

RUDOLPH FISHER:
EXPURGATED AND ABRIDGED

I tole him 'for' he left home, I say, "Son, you the only one o' the chillun what's got a chance to amount to sump'm. Don't th'ow it away. Be a preacher or a doctor. Work yo' way up and don' stop short. If the Lord don' see fit for you to doctor the soul, then doctor the body. If you don't get to be a reg'lar doctor, be a tooth-doctor. If you jes' can't make that, be a foot-doctor. And if you don' get that fur, be a under-taker. That's the least you must be. That ain' so bad. Keep you acquainted with the house of the Lord. Always mind the house o' the Lord-- whatever you do, do like a church-steeple: aim high and go straight."

from "MISS CYNTHIE"
first published in Story magazine (1933)
written by Rudolph Fisher (1897-1934)

I.

1919

Steamed Atlantic blue presses, shining, beneath solid sky. Errant sun strokes run down, rub against cold water, run again across ocean, across land, towards asphalt, towards windows of cars of sweating summer roamers.

One roamer runs heady bass from his chest, up his throat, out his mouth. Paul. Beside the singing man sits a tall fellow. Well-featured, too; well-muscled. A fine-looking man. Occasionally, he smiles full, joins Paul for a verse, joins Paul for a laugh. His laugh fills both men with bellied warmth. Paul sings the music; the other arranges the music; the other laughs. Bud.

Bud met Paul not long ago.

"Four Negro Commencement Speakers," the program was called. The Carlton YMCA in Brooklyn swung and swayed with black audience members-- middle-class folk-- finding their seats. One by one, each boy embraced the podium and delivered his university commencement speech before this second audience. Hands clapped. Hands in hands.

Later, a local black newspaper: Remark "the efficiency that the Race is capable of attaining" through the "broadmindedness of the leading white colleges in the East in admitting Colored students"!

After the speeches, two of the Four-Negro-Commencement-white-college-Colored-students clasped arms. Congratulations; compliments. The two boys breathed in deeply-- another man who understood! Rudolph "Bud" Fisher, Brown University, was twenty-two; Paul Robeson, Rutgers University, twenty-one. Both claimed clergymen for fathers-- and now, white institutions for alma maters.

Promises were made-- you got my word!-- to stay in touch. Weeks later, Bud and Paul set out to tour the coast-- a crack at raising tuition funds through song and spirit.

Alas, dollar bills hid, reluctant. Wild oats, however, were sung, spread, and sown along the seaboard. Bud and Paul-- "boon coons."

D U S T

The paper is thin. The type pushes through-- gradations of ink. Jet-black periods, commas, colons, semicolons; charcoal letters on the topmost page; faded silver figures from the one behind.

The title page is bare paper and phantom letters. In the center, typed: "THE RACE." One line of pen pierces through, wavering in the middle but darkening with finality as it terminates, just past the period. Above, four letters stand neat: D U S T.

Rudolph Fisher's "Dust" is about a race. Pard, foot to pedal, careens forward-- he must beat the Georgia-plated yellow car manned by, he assumes, a white driver. Great speed, swift brakes, thrown cars-- and Pard finds that the Georgian motorist is, in fact, a black man as well.

Page three: the race is launched. "His foot went down on the gas; the car jumped forward like a cruelly spurred horse, then laid back its ears and flattened itself out in a wild, headlong, heedless run." Fisher's blue-black pen scribbles at "car." Crowded close above is "roadster." More evocative; more precise.

Six lines down: ". . . the yellow car was vanishing to the right at the end of a half-mile straight-away." Here is the same blue-black ink, but the line is clean, single. "Machine." Repeating "car" is, apparently, undesirable.

Precise diction. Careful.

Easy now, slow, slow.

"THE RESISTANCE OF DIFFERENT CONCENTRATIONS OF A BACTERIOPHAGE TO ULTRAVIOLET RAYS" [I]

R. Fisher and E. B. McKinley, 1927

A series of quartz tubes, each containing exactly 5 cc. of the dilution to be tested, was exposed to the emanations from an Alpine sun lamp of 4.5 amperes at a distance of one

foot . . . The tubes were slanted at an angle of about 5 degrees in glass Petri dishes and were gently agitated every five minutes by sliding the dishes back and forth twenty times. The smallest difference allowed between exposures of successive tubes was two minutes.

EARLY 1920s

A series of taxi cabs, each containing passengers to be transported, stops. Exposed to the Alpine wind and rain of New York City, the cabs wait. Behind them, emerging from wet darkness some blocks away, a throaty motor is detected before the rain-splintered headlight is. The oncoming taxi brakes, stops quick. Close.

Reeling, the taxi slants forward. Inside the gently agitated casing of metal and glass, four men slide forward. Released back, they catch their breath. The driver, young and black like them, steadies his foot above the accelerator.

Bud, Paul, and two other friends wait for the lurch back. "Driver," Paul cuts in suddenly, "do be careful. If anything happens to us, you will set the race back three generations."

