

TONI MORRISON. *SONG OF SOLOMON: THE FLIGHT OF AFRO-AMERICAN LIFE*. New York: Signet, New American Library, 1977. 341 pp., \$2.50 paper.

"If you rich and you want to get poor
Get a broke-down car and a no good whore
When you poor and you want to get rich
Get rid of the car and kill the bitch..."

Dave Luck, ex-hustler/Tavern Owner
Pittsburgh, Pa.

Song of Solomon can only be viewed as a tribute to the artistic and cultural genius of Ms. Toni Morrison. I, as reviewer and want-to-be-rich writer, am studious and intent throughout my reading of her novel. I am amazed, gratified and satisfied. I am fully amazed that she pulls it through; this wealth of characterization and plot. This is a novel of growing into manhood. It is at once the tale of man-to-man relationships and man-to-woman relationships in the Afro-American community where there is an essential struggle simply to be. There is in *Song of Solomon* mystery, romance and intrigue. The *Song* catalogues the fundamental struggle for integrity of the Black being in this American land. I am grateful, that Ms. Morrison does not enter into the fabric of this torn garment with stock-issue characters. I am thoroughly satisfied upon completion of the novel, that there is nothing left undone, there is no string untied. *Song of Solomon* is a masterpiece of fiction.

A word of explanation about the use of Mr. Luck's aphoristic analysis on the relationships obtaining between wealth, women and automotive equipment. Milkman (Macon Dead III), protagonist and anti-hero of this tortuously magnificent work, is the "poor little rich boy" son of a well-to-do (nigger-rich) colored realtor (Macon Dead II). Milkman "want(s) to get rich" on his own accord, so he misloves a woman (treats her like a whore) and gets an old car to ramble through ancestral homelands in search of gold. True to Luck's form, he "gets rid of the car" and imputatively though not disconnectedly "kills the bitch." Milkman's dream of flight and romantic fancy and his search for love and riches is at the core of the *Song of Solomon*, giving us a central vision through which to observe the lives of a community of characters.

Moreover, Pittsburgh is mentioned once or twice in the novel and it is at the Pittsburgh Airport that the mystery of the flying Africans in this *Song* begins to resolve itself.

There are a lot of things flying about in *Song of Solomon*; an insurance salesman atop Mercy Hospital announces his intended departure at the outset of the novel. A white female peacock mysteriously aflight in the midst of the ghetto. Musical notes, lilting and flying, weave a mythic reality in this family fable of African ancestor's a'flying away from the nest of oppression.

Most notably, there is the Milkman who upon learning, "...that only birds and airplanes could fly -- (he) lost all interest in himself."

(*The Milkman*)/*Last of the Flying Africans*:

"Cry-baby tippy

Suck he momma's nippy..."

Black First-graders lament, circa
1944, Anonymous, Braddock, Pa.

"Sugarman done fly away

Sugarman done gone

Sugarman cut across the sky

Sugarman gone home."

from *Song of Solomon*,
Pilate's song.

Milkman is the community given name of Macon Dead (III) whose father was Macon Dead (II) whose father was Jake son of Solomon who got the name Macon Dead (I) like this, "... . . . All the colored people to register with the Freedman's Bureau. . . . Free and not Free. Papa was in his teens and went to sign up, but the man behind the desk was drunk. . . . He asked Papa where he was born. Papa said Macon. . . . he asked him who his father was. Papa said, 'He's dead.' Asked him who owned him, Papa said, 'I'm free.' Well, the Yankee wrote it all down, but in the wrong spaces. Had him born in Dunfrie, wherever the hell that is, and in the space for his name the fool wrote, 'Dead' comma 'Macon'. But Papa couldn't read so he never found out what he was registered as till Mama told him."

Milkman is a character betrayed by his name. He is betrayed by his mother's barren need to tit-nurse him until in her lap, "... (she) wished to avoid seeing his legs dangling almost to the floor." Thus, his name Milkman, "...That's what you got here, Miss Ruffie. A natural Milk man if I ever seen one. Look out women's. Here he come. Huh!" Freddie from the community has peeped through the crack.

