

University of Massachusetts Amherst

From the Selected Works of Nicholas Bromell

2003

The Block

Nicholas Bromell, *University of Massachusetts - Amherst*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/nicholas_bromell/6/

THE BLOCK

N. K. BROMELL

“YOUR house is on fire!”

I took another step or two with the words ringing in my ears but making no sense, maybe because the woman who had said them was herself named Mrs. House—Larry and Ronnie’s mother. She inexplicably had left the block and come to meet me on my way home from school.

“Your house is on fire!” she insisted.

I stared up at her urgent face, lean and thin lipped; the April breeze lifted her wisps of brown hair. Though her excitement strained toward me like a dog on a leash, I resolved not to be fooled.

“Your mama asked me to come meet you.” She fell into step beside me, her leg bumping my Roy Rogers lunch box. “She didn’t want you to be surprised by the fire trucks.”

But, when we turned the corner a moment later, I *was* surprised. Fire trucks, ladders, firemen, smoke. Our house *was* on fire.

When I turned and looked up at her, Mrs. House was already answering my unasked question.

“Eugene,” she explained. “That little nigger boy was playing with matches again.”

To judge by my own life, a boy’s second four years are the critical ones, the ones that determine who he’ll be and where he’ll go. My memory holds images of the earlier years—sharp images suffused with the meaning of figures in dreams—but until I turned four I seem to have been formless, fluid, ready to flow anywhere and turn into anyone. By the time I turned eight, I had become essentially the man I would grow up to be. The grain had been set in the wood. A direction of growth had been marked, saying “*That way, more or less.*”

© 2003 by N. K. Bromell

We lived, in those years, in a city in Virginia, in a row house made of brick, in a neighborhood I would much later learn to call “blue collar,” though “poor white” would be just as true. My parents were two decades ahead of history, gentrifiers in the 1950s, with the sensibility of the wealthy but the means of the lower middle class. My father was just starting a career in the foreign service—the CIA we would eventually learn—and, unable to afford a house in the smart neighborhood called “Old Town,” he bought one about ten blocks further south. Every weekend after breakfast he would gather his tools from basement and shed and go to work on a project—repointing the brick, remodeling the kitchen, tearing down a wall and replacing it with French doors, installing a fountain in our small backyard.

As children my brothers and I had to adapt ourselves to a world our parents, transplanted Yankees with degrees from Vassar and Yale, hardly knew. My mother recalls a morning when she stood shaking out a rug at an upstairs window, listening to me tell my friend Larry House all the things my older brother Hank had started to learn in the Robert E. Lee Elementary School, where he had just started second grade. “Before Abraham Lincoln,” I said, “you could buy slaves down at the five-and-ten.” *You* meant *we*, of course, though I was unaware of that at the time. Just as I was unaware that *slaves* were *them*, those whom my parents insisted we call *Negroes*, while to all our friends they were that word that named a hate: *niggers*.

We lived on a block, which for us was *the* block. *I’m going around the block to get some bread . . . Be home by five and don’t leave the block.* Those four sides, bisected by two alleys, were outwardly a rigid geometry of order, indistinguishable from dozens of other blocks in the same city. But, to the boys who lived there, the block was a world of curves and shadows, hideouts, mysteries, dangers, and endless hours of summer boredom. The side of the block we lived on was made up of brick row houses, each with a compact backyard. The opposite side of the block was all commercial, with a small grocery store on one corner, then Mendelsohn’s Hardware, then Co-

hen's Men's Clothing, then a barbershop; then I come to several blanks my memory cannot fill; then a bar, the door of which was always open and showed us the life of men drinking, smoking red packs of Pall Malls. Then came a Chinese restaurant, and then, at the next corner, the abandoned taxicab company we thought was haunted.

