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FOR  
**MICHAEL HOWARD RAYMOND JORDAN**  
FOR  
FORTY YEARS

*We die with the dying:*  
*See, they depart, and we go with them.*  
*We are born with the dead:*  
*See, they return, and bring us with them.*

T. S. ELIOT, "Little Gidding"

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BOUND HOME





## APRIL 1993

For thirty-odd years, this white narrow room at the top of a granite building in the midst of Duke University had been one place where Hutchins Mayfield never felt less than alive and useful by the day and the hour. For that long stretch he'd met his seminar students here, and this year's group was gathered for its first meeting of the week. There were fourteen of them, eight men and six women, aged nineteen to twenty-two; and by a pleasant accident, each had a winning face, though two of the men were still in the grip of post-adolescent narcolepsy—frequent short fade-outs.

This noon they all sat, with Hutch at the head, round a long oak table by a wall of windows that opened on dogwoods in early spring riot; and though today was the class's last hour for dealing with Milton's early poems before moving on to Marvell and Herbert, even more students were dazed by the rising heat and the fragrance borne through every window.

In the hope of rousing them for a last twenty minutes, Hutch raised his voice slightly and asked who knew the Latin root of the word *sincere*.

A dozen dead sets of eyes shied from him.

He gave his routine fixed class grin, which meant *I can wait you out till Doom*.

Then the most skittish student of all raised her pale hand and fixed her eyes on Hutch—immense and perfectly focused eyes, bluer than glacial lakes. When Hutch had urged her, months ago, to talk more in class, she'd told him that every time she spoke she was racked by dreams

the following night. And still, volunteering, she was ready to bolt at the first sign of pressure from Hutch or the class.

Hutch flinched in the grip of her eyes but called her name. “Karen?”

She said “*Without wax*, from the Latin *sine cere*.”

“Right and what does that mean?”

She hadn’t quite mustered the breath and daring for a full explanation; but with one long breath, she managed to say “When a careless Roman sculptor botched his marble, he’d fill the blunder with smooth white wax. A sincere statue was one without wax.” Once that was out, Karen blushed a dangerous color of red; and her right hand came up to cover her mouth.

Hutch recalled that Karen was the only member of the class who’d studied Latin, three years in high school—an all but vanished yet near-vital skill. He thanked her, then said “The thoroughly dumb but central question that’s troubled critics of Milton’s ‘Lycidas’ was stated most famously by pompous Dr. Samuel Johnson late in the eighteenth century. He of course objected mightily, if pointlessly, to the shepherd trappings of a pastoral poem—what would he say about cowboy films today? He even claimed—and I think I can very nearly quote him—that ‘He who thus grieves will excite no sympathy; he who thus praises will confer no honor.’ I think he’s as wrong as a critic can be, which is saying a lot; and I think I can prove it.”

Hutch paused to see if their faces could bear what he had in mind; and since the hour was nearly over, most of their eyes had opened wider and were at least faking consciousness again. So he said “I’d like to read the whole poem aloud—again, not because I love my own voice but because any poem is as dead on the page as the notes of a song unless you hear its music performed by a reasonably practiced competent musician. It’ll take ten minutes; please wake up and listen.” He grinned again.

The narcolepts shook themselves like drowned Labradors. They were oddly both redheads.

One woman with record-long bangs clamped her eyes shut.

Hutch said “Remember now—the most skillful technician in English poetry who lived after Milton was Tennyson, two centuries later. Tennyson was no pushover when it came to praising other poets—very few poets are—but he claimed more than once that ‘Lycidas’ is the highest touchstone of poetic appreciation in the English language: a touchstone

being a device for gauging the gold content of metal. Presumably Tennyson meant that any other English poem, rubbed against 'Lycidas,' will show its gold or base alloy."

Though Hutch had long since memorized the poem, all 193 lines, he looked to his book and started with Milton's prefatory note.

"In this monody the author bewails a learned friend unfortunately drowned in his passage from Chester on the Irish seas, 1637."

Then he braced himself for the steeplechase run-through that had never failed to move him deeply.

"Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more  
Ye myrtles brown, with ivy never sere,  
I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude,  
And with forced fingers rude,  
Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year."

From there on, along the crowded unpredictable way to its visionary end—with Lycidas rescued and welcomed in Heaven by a glee club of saints and Christ himself, giving nectar shampoos—Hutch stressed what always felt to him like the heart of the poem, its authentic cry. It sounded most clearly in the lines where Milton either feigned or—surely—poured out genuine grief for the loss of his college friend, Edward King, drowned in a shipwreck at age twenty-five, converted in the poem to an ancient shepherd named Lycidas and longed for in this piercing extravagant cry with its keening vowels.

