SONG OF SOLOMON:
TO RIDE THE AIR

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Myth unfolds in a series of outwardly connected actions what the symbol embodies in a unity.
—J. J. Bachofen, “Symbol and Myth”

The world’s great myths continue to be relevant to man’s questions about his nature and his relationship to self, society, and the universe. Beneath their myriad details, both thematic content and structural patterns recur. Moreover, as we know, the myths are recreated in varying times and cultures. The essential stories reappear, their meanings often consciously enhanced by image and symbol recalling older versions, but revitalized by a new grounding in the concrete particularities of a specific time and place. In Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon, for instance, we encounter once more the story of man’s archetypal search for self and for transcendence. Simultaneously, we find the unique and imaginatively realized specifics of a black American experience.

In Song of Solomon, Morrison draws on specific Afro-American legends of Africans who could fly and who used this marvelous ability to escape from slavery in America; that is, literally to transcend bondage. With a magical realism that disregards conventional verisimilitude in its blend of the fabulous with carefully delineated historical circumstances, she evokes a specific past and present black experience. The novel’s mythic structure, additional allusions, and its network of symbols also suggest a meaning broadly applicable to any person who seeks to emerge from the dark labyrinth of the past into an illuminating knowledge of identity. Morrison constructs for her protagonist a lonely pilgrimage that encompasses elements of the universal monomyth: initiation, renunciation, atonement, and release. Throughout, the liberating goal of the pilgrimage is emphasized by symbols and images related to flying. The quest is for the self-knowledge that leads to transcendence, as the protagonist finally discovers how to ride the air.

The novel opens with the imminent birth of the central character “Milkman,” actually named Macon, born Dead. The improbable naming immediately signals both the author’s disregard for total verisimilitude and the fact that the options ahead for this child can be only reaffirmation of death or rebirth. Milkman’s birth is triggered by the excitement of the opening action, the failed attempt of Icarus-like Robert Smith to fly on artificial wings from the roof on an urban Mercy Hospital. This sequence calls

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attention to the book’s central motif of flight, to other minor ones, and to some of the most important supporting characters. Present are Milkman’s sisters; his mother Ruth; the boy Guitar, who will be both friend and enemy; and his aunt, the marvelous Pilate. The latter is unforgettable as she sings the lines which will become the story’s refrain:

O Sugarman done fly away
Sugarman done gone
Sugarman cut across the sky
Sugarman gone home. . . .2

The date of 1931, in the midst of the Great Depression, and the ironically humorous references to the racial discrimination of “No Mercy” charity hospital ground the fantastic episode in the familiar realities of time, class, and race. Morrison thus achieves definition of a specific milieu while at the same time she suggests both a specific myth and a timeless pattern of aspiration. The blood-red velvet roses scattered by the sisters symbolically stain the snow, and in so doing they underline the artificial lives led by Ruth and her girls. More significantly, their graphic allusion to blood suggests Robert Smith’s failure to “go home,” to transcend his troubled life. As readers, we recurrently have occasion to remember him. We never totally understand his failure to soar, either literally or figuratively, because Morrison does not allow us to do so. Yet, we must assume that he lacked something which Milkman later acquires and which enables flight. Clues lie in the many variants of Afro-American folktales about escaping slaves. Their flight seems always to have been accomplished by newly arrived Africans and facilitated not by artificial wings but by the knowledge of a secret, usually indicated by the enunciation of a secret word. In one version told by the slaves and their descendants of the Sea Islands, it is the oldest man who helps a younger to rise, defining the proper time for flight and crying at the last moment the special words “Kuli-ba! Kuli-ba!” as he gives a sign in the Master’s face. An analogous story suggests that it was enslaved former witch doctors, carrying the secrets of their African people, who could initiate escape. Here again a strange word is uttered and an exact moment defined for the leap. “No one remembers the word,” says the narrator.4 There are innumerable versions of the legend which contain the constants of special knowledge and many which speak of Africa as the destination of flight.5 In the light of the legends, one may theorize that Mr. Smith is too far removed from his heritage, that he has lost the secret—sign, word, timing—which would have allowed him to go home on his own power. He is unprepared for flight. Gradually, Milkman will, in the course of the novel, have to learn the secret—something internalized and clearly more potent than externals such as Smith’s cloth wings.

