

"I'm invisible!"

I was frankly kind of impressed that the guy would say something like this. I don't expect a homeless guy on the bus to say such things, strange and existential – an awl to the heart. It made me think -- *he understands his condition*. I thought about Ralph Ellison. The homeless guy looked around and repeated it yet again, as he looked around at the rest of us on the bus.

The bus driver turned, scowled, but said nothing.

"Hey, white man!"

Without thinking, I turn and look at the homeless man. Apparently, I'm not so invisible to him.

"What you doing here?"

Everyone on the bus is obliquely looking at me. I have to say something.

"I'm going to work," I reply, coolly.

"What you on our bus for?"

"I'm just going to work," I repeat, then turn away and look out the window at the old *Tele-Arts*. It was a newsreel theatre in my mother's time, but now it's been turned into some sort of swanky nightclub.

"Motherfucker on our bus."

"Shut your mouth," says the woman with the child in front of him. She's not sticking up for me, I know. She means that language in front of her child.

"Motherfucker."

Slowly she turns back to him, eyes like smoldering carbon. "You want to be invisible? I'll *make* you invisible."

She says it in that way that many black women have, that way that makes most anybody shut up if they know what's good for them. It certainly works on

me, not that I invite that sort of thing. I mind my own business. It's the only way to be when you're the only white person on the bus, *the cue ball effect*, as a friend of mine calls it.

The homeless man quiets down for the moment. We're further down Woodward now. I look out at the window at the storefronts, facades ripped off, gaping wide open into the street. They are being gutted for new lofts, many of them right across from the old J.L. Hudson's site, where the behemoth department store was imploded. It is now replaced by a giant new skyscraper built by a software billionaire.

When things like this happen, the world starts to pay attention. *Detroit is a city again! Back from the dead! Rising from the ashes!* They can see us again. We were always there, but transparent, the way you can see right through the exoskeleton of the Michigan Central Train Station.

To the rest of the world, Detroit was just a place where Japanese film crews showed up every year to photograph the house fires on Halloween Eve, a.k.a., *Devil's night*. Other than that, they hardly saw us. We didn't even show up on the city temperature listings on the Weather Channel.

Further up, through one of the construction sites I catch a glimpse of the old Statler-Hilton Hotel, once proud home of *Trader Vic's*. The building has been ignored for so long, the windows are no longer even boarded up. The Michigan weather is not kind to a man-made tropical oasis. Inside, columns of bamboo once seemed to shore up rattan-wrapped walls. Glowing blowfish and a native kayak hung from the ceiling, along with colored globes encased in fishnets. At the front door, where a stoic Moai once stood sentry, there is rubble. Long pieces of terracotta tile still surround the front door, ragged with metal mesh, depicting

the faces of Tiki gods, mouths contorted, faces squinched into impossible, pained grimaces.

A Tyree Guyton lavender polka dot has now been painted on the door. He of the Heidelberg Project, a block long art project composed completely of discarded objects: a gutted polka dot Rosa Parks bus, a backyard of vacuum cleaners, a tree of shoes. These dots appear on abandoned buildings all over the city. Cheery carbuncles that make sudden art of blight. What else can you do?

The story for *Trader Vic's* is much the same as the *Chin-Tiki* and the *Mauna Loa*. When the white folks disappeared from downtown Detroit at the end of the workday in the 70s, the clubs and restaurants foundered. The building is now slated for demolition, but it's been a ghost for decades. "Demolished by Neglect" as the preservationists like to say around here. They say it a lot.

I am chagrined to relate that I have been part of that demolition as well. One night, in a drunken Tiki frenzy, some friends and myself brought crowbars to this very site and ripped terracotta tiles from the façade of the building. No one was using them anymore, right? That's what we told ourselves. It was wrong, and I knew it. I think of my offense to the Tiki gods when I look at my filched tile, which now resides in my backyard. Shame on me, I say. Shame. Yet these agonies of all our pasts will soon be ground into dust in the middle of the night, the preferred time to demolish historic buildings here in Detroit.

Down one street, there is a sign on the side of a car wash: "HAND WASH TO THE GLORY OF GOD."

"Motherfucker on our bus," I hear the homeless man mutter. I really wish he would stop saying that.

We pass by more construction sites. Things are changing here. New buildings push out the grand old ones, like bullies in a big rush. When you go downtown at night there are people there now, suburban people, city people, doing things, spending money.

“White man! Why don’t you go back to Livonia?” says the homeless man.

I ignore him. Nothing bad is going to happen, for some reason I know this. Yet it alarms me when I hear a startled inhalation, a collective *huh!* roll through the bus. I turn to look at the invisible man and I see that he has dropped filthy trou and is displaying his penis to me and everyone else on the bus.

Frankly, I’m kind of relieved. An act of aggression, but a harmless one.

“I ain’t too invisible now, am I, motherfuckers?” he yells, waving his spotted peter at everyone on board. To be on the safe side, I clutch my thermos, figuring it will work well as a cudgel if I need to use it that way. Taunt me, yes. Piss on me? I don’t think so.

Still, it’s a relief when the driver pulls the bus over right next to a construction site, stomps down the aisle and tells the now very visible homeless man to walk his raggedy ass off his bus. *Right now.*

With great dignity, the homeless man pulls up his pants, turns and exits. When the pneumatic doors close behind him, there is only the smell of him left. The woman with the child looks sternly at me. She is holding her child closely, protecting him, her lips squeezed tight.

For a moment, I try not to laugh about what just happened, but just can’t help myself. She looks at me, puts a hand over her mouth, but soon her head is shaking and she can no longer hold it in. Everyone on the bus starts laughing. Up in the rearview mirror, I can even see the driver smiling.