"Thee shepherd, thee the woods, and desert caves,  
With wild thyme and the gadding vine o'ergrown,  
And all their echoes mourn.  
The willows, and the hazel copses green,  
Shall now no more be seen,  
Fanning their joyous leaves to thy soft lays.  
As killing as the canker to the rose,  
Or taint-worm to the weanling herds that graze,  
Or frost to flowers, that their gay wardrobe wear,

When first the white thorn blows;  
Such, Lycidas, thy loss to shepherd's ear."

Ten minutes later at the poem's hushed end—"Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new"—Hutch was even more shaken than he'd meant to be. Strangely he hadn't quite foreseen a public collusion between Milton's subject and his own ongoing family tragedy. But at least he hadn't wept; so he sat for five seconds, looking out the window past the creamy white and cruciform blossoms toward the huge water oaks with their new leaves.

Then he faced the class again and repeated from memory the central lines—"Thee shepherd, thee the woods, and desert caves. . . ." When he thought they'd sunk as deep as they could into these young television-devastated brains, he said "Estimate the wax content of those few lines."

Even Karen looked flummoxed again and turned aside.

Hutch tried another way. "—The sincerity quotient. Does Milton truly miss the sight of young Edward King, King's actual presence before the poet's eyes; if not, what's he doing in so many carefully laid-down words?" When they all stayed blank as whitewashed walls, Hutch laughed. "Anybody, for ten extra points. Take a flying risk for once in your life." (Through the years, except for the glorious and troubling late 1960s, most of his students had proved far more conservative than corporate lawyers.)

Finally Kim said "He's showing off"—the class beauty queen, lacquered and painted and grade-obsessed.

Whitney said "Milton's almost thirty years old, right? Then I figure he's stretching—he's using King's death as a chinning bar to test his own strengths. *Can I write this thing?* he seems to be saying, right through to the end." Since Whit was one of the midday nappers, his contributions were always surprising in their sane precision.

Still fire-truck red, Karen finally said "I think Milton's discovering, as the ink leaves his pen, how terribly his friend drowned and vanished—they never even found the friend's corpse apparently. I think it sounds like Milton truly longs for him back."

Hutch said "Does it *sound* like longing, or does he really long?"

Karen winced and withdrew.

Whitney said "What's the difference? Nobody can gauge that, now anyway."

Hutch said "Why not?"

"It's too far behind us, nearly four hundred years. The words have all changed; we can't hear their meaning." Whit lowered his near-white lashes like scrims down over green eyes.

Alisoun said "Then let's all go home." She was six foot one, and any threat to unfold her long bones to their full height was always welcome.

Hutch asked her to explain.

"If four hundred years in the life of a language as widespread as English add up to nothing but failed communication, then I don't see any point in encouraging the human race to live another year. Let's just quit and vacate." She was genuinely at the point of anger.

The other women looked officially startled; their mothering genes had felt the assault.

Erik turned his face, that was always stern, a notch or two sterner and set it on Alisoun. "Get serious. *I* anyhow understand every syllable—not one of them's moved an inch in three centuries—and I'm no genius of a reader, as you well know. Milton is literally desolate here, right here on this page, all this time later. The fact that he's also phenomenal at words and rhyme and music doesn't disqualify him for sincere grief. If that's been the problem about the poem since old Dr. Johnson, then it looks like critics are short on reasons to fan their gums."

Hutch said "*Touché*. They mostly are."

But to general surprise, Karen recovered gall enough to say "I have to disagree. Milton's mainly bragging, the way Kim said. The poem's primarily about himself—'Watch my lovely dust. Recommend me to God. Buy all my books.'"

Hutch smiled but raised a monitory finger. "Milton didn't publish a book of poems for eight whole years after 'Lycidas.'"

So tremulous Karen took another long breath, faced Hutch unblinking and thrust toward the subject that no other student had found imaginable. "Mr. Mayfield, have you written poems about your son?"

Startling as it was to have the question come from Karen, Hutch realized he'd waited months for someone to ask it. *Now the demon's out*

*and smashing round the room.* In Karen's halting, plainly sympathetic voice, the question sounded answerable at least. Her boldness surely had to mean that the news of his son was widespread now and accepted as mentionable. Yet when Hutch looked round to all the faces—some class was breaking up early outside; the hall was a din through the shut glass door—all but Karen were blank as slate again. So Hutch offered the minimum he thought they could use. "My grown son is sick with AIDS in New York. Till today no known AIDS patient has won. And no, Karen, I haven't written a word, on that subject anyhow. I doubt I ever can."

Karen had the grace not to push on and make a connection with Milton, though she thought *Anybody in genuine grief couldn't sit and write an intricate poem, not one we'd keep on reading for centuries.*

But Hutch could read the drift in her eyes. "Don't for an instant make the tempting mistake of thinking that I share Milton's powers—nobody else in European poetry, not since Homer anyhow, can make that claim."

