allen Grossman at Johns Hopkins University were incredible models of how to live a

"writer's life." Special thanks to Francine Prose for her sharp wit and constant support.

John L'Heureux, Tobias Wolff, and Elizabeth Tallent at Stanford were invaluable to me in revising this manuscript. Thanks also to Gay Pierce, who kept the Stegner program running smoothly.

My thanks to friends and peers who have read these stories in their numerous incarnations: Julie Orringer, Edward Schwartzchild, Adam Johnson, Bridget Garrity, Doug Dorst, Ron Nyren, Malinda McCollum, Katherine Noel, Lysley Tenorio, Jack Livings, Otis Haschenmeyer, Rick Barot, Jane Rosenzweig, Carrie Messenger, Brian Teare, and the glorious Salvatore Scibona.

Thanks to Mara Folz for being my first reader and fan; to Felicia Ward for those many "writing dates." Faith Adiele, LJ Jesse, Angela Pneuman, Cate Marvin, and my sister Jamila are the best friends a girl can have.

Special thanks to the fine editors at *The New Yorker,* Cressida Leyshon and Bill Buford, who took a chance on a young unknown; to Colin Harrison and Barbara Jones at *Harper's;* and last but not least, to the wise and intrepid Lois Rosenthal at *Story.*

Finally, heartfelt thanks to the wonderful Eric Simonoff, who does triple duty as agent, reader, and friend; to Venetia van Kuffeler, the fab assistant to my editor at Riverhead, Cindy Spiegel, whose time, patience, and skill made this book what it is; and to Michael Boros, without whose love I wouldn't be.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following magazines, where these stories first appeared, some in a slightly different form: *Harper's*: "Brownies"; *Ploughshares*: "Every Tongue Shall Confess";

Story: "Our Lady of Peace"; *The New Yorker*: "The Ant of the Self," "Drinking Coffee Elsewhere"; *Zoetrope All-Story*: "Doris Is Coming."

"Brownies" also appeared in *The Best American Short Stories 2000*; "Our Lady of Peace" in *Symphony Space's Selected Shorts*; "Drinking Coffee Elsewhere" in *Here Lies*, edited by David Gilbert; "Speaking in Tongues" in *The Workshop: Seven Decades of the Iowa Writers' Workshop,* edited by Tom Grimes. "Geese" originally appeared in *Twenty-five and Under.*

Join me in the hope that this story of our people can help to alleviate the legacies of the fact that preponderantly the histories have been written by the winners.

—ALEX HALEY, *ROOTS*

Drinking Coffee Elsewhere

Contents

Brownies

BY OUR SECOND DAY at Camp Crescendo, the girls in my Brownie troop had decided to kick the asses of each and every girl in Brownie Troop 909. Troop 909 was doomed from the first day of camp; they were white girls, their complexions a blend of ice cream: strawberry, vanilla. They turtled out from their bus in pairs, their rolled-up sleeping bags chromatized with Disney characters: Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Mickey Mouse; or the generic ones cheap parents bought: washed-out rainbows, unicorns, curly-eyelashed frogs. Some clutched Igloo coolers and still others held on to stuffed toys like pacifiers, looking all around them like tourists determined to be dazzled.

Our troop was wending its way past their bus, past the ranger

station, past the colorful trail guide drawn like a treasure map, locked behind glass.

"Man, did you smell them?" Arnetta said, giving the girls a slow once-over, "They smell like Chihuahuas. *Wet* Chihuahuas." Their troop was still at the entrance, and though we had passed them by yards, Arnetta raised her nose in the air and grimaced.

Arnetta said this from the very rear of the line, far away from Mrs. Margolin, who always strung our troop behind her like a brood of obedient ducklings. Mrs. Margolin even looked like a mother duck—she had hair cropped close to a small ball of a head, almost no neck, and huge, miraculous breasts. She wore enormous belts that looked like the kind that weightlifters wear, except hers would be cheap metallic gold or rabbit fur or covered with gigantic fake sunflowers, and often these belts would become nature lessons in and of themselves. "See," Mrs. Margolin once said to us, pointing to her belt, "this one's made entirely from the feathers of baby pigeons."

The belt layered with feathers was uncanny enough, but I was more disturbed by the realization that I had never actually *seen* a baby pigeon. I searched weeks for one, in vain—scampering after pigeons whenever I was downtown with my father.

But nature lessons were not Mrs. Margolin's top priority. She saw the position of troop leader as an evangelical post. Back at the A.M.E. church where our Brownie meetings were held, Mrs. Margolin was especially fond of imparting religious aphorisms by means of acrostics—"Satan" was the "Serpent Always Tempting and Noisome"; she'd refer to the "Bible" as "Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth." Whenever she quizzed us on these, expecting to hear the acrostics parroted back to her, only Arnetta's correct replies soared

over our vague mumblings. "Jesus?" Mrs. Margolin might ask expectantly, and Arnetta alone would dutifully answer, "Jehovah's Example, Saving Us Sinners."

Arnetta always made a point of listening to Mrs. Margolin's religious talk and giving her what she wanted to hear. Because of this, Arnetta could have blared through a megaphone that the white girls of Troop 909 were "wet Chihuahuas" without so much as a blink from Mrs. Margolin. Once, Arnetta killed the troop goldfish by feeding it a french fry covered in ketchup, and when Mrs. Margolin demanded that she explain what had happened, claimed the goldfish had been eyeing her meal for *hours,* then the fish—giving in to temptation—had leapt up and snatched a whole golden fry from her fingertips.

