

1975

Introduction

Al Young

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Recommended Citation

Young, Al. "Introduction." *The Iowa Review* 6.2 (1975): 42-44. Web.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.1864>

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shrunk in his *trunk-skincapped*
shaven head, in thighs
distrusting-white-hands-picking-baboon-light
on this son who will not make his second night
of this wardstrewn intensive airpocket
where his father's asthmatic
hymns of *night-train*, train done gone
his mother can only know that he has flown
up into essential calm unseen corridor
going box carred home, *mamaborn,sweetsonchild*
gonedowntown into *researchtestingwarehousebatteryacid*
mama-son-done-gone/me telling her 'nother
train tonight, no music, nobreathstroked
heartbeat in my infinite distrust of them:

and of my distrusting self
white-doctor-who-breathed-for-him-all-night
say it for two sons gone,
say nightmare, say it loud
panebreaking heartmadness:
nightmare begins responsibility.

FICTION

Introduction / Al Young

John McCluskey, James Alan McPherson, Alison Mills and Ishmael Reed are all American writers of fiction. They each happen to be under forty and of visible sub-Saharan African descent, Black, if you will, but there the resemblance rapidly fades. Having emerged from varying backgrounds and generations, each of them proceeds from a style, a sensibility, a vision and voice that is peculiarly his or her own.

During his undergraduate days at Harvard, John McCluskey—whose important first novel, *Look What They Done to My Song*, was brought out by Random House last fall—was a highly-regarded athlete, a star quarterback. Always a searching prose writer, he later attended Miles College in Alabama (where he also taught) and Valparaiso College in Indiana before winding up his M.A. in creative writing at Stanford. He is presently an assistant professor of English at Cleveland's Case Western Reserve Univer-

sity. Born thirty years ago in Middletown, Ohio, McCluskey writes comfortably and engagingly of Middle America with an insight that is as affecting as it is compassionate. His critical essays have appeared in numerous underground journals as well as in the popular *Black World*.

James Alan McPherson's highly acclaimed *Hue and Cry*—a collection of short stories issued in 1969 by Atlantic, Little-Brown—has been praised by Ralph Ellison, among others, as the work of a singularly gifted young writer. McPherson, who is also an accomplished journalist, has published articles and stories in innumerable publications, including the *Atlantic*, which conferred upon him its coveted Atlantic First Award in 1968, and to which he has subsequently been a contributing editor. His work is widely anthologized and regularly graces the pages of the *Best Short Stories* annuals. He was born in Savannah, Georgia, in 1943, attended Morgan State College in Baltimore and received his Bachelor of Arts degree from Atlanta's Morris Brown College. Trained in law at Harvard, where he first began to study and write fiction, his love of literature has kept him at his typewriter and in libraries, far from the law offices and courtrooms which he writes about so challengingly in the story appearing here. He has lived and worked in many sections of the country, and has taught writing and literature at both Iowa and the University of California at Santa Cruz.

At twenty-three, Alison Mills is the youngest and least formally trained writer of this group. The storytelling of both McCluskey and McPherson is solidly grounded—technically anyway—in short story tradition. Mills, by comparison, is a remarkably talented primitive whose lyrical fictionizing, strongly diaristic in its treatment of detail, is uniquely American, that is, romantic to the core and rife with the kind of open-hearted naïveté and sense of becoming that has given this national characteristic its universal appeal. After graduating from Los Angeles High, she studied for four years at the American Theatre of Being under the direction of veteran screen actor Frank Silvera. While still in her teens, she became a regular on such TV programs as “Laugh-In,” “The Leslie Uggams Show,” and “Julia,” in which she played Carol Deering, the babysitter. She has worked in off-Broadway theater and, as a jazz vocalist, performed with Ornette Coleman at San Francisco's Keystone Korner. Her first novel, *Francisco*, a subterranean favorite that is quickly surfacing, came out last year from Reed, Cannon & Johnson.

Ishmael Reed is Ishmael Reed, author of three collections of poems and four novels, the latest of which are *Mumbo Jumbo* and *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*. A founder of both *The East Village Other* and *Yardbird Reader*, he was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1938 and spent his formative years in Buffalo, New York. In addition to being a dauntless iconoclast and a scholarly Americana enthusiast, Reed is this country's most orig-

inal young literary stylist, a satirist who does not hesitate to assail hypocrisy and social injustice wherever he uncovers it and regardless of its color, race, creed, religion, social standing or national origin. Classicist at heart that he is, his hilarious barbs are meant to expose human folly, mendacity, absurdity and wickedness with an eye to tempering their evil effects. Reed has taught writing and American literature at the University of Washington at Seattle and at U.C. Berkeley. This summer he will travel east back to his old hometown to conduct classes at S.U.N.Y. at Buffalo. The selection which appears here is from his forthcoming novel, *Flight to Canada*, inspired by his readings of slave narratives.

With settings that range from the Middle West, the present-day South, Los Angeles and Hollywood to the mythic Dixie of antebellum days, it is hoped that the work of these four authors will serve to provide the reader with some idea of the richness, variety and broad scope of contemporary Afro-American writing.

FICTION / JOHN McCLUSKEY

John Henry's Home

In the longest moment of his life, John Henry Moore stared down the barrel of a shotgun and reached slowly for the toothpick in the corner of his mouth. The cigarette in his other hand was burning down to the filter and he let his aching fingers drop it, checking any sudden move. He watched the eyes of the man holding the gun and, finding no mercy, looked to the man's screaming wife.

"Don't kill him, Lou! Don't kill him!"

He cursed his luck, his life that flashed by like a doomed comet, and that first weekend after he had returned to the world. He had lied to himself about what was possible at home, lied about how easy things would be. He had looked too long at the reflection of the present and he had called that good. He held his breath, hoping to ease the strain on his kidneys, and looked again at the open lips of the barrel, down its blueblack length to the man's nervous fingers . . .

He had closed the closet door, straightened the full-length mirror hanging against its back, and studied his front. He had dragged on his cigarette and watched the smoke ooze evilly from his nostrils. The pose had dictated some kind of badassed movie detective or mackman. He had pulled his slacks up, then frowned at the tightness through the crotch and thighs. Most