

Excerpt from *The White Boy Shuffle*

Paul Beatty

ON ONE HAND this messiah gig is a bitch. On the other I've managed to fill the perennial void in African-American leadership. There is no longer a need for fed-up second-class citizens to place a want ad in the Sunday classifieds reading:

Negro Demagogue

Must have ability to lead a divided, downtrodden, and alienated people to the Promised Land. Good communications skills required. Pay commensurate with ability. No experience necessary.

Being a poet, and thus expert in the ways of soulful coercion, I am eminently qualified. My book, *Watermelonin*, has sold 126 million copies. I have the ear of the academics, the street denizens, and the political cabalists. Leader of the Black Community? There is no better job fit.

I didn't interview for the job. I was drafted by 22 million hitherto unaffiliated souls into serving as full-time Svengali and foster parent to an abandoned people. I spoon-feed them grueled futility, unveil the oblivion that is black America's existence and the hopelessness of the struggle. In return I receive fanatical avian obedience. Wherever I travel, a long queue of baby black goslings files behind a plastic wind-up bard spring-driven toward self-destruction, crossing the information superhighway and refusing to look both ways. If a movie mogul buys the film rights to my life, the *TV Guide* synopsis will read:

In the struggle for freedom, a reluctant young poet convinces black Americans to give up hope and kill themselves in a climactic crash 'n' burn finale. Full of laughs and high jinks. Some violence and adult language.

In the quest for equality, black folks have tried everything. We've begged, revolted, entertained, intermarried, and are still treated like shit. Nothing works, so why suffer the slow deaths of toxic addiction and the American work ethic when the immediate gratification of suicide awaits? In glorious defiance of the survival instinct, Negroes stream into Hillside, California, like lemmings. Every day they wishfully look heavenward, peering into the California smog for a metallic gray atomic dot that will gradually expand until it explodes some one thousand feet over our natural and processed heads. It will be the Emancipation Disintegration. Lunch counters, bus seats, and executive washrooms be damned; our mass suicide will be the ultimate sit-in.

They're all here, the black American iconographic array, making final preparations for Elysium approximately five hundred years after our arrival in this purgatory. The well-dressed guy who worked in the corporate mailroom and malapropped his way through your patronizing efforts to engage him in small talk wonders if he left the stove on, then laughs aloud at the absurdity of it all. The innocuous Democratic ex-mayor of your city writes mediocre elegiac verse without a nod to the absurdity of it all. That fine young black thing you drooled over in eighth-grade gym class struts up and down the block looking for one last world to rock. The woman who sat next to you clutching her handbag while you waited for the morning bus and then elbowed you in the solar plexus fight for a seat plans to call her boss and talk shit until the last minute, then put the receiver to the explosion, saying, "I won't be in to work tomorrow. I'll be a fuckin' evaporated carbon dustball. You slave-drivin' fuck."

Last week's issue of *Time* magazine identified me as the "Ebon Pied Piper." In *U.S. News & World Report* I was "the bellwether to ethnic hara-kiri." History will add my name to the list of maniacal messiahs who sit in Hell's homeroom answering to the Devil's roll call: Jim Jones, David Koresh, whoever led the charge of the Light Brigade, Charles Manson, General Westmoreland, and me. These pages are my memoirs, the battlefield remains of a frightened deserter in the eternal war for civility.