"*Serious* Chihuahua," Octavia added, and though neither Arnetta nor Octavia could *spell* "Chihuahua," had ever *seen* a Chihuahua, trisyllabic words had gained a sort of exoticism within our fourth-grade set at Woodrow Wilson Elementary. Arnetta and Octavia would flip through the dictionary, determined to work the vulgar-sounding ones like "Djibouti" and "asinine" into conversation.

"*Caucasian* Chihuahuas," Arnetta said.

That did it. The girls in my troop turned elastic: Drema and Elise doubled up on one another like inextricably entwined kites; Octavia slapped her belly; Janice jumped straight up in the air, then did it again, as if to slam-dunk her own head. They could not stop laughing. No one had laughed so hard since a boy named Martez had stuck a pencil in the electric socket and spent the whole day with a strange grin on his face.

"Girls, girls," said our parent helper, Mrs. Hedy. Mrs. Hedy was Octavia's mother, and she wagged her index finger perfunctorily,

like a windshield wiper. "Stop it, now. Be good." She said this loud enough to be heard, but lazily, bereft of any feeling or indication that she meant to be obeyed, as though she could say these words again at the exact same pitch if a button somewhere on her were pressed.

But the rest of the girls didn't stop; they only laughed louder. It was the word "Caucasian" that got them all going. One day at school, about a month before the Brownie camping trip, Arnetta turned to a boy wearing impossibly high-ankled floodwater jeans and said, "What are you? *Caucasian?*" The word took off from there, and soon everything was Caucasian. If you ate too fast you ate like a Caucasian, if you ate too slow you ate like a Caucasian. The biggest feat anyone at Woodrow Wilson could do was to jump off the swing in midair, at the highest point in its arc, and if you fell (as I had, more than once) instead of landing on your feet, knees bent Olympic gymnast–style, Arnetta and Octavia were prepared to comment. They'd look at each other with the silence of passengers who'd narrowly escaped an accident, then nod their heads, whispering with solemn horror, *"Caucasian."*

Even the only white kid in our school, Dennis, got in on the Caucasian act. That time when Martez stuck a pencil in the socket, Dennis had pointed and yelled, "That was *so* Caucasian!"

WHEN YOU lived in the south suburbs of Atlanta, it was easy to forget about whites. Whites were like those baby pigeons: real and existing, but rarely seen or thought about. Everyone had been to Rich's to go clothes shopping, everyone had seen white girls and their mothers coo-cooing over dresses; everyone had gone to the downtown library and seen white businessmen swish by importantly,

wrists flexed in front of them to check the time as though they would change from Clark Kent into Superman at any second. But those images were as fleeting as cards shuffled in a deck, whereas the ten white girls behind us—*invaders,* Arnetta would later call them—were instantly real and memorable, with their long, shampoo-commercial hair, straight as spaghetti from the box. This alone was reason for envy and hatred. The only black girl most of us had ever seen with hair that long was Octavia, whose hair hung past her butt like a Hawaiian hula dancer's. The sight of Octavia's mane prompted other girls to listen to her reverentially, as though whatever she had to say would somehow activate their own follicles. For example, when, on the first day of camp, Octavia made as if to speak, and everyone fell silent. "Nobody," Octavia said, "calls us niggers."

At the end of that first day, when half of our troop made their way back to the cabin after tag-team restroom visits, Arnetta said she'd heard one of the Troop 909 girls call Daphne a nigger. The other half of the girls and I were helping Mrs. Margolin clean up the pots and pans from the campfire ravioli dinner. When we made our way to the restrooms to wash up and brush our teeth, we met up with Arnetta midway.

"Man, I completely heard the girl," Arnetta reported. "Right, Daphne?"

Daphne hardly ever spoke, but when she did, her voice was petite and tinkly, the voice one might expect from a shiny new earring. She'd written a poem once, for Langston Hughes Day, a poem brimming with all the teacher-winning ingredients—trees and oceans, sunsets and moons—but what cinched the poem for the grown-ups, snatching the win from Octavia's musical ode to Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, were Daphne's last lines:

You are my father, the veteran
When you cry in the dark
It rains and rains and rains in my heart

She'd always worn clean, though faded, jumpers and dresses when Chic jeans were the fashion, but when she went up to the dais to receive her prize journal, pages trimmed in gold, she wore a new dress with a velveteen bodice and a taffeta skirt as wide as an umbrella. All the kids clapped, though none of them understood the poem. I'd read encyclopedias the way others read comics, and I didn't get it. But those last lines pricked me, they were so eerie, and as my father and I ate cereal, I'd whisper over my Froot Loops, like a mantra, *"You are my father, the veteran. You are my father, the veteran, the veteran, the veteran,"* until my father, who acted in plays as Caliban and Othello and was not a veteran, marched me up to my teacher one morning and said, "Can you tell me what's wrong with this kid?"

I thought Daphne and I might become friends, but I think she grew spooked by me whispering those lines to her, begging her to tell me what they meant, and I soon understood that two quiet people like us were better off quiet alone.

"Daphne? Didn't you hear them call you a nigger?" Arnetta asked, giving Daphne a nudge.

The sun was setting behind the trees, and their leafy tops formed a canopy of black lace for the flame of the sun to pass through. Daphne shrugged her shoulders at first, then slowly nodded her head when Arnetta gave her a hard look.

Twenty minutes later, when my restroom group returned to the cabin, Arnetta was still talking about Troop 909. My restroom group had passed by some of the 909 girls. For the most part, they deferred