Turning that corner, the concrete sidewalk gave way to brick, and soon the brick frayed into dirt and cobblestones, and we had to stop skating and clomp along slowly with arms outspread for balance. At night, or as dark fell on a long summer evening, we were usually hurrying there. Beside the haunted taxi building rose an abandoned house that had caught fire years before. It stood windowless now, staring like a lunatic, filled with litter, human excrement, and empty half-pint whiskey bottles. Tramps slept there, our parents warned, and we must stay away after dark.

"Bobby Allen knew a guy who spent the night there, and when he came out the next day his hair was all white," said my brother Hank.

"That's nothing," snorted Ronnie. "I was walking by on the way to High's for ice cream last night, and as I crossed the street I could see a man standing in the window looking at me, and there was blood all around his mouth."

It could have been a July day, hot, and we could have been standing in the thin shade of the tamarind tree that grew between the alley and the empty house, doing nothing, sucking candy we had bought, looking for trouble we could get into, looking for something to happen.

There were just four of us: me and Hank, who was three years older, and Larry and Ronnie House, who were exactly our ages. Today you would recognize Larry and Ronnie if you leafed through a book of Walker Evans photographs. They were both skinny (all of us were skinny, wiry, all ribs and wrists) with high flat cheekbones and pale gray eyes. They were *real* southerners, a second slower to speak than we, as if they ran on different time, and they could insult or scare us just by standing there and letting us squirm in the grip of their long silent pause. When we had first moved to the block,

they had been our instant enemies, standing in the alley behind our yard and yelling insults and taunts over the wall. But after a couple of weeks of this, then of laughing and running away when we came into view, they had accepted us because they had to. We were their age, we were boys, we were white. And we lived on the block.

So together we used to circle the block, pausing here, pausing there, watching the traffic on King Street, calling out the names of the new car models as they rolled by, drifting through the cool inside Mendelsohn's Hardware, eyeing the bags of nails and spools of chain while Mr. Mendelsohn kept a watchful eye on us. Sometimes we'd split up, two of us going one way, the other two in the opposite direction, and when we happened to run into one another an hour later, maybe by the Coke machine in the vitamin store, we'd usually have something to report.

"Saw Billy from down Royal Street."

"Billy? What was that chicken doing on the block?"

"He was with his daddy. Buying some groceries."

"Say anything?"

"*Naw*. We went in there just to look at him, but he stuck real close to his daddy's legs. Didn't say nothin'."

"Figures," I sneered, knowing even as I said it that I'd never venture into the strange and hostile territory of another block without my daddy either.

After the burned-out shell of a house came a row of four tiny white cottages, each of them set back from the sidewalk behind a little picket fence and a cramped yard. Each was occupied by an elderly Negro woman, rarely seen except on Sunday mornings, when they all four emerged simultaneously, dressed in formal clothes and leaning on canes, and passed through their little gates and tapped their way up the sidewalk toward their church on some other block. They were very poor. Early Saturday morning, a truck stopped in front of their houses, and brawny men with huge tongs carried blocks of ice inside for their iceboxes. And yet from Ronnie and Larry we learned to be scrupulously polite to these frail

white-haired ladies, making southern time to stop our play for small talk, and *Yes, ma'am* this and *No, ma'am* that, all the while classifying them not quite as *niggers*—a word so burdened with meaning that Hank and I could never get to the bottom of it—but not quite as *women* or *ladies* either. Of these niceties of rank and manners, our parents knew little, and at a very early age we knew better than to ask them to explain.

“Don’t you kids go down there. There’s a whale in that basement down there.”

The policewoman, chewing gum, had intercepted us in one of our circular sweeps of the block just as we’d gathered round a rusty iron bulkhead in the alley behind King Street.

“Yes, ma’am,” said Ronnie.

I looked around at Hank and Larry, then up at the policewoman again. Her china-blue eyes were utterly humorless; she might have been writing out a parking ticket. I looked back down at the green bulkhead with its intricate geography of rust, imagining the whale, enormous and white, floating in the darkness of a flooded basement. Its tail flicked against one wall, its nose bumped the other. It was probably blind, I figured, from living all its life in the darkness.