The driver nods in apology. The future of the Negro race!

The smallest difference in acceleration reduces exposure to danger in successive advances towards Manhattan.

"AN INTRODUCTION TO CONTEMPORARY HARLEMESSE EXPURGATED AND ABRIDGED" [I]

Rudolph Fisher, 1928

B I G G Y

Sarcastic abbreviation of *big boy*.

B O O G Y

Negro. A contraction of *Booker T.*, used only of and by members of the race. My own favorite among all the synonyms of Negro, of which the following are current: *Cloud, crow, darky, dinge, dinky, eight-ball, hunk, hunky, ink, jap, jasper, jig,*

jigaboo, jigwalker, joker, kack, Mose, race-man, race-woman, Sam, shade, shine, smoke, spade, aigaboo.

BOY

Friend and ally. Buddy.

II.

1930

Vincent McHugh, a young twenty-five, rings the doorbell. He waits, rubbing gloved hands together. It is late February in Manhattan. Damp breath writhes in winter morning air.

The door opens. The woman behind is tall, perhaps 5'8". Black hair has been pulled back atop her head; her face, arresting. "Jane Fisher. How do you do?" McHugh follows behind the tap-tap of her short heels.

In the living room, a small boy plays quietly. His complexion is lighter than that of both his mother and what McHugh has seen of his father from other newspapers. McHugh sits. Down the hall, a toasty cider voice spills through and across the grooves of the apartment, laughing gently every so often-- the good doctor on the telephone.

McHugh takes the spare minutes to sort out pen and pad, asking the child about his toys, his pastimes. Finally, a click. Solid footsteps, closer and then--

"Hugh! How did you get in here? You's better pack along. Your father's got to talk about himself." Dr. Rudolph Fisher is tall-- a good match for his wife. He chuckles, and McHugh finds himself smiling.

The boy looks up at his father, at the reporter. Father must have made a grown-up joke.

Dr. Fisher crouches beside his son, offers him a wooden truck, and rubs the top of his head. Dr. Fisher reflects on his son's birth-- he had nicknamed the bleating babe "The New Negro." He asks the boy, now aged four, to give him a moment with the guest. Submitting, Hugh gallops out of the room. His father grins, shaking his head.

Days later, in an article by one Vincent McHugh for the *Providence Journal*: "The planes of [Fisher's] features in repose had a dark grace; and his voice, quickened with humor and indefinable warmth, . . . was singularly potent in its suggestion of character, and singularly hospitable to understanding."

“THE RESISTANCE OF DIFFERENT CONCENTRATIONS
OF A BACTERIOPHAGE TO ULTRAVIOLET RAYS” [II]

R. Fisher and E. B. McKinley, 1927

In this particular series it will be seen under test 1 that destruction begins promptly, appearing here as early as after 10 minutes, but is not complete, as shown by tests after incubation, until at least 62 minutes of irradiation. This period is therefore the minimal lethal exposure in this series.

THE NEW NEGRO

Broken paper panes bear liling ink-- the handwritten lines of Rudolph Fisher. The first page reads: “White Writers of Current Black Fiction.” In the pile that follows: dense lines; dark pen; white writers; black subjects; black humans; humanity.

The essay will never be published.

The last pane is not thickly threaded prose. Here are blocks of words-- the cellular matter of ideas. The cellular system laid bare.

At the top: **The New Negro**. (Underlined)

Below are **Definition**:

Etiology:

Pathology:

Beneath are **1. 2. 3.** (**Negro himself**, noted to the left.) (**Dialect**, to the right.)

The body consists of many factors (**Symptomatology**:).

1.

Compact

lists

2.

beneath

each

3.

number

heading.

Diagnosis:

Treatment: **1. 2. 3.**

Exposure to a series of dehumanization is lethal to the self. How does one minimize lethal exposure in this series?

The new Negro. The new humanity.

“AN INTRODUCTION TO CONTEMPORARY HARLEMESE
EXPURGATED AND ABRIDGED” [II]

Rudolph Fisher, 1928

EIGHT - BALL

The number 8 pool ball is black.

EVERMORE

Extremely, as an *evermore red-hot mamma*.

...

MAMMA

Potential or actual sweetheart.

1920

Washington, D.C. 11th and U Street. Jane Ryder is 26 years old.

The block is a very famous block. It is supposed to be *the* block in Washington, and the superintendent of schools lives here. And the famous Dr. William Warfield of Freedmen’s Hospital is down at the end of the block, down T Street way where he and his family live in a huge house there. At least, it is huge to us.

I come downstairs with my cousin Charlotte, carrying these roses the two boys bought for her, because she is trying her best to walk down the steps, and when we get downstairs-- of course these two fellows are there! They are standing, waiting to greet us. Outside, it is a blizzard day. Bud is so big. He has on this huge overcoat, and it is so big, and of course, I guess I must make quite the impression because I am dressed for the summertime, and here I am in this summer outfit and this vase of beautiful roses, and it makes quite an impression. When he accepts the introduction to me, he just gazes at me, and very formally bows. I think: “Oh boy! What do we have here!”

Come spring 1924, Bud will graduate from Howard Medical School. I will marry him in Baltimore that fall.

III.

“AN INTRODUCTION TO CONTEMPORARY HARLEMESE EXPURGATED AND ABRIDGED” [III]

Rudolph Fisher, 1928

RIGHT ON

Nevertheless.

EARLY 1930s

Somewhere in the brownstone, a clock ticks. Footsteps towards the kitchen-- Jane, putting on hot water. Down below, automobiles begin to bray at one another. In his study, Rudolph Fisher separates lips from cork-tip cigarette. He listens to himself exhale.

Fisher regards the splay of ink-heavy papers before him. Character exposition for a new short story. An errant adjective catches his eye. In his hand, he replaces cigarette with black pen and, on the page, replaces one word for another. Better.

Fisher makes his way through the rest of the lines. Morning sun flashes off the silver tip of his slashing pen. Pulsing ink; tick, tick.

Quick. Time? A quarter past ten. Good-- at least one more hour before he must leave for the hospital. The two-leaved X-ray plate projector hums in Fisher's mind.

In his mind, lapping marble too hums. Drifting, remembering, Fisher closes tired eyes and breathes in columnar hush, vaulted sunlight, mahogany warmth. The Library of Congress, 1924. Fisher had been a senior in medical school. Each afternoon, he would shuck his white coat and dash, long-legged, to the great library. There, breathless with lucid portraits of the day's patients, he wrote his first story to be published.

Time has changed little, Fisher observes to himself. Often while treating a patient, he finds himself more interested in studying the patient's character and

guessing at his life as material for fiction than in diagnosing his ailment. If he could live on it, he supposes he'd write short stories for the rest of his life.

"DR. FISHER UNDER KNIFE"

The New York Amsterdam News | March 31, 1934

Dr. Rudolph Fisher, author and physician, was operated on at Post Graduate Hospital Tuesday morning. The operation was performed by Dr. Fedman, chief of the surgical staff. Dr. Fisher, who has been in poor health for nearly two years, entered the hospital Monday morning. He is reported as "doing nicely" following the operation.

THE LINDY HOP

Three manuscripts tell the same tale: young Tillie determines to enter the Lindy-hop competition at the Arcadia Ballroom, but Grammie will hear nothing of it.

The earliest draft, typed, bears markings made by two different pens: one Fisher's, the other wielded by an anonymous editor. On the title page, the second diagnoses: Bad end

The situation is fine.

confused in dance hall.

The pen underlines "end" three times. Bad end. End. End.

The offending conclusion: Tillie's partner blunders; the two lose the competition; and Grammie is appeased. Where the type leaves off on the final page, Fisher's pen inserts three exclamation points.

(editor's pen) *Grammie should steal the show by dancing with Bucky.*

(Fisher's pen again) Shake well before using.

The second draft is handwritten, and Grammie does indeed steal the show by dancing with Bucky. Fisher's pen scurries. Attached to the pen is the man shaking, welding, using what he can to mend deficient material. Fisher yields six different attempts at the closing dialogue:

The final lines

exchanged between

Tillie and Bucky

form a grid

down page

twenty-four.

Fisher separates each potential treatment with a horizontal line of black ink; across the first four he slashes vertically.

Finally, Fisher offers, in untarnished type, a third manuscript complete with remedied conclusion:

For a moment of silence Tillie looked down at Grammie. Then:

“Pick up the marbles, big boy,” she said.

And Grammie smiled in her sleep.

Fine paper, full with Fisher’s breath, folds in and fades out and gives way to the man in his study.

Fisher: picks up the pen, puts down the pen, smiles. There is no need for handwritten edits on this one-- at least not yet. It is almost time to put Hugh to sleep. Happiest of dreams, son. Papa’s New Negro has grown into such a big boy. Hugh will enjoy “The Lindy Hop.”

No form of the short story will ever be published. Rudolph Fisher will die a year or two later of intestinal cancer on a Wednesday at 9:15 P.M. He will be thirty-seven.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many of the words here are not my own. In an attempt to render the man in both the most honest and the fullest way possible, I have privileged others' words over my own. I humbly present the reader with words from those fortunate enough to have met Fisher-- as well as words from Fisher himself.

Accordingly, I am indebted to a range of external material for the completion of this work. First and foremost, I would not have been able to write this piece without the Fisher papers at Brown University. This collection served as the ultimate cartographical guide through the extraordinary topography of Rudolph Fisher's life and writing. Here, I reveled in letters, newspaper clippings, and edited manuscripts. I am also grateful for the work of Fisher scholars John McCluskey, Jr. and Margaret Perry. Both have forged longtime relationships with the work of Mr. Fisher; I have only begun mine. Finally, I conclude with the most powerful source of all-- the work of Fisher. This piece represents, perhaps, no more than the effort of one writer to understand and to honor another. Here's to you, Bud.

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