Song of Solomon breaks into two major parts which parallel “the preparation” and “the adventure” in the universal monomyth of the life journey.6 The two parts are separated by a brief interlude in which Milkman receives a classic call to his initiatory adventure. The first six chapters define his environment and his condition up to the age of thirty-six when, answering the summons, he begins actively to seek a belated maturity. In so doing, these chapters also give insight into the historical predicament of American blacks.

Milkman’s family dwelling is, literally and figuratively, a house of death. The Dead sisters pass their days in making artificial roses. The atmosphere is heavy with the fear of their father Macon, who “mangled their grace, wit, and self-esteem” (p. 11). For the mother, Ruth, an ugly, spreading watermark on the dining room table is the only confirmation of her existence: “That she was alive somewhere, inside . . . she acknowledged to be true only because a thing she knew intimately was out there, outside herself” (p. 11). The mark was made by a crystal bowl which had, in the past, been filled daily with fresh flowers. This elegant object is associated with her dead father’s pride in a caste which he defined by light color and possessions, and is an external proof of her blemished life. We learn that the nickname Milkman derived from her nursing the child too long in her desperate need for human contact. We hear of necrophilia, her adoration of her dead father’s body. And we also hear of Macon’s parallel worship of money and property—of his threat to evict a poor tenant and of his wish to “own people” (p. 4). In addition to the death of feeling, another kind of dying is clear in Macon’s sense of lost identity: “. . . he and his sister had some ancestor, some lithe young man with onyx skin and legs as straight as cane stalks, who had a name that was real. A name given to him at birth with love and seriousness. A name that was not a joke, nor a disguise, nor a brand name. But who this lithe young man was, and where his cane-stalk legs carried him from or to could never be known. No. Nor his name” (pp. 17-18).

As the epigraph to the novel tells us, however,

The fathers may soar
And the children may know their names

This possibility opens for Milkman in his aunt’s home, which contrasts significantly with Macon’s. Pilate’s is a home where naturalness is valued. Filled with music, it is set amid pine trees. It smells of the forest and blackberries, of apples and wine. Reining in the joyous atmosphere is Pilate herself, who carries her name with her always in her strange, brass-box earring. Milkman first sees her posed like some ancient mother goddess, one foot pointing east and one west (p. 36), suggesting in the directions her connection to both life and death. Her lack of a navel reinforces this sense of divinity, testifying to her miraculous birth and suggesting even the original earth mother. Her “pebble voice” seeming to rise from the earth itself, she offers knowledge (apples) and rebirth (eggs); and she volunteers to be a literal pilot for Milkman. Macon has insisted she is a snake (p. 54), meaning he and his sister had some ancestor, some lithe young man with onyx skin and legs as straight as cane stalks, who had a name that was real. A name given to him at birth with love and seriousness. A name that was not a joke, nor a disguise, nor a brand name. But who this lithe young man was, and where his cane-stalk legs carried him from or to could never be known. No. Nor his name” (pp. 17-18).

It is Guitar, the friend Milkman feels “can liberate him” (p. 36), who leads him to Pilate. Significantly, he meets Guitar as puberty begins—at age 12. Morrison’s description and naming of Guitar, as with all of her characters, is richly suggestive with ironic overtones. His attributes echo several of the mythic gods who function as agents of rebirth. He has a “hawk-head” and golden eyes; he guides Milkman to new
thresholds of experience that are successive descents “under-
ground,” metaphoric deaths preceding rebirth; and he is the
avenging son of a mutilated father. All this reminds us of
Horus, the falcon-headed Egyptian sky-god, avenger of the
death of his father Osiris, associated with wings and the sun;
or of Horus’ Greek analogue Hermes, winged messenger of
the gods, guide to the underworld, inventor of the lyre.
There are even hints in this young master hunter of the
archer Apollo, born on the seventh day of the month; also
associated with the sun, the lyre, and birds; equally murderer
and artist. It seems appropriate that Morrison’s black
Hermes, instead of inventing the lyre, wistfully covets an
inaccessible store-window guitar, earning thereby a mock-
ing name. The names of the other characters provide the
same dual effect. They widen the reader’s perspective to
mythical connotations and simultaneously provide ironic
commentary on the historical plight of the American black.

