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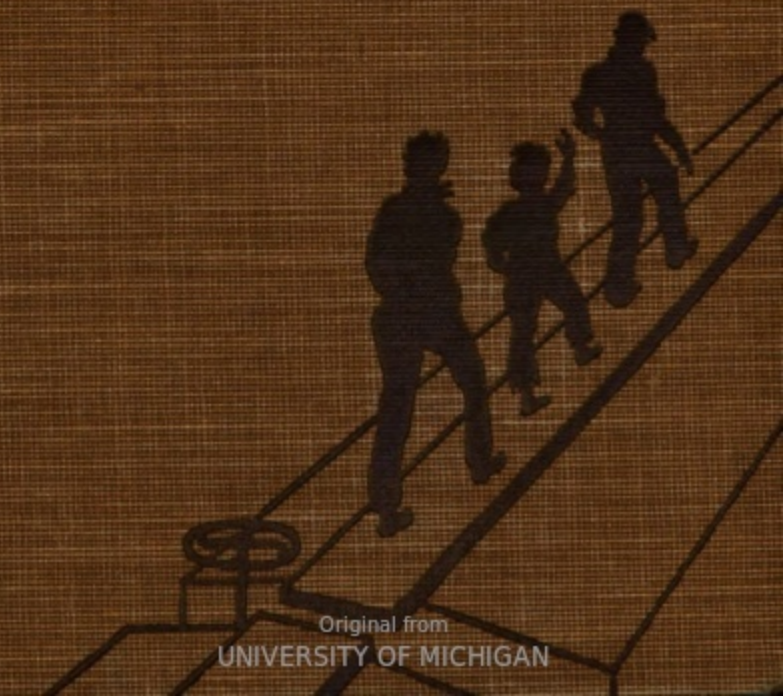

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THIS FIRST NOVEL by a young Negro discloses a fresh and amazing talent. At twenty-five, his feet dusty from wandering, William Attaway has brought to his publishers a book as poised, as perceptive, as honest and tender as many an older writer with a solid list of books behind him would be proud to claim. This is the story of Step and Ed, young men with no childhood behind them, no security before them; too young as yet to know complete despair, but old in the ways of hard, precarious living. Most of all it is the story of Hi Boy, a little Mexican boy of ten, who brought to Step and Ed a glimpse of unguessed integrities, who gave meaning to their lives. LET ME BREATHE THUNDER is that rare thing, a novel by a Negro about whites; a novel that reveals a powerful and objective talent at work upon the very fabric of life.

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WILLIAM ATTAWAY

LET ME BREATHE THUNDER

DOUBLEDAY, DORAN & COMPANY, INC., NEW YORK, 1939

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FIRST EDITION

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LET ME BREATHE THUNDER

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WE WERE SEATED in the doorway of a boxcar, legs dangling. The ground was speeding away beneath our bare feet and the fields swung in a semicircle around the doorway of our "hobo pullman." The little Mexican boy who was between Step and me yelled gaily at a cow tethered in a field:

"Hi boy, hi boy, hi boy, hi . . ." And the cow was gone.

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Step looked at me and laughed. The kid's high treble and singing tones always tickled him. I laughed with him just for the fun of it.

"Hi boy, hi," the little lad sang as we left a town behind.

"Ought to be in Seattle pretty soon," yelled Step, throwing his voice through cupped hands.

Boyish and full of friendliness for all things sounded the kid's cry again; we had just passed a farmer who had waved at us from his fields. Step reached over in mock anger and took the lad by the throat.

"Don't you know any other words?" And his grip became a rough caress.

The kid didn't know much more than his one greeting for the whole world: "Hi boy." We had just picked him up in New Mexico a week or so before, and all we had been able to get out of him was a few sentences:

"Family over there. . . . *Están allá, pero no*

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encontrarlos. . . . Los molestaría mucho . . . yo," he had said and pointed when asked about his folks. But this left us even more confused, for the pointing finger wavered this way and that until his people might have been in any three or four places in the Southwest at the same time.

"Sure, you're too young to be on the road," I had chimed in. He could not have been more than nine years old.

"*Mucha* trouble . . . run away *¡pronto!* Got ten dollars," he said.

"Ed, you know some Mex. What's it all about?" Step had appealed to me, but all my Spanish was on the listening end. I couldn't ask him any questions. What little I knew came from hearing the Spicks jabber around on the quays. The kid had not lied about the money, though. Step had it in his pocket now for safekeeping.

"Am on road now?" the lad had asked after passing the money to Step.

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"And how," was Step's answer, and he winked at me. We wanted to run out on him right away, but he was such a trusting little feller that we didn't have the heart. It was finally decided that he should go on to Seattle with us for a hot time.

It was a long trip but we always had more time on our hands than anything else, and distance doesn't mean a thing to a guy on the road. So because Seattle was a wide-open town, like it was just across the street instead of over a thousand miles away, we set out.

Step and me had been on the way to our regular summer round of the flat farm country before the kid came along, but the ten dollars changed our minds. We were just wandering handymen who never thought of work as long as there was a dollar to throw away in some city.

It was late afternoon when our freight pulled into the Seattle yards. The boy was asleep underneath Step's coat, for the day had turned cool. Step slapped

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at his shoes with the dog's tail he always carried and glanced enviously at my leather jacket.

"That tail's a hell of a thing to carry around."

"Almost in the home stretch," he said. "Time to wake up the kid."

"Whyn't you throw that thing away and get you a whole dog?"

"Butch wasn't just a dog."

"If that flyer had left the behind onto the tail, I suppose you'd carry that around too."

"He was mine, even if he was too dumb to dodge."

"He was my dog too, but that tail needs sun for awhile."

"This tail's luck," he said. "Luck and a smooth ride."

"Aw stuff, get the kid up," I told him. The train was slowly coming to a stop.

He shook the boy roughly and took the coat. Rubbing his eyes, the boy sat up.

"Put your shoes on. Time to bail out."

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Through half-opened eyes the little lad looked into Step's face.

"Hi boy," he whispered sleepily.

Step felt my eyes on him.

"Time to get the hell out of here," he said, and pushed the boy out through the car door.

The three of us crouched by the side of a switch engine, anxiously scanning the yards for road detectives.

"No snakes around."

We struck out across the tracks. Before us were the hazy lights of the town, clean and beautiful now; soon to show the dirty streets of the waterfronts.

"Let's go to Hamburger Joe's first."

"Okay," agreed Step.

Passing through a square at the skirts of the city, we were stopped by the sight of a little fountain.

"Race you." And we were off.

I was the first to reach the water, and after a quick

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drink I stepped back and began to tear off my clothes.

"Squirt the water on me . . . Squirt the water."

Step reached for the nozzle of the fountain, then he stopped.

"I say squirt the water," I cried. But there was something the matter with Step. The kid, too, had a strange look on his face. Suddenly I knew what the trouble was.

"Eee-ya, ee-ya!" we yelled, and did a war dance.

The lice were eating us up.

Throwing clothes right and left, half-hysterical with laughter, we swabbed each other down with water.

It was black night before we resumed our march on the city.

"Women or whisky? Women or whisky?" puzzled Step to himself.

"A beefsteak with mushrooms and onions," I exulted.

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"Smokes, cigars," said the kid gravely. He pulled hard on an imaginary cigar.

"Okay, kid," cried Step, "we'll all smoke cigars . . . big black cigars."

On the way to Hamburger Joe's we had to pass through the red-light district and Step wanted to stop in one of the underground dives for a drink.

"Aw, c'mon, let's eat first," I begged. But he had to have his drink, so we went down the steps to a little basement saloon. We were stopped at the door.

"Can't bring that kid in here," snarled the bouncer.

"Okay, okay," said Step, drawing up his chest, "you don't have to get tough about it."

We took the kid back to the sidewalk and placed him on the curbing.

"Stay right here, now," commanded Step. "We'll be right out."

"Hi, hi, hi, hi boy." The kid was calling to the passing automobiles.

I felt kind of funny leaving him there all by him-

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self, but I didn't want my buddy to think I was soft. I said nothing.

"A pony and two glasses," ordered Step, slapping the bar with the fat of his hand.

The whisky passed over the bar and we tried to toss it off without making faces. One round followed another. The hot coal in the pit of my stomach began to expand. I forgot about food. My image in the mirror across the bar grimaced foolishly at me. I grimaced foolishly back at it.

Step had drunk more than I had. His eyes were like quick snakes in his head. There was a woman seated at a table by the bar. His hot eyes settled on her and he walked the length of the bar to where she sat.

"Hello, sugar," he said thickly.

Evidently she didn't know much English, for she let out a stream of heavy Spanish phrases.

"Damn," said Step disgustedly, "a Spick."

"Sure, baby," said the woman.

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"Okay, okay," said Step, grabbing her by the arm. "Have a drink."

He ordered more whisky.

"Speak English? English?" Step asked.

"Sure, baby," said the woman.

"Talk to her, Ed," he told me.

"Aw, c'mon, Step," I pleaded, "the kid's waiting."

"What the hell's eating you?" he snapped. "You know well as me we got to ditch that kid."

I just looked at him.

"Jeez, he can't go around with us," he said. "They won't let him in a bar, and we can't take him in any of them places."

There was logic in what he was saying, but it still didn't seem right . . . it being the kid's money and all.

"We'll give him back a couple of dollars," said Step. "An' I call that being damn soft."

I didn't say anything else. Step was a bad person to cross when he was drinking. He had done a turn

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in the ring, too, and whisky always made him quick with his fists.

"Suppose we take this Spick broad with us. Save picking up a dame later."

"Naw, we can go to a house," I said. I was still hoping that he would think of the kid after he sobered up.

"One dame is the same as another." He patted the woman's broad hips. "Jeez, here's woman enough for both of us."

"Okay," I gave in. "But you're the guy that 'll have to get rid of the kid."

Gathering up the change from the ten dollars, he led the way to the door. With no urging the woman followed. Just before we reached the steps the bouncer stopped us.

"You goddam tramp," he told the woman, "we told you before we don't allow no pickups in here."

"Sure, baby," said the woman.

"Now hold it a minute," began Step.

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"You damn Spicks don't know a word of English when you get in a jam," said the man. "I'm wise to that stuff."

"I said hold it," repeated Step.

"That's all right, buddy," said the bouncer. "I ain't blaming you none. But she's been warned before in Spanish. She knows what I'm talking about."

"Sure, baby," said the woman.

"Just don't give a damn if we get closed up, do you?"

He hit her across the breast with the side of his hand. She fell back against the door, all her pain held, like a bitch dog, in her eyes.

"Sure, baby," she whimpered.

I tried to grab Step's arm but I was not quick enough. His clenched fist raked the bouncer's chin, and with the follow-through his elbow stabbed at the dazed man's eyes. A knee in the pit of the stomach left just a helpless dummy for the quick fist and elbow to cut to pieces. Step was like a mad-

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man. He did not try to knock the man down. It satisfied him to turn the bouncer's face into a mass of long red welts.

"Lay off, Step. Lay off," I yelled, but I could not hold him. The face began to turn into just a piece of pulpy meat.

The bartender sprinted around the bar and tried to help me save the bouncer. Step turned and struck savagely at us.

"Don't let him kill him," cried the bartender. "They'll close my place up if he kills him."

I picked up a beer bottle. There was nothing left to do. I couldn't let him kill a man. He had had to quit the ring because he went mad like this when he started hitting a man.

The bottle was aimed for the side of Step's head, but he moved and it caught him on the cheekbone. He went down like the cattle used to fall when I had that job polling steers at the St Louis stockyards. The bouncer was still on his feet. He would have

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fallen across Step if the bartender had not held him up.

"Get him out of here," said the bartender. "Better get him out of town too. This guy has a lot of friends. They won't like this."

I threw the dregs of some beer in Step's face and in a few minutes he opened his eyes. Because he looked up at me and smiled, I knew he was dead sober.

"You didn't have to hit me so hard," he said.

I helped him to his feet.

"The bottle slipped," I told him.

He still would not go without the woman. She had been crouched behind the door during the fight. It was easy to see that she was scared to death of him, but she went with us to the sidewalk. The Mexican boy was still seated on the curbing where we had left him.

"Hi, hi," he sang when he saw us.

We stood looking at him. The woman stood with

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us. Her eyes were dull lead in her face. She was an animal waiting for her master's mind that would be her mind.

"Okay, you tell him," I said to Step.

The kid sat with his eyes on us, unsurprised at sight of the woman. He was, probably, not the kind of kid to be surprised at anything. His attention finally wandered to the street again and his lips moved in a soundless "Hi boy, hi."

"Go ahead, tell him."

Step rubbed his face where the beer bottle had left a great purple splotch. His brow knitted in heavy thought.

"Didn't have to hit me so hard," he muttered absent-mindedly. He glanced quickly at the woman.

"Sure, baby," jerked from her lips.

"Look here, Sure Baby," he said. "I changed my mind. Go peddle your papers."

She looked, uncomprehending.

"I mean for you to scram . . . blow." He gave

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her a little shove. She got the idea and backed away a few steps. Then she stopped.

"Here, wait a minute," he said, and pushed a couple of bills into her hand. She was holding the money limply as we went away. I guess she never met anybody like Step before.

We did not go to Hamburger Joe's. We walked around the city. Step bought some frankfurters and a bag of rolls, and we walked along munching and saying nothing. Even the kid was silent. I was surprised when Step remembered to buy the cigars.

Late that morning we found a city park and settled down at the edge of a duck pond to wait for dawn. The kid fell asleep. Step took the lighted cigar out of the little feller's hand, snuffed it out and put it away. His jaw was paining him and he did not feel like smoking. The grayness that came at four-thirty found us there watching the ducks that kept up a riotous "ha . . . ha . . . ha . . ." and

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thinking that life was not so simple as it had been before we met Hi Boy.

"Get on your coat, we got to get going." That was how quick we left Seattle. It wasn't because Step was afraid of what the bouncer's friends might do, it was simply that a transient cannot afford to get into trouble. He insisted on us riding the cushions as long as we had money.

"You got to remember," he told me when I protested, "we ain't real hoboes. We're out looking for a job of work."

"But where we going?"

"Far as these tickets on the N.P. will take us, stupid."

"That ain't very far."

"All right, then, we'll jump a freight after that. There's a farm around the Snake River. Be plowing for wheat now . . . need good men."

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