

Plank

“Denial is more acceptable to the majority of Americans than placing themselves, their inherited dominance, at risk.”-John Edgar Wideman

The ethical issue with which I struggle seems to stand out as one of the oldest in the book. “Race relations,” as many have referred to it, is a well worn path. I do not presume novelty or position. In fact, my background recommends me nothing but the branding of *white American woman*. What then could I possibly say that hasn’t been said? The Civil Rights Movement was fifty years ago. Fifty years. Surely I must have heard.

November 6, 2010. The dining room was bright. Beams of sun spilled through the window-lined walls facing the lake. Linen tablecloths glowed a blinding white with the amount of direct sunlight they were receiving; wine glasses—intense, colorless sparks. High ceilings, mahogany, silver ladles in crystal punchbowls. Servers floated from table to table, attempting to be seen if needed yet go unnoticed when not. At the center of the scene upon which we were entering I observed a young boy sliding slimy palms down the glass window and rubbing his face against the smears he’d made. What remained resembled the mark which might have been left had a pigeon plummeted into the window from the outside. With this sight a strange sensation of disgust overcame me. It wasn’t the boy, really; for the boy reminded me of the way my fiancé, Evan, might have looked having come here with his grandparents as a child. It wasn’t the boredom the boy seemed to be feeling or his restless yearning to be outside. Rather, it was that he was unaware, innocently unaware of the history to which he was adding his fingerprints; an ongoing history I was equally unaware of prior to the previous evening.

“There’s something I need to tell you,” Evan had said over the phone.

“What’s the matter?”

“I knew you would be upset and I didn’t want you to find out at lunch there tomorrow. And we’re only going because my grandparents are in town and it’s where they always take us. But... the yacht club doesn’t...they don’t allow black people to be members.”

November 10. In a trial that began two days earlier, Assistant U.S. Attorney Tracey Knight laid out the government's case against five New Orleans police officers for their actions during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Knight relayed to the court, "They swore to uphold the constitutional rights of others, but on Sept. 2, 2005, these men broke that promise. They believed that after the storm no one was watching. They were convinced that no one cared about Henry Glover and how he died."

After Katrina passed over New Orleans, horror filled those who had remained to ride out the storm and a chaotic struggle to survive hovered like dark fog over my hometown. This was our city’s deepest fear coming true. We all knew the dangers of living in what has been deemed “a fishbowl”—being twenty-plus feet below sea level in places—but had never fully grasped the implications that would have on our lives were a hurricane to hit us head-on. But she did. And the aftermath turned into something far more garish than a natural disaster. It became a human disaster as well. Images from the time show frantic faces painted with strokes of hopelessness. Everyone was looking, searching for something—a family member, a rescue boat, food, water. On top of this, the law enforcement agencies were made up of people just as scared as everyone

else. And although looting for food, water, and supplies is understandable, officers were also faced with many legitimate cases of citizens criminally taking advantage of the tumultuous situation. This cannot answer for everything, however. Several actions taken by certain members of the New Orleans police department in the days immediately following the storm were unjustified, ruthless, and criminal in themselves. Some citizens were made enemies by the very people who had vowed to protect them.

This was the case for Henry Glover on September 2, 2005. Behind a shopping mall on the west bank of the Mississippi River¹, approximately 1.8 miles from my home, unarmed thirty-one year old Glover was fatally shot by a policeman who suspected him of being a looter. Three seconds elapsed between the rookie officer's command "Police, get back!" and his firing at Glover from the balcony². In a Chevy Malibu, Glover's dying body was taken by his brother, a friend and a stranger to an elementary school nearby where the Fourth District SWAT team had established a make-shift police compound. The men thought the police would be able to assist Glover since there were medical supplies at the school. Yet instead, two policemen allegedly handcuffed and beat the men³ while Glover is thought to have died in the car. Next, one of the policemen drove the car to a nearby levee while the other followed in a truck. The car and Glover's body were then set aflame and abandoned.

Officer David Warren was charged with the shooting; Lt. Gregory McRae and Lt. Dwayne Scheuermann were charged with civil rights violations and obstruction of a federal investigation for beating the men who tried to help Glover and then burning his body; former Lt.

¹ This section of New Orleans did not flood.

² Warren admitted this in court on November 23, 2010. The information on this case has been gathered from a variety of news sources. These include but are not limited to nola.com, wdsu.com, thenation.com, propublica.com and The Times-Picayune Newspaper.

³ Officers deny beating occurred.

Robert Italiano and Lt. Travis McCabe were charged with preparing a fraudulent police report about his death.

I may not have “bussed” in the sixties or participated in race riots, but I have seen what hate looks like. I have seen it shining on a plaque reading “Members Only.” I see it every time I drive by the elementary school or walk along the levee and remember what happened there. This is not fiction, nor is it 1955. In our midst—perhaps in ourselves—lies the latent presence of prejudice; prejudice that can wear a mask of class or authority, politeness or brutality. We may not even realize our own leanings.

For instance, what ethnicities did we attach to the officers and to Glover? I ask this in all sincerity because I believe that there is both an acknowledgment within many of us that racial crimes are not merely events in the past and a prejudice in some of us which assigns certain ethnic identities to particular persons even when not mentioned. Knowing our own presuppositions, we should pause and consider the reality that Glover was an African-American and the five officers are—that is, present-tense alive—white.

I understand that the NOPD as a law enforcement agency does not discriminate on the basis of race. Black and white officers in the department have historically worked side by side. I trust that far more of them disapprove of the crimes against Henry Glover than condone them. What happened to Glover was not done by the NOPD. In fact, to say that it was is to misplace the responsibility. Five men are being held accountable in trial: five human beings for their crimes against another human being.

“I hate it,” Evan continued over the phone, “But it’s not my choice where we go to lunch. My grandparents take us there whenever they’re in town. They are not prejudiced. They’ve just always loved the yacht club. My grandpa was a sailor and taught his kids and grandkids how to sail there. I know it’s not right, but it has family significance for them especially now that they’ve moved away.”

“But they’re still members. They know the policy and they’re still members.”

Our waiter seated us at a round table next to a large window with a stunning panoramic view of the lake. Evan’s grandparents had requested the table and were already seated, anticipating our arrival. His grandpa is a tall, thin, white-haired fellow with round cheeks and a rosy complexion. His grandma—who has always appeared clever to me—is petite, but not short, with salt-and-pepper hair. There were eight of us in all. I assumed we might be a large group compared to other guests; however, as my eyes explored the expansive room I noticed a table with at least fifteen people as well as another table of six or seven. Both of the other large tables were evidently families—three generations together, just as we were. Turning my attention back to our gathering, I was greeted by the comment, “Looking around the room, aren’t you? It really is beautiful here.” I offered a polite laugh. Out of the window I noticed a large number of smaller-looking sailboats floating stagnant on the water; distant white triangles. Evan’s grandpa told me this was a regatta for children. “Too bad there isn’t any wind today,” he chuckled. When everyone began looking through the menu it took me a minute to move past the cover. In large, bold characters pressed into thick, black leather was the seal—“Since 1849.” In the South we all know the meaning that date holds. Pre-emancipation.

Ours is a culture accustomed to a bubble bath of instant results. If our burgers take longer than five minutes we fume. If our internet connection is moving slower than usual, whining ensues. We then turn to history and demand the same immediacy. But moral reform cannot be checked off of our social agenda like potatoes on a grocery list. Humanity has never transformed on command. Although the abolition of slavery in the United States took place through the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863 the cause began over a century and a half before. In 1700 a wealthy merchant from Massachusetts named Samuel Sewell published the first direct attack on slavery and the slave trade in New England. In his *The Selling of Joseph*, Sewell undermines the biblical and moral justifications of slavery by his assertion that, as sons of Adam, all men have equal rights to liberty. Were we to mark Sewell's publication as the beginning of anti-slavery sentiments in America this would mean it took one-hundred-and-sixty-three years for the cause to see fulfillment. After fifty years might there still be ground to gain in the realm of race relations and civil rights?

On November 18th in a closed-door session with the judge, prosecutors, and defense, the defense objected to the prosecution's wanting to admit seven pictures as evidence. The prosecution claimed the pictures corroborated what their witnesses had testified to. However, Defense Attorney Julian Murray objected saying that the pictures would have an explosive effect on jurors and that allowing them would be too prejudicial. However, some of the pictures were eventually shown during the testimony of Stan Aviles, the New York firefighter who took the photographs. During the aftermath of the storm he came upon the incinerated car and Glover's charred remains on the levee. Aviles took detailed pictures of what he found, including a close up of Glover's skull—with what appears to be a small, mysterious hole in the forehead. Several

of Glover's family members cried softly as the photos were projected onto a screen in the court room.

"We don't know whether or not the jury picked up on some of the family members crying or not," said former prosecutor Donald "Chick" Foret, "but the defense very, very coherently argued that they thought many of the pictures should not come in. The judge ruled that several would not be allowed in, but he did allow several of those pictures to be introduced into evidence."

The defense did not want members of the jury to look at the charged photographs of that levee scene and burnt body. Yet as John Edgar Wideman recalls with stinging poignancy, "Emmett Till's dead body...reminded us that the bad old days are never farther away than the thickness of skin, skin some people still claim the prerogative to burn or cut or shoot full of holes if it's dark skin." He continues, "Emmett Till dies again and again because his murder, the conditions that ensure and perpetuate it, have not been honestly examined."⁴ Have we not looked away long enough?

After lunch the eight of us stepped out on the balcony overlooking the club's property below. The sky was empty, the air dead, the wind cold. From our vantage point we could see teenagers and college students relaxing on the grass next to the water. They were bundled, but still basking. A blonde girl in a light blue sweatshirt was piggybacking another girl around the lawn, laughing. The guys were passing around a bag of chips. They seemed so safe, so carefree. I wondered, looking at them, what they've experienced in life. Have loved ones in their lives passed away?

⁴ John Edgar Wideman, "Looking at Emmett Till," *In Fact: The Best of Creative Nonfiction*, ed. Lee Gutkind (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.: 2005), 24.

How did these people die? Have they ever had to live without? I did not pretend to know these young people. But I was curious. I was curious about how they viewed themselves, living on the sunny side of segregation. Dr. Kenneth Clark, a psychologist said, “Segregation is the way in which society tells a group of human beings that they are inferior to other groups of human beings in that society. It really is internalized in children.It influences the child’s view of himself.”⁵ I was curious whether or not these carefree youth knew about Henry Glover; whether they knew his four children were growing up without a father.

This generation learns about racism in the past tense. We memorize terms and study for exams testing us on significant cases, people, and dates from the Civil Rights era. *Brown v. Board of Education. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks. August 10, 1965: Voting Rights Act passed by Congress.* We are told how far we’ve come since then. *Before the Civil Rights movement black people were forced to use different water fountains and entrances. Whites sat at the front of the bus. Today Barak Obama, an African-American, is president of the United States.* We view ourselves as an equality-enlightened generation.

But inaction is action, as well. My former boss was racist. In the first few days of working there he told me a joke about President Obama, only not regarding his politics. I responded, “Don’t ever say things like that to me again. They aren’t funny at all.” From then on he knew. But that didn’t stop him from telling the jokes. He just moved on to my coworkers. They might not have laughed but they let him talk. Yet what if we all said no? Perhaps this would have challenged his self-assurance and caused him to examine his beliefs. The fact is,

⁵ Quoted in Anthony Walton, *Mississippi* (New York, Random House Inc.: 1996), 242.

there is a time and a place for us to stand up and be intolerant. Polite, passive prejudice keeps the segregation of the yacht club from ending and keeps hate comfortable. But it doesn't have to stay this way. There is one human race—not these *races* we've invented to stabilize our pride.

Ethnicities yes; not races. We must rise.