Kim said "Not Virgil, Dante or Shakespeare?"

Hutch shook his head No and suddenly felt a surge of pleasure—a strange boiling from deep in his chest of pleased excitement to plant his feet down and crown John Milton supreme in all the great questions of life. He said "Milton knows more than anyone else, in the western hemisphere in any case, in verse anyhow; and he's nine-tenths right on almost every question. Shakespeare is all a zillion bright guesses, bright or pitch-dark—not one single answer. Dante knows just one big urgent thing."

Whitney said "Which is?"

Hutch said " 'No rest but in your will'—the *your* means God of course."

Kim scowled, the regulation atheist.

And Karen's eyes plainly showed that she felt Hutch had short-changed the subject she raised—his son's present illness.

So he faced her directly and tried to give more. "Even Milton will have found that not every loss, however picturesque, and not every joy, however rhythmic, will submit itself as poetry fodder—as food for new poems."

Karen accepted that but wanted still more. "Can you think of a

sadness or a genuine pleasure that wouldn't submit when you yourself tried to write it out?"

Hutch knew at once. "In fact, I can—oh many times over. But one in particular strikes me today. I'll be dealing with it again—in my life, not my work—in another few hours. Soon as I leave you today, I'll be driving up to my family's homeplace in the rolling country north of here, up near Virginia, for what should be a mildly pleasant occasion. We'll be celebrating the 101st birthday of a cousin of mine, named Grainger Walters. I've known the event was coming for a long time and have tried more than once to write a poem that would say what that man's meant to me since the day I was born—a kind of older brother when my mother died, a surrogate father when my father died young, even a species of bighearted alien from some kind of Paradise, guarding and guiding me fairly successfully for six long decades. But a poem won't come, or hasn't come yet."

Whitney said "Do you understand why?"

"Not fully, no I don't. But I'm fairly sure the problem's buried somewhere in the fact that I'm all white—pure Anglo-Saxon and Celtic genes, to the best of my knowledge—and Grainger Walters is part black, the grandson of one of my Aryan great-grandfathers on up in Virginia, in Reconstruction days."

Whitney suddenly strummed an imaginary banjo and sang to the tune of "Way Down Upon the Swanee River,

"Hankey-pankey on the old plantation,  
Far, far away."

Alisoun said "It's already been written."

Hutch was puzzled.

"By Mary Chestnut in her famous diary; by Faulkner, in every paragraph—by Robert Penn Warren too, a whole slew more. Won't that be the main reason you're stymied? The job's been *done*."

Since Hutch was a poet, not a novelist, the fact had never quite dawned that harshly. He instantly suspected *She's at least a third right*. But he said "Wouldn't the fact that every one of you is white, that a black student at this university—or any other—very seldom takes courses in



literature, mean that you're wrong? Far from being done to death, the subject of race in America—race in its deepest historical and moment-by-moment contemporary ramifications—has barely reached the level of audibility in our literature, much less the level of sane portrayal. A world of explaining remains to be done.”

Alisoun's answer was long-since ready. “I've noticed how scarce blacks are in this department, yes; but the reason for that has got to be, they *know* you'll tell them nothing but lies—our solemn white poems and stories about human one-ness, all our feeble alibis for common greed and meanness and worse: torture, murder. Every black student here, and I know quite a few—I've made it my little white-girl project for the past three years—has got those lies bred into their *bones*. They don't need to read Old Master's effusions. What have we got to tell them, we Western white folks, in poems and plays?”

Her immaculate pale green cotton sweater and short string of pearls had misinformed Hutch; he was shocked by her force. *I'll think about that on the road today*. For the present he could only say what he trusted. With all the self-trust of a lifelong teacher, his mind chose to seize the wheel of the talk and turn it his way. “What conceivable subject—any subject comprehensible to humans at least, of whatever color—hasn't been done to death? The fact that Milton wrote ‘Lycidas’ has hardly prevented the writing of later great poems about dead youth.”

Alisoun said “Name two.”

Hutch said “Take three, off the top of my head—Tennyson's ‘In Memoriam,’ Arnold's ‘Thyrsis,’ Robert Lowell's ‘Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket.’ ”

Erik said “But isn't the theme of early death a whole lot more universal and available than the historical accident of Anglo and Afro-American miscegenation for three hundred years in a highly particular steamy place called the old Confederacy?”

Hutch waited, then had to say “Thanks for the question; I need to think it over. I will admit I don't think William Faulkner is a genius compared to, say, Tolstoy or Dostoevsky. Faulkner knew a small hot patch of ground he invented; it lacked huge chunks of the actual world—real women, for example: just half the human race unaccounted for. And responsible fathers, which many men are. Mothers who can love and not