

"Between the World
and Me"


RICHARD
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READER

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IV

*I am black and I have seen black hands
 Raised in fists of revolt, side by side with the white fists
 of white workers,
 And some day—and it is only this which sustains me—
 Some day there shall be millions and millions of them,
 On some red day in a burst of fists on a new horizon!*

Between the World and Me

*And one morning while in the woods I stumbled
 suddenly upon the thing,
 Stumbled upon it in a grassy clearing guarded by scaly
 oaks and elms.
 And the sooty details of the scene rose, thrusting
 themselves between the world and me. . . .*

*There was a design of white bones slumbering forgottenly
 upon a cushion of ashes.
 There was a charred stump of a sapling pointing a blunt
 finger accusingly at the sky.
 There were torn tree limbs, tiny veins of burnt leaves, and
 a scorched coil of greasy hemp;
 A vacant shoe, an empty tie, a ripped shirt, a lonely hat,
 and a pair of trousers stiff with black blood.
 And upon the trampled grass were buttons, dead matches,
 butt-ends of cigars and cigarettes, peanut shells, a
 drained gin-flask, and a whore's lipstick;
 Scattered traces of tar, restless arrays of feathers, and the
 lingering smell of gasoline.
 And through the morning air the sun poured yellow
 surprise into the eye sockets of a stony skull. . . .*

*And while I stood my mind was frozen with a cold pity
 for the life that was gone.
 The ground gripped my feet and my heart was circled by
 icy walls of fear—
 The sun died in the sky; a night wind muttered in the
 grass and fumbled the leaves in the trees; the woods
 poured forth the hungry yelping of hounds; the
 darkness screamed with thirsty voices; and the
 witnesses rose and lived:
 The dry bones stirred, rattled, lifted, melting themselves
 into my bones.
 The grey ashes formed flesh firm and black, entering into
 my flesh.*

*The gin-flask passed from mouth to mouth; cigars and
 cigarettes glowed, the whore smeared the lipstick red
 upon her lips,
 And a thousand faces swirled around me, clamoring that
 my life be burned. . . .*

*And then they had me, stripped me, battering my teeth
 into my throat till I swallowed my own blood.
 My voice was drowned in the roar of their voices, and my
 black wet body slipped and rolled in their hands as
 they bound me to the sapling.
 And my skin clung to the bubbling hot tar, falling from
 me in limp patches.
 And the down and quills of the white feathers sank into
 my raw flesh, and I moaned in my agony.
 Then my blood was cooled mercifully, cooled by a
 baptism of gasoline.
 And in a blaze of red I leaped to the sky as pain rose like
 water, boiling my limbs.
 Panting, begging I clutched childlike, clutched to the hot
 sides of death.
 Now I am dry bones and my face a stony skull staring in
 yellow surprise at the sun. . . .*