The names in the song of Solomon, "... . . . Solomon and Ryan, Belali Shalut/Yaruba, Mediana, Muhammet too/ Nestor, Kalina, Saraka cake? Twenty-one Children, the last one Jake/ O Solomon don't leave me here/Cotton balls to choke me/ O Solomon don't leave me here/Bukra's arms to yoke me/ Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone? Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home." are the keys to the unraveled mystery of Milkman's search and destroy mission to find himself.

Morrison gives us the key in her dedication: "The fathers may soar/ And the Children may know their names." We are reminded elsewhere that, "... . . . the African child is made to believe from his infancy that the names he bears has something to do with the building and moulding of his character. Names are not, therefore,

chosen in a haphazard fashion. Great care and thought are taken when selecting them. ... It might be possible for the child to adopt certain traits of the person he is named after. For this and other reasons, the African gives his child a name not because it is pretty, but because of the character of the ancestor who carried it." (Mafukidze, T.S., "The Origin and Significance of African Personal Names," *Black World*, July, 1970).

Toni Morrison has taken equal care in her fictional account of an ancestral lineage which circles like a hawk in on it's prey, and it's prey is itself. Milkman is finally the last of the flying Africans. He defies the unconscious conditions of naming as articulated by his cut-brother Guitar, "...let me tell you something baby. Niggers get their names the way they get everything else -- the best way they can. The best way they can."

By the time our protagonist and anti-hero Milkman emerges in the novel, he is narcissistically, pre-natally and neurotically hooked on the mystery of himself. His heroic moments are at the cost of the destruction of others. He is neither big Afroed nor wide of shoulder; he adopts a limp, he has no self-intention, his slowly arcing life reaches an apogee only in submission and transcendence of the circumstances of life and death. His greatest moments are in combat with father, stranger or friend or in-sexed with woman, he is the perennial "little brother."

Little brothers in the Black community are males who don't quite make it to the top and who don't quite make it to the bottom. They are neither homeboys who make it on reputation or reality nor are they hustlers in correctional institutions who have that reverse fame going for them. They are 'just around.' Fixtures on a low horizon. Milkman, to his credit, grapples with his little brotherism.

Julius Lester once collected a selection of Black Folktales, circa 1969 for Grove Press. (see Lester, *Black Folktales*, Grove Press, 1969). In them as in *Song of Solomon*, there is the tale of "People Who Could Fly." (pp. 147). In Lester's tale it is a magic word uttered by a young African witch doctor captured as a slave which allows the brutalized and work weary slaves to, "... ..(drop) their hoes, stretch out their arms, and fly away, back to their home, back to Africa." Lester surmised that, "Maybe one morning someone will awake with a strange word on his tongue and, uttering it, we will all stretch out our arms and take to the air, leaving these blood-drenched fields of our misery behind."

Maybe Morrison has done it. If so, the word sounds curiously like the age-old ghetto street challenge, "You want some'a me." "You want me? Huh? You want my life?," like Uncas, last of the Mohicans perched on a rock, Milkman, the titty-baby, flies into manhood.

KILLIN' THE BITCH: Relations in *Song of Solomon*.

Solomon, the first flying African, flew away one day leaving in the wake of his fluttering arms a mysterious legacy of song, family, manhood and womanhood, relationships and ideology, circumstance and consciousness to be fulfilled.

Morrison has created a family of "Dead." Relationships don't work for the characters in *Song of Solomon*. Being the family of Dead, romance begins in death and ends in death, such is the *Song of Solomon*.

Milkman loves Hagar. Hagar tolerates Milkman. Hagar loves Milkman. Milkman does not love nor tolerate Hagar. Hagar dies.

Macon Dead (II) does not love his wife, Miss Ruthie. He tolerates her only as the mother of his children, daughter of the man whose wealth he coveted. He is dead to romance, living with the memory "of the whitest, softest, underwear on earth."

Pilate loves her brother Macon Dead (II) in a mysterious and surreptitious manner. Pilate loves the brave young Macon; who is straight and faithful, willing to kill to protect his beloved sister. She despises the brash and rich Macon, arrogant, penny-pinching and vain, who disowns his family and her legacy.

Ruth, wife of Macon Dead (II), child of naivete and colored wealth, loves her father, who has died. As a reflection of her father she loves her son Milkman, who loves no one. Sexually abandoned by her husband for more than twenty years, she suckles her son beyond the requirements of life. Love dies around her all the time.

First Corinthians loves Porter. Porter loves First Corinthians. He is older (much), lower classed (much), and terrorist and she is a woman whose "breasts have dropped of their own accord" who has watched her pubic hairs turn gray never having felt the caress of erotic love.

Guitar loves Milkman. Milkman loves Guitar. This is a man-love. A sexual camaraderie and sharing of life space, they are 'brothers of the cut' and of the streets. Guitar is out to kill Milkman. Milkman flies to the attack.

It is Hagar's demise of "nervous love" which sets the romantic tone of the novel.

For this reader, there is nothing in the novel so completely done as is the doing in of Hagar. Hagar and Milkman, lovers though cousins, have reached that stage where the student of love (Milkman, of few years younger and in the beginning far less wordly) abandons

the teacher of love (Hagar, the goddess who got in over her head). Milkman puts Hagar down. He has formed his own wings of love and is flying through the community with women lighter and brighter than his sexual mentor. For him, it has become a game. Hagar is not letting go that easily.

Every month, as regular as the moon and millions of menstrual cycles, her love comes down. When it does, she wants to take Milkman out. She stalks the community in search of him. Each time she finds him with another woman and attempts to kill him. Hagar is making her seventh monthly ritual murder attempt on the life of Milkman, "...The calculated violence of a shark grew inside her, and like every witch that ever rode a broom straight through the night to a ceremonial infanticide as thrilled by the black wind as by the rod between her legs; like the very fed up-to-the-teeth bride who worried about the consistency of the grits she threw at her husband as well as the potency of lye she had stirred into them; and like every queen and every courtesan who was struck by the beauty of her emerald ring as she tipped its poison into the old red wine, Hagar was energized by the details of her mission." This time Milkman lies passively awaiting his fate. But, "...try as she might the ball joint in her shoulders would not move ... Oh! she thought, when she saw his face, I had forgotten how beautiful he is."

As for the Milkman, at the scene of his supposed death, he takes heart. Relieved from death and steeled in the fire of fear, "Milkman sat up, swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood. 'If you keep your hands just that way,' he said, 'and then bring them down straight, straight and fast, you can drive that knife right smack into your cunt. Why don't you do that? Then all your problems will be over.' He patted her cheek and turned away from her wide dark, pleasing hollow eyes." Hollow eyes which finally, after self destructing in the rain and in a rage of mascara and mad money, lay, finally "...sand dry and quiet as glass."

THE GUITAR WITH THE BROKEN STRING: Man Love vs. the Territorial Imperative.

Robert Ardrey in his *Territorial Imperative* suggests that aggression is the fundamental human motivation; if so, that may explain what happens to Guitar in *The Song of Solomon*.

If Milkman's relationship with Hagar is most tragic, then it is his relationship with Guitar, his teacher and peer, which is most enigmatic.

Guitar is the other side of Milkman. Where Milkman is the pampered and frustrated child of middle-class pretentiousness, Guitar is the hard core wisdom of life nurtured in pain and the pangs of ghetto experience. Where Milkman is ignorant and selfish, Guitar is profound and committed; where Milkman is narcissistic and flighty-urban jigaboo, Guitar is grounded in the earth, keen

and concentrated. Where Milkman is *on* the prowl, Guitar *is* the prowl. Two of a cut, Guitar and Milkman form the whole of manliness in the novel; it is a manliness divided against itself.

Guitar as anti-theses to an anti-hero could become the hero of the novel, (and maybe he is), but this is a novel of non-heroics.

There is scarcely a clue as to why Guitar flushed Milkman out, pumps a well placed shot into Pilate and brings the novel to its leaping close. Functionally Black, Guitar is a member of an organization (The Seven Days): "They don't initiate anything; they don't even choose. They are as indifferent as rain. But when a Negro child, Negro woman, or Negro man is killed by whites and nothing is done about it by *their* law and *their* courts, (The Seven Days) selects a similar victim at random, and they execute him or her in a similar manner if they can. If the Negro is hanged, they hang; if a Negro was burnt, they burn; raped and murdered, they rape and murder. If they can. If they can't do it precisely in the same manner, they do it any way they can, but they do it." Guitar on (white) aggression: "...Their writers and artists have been saying it for years. Telling them they are unnatural, telling them they are depraved. They call it tragedy. In the movies they call it adventure. It's just depravity that they try to make glorious, natural. But it ain't. The disease they have is in their blood, in the structure of their chromosomes."

Milkman's "blood-brother" becomes his nemesis. Guitar falls victim to self-fulfilling prophecy. He is afflicted with the disease, for "...it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother."

So where is the slight clue, that all this would ensue? That this dialogue would justify Guitar Bains' passion for the death of his friend, the Milkman:

"You took the gold." (Guitar)

"What gold? There wasn't any gold. (Milkman)

... ..

"You took the gold." (Guitar)

"You're crazy Guitar." (Milkman)

"Angry. Never Crazy." (Guitar)

... ..

"Is that why you tried to kill me?" (Milkman)

"Yes." (Guitar)

"Because I ripped you off?" (Milkman)

"Because you ripped you off?" (Milkman)

"Because you ripped us off! You are fucking with our work."
(Guitar)

"You're wrong. Dead wrong." (Milkman)

"The 'dead' part is you." (Guitar)

Guitar is dead wrong. There was no gold. Only myth and fancy. The *us* in Guitar's lament is the Seven Days, but isn't it all of us, and if Milkman has ripped us off he deserves execution. But he has not. So is there another motivation for Guitar Bains' willingness to do him in? Guitar who was there when the labor pains of his birth hit his mother, Guitar who knew more about Milkman than Milkman himself knew. Or is Guitar simply dead wrong, because he represents the militant tendency? That aggressiveness out of the flame throwing sixties which betrayed us all. Is this the destruction of the Black leather rhetoric and the back to Africa hype or is this just the way Morrison thinks of that particular relevance? We have all seen the non-violent militant lampooned and lambasted on our TV screens in the movie houses and everywhere else in popular American life. It is like trying to do in the boogie man with something just a little stronger than whistling in the dark. It is a primordial destruction of evil. Except that in our world and in Guitar's it could be that a White man's devil is the Black man's angel. This used to be a question, a position, an ideology. In the novel this position is represented by Guitar and the Seven Days. It is only this particular relevance which takes the work out of the subjective meandering of our anti-hero and into the core of life, into being Black and responsive to this American environment.

Guitar and the Seven Days come closer than anything in the novel to a recognition of the social struggle, the "condition of our condition" as Guitar put it, which surrounds the mythic telling of the story of the flying African and his morassed ancestral linkages. Guitar is the revolution. He is the militant. He is the voice of Black consciousness and, we trust, of Black Conscientiousness. So when he is "dead wrong," when he is shallow and treacherous, then, the revolution is shallow and treacherous, the militant movement is wrong, shallow and treacherous; a nest of vipers who turn on those whom they love and those only ones who understand their purpose. Milkman has just finally, "really understood." Guitar is across the boundaries of class and ideological perspective when his wire tightens around his neck.

The barest clue is that Milkman has to fly. Remember the 'white peacock poised on the roof of a long low building.' "... Guitar opened his eyes and said, "Goddam! Where'd that come from?"

Milkman was relieved. "Must of come from the zoo."

That raggedy-ass zoo? Ain't nothing in there but two tired monkeys and some snakes."

Well where then?"

Beats me."

"Look -- she's flying down." Milkman felt again his unrestrained joy at anything that could fly. "Some jive flying, but look at her strut."

"He."

"Huh?"

"He. That's a he. The male is the only one got that tail full of jewelry. Son of a bitch. Look at that." The peacock opened its tail wide. "Let's catch it. Come on Milk," and Guitar started to run toward the fence.

..."What we gonna do if we catch him?" (Milkman asked.)

"Eat him!" Guitar shouted... ..

"How come it can't fly no better than a chicken?" Milkman asked.

"Too much tail. All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Can't nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down."

No, Guitar is not shallow. It is his job to take his partner out on the limb, to allow his surrender to life and mission, to let him fly. In this context, he, too, is surrendering to his circumstances and transcending them, riding them like Shalimar knew: "If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it."

Morrison has a woman's message couched in her tale of growing into manhood. That the first change, the first revolution, involves surrender. Women have known this. Men will come to learn. Surrender to things just the way they are and you master them. As Milkman mastered his fate and as Toni Morrison has mastered the art of the novelist.

--Curtiss E. Porter

*Dept. of Black Community Education
University of Pittsburgh*