We must stop ignoring what we know exists. It is certainly an uplifting thought that our nation fought for equality and defeated racism. And there were indeed indisputable positive strides made during the Civil Rights Movement without which our nation could not be what it is today. But a false perspective on reality, regardless of how encouraging, is no reality at all. The longer we pretend—and teach and uphold—that segregation and hate crimes are archaic events of the past the longer we will perpetuate and permit their present existence. We will never move past our prejudices until we cease to deceive ourselves that we as a nation have moved past them. It is better to think we will always need to fight than to claim victory in an ongoing battle.

Henry Glover was a human being—a fellow human being struggling to survive. Unarmed, he was murdered by a white officer on a balcony. Shot in the back. During his first day of testifying, Warren said he fired at Glover after three seconds of forethought. He also said, "Let me be very plain. I was concerned for my life....I was concerned about going home to my family." Warren failed to consider that Glover was feeling the same fears and worrying about his family as well. Patrice Glover, Henry's sister, remembered that morning: "My brother and another friend said that they was going out to get some help, you know, and get some water and some food and stuff. And...he never made it back."⁶ In three seconds four children lost a father. Warren does not mention thinking about this possibility before he fired his weapon. Nor does McRae mention considering this reality when he dealt with Glover. The question demands itself,

⁶ Taken from the PBS documentary, "Law & Disorder"

if a white man was bleeding to death in the back of a Chevy, would these policemen have denied him medical attention? If Glover's companions were white would McRae and Scheuermann have beat them for no reason when they asked for help? Would McRae have burned the body of a person who looked like him or a brother? If a white man was murdered would these policemen have destroyed his body, evidence? In trial, McRae admitted of Glover, "I knew he was a victim of a homicide," but says, "I looked at it as a corpse."⁷

"If you go look at the history of the New Orleans police department you're gonna find other instances of this," said former New Orleans mayor, Ray Nagin, "All I can say to you is that there is an element inside the New Orleans police department that is still fairly active. In my opinion it's racist. And in my opinion, now that I'm starting to see what happened after Katrina and these cover-ups it's something that shouldn't have happened but did."⁸

Although five officers were charged, no one has had to answer for certain acts in the Glover case. After the trial ended on December 3rd, speakers rallying around the courthouse noted that Glover's skull, which was inside the car after it was burned, according to a videotape as well as Aviles' photographs, went missing shortly after. The mystery of what happened to it has not been solved and was not a subject in the hearings, apparently⁹. Yet although the physicality of the skull is not present, the grim reality of why it might have been removed is undeniable. It is not difficult to piece together the possibility that Glover was not yet dead when McRae drove the vehicle to the levee. It is also not difficult to assume McRae might have reasoned in his own twisted ethics to finish the job rather than burn a man alive. The jury will begin deliberations on December 6th.

⁷ On November 29, 2010

⁸ Taken from the Spike Lee documentary, "If God is Willing and da Creek Don't Rise"

⁹ "Firey Testimony Ends in Glover Case," *The Times-Picayune*, December 4, 2010.

There is a biblical admonition which teaches to “first remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck¹⁰ from your brother’s eye”¹¹. In this account Jesus is instructing his listeners to look carefully at their own guilt rather than pick at the sins of others. That is, once we examine our own lives the vices of others will not be as shocking for we have first known them in ourselves. In this way, before we distance ourselves from the splintering prejudices which mar our nation’s history, we must first consider the glaring plank in our present. We must look at it. Own it. Walk up close and find our initials carved indelibly into it. As Wideman implores, “Begin now. Today. Give up walls, doors, keys, the dungeons, the booty, the immunity, the false identity apartheid preserves.” Only when we accept there are strides still to be made towards liberty and justice for all, only when we recognize there is still a movement to be made, only then can we approach the past properly—not as those who study history but as students *of* history, gleaning from the past what we need to change the present.

¹⁰ Καρφος, in the Greek, meaning “a speck, splinter, chip.” Cf. Arndt, William F., and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Christian Literature*, 2nd ed., edited by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 510.

¹¹ Matthew 7:5, *New King James Version* (Thomas Nelson Inc.: 1982).