Biblical references abound. Consider Milkman’s sisters,
First Corinthians and Magdalena, called Lena. St. Paul’s
first epistle to the Corinthians attacks personal pride and
ambition, indeed all forms of vanity, and exalts charity
(Ch. 13). First Corinthians Dead is so named by a father
lacking sympathy and exhibiting all the faults to which Paul
directs himself. Moreover, St. Paul exhorts the people of
Corinth to remain unmarried so that they may devote
attention to religion in preparation for Christ’s Second
Coming, and he states his belief in Christ’s resurrection and
personal immortality (Ch. 15). Corinthians Dead remains
unmarried because of her father’s caste consciousness, and
must find her own spiritual resurrection by rejecting his
values. Magdalena, always, Morrison insists, “called Lena,”
is actually shortened, truncated by her life’s circumstances.
To be even a “fallen” woman, and certainly a reborn one,
would be preferable to her living death in Macon’s house.
The name of their mother Ruth ironically echoes that of the
Bible’s ideal daughter and wife, as Ruth’s life proves her
name a bitter joke.

It takes the entire novel for the reader to come to terms
with the Biblical name in its title. Initially, one might be
tempted to say that the entire book is a song of ancestral
wisdom, of the accruing of the understanding heart which
God gave to Solomon (see I Kings 3.9-13, 4.29-34). As
Temple-builder, Solomon may also function as an allusion
to the establishment of vital community (see I Kings
5-9), a concept which Milkman eventually learns to value.
That “The Song of Songs” itself, however, is a lyric of
human love and its central character a beautiful, estranged
woman of dark complexion may speak to the love for the
flying Solomon of those dark women left behind to tend the
fields of others:

I am black, but comely . . . .
Look not upon me, because I am black,
Because the sun hath looked upon me:
My mother’s children were angry with me;
They made me keeper of the vineyards;
But my own vineyard I have not kept.

(The Song of Solomon, 1.5-6)

While the more immediately apprehended characters
acquire added dimension through allusion, they also come to
live uniquely as themselves. The reader learns of a black
family victimized by the social ills inherent in Afro-
American history—those engendered by slavery and the loss
of a past as well as the consequences of the urban, middle-
class standards for success in a rejecting society. Anonymous
and in awe of fair color and property, the Deads have
experienced a loss of true self-respect. In order to mature
from the infantile condition indicated by his name, Milk-
man must liberate himself from false values and confront the
truth of his identity. Throughout the first half of the book,
his limp calls attention to his halting progress in that
direction. One leg is shorter than the other. It is as if he were
trying to take flight, half-hovering, unable either to walk or
to fly.

A key event pushes Milkman forward when he is twenty-
two. Defending his mother from his father, he first acts on
his own. After striking Macon, he senses he has both won
and lost; for along with independence, he acquires some of
the burdens of maturity. With new possibilities comes new
responsibility (p. 68). In his room, staring into the mirror, he
becomes aware that his face lacks “coherence, a coming
together of the features into a total self. It was all very
tentative, the way he looked, like a man peeping around a
corner of someplace he is not supposed to be, trying to make
up his mind whether to go forward or to turn back”
(pp. 69-70). His father reinforces this impression in his
subsequent explanation of what he perceives to be the facts
about himself, Ruth, and her father. He tells Milkman,
‘‘You have to be a whole man. And if you want to be a
whole man, you have to deal with the whole truth’’
(p. 70).

Actually, dealing with the truth is something none of them
has done very well. Although Milkman would like to reject
the unpleasant knowledge given him, it triggers in him a new
sense of individuality—and of separateness (p. 75). As he
walks the street later, he has an acute sense of being unloved
and alone. He sees everyone else going in the opposite
direction. He questions whether anything is what it seems.
He sees even the three “winehouse women”—Pilate, Reba,
and Hagar—as “indifferent to nothing and underst[standing]
nothing . . . . like bright-eyed ravens, trembling in their
eagerness to catch and interpret every sound in the universe”
(p. 79). He is half-right. They are eager, but they are
instinctively in tune with the universe. That he thinks they
understand nothing is a measure of his ignorance. He has
consistently taken from them with no attempt—or desire—
to value properly their love, generosity, and genuine bond-
ing to people and nature.

Milkman next seeks out his friend who, it is increasingly
apparent, will be both helper and antagonist in Milkman’s
journey to selfhood. Guitar operates in the tradition of the
trickster and other ambivalent archetypal figures who, by
challenging the hero, push him to his destination. He
may cause destruction or rebirth depending on how his challenge
is met. The black community’s anger over the Emmett Till
murder in 1954 provides the social background for Milk-
man’s meeting with Guitar. Self-preoccupied, Milkman is
disinterested in Till and can only repeat his own personal
desire to know his name. Contrastingly, Guitar has been
radicalized by his tragic family and racial history. He has
become an avenger in The Seven Days, a group dedicated to
retribution and racial brotherhood. Though cold to Milk-
man's egocentric needs, he does offer the opinion that to take passively the name arbitrarily given you, as Macon's father did, is to be "already Dead" (p. 89).

Morrison then pauses to narrate the twelve-year relationship of Milkman and Hagar, Pilate's granddaughter, whose name appropriately suggests the woman rejected as unsuitable. The interruption of the narrative and doubling backward and forward in time, though initially disconcerting, is not a digression. It serves to underscore Milkman's immaturity. This effect is intensified with the sequence's climax—his dismissal, in 1962, of Hagar, his lover for twelve years, with money and a thank-you note. We see that, at this point, he has gained no capacity to feel for others. Here again he seeks the aid of Guitar, and anger erupts between them over class differences. Guitar accuses him of not being a "serious person," of using his affluence for shallow amusements, of "liv[ing] nowhere"—only hanging out. This time the large background emerges in terms of the Civil Rights movement with references to the Montgomery, Alabama, of Martin Luther King. It is clear that Milkman wants nothing enough to risk himself. He is "bored" by racial problems. As Guitar says, everyone is still going in the wrong direction but him. In answer to the question of where he is going, he responds, "Wherever the party is" (pp. 103-106).

Several other segments follow to complete Milkman's preparation for adventure. All are written with Morrison's remarkable blend of the fantastic and the realistic, which encourages the reader to surrender disbelief. All incidents point the direction toward which Milkman turns; i.e., towards the death that may lead to rebirth. First, there are the monthly attempts on his life by Hagar, who behaves as if she is driven by some lunar love goddess. Her rage at her father's murder by the white men who stole his land. This time the large background emerges in terms of the Civil Rights movement with references to the Montgomery, Alabama, of Martin Luther King. It is clear that Milkman wants nothing enough to risk himself. He is "bored" by racial problems. As Guitar says, everyone is still going in the wrong direction but him. In answer to the question of where he is going, he responds, "Wherever the party is" (pp. 103-106).

Milkman needs Guitar to help him steal the gold that they suppose to be at Pilate's. He recalls their successful youthful escapades, when together "they rode the wind." He also wants Guitar's fearlessness, the sense Guitar brings of "life lived on the cutting edge" (p. 177). Guitar wants the gold too—for The Seven Days—so he joins the effort. As they plan the break-in, they see, poised on a low roof, a white peacock which suddenly flies down to earth. Morrison calls our attention to the bird, reiterating that it is "pure white" (p. 179). Interestingly white peacocks are known to exist only in captivity. Aptly, the bird appears to be a captive of its own vanity, although its color may also be a negative racial comment. Milkman again feels "his unrestrained joy at anything that could fly" (p. 178), a joy he has felt since childhood. He admires the peacock's strut, but asks why it can't fly any better than a chicken. "Too much tail," Guitar replies. "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" (p. 179).

"But the bird had set them up," the author says. It seems to beckon Milkman and makes him dream of motion and command, though on a false basis: "He just wanted to beat a path away from his parents' past, which was also their present and was threatening to become his present as well." He wants to "transcend" the "acridness" of his parents' relationship, to avoid "commitment and strong feelings, and decisions." He strives "to know as little as possible, to feel only enough to get through the day amiably and to be interesting enough to warrant the curiosity of other people—not their all-consuming devotion." He thinks of the theft of gold as a "Jack and the Beanstalk bid for freedom" (p. 180). Clearly, he is climbing to a fall with these delusions—that freedom may be attained by ignoring the past and avoiding commitment, or by seeking the lower orders of feeling suggested by amiability and curiosity.

Still, it is necessary to begin, and Milkman responds intensely to Guitar's impatient admonition, "'You got a life? Live it! Live the motherfuckin life! Live it!' " (p. 183). There follows one of Morrison's most effective passages, as the symbolic import underlines the narration:

... the clarion call in Guitar's voice filled [Milkman's] mouth with salt. The same salt lay in the bottom of the sea and in the sweat of a horse's neck. A taste so powerful and necessary that stallions galloped miles and days for it. It was new, it was delicious, and it was his own. All the tentative ness, doubt, and inauthenticity that plagued him slithered away without a trace, a sound... He felt a self inside him emerge, a clean-lined definite self... He only tasted the salt and heard the hunter's horn in Guitar's voice. (pp. 183-84)
Seeming to warn of vanity, “far down the road . . . the peacock spread its tail” (p. 184). Meanwhile, supporting the life images of the sea and the stallion, the author appeals to all the senses as she points Milkman’s direction. The “heavy spice-sweet smell that made you think of the East and striped tents and the sha-sha-sha of leg bracelets” (p. 184) says Accra—i.e., Africa, home, life.

It is ginger smell, unobscured by the air conditioners of white neighborhoods and overcoming the refuse of Western civilization, the carp and the plastics. It is sharp enough to distort dreams and “make the sleeper believe the things he hungered for were right at hand.” It permeates the air near Pilate’s house. Milkman’s foot hovers off the ground as he and Guitar finally cross the threshold into a “deeper darkness” that is “as cold as ice.” Then the moon illuminates the darkness hanging “green like the green of Easter eggs left too long in the dye. And like Easter, it promised everything: the Risen Son and the heart’s lone desire. Complete power, total freedom, and perfect justice” (p. 185). The sensuous imagery and the symbols clearly suggest that a descent into the darkness precedes the possibility of Milkman’s flight and rebirth. More subtle is the implication of his vanity and návété as he assumes that complete freedom and justice may be so easily gained. The bag he thinks holds gold contains only the bones of a skeleton, after all.

Before Milkman journeys south in further search of the treasure, Morrison injects two last story elements—again only apparent digressions. First, she interposes the story of First Corinthians, also a tale of maturation. To find her own identity and some semblance of life, Corinthians must transcend her father’s narrow vision. The account of her withering in wait for a “suitable” husband allows the author to satirize those who measure worth by externals. In establishing a relationship with the laborer Henry Porter, Corinthians moves from hating him “for the shame she felt” (p. 194) to being a “grown-up woman” (p. 196). She recognizes her need to escape the velvet roses which speak “to her of death. First the death of the man in the blue wings [Smith]. Now her own” (p. 198). When she gives herself to Porter, Morrison says, “In place of vanity she now felt a self-esteem that was quite new” (p. 201). Second, there is the jail episode, in which Pilate explains the reason that she has kept her white employers’ home into a kennel in recompense for their outrage of her dignity. Fragrant with ginger, she holds the keys to origins. Morrison applies the symbols with a somewhat heavy hand here, but one can accept them in the context of this other world. It is a magic realm, and perhaps more than Yoknapatawpha, it suggests the Macondo of García Marquez, whose work Morrison admires.12

Following Circe’s directions to the cave, Milkman undergoes archetypal trials. He crosses a broken stile, pushes through underbrush, wades a shallow creek—where he falls and goes under—and climbs to the hills (pp. 247-52). It is a difficult but not a dangerous trip. He is hindered primarily by ineptness and city clothes. He doesn’t gauge the depth of the creek accurately. An unseen footpath was there all along. Like Dante, and most questors, he seems to have to take the long way around to reach his destination. A salt taste in his mouth again signals the sea journey which leads to new life. Simultaneously, his thoughts turn to all the tired black men he has met and to the murderer of his grand-father. With new empathy and understanding, and allowing his body to do the physical job naturally, he arrives at the cave. There is no gold, but he has grown from his first major test. When he leaves, the pathway down from the hills, across the creek, and out of the woods is easy. Ravenously hungry, he eats berries which, though bitter, serve. His watch broken, he gauges time by the sun. He is learning to live on his own. The loss of his suitcase, further divesting him of the useless accessories of city life, concludes this section.

Pursuing the elusive gold that he thinks Pilate must have carried with her, Milkman pushes further south by car toward the home which Reverend Cooper said his grandparents left. As he goes, he now relates to the hills which were formerly just scenery to him. He feels self-directed and powerful. He finally reaches the village of Shalimar and here undergoes a major trial by which he is initiated into the community. He also learns for the first time that Guitar has been following him with murderous intent, apparently thinking that Milkman has absconded with both shares of treasure? South, of course, to his origins in this country. Milkman Dead heads for Virginia thinking he will find gold in the cave where Pilate and Macon preceded him. By plane, by bus, walking—ever more slowly, he travels. In Danville, a Reverend Cooper, who had “‘the call’” becomes his first encounter with real community. “‘I know your people!’” (p. 229), Cooper exclaims and tells him about his grandfather’s farm and his strength. Feeling pride, Milkman thinks, “Here, this here, is what a man can do if he puts his mind to it . . .” (p. 235). He realizes what he has missed. Cooper gives him directions to his real guide, named Circe, like Odysseus’ guide, who told him how to reach the lower world. Alone, Milkman takes a stony path to her house, emerging out of woods that seem a tunnel, a “green maw” (p. 238)—another womb image. The evil-seeming house reeks of animal smells, but also of ginger-root perfume. In the house, he ascends a spiral staircase to what appears to be a one-hundred-year-old witch at the top, surrounded by dogs with golden eyes. The scene is reminiscent of some of Faulkner’s decaying mansions, but it is more: Circe is a fairy-tale witch—wizened but with a young girl’s voice, capable of arousing Milkman sexually. She appears to be the mythic agent of retribution—an old black servant who is turning her white employers’ home into a kennel in recompense for their outrage of her dignity. Fragrant with ginger, she holds the keys to origins. Morrison applies the symbols with a somewhat heavy hand here, but one can accept them in the context of this other world. It is a magic realm, and perhaps more than Yoknapatawpha, it suggests the Macondo of García Marquez, whose work Morrison admires.12

Part II of Song of Solomon presents the adventure for which all the above events have been a preparation. Its components are recognizable, recalling both the myths of all cultures about initiation and the search for identity, and the specific African legends of flying men. When he answered his call to adventure, Milkman’s entry into the dark, cold interior of Pilate’s house suggested his passage of The Magic Threshold, which is the “transit into a sphere of rebirth.”11 After the first breakthrough, in Part II he enters upon a further series of initiatory trials in an unfamiliar world.

Into what unfamiliar land does this Northern, middle-class, nameless black hero go in search of a liberating
the gold. Before he can conclude his journey, then, he will have to prove himself double—within the group and in single combat with Guitar.

The community trial has two stages. Its first part is a fight in the general store. Milkman provokes the hostility of the men there by obtuseness and his ignorance of country ways. His casual discard of his malfunctioning automobile ignites their anger:

They looked with hatred at the city Negro who could buy a car as if it were a bottle of whiskey because the one he had was broken. And what's more, who had said so in front of them. He hadn't bothered to say his name, nor ask theirs, had called them 'them,' and would certainly despise their days, which should have been spent harvesting their own crops, instead of waiting around the general store hoping a truck would come looking for mill hands or tobacco pickers in the flatlands that belonged to somebody else. . . . He was telling them they weren't men. . . . They looked at his skin and saw it was as black as theirs, but they knew he had the heart of the white men who came to pick them up in the trucks when they needed anonymous, faceless laborers. (p. 266)

With a ritualized exchange of insults, they challenge him, and he accepts. In the fight with their champion, a knife and a broken bottle the weapons, he is wounded but demonstrates courage. It is enough to obtain him an invitation to that night's hunt.

For the hunt, older men take over the initiation rite from the youths. The names of the men—Omar, King Walker, Luther Solomon, Calvin Breakstone, and a giant called Small Boy—seem to indicate that Milkman has entered the circle of village elders, of poets, kings, and men of God. Though terrified and unskilled, he accepts and concludes that he has "stopped evading things, sliding through, over, and around difficulties . . . . Now he took [risks] alone" (p. 271). He is suitably reclothed and leaves his money behind to enter the "lessening light." Lost in the dark forest, he has to learn how to walk and see (p. 273). As the men climb upward to the high ground, Milkman is unable to keep pace—limping and hobbling as his short leg pains him. Wondering why he is in this place, he finds the answer. "Ignorance, he thought, and vanity" (p. 276). His maturation progresses as he ponders the need for responsibility to others and for sharing not only the happiness of others but their pain. "Under the moon, on the ground, alone . . . his self—the cocoon that was 'personality'—gave way. He could barely see his own hand, and couldn't see his feet. He was only his breath, coming slower now, and his thoughts. The rest of him had disappeared. So the thoughts came, unobstructed by other people, by things, even by the sight of himself" (p. 277).

Progressively divested of the old ego, Milkman has reached an essential core from which a new self can emerge. He is aware that "all he had started with on his journey was gone"—all those harping accessories to urban life. Out here, "all a man had was what he was born with, or had learned to use. And endurance" (p. 277). He notes with wonderment that the men and dogs speak to each other—"not [in] language . . . . [but] what there was before language. . . . And if they could talk to animals, and the animals could talk to them, what didn't they know about human beings? Or the earth itself, for that matter" (p. 278). For the first time he understands Guitar's love of the South but concludes also that something has maimed him—as it has all the victimized blacks there. Morrison causes the reader also to understand the internal scarring of all her characters.

To consummate Milkman's sense of unity with people and with nature, Morrison now describes his efforts to listen to the earth as he lies cradled by the tree roots. It is the earth that saves him from being killed by Guitar, for it tells him someone is behind him. He grasps the wire Guitar slips around his throat; but choking, he yields momentarily to death. This is important on two levels. Physically, his neck muscles relax, thus allowing him to breathe again. Symbolically, this metaphorical death fits him for the rest of the contest that he wins. Communal initiations customarily contain ritual elements representative of the divestment, wounding, and dying, that make way for new life. The anthropologist speaks of African and other tribal manhood rituals, the sociologist of "rites of passage" ranging from fraternity initiations to religious puberty ceremonies. Myths throughout the world tell of descents into the world of death. Milkman emerges from the hunt with laughter, exhilaration, and acceptance. "And," says Morrison, as the men leave the forest, "he did not limp" (p. 281).

The group share food and merriment at dawn in King Walker's gas station and skin the bobcat they have shot. As this ritual ensues, Morrison uses a moving counterpart, alternating description of the process with Milkman's memory of Guitar's earlier words at crucial times (pp. 281-83). She infuses the scene with meaning beyond the particular characters, and the parallels are clear. "'Everybody wants a black man's life,' " Milkman remembers as the men turn the graceful animal over. "'Not his dead life; I mean his living life,'" he says, as the men cut off the bobcat's genitals. Line for line a story emerges. Milkman sees that, for Guitar, the black man's "condition" is defined by the flaying and evisceration of the cat. "'What good is a man's life if he can't choose what to die for?'" underscores the fragility of externals as the transparent underskin tears, exposing the inner animal. The flesh slit by the hunters could be Guitar's or his victims' or both. He is, after all, externalizing his own "muder" in killing others. The remembered words are, "'Fair is one thing I've given up.'" As the body is further reduced, and the entrails cut out, Milkman remembers Guitar's defense of his criticism of blacks: "'Can't I love what I criticize?'" This question illuminates the mutual love of Milkman and Guitar themselves—antagonists and brothers.

It is clear too that the hunters love the beast they disect. The hunt is about love—Guitar and Milkman, the men and the cat, the participants and the community. The ritual culminates in the initiate's being allowed to lift out the heart. "'What else but love?'" he thinks. In response to his question as to what he should do with the heart, the men cry, "'Eat him!'" One recalls the ancient tribal rites in which hunters symbolically internalize the courage and other attributes of the prey by consuming it. In some instances the animal becomes a spiritual father to its killer. In any case, Milkman is clearly the victor. The hunt and the skinning bring knowledge—of Guitar, of the community, and of himself. As he receives his prize, a peacock, evidently no longer quite so weighted down, "soared away and lit on the hood of a blue Buick."

Additional rewards follow. Milkman receives his first hints as to his grandmother's identity, and mates with a natural "goddess" named Sweet. The latter incident implies
a new capacity on his part for a reciprocal relationship. It culminates in a joyous swim that suggests a baptism and his rebirth. He settles for a nearby spring, though he craves the sea. The clues allow him to find his mother’s relatives, appropriately named the Byrds, and he is then able to decode the children’s song which tells his paternal family story. He is, it seems, one of the descendants of Solomon, that flying African who did “go home” on his own power. As the pieces of the rhyme-puzzle fall into place for him, for the first time he feels deep regret for his treatment of Pilate and Hagar, and he understands his parents. He “recognizes” his father, his heritage, literally and figuratively.

The novel moves swiftly to an ending. Milkman rushes north bringing his treasure, the gift of knowledge, the universal hero’s boon, to his people. At home he must accept responsibility for Hagar’s death. Although he knows that Guitar’s avenging shadow is near, the trip is one of joy and maturity. Doubling back, he returns south, bringing Pilate to bury the bones of her father. At the hilltop place of burial in the climactic scene, the major symbols cohere and the final point is made.

First, as Pilate opens the sack of bones, “a deep sigh escaped from the sack and the wind turned chill. Ginger, a spicy sugared ginger smell, enveloped them” (p. 335). As Circe said earlier, the dead do not like being buried. The son of Solomon can rest now at this spot where his father leaped toward Africa. He will lie with the ginger smell, which speaks of home. Having placed the brass-box earring bearing her name as a marker, Pilate stands up, and the shadowing Guitar’s bullet, sent from the opposite hilltop, puts an end to her pilgrimage. Images of death and flight conjoin as circling birds dive down into the new grave, scoop up the name-bearing box, and soar away: “Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly” (p. 336).

Pilate has always had a knowledge of self which enables transcendence. Milkman takes his last step toward it as he invites a final contest with Guitar. The description here, as throughout the novel, operates on two levels—those of immediate reality and of symbolic import. ‘‘Over here, brother man! . . . Here I am!’ . . . Am am am am, said the rocks. . . . You want my life? Life life life life.” This hilltop is a place of echoes. “Brother” and “man,” commonly used by blacks as modes of address, join to affirm community and also to negate the long history of blacks being called “boys” and Milkman having been one. Significantly, Milkman thus declares to Guitar his brotherhood, manhood, existence, and life; and the rocks affirm his words. Responding and smiling, Guitar offers recognition: “‘My main man, ’ he murmurs, “‘My main man!’ ” With this acknowledgment of Milkman’s maturity, Guitar lays down his gun. Not seeing, Milkman offers his life to his brother, and the novel concludes: “‘You want my life? . . . You need it? Here.’ Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees—he leaped. As fleet and bright as a smiling, Guitar offers recognition: “‘My main man,’ “he

suggestiveness here in the symbolism. The air is almost always symbolic of the immaterial, of the soul, and of life itself. Milkman surrenders to it and to his brother, thus achieving a final expansion of consciousness. As the author says, death does not matter. It brings the deepest knowledge. Liberation and transcendence—flight, literal and figurative—follow the discovery of self.

Morrison’s protagonist, “Milkman” Dead, takes a mythic life journey from the infantile death-in-life conveyed by his name to a liberating maturity. To reach this end, he passes through a labyrinth of ambivalent forces with the capacity either to hinder or to facilitate growth. He obtains release from inhibiting parents yet also learns compassion for their pain. He grows to value correctly the unity with nature represented by the three loving women on Darling Street. From his friend-enemy Guitar, he learns the responsibilities of brotherhood. In order to go forward, he realizes, one must go back—examine the past rather than ignore it. Initiated into a real black community, he abandons false pride and atones for his errors in suffering. Releasing egoism, he attains rebirth into new life. Toni Morrison seems to tell her readers that Milkman’s flight may be duplicated by all who can abandon the frivolous weights that hold them down and, in so doing, ride the air.

NOTES

6Variants may also be found in Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes by the Savannah Unit of the Georgia Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration (Athens, GA, 1940) and in Mason Brewer’s American Negro Folklore (New York: Quadrangle, 1968), p. 309.
8Joseph L. Henderson and Maud Oakes, in The Wisdom of the Serpent: The Myths of Death, Rebirth and Resurrection (New York: Collier Books, 1963) provide, against the background of Jungian psychology, a useful anthology of myths and tales concerning the serpent.
9Guitar also suggests the archetypal double and, in Jungian terms, the “shadow” figure who is an objectification of an unconscious aspect of the human personality (see M. L. Franz, “The Process of Individuation,” in Carl G. Jung, Man and His Symbols [New York: Doubleday, 1964], pp. 168 ff.).
10Abraham’s concubine and the mother of Ishmael (see Genesis 16, 21-9.15).
12Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces, p. 90.