That night we told our parents as they sat in our backyard, which my father had turned into a brick patio surrounded by shrubs and flowering trees.

“A *whale*?” he said, stirring the ice in his martini with one finger. “A whale in the basement?”

“Oh, I know,” said our mother, with a peal of her beautiful laughter. “She meant a well. There’s a *well* down there.”

“I was standing here last week,” said Mr. Mendelsohn, catching a breeze in the back door of his hardware store, “and I saw him walking home right there.” He pointed across the street.

We were talking about John Keller, the star of the George Washington High School football team, a fullback. He lived on an adjacent block, across Cameron Street, and thereby shed considerable glory on our block and on us.

“Two nigger boys jumped him as he passed the alley, and he just kind of shrugged his shoulders, and they flew off into the street. That’s how strong that boy is.”

Mr. Mendelsohn was fat and very pale. His hairy forearms were freckled from his wrists to his elbows. I wondered why he would tell such a story—it was inconceivable that two Negro boys would venture into our neighborhood and try to jump a high-school football player in broad daylight—but at the same time I had no trouble believing it, just as I believed there was a witch living in the old taxicab building and a maniacal hobo sleeping in the abandoned house and a whale in that basement. (Once it was lodged in my mind, I couldn’t expunge the image of its ghostly bulk or stop hearing the sound of the dark waters lapping its sides.) Stories were as much a part of the physical being of the block as the sky cut into thousands of triangles by the trees at dusk, or the tin garage doors against which our rubber ball banged loudly, hollowly, as we played stickball in the alley after supper.

Behind our house and all the other houses on that side of the block ran an alley that belonged, or so it felt, to us boys. Grown-ups walked on the sidewalk in front of the houses. We scouted through the alley behind them. Turning into the alley, we passed the fenced back of Larry and Ronnie’s yard. Sometimes we could hear their older sister playing Elvis records with her girlfriends, and once I climbed the scrawny plum tree that grew there and watched them dancing together, skirts spinning, to rock and roll. After about five houses, the alley widened into a kind of central open space, most of which was occupied by an old red barn. That’s where Eugene lived with his mother and little brothers and sisters. Beyond it were four cinder-block garages with corrugated metal roofs and doors. When those doors were open, we were drawn there like butterflies to milkweed.

Sixteen tons and what do you get,
Another day older and deeper in debt . . .

Booming out of the darkened garage, that song played on the radio all summer long. We would drift over the threshold, into the cool darkness where Bobbie Allen, the eighteen-year-old prince of our kingdom, was fixing up an old Chevy with two buddies of his. All three wore black jeans and white T-shirts; they rolled the sleeves of their T-shirts up above their rounded biceps and tucked packs of Pall Malls into the fold. Their arms and hands were always black with grease. They were always in on some joke, some conspiracy, and they laughed together at one-word jokes we younger boys could never get. Parts of the car were scattered across the floor of the garage.

"Hey, Nick, get me a Coke will you?" Bobbie held out a nickel, shiny in his black palm. He might just as well have been offering me a Congressional Medal of Honor.

"I'll get it," said Larry, cutting me off. And before I could object he had grabbed the coin and raced away.

We heard a lot of rock and roll coming out of that garage too, along with the names of bands and singers: Bo Diddley, Nat King Cole, Fats Domino. I loved the weight and feel of these names on my tongue—or rather on the tongue of my imagination, since I rarely dared to speak one aloud, terrified that I might misidentify a song or voice and call down upon myself the scorn of the pack. The names rolled in my mouth like marbles, and they spoke of palaces and princes and the glory of a name that was distinctive, like Galahad or Lancelot, whose stories our mother read to us in the evening, when the bells of the Catholic church a few blocks over rang vespers and from below rose the sounds—the slap of sneakers, the rattle of skates—of Ronnie and Larry still at play, allowed to stay up much later than we, allowed to stay up late enough to watch *Gunsmoke* at ten.

Bobbie worked at a nearby filling station during the week, and sometimes when we pulled in for gas he would be the one to come and pump it for us. There was always an embarrassment in these moments. We were with our mom or dad, and just three words in their accent—*Five gallons, please*—threatened to expose us once again for what we were: outsiders.

Yankees. And there was something about Bobbie's spotless uniform and deferential manners—*Anything else, Mrs. Bromell?*—that discomfited. Bobbie was supposed to be above all this, untouched by grown-ups and their power. There was something else as well, something that we couldn't name, a deference that had nothing to do with age, a distance that had nothing to do with our being Yankees, and our hearts lifted and our breath came easier when my mother restarted the engine and we pulled away.

Eugene's mother used to hang her laundry on a line that ran from one corner of her house to a branch of the tree that shaded the rusted shell of an abandoned car. Until the summer hornets made a nest there, we used the car as a kind of clubhouse. Two of the windows still rolled up and down. The roof sheltered us from a light rain. We'd climb in and eat candy, flick the radio switch back and forth in the never extinguished hope that maybe *this* time it would turn on and we'd hear Tennessee Ernie Ford's dark truck of a voice filling our ears. We'd smoke an occasional cigarette stolen from our parents—always *our* parents because Ronnie and Larry's parents would have noticed if one was missing from theirs. Or so Ronnie and Larry claimed. You could look up through the broad leaves of the tree and see the laundry floating like bright flags against the blue sky. You could hear Eugene and his brothers and sisters playing in their yard just ten feet away. They played games that were exotic and incomprehensible, involving complicated nonsense rhymes and claps and shouts. We sat with our heads tilted back against the bursting upholstery of the car seats, passing the cigarette, staring into the sky, and listening in spite of ourselves.

It was Ronnie who taught me how to ride a bike without training wheels shortly after my sixth birthday. Together we crossed the street to a smooth concrete sidewalk running the entire length of that block. (Behind a chain-link fence rose a large two-story brick elementary school attended only by Negro children. We and all the other white kids for blocks

around walked to the distant Robert E. Lee School, a modern low-slung affair with picture windows.) Holding my handlebars firmly, Ronnie ran alongside me, urging me to pedal. "Faster," he said. "Faster." His gray eyes were shining. His knuckles were white. Then he let go. "Keep pedaling," he urged. "Don't stop." As soon as my nerve failed and I started to keel over, he was there to grab the handlebars and keep me from falling. Back and forth we went, from one end of the block to the other. At each corner he paused to catch his breath, his ribs pumping up and down like a giant heart. By the time dusk had cast the whole sidewalk into shadow, I could ride by myself.

One afternoon about a year later Ronnie and I got into an argument about something. We were right in front of our house. I had always been afraid of Ronnie, not just because he was bigger and stronger, but because my older brother was too. Nonetheless, Ronnie and I got into a shoving match, the usual ritualistic *Oh yeah?*—shove—*Oh yeah*—shove—*What are you going to do about it?*—shove—and then he shoved me especially hard and I fell down hard on my bottom. Springing up, my mind blank with fear and rage, I swung wildly and landed right on his nose. We both stood stunned. Blood gushed over his mouth and fell in a stream from his chin to his T-shirt. He grabbed his nose and started to cry, and as he spun around to run home I spun in the opposite direction and darted like a squirrel up the nearby tree, a maple sapling planted optimistically by the town fathers.

One fine April morning, when Hank and I were at school, Eugene set fire to his house as he was playing with matches. Because the house was literally a barn, it burned rapidly and thoroughly. By the time we got home, heard the news, and tore out into the alley, the fire trucks had gone and nothing remained but a broad black smudge and jutting black embers that hissed when we spat on them. The fire had followed the clothesline to the tree that shaded our clubhouse, and several of its branches had caught fire before the trucks arrived. It looked comically undignified now, like someone whose hair

stuck out after a long night's sleep. The whole alley was different. Larger now. Empty. