ZORA HURSTON: A PERSONALITY SKETCH

The late Zora Hurston first swung into my orbit when she was a new graduate of Barnard College. About a decade later she was to swing out of the orbit of so many of us into a mysterious limbo of sustained silence. It required nothing short of her recent death at fifty-five to reveal her whereabouts.

She walked into my study one day by telephone appointment, carelessly, a big-boned, good-boned young woman, handsome and light yellow, with no show of desire for the position of secretary for which she was applying. Her dialect was as deep as the deep south, her voice and laughter the kind I used to hear on the levees of St. Louis when I was growing up in that city. As Zora expressed it, we "took a shine" to one another and I engaged her on the spot as my live-in secretary.

What a quaint gesture that proved to be! Her shorthand was short on legibility, her typing hit-or-miss, mostly the latter, her filing, a game of find-the-thimble. Her mind ran ahead of my thoughts and she would interject with an impatient suggestion or clarification of what I wanted to say. If dictation bored her she would interrupt, stretch wide her arms and yawn: "Let’s get out the car, I’ll drive you up to the Harlem bad-lands or down to the wharves where men go down to the sea in ships."

Her lust for life and food went hand in hand. She nibbled constantly between meals and consumed dinner off the stove and out of the refrigerator before the meal was served. "Sorry I ate all the casaba melon for tonight’s dessert, I was hungry for so many years of my life, I get going nowadays and can’t stop."

This was before her first book. Up to this time she had mentioned only vaguely her writing intention and ambitions.

One day after reading the manuscript a strange young man had submitted for my opinion, I dictated a letter to him. When Zora gave it to me to sign, she pointed out that she had added a final paragraph of her own, something to this effect: "I, the secretary, have also read your manuscript. I think better of it than Miss Hurst. Atta-Big-Boy!"

Rebuke bounced off of her. "Get rough with me if you want
results. I’ve been so kicked around most of my life that your kind of scolding is duck soup to me.” But after more and more of the same her gay unpredictability got out of hand. “Zora,” I exploded one morning after she yawningly announced she was not in the mood to take dictation but felt like driving into the countryside, “consider yourself fired. You are my idea of the world’s worst secretary. As a matter of fact, I think I should be your secretary. But you are welcome to live on here until you are settled elsewhere.” In the end she remained on for about a year, still in my employ, but now in the capacity of chauffeur. She drove with a sure relaxed skill on the frequent trips north, east, south, and west that we took together.

Uninhibited as a child, she had a subconscious fashion of talking to herself as she drove, expressing thoughts easily audible that ranged from gross vulgarities to florescence, from brash humor to bright flights of fancy and unsuspected erudition. A member of her own race, happening to cross in front of the car, was invariably the occasion for remarks provocative and revealing: “My, what a fine tail my cat’s got. But you’re not so light as you think. You are yellow, yellow.” Next a line from Wordsworth or Millay might come tumbling from her memory.

She once remarked to herself: “I want to put Carl [Van Vechten] in a book. The way he is. The way nobody but me, knows.” Then in song: “No one but God and me knows what is in my heart”; then spirituals for one mile, bawdy songs for the next.

An effervescent companion of no great profundities but dancing perceptions, she possessed humor, sense of humor, and what a fund of folklore! Although she seemed to have very little indignation for the imposed status of her race, she knew her people. Probably this insensitivity was due to the fact that her awakening powers and subsequent recognition tended to act as a soporific to her early sufferings and neglect.

On one occasion we motored to Eaton, Florida, her birthplace, the first incorporated Negro town in the United States. There we visited her deserted home, a dilapidated two-room shack that indicated what must have been deep squalor, even when its clapboards had been new. “Everybody in this town had the same chance to work themselves out of it that I did,” she observed. “But not your
talents," I countered. "Then let them use elbow grease for what they are fitted to do. I used it when I had to. I scrubbed and dish-washed. The world will treat you right if you are all right."

It was a vulnerable philosophy at variance with much of her splendor, for splendor she had. It irradiated her work and her personality, or perhaps that is putting the cart before the horse. It is probably because of her vividness, both vulgar and exquisite, that in her girlhood she had never known the pangs of discrimination, which can be even fiercer than those of poverty.

But regardless of race, Zora had the gift of walking into hearts.

Again she once said of her favorite, Carl Van Vechten: "If Carl was a people instead of a person, I could then say, these are my people." Considering her ragged and tattered childhood, this lack of identity with her race was surprising. But in spite of herself her rich heritage cropped out not only in her personality but more importantly in her writings.

Her book of folk tales, Moses Man of the Mountain, was written out of race memory, if such a thing there be; her autobiography, Dust Tracks on a Road, was the result of experiences conditioned by race. But she herself was a gift both to her race and the human race. That she died in poverty and obscurity was because for a decade at least she had deliberately removed herself from the large group of us who felt puzzlement and still do. Where lurked her ultimate defeat, ending in retreat? Why and how?

Despite her bright accomplishments, her books, including Tell My Horse (the result of her explorations into Haiti), Their Eyes Were Watching God, Dust Tracks on a Road, are Negro Americana, to the smell of fried chitterlings, which by the way she loved.

Yet the inescapable conclusion persists that Zora remains a figure in bas relief, only partially emerging from her potential into the whole woman. She lived laughingly, raffishly, and at least in the years I knew her, with blazing zest for life. Daughter of a combined carpenter and self-ordained Baptist minister, she sang with the plangency and the tears of her people and then on with equal lustiness to hip-shuddering and finger-snapping jazz.

Illogically, indeed incredibly, irresponsibility was one of Zora's endearing qualities. Zora late, Zora sleeping through an appoint-
ment, Zora failing to meet an obligation, were actually part of a charm you dared not douse. One spring, after she was earning with her pen and living in her own little apartment, she importuned me to consent to visit and address one of her classes at Columbia University where she was majoring in anthropology under Dr. Franz Boas. I agreed, and on the appointed day arrived at the University only to find it closed for the Easter holidays and Zora off visiting friends up-state. She was casual about it all and, strangely and uncharacteristically, so was I.

And withal, that recurring and puzzling trait, lack of indignation. On our excursions, we repeatedly encountered the ogre of discrimination. At hotels, Zora was either assigned to servants’ quarters or informed that they were full up. When I also refused accommodations, Zora’s attitude was swift and adamant: “If you are going to take that stand, it will be impossible for us to travel together. This is the way it is and I can take care of myself as I have all my life. I will find my own lodging and be around with the car in the morning.” And that was the way it was, although an ironic incident broke its continuity.

One hot August day returning from Vermont, we drove past a well-known Westchester County hotel. An idea struck me. Zora, in a red head-scarf and one of her bizarre frocks of many colors, looked hot and tired from a full day’s driving. At my sudden request we stopped before the Inn. “Do me a favor, Zora. No questions please. Follow me.” At the dining-room entrance I pushed ahead. A head-waiter appeared, his expression, when he saw Zora, as if a window shade had been drawn over his face. Before he could come through with the usual, “Sorry, everything reserved,” I announced, “The Princess Zora and I wish a table.” We were shown to the best in the room.

Following a good meal and some levity, Zora made a remark that revealed for an instant her mental innards: “Who would think,” she soliloquized as we resumed driving, “that a good meal could be so bitter.” Thus we must rest content with the memory of Zora, a woman half in shadow.

She lived carelessly, at least at the time I knew her, and her zest for life was cruelly at odds with her lonely death.
LIBRARY GAZETTE

But death at best, is a lonely act.
But to life, to her people and to people, she left a bequest of good writing and the memory of an iridescent personality of many colors.
Her short shelf of writings deserves to endure. Undoubtedly her memory will in the minds and hearts of her friends. We rejoice that she passed this way so brightly but alas, too briefly.

FANNIE HURST.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of Negro Arts and Letters Founded by Carl Van Vechten contains copies of all the published books of Zora Neale Hurston, the manuscripts of four of them (presented by their author through Carl Van Vechten), a number of other shorter manuscripts, and some letters. A checklist follows.

Books
THE YALE UNIVERSITY

York, J. B. Lippincott Company, 1942. 294 p. 21 cm. Author's presentation copy to Carl Van Vechten (gift of Mr. Van Vechten).

... Polk County, A Comedy of Negro Life on a Sawmill Camp ... By Zora Neale Hurston and Dorothy Waring. [New York] 1944. [166] leaves. 27 1/2 x 21 cm. Reproduced from typewritten copy. Gift of Carl Van Vechten.

Seraph on the Suwanee, A Novel ... New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948. 4 leaves, 311 p. 21 cm. Author's presentation copy to Carl Van Vechten (gift of Mr. Van Vechten).

MANUSCRIPTS

Book of Harlem. Typescript: 7 leaves.
The Chick with One Hen. Typescript: 2 leaves.
Dust Tracks on a Road. Pencil manuscript and typescript. Various paging.
The Emperor Effaces Himself. Typescript: 7 leaves (incomplete).
Harlem Slanguage. Typescript: 9 leaves.
Moses Man of the Mountain. Pencil manuscript: 172 numbered leaves.
Now You Cookin' with Gas. Typescript: 10 numbered leaves. 2 versions.
Tell My Horse. Pencil manuscript and typescript. Various paging.
Their Eyes Were Watching God. Pencil manuscript: 108 numbered leaves.

LETTERS

One letter to Harold Jackman. Gift of Mr. Jackman.
Eight letters to James Weldon Johnson, with carbons of Mr. Johnson's replies.
Gift of Mrs. James Weldon Johnson.
Seventy-three letters to Carl Van Vechten. Gift of Mr. Van Vechten.
One letter to Walter White. Gift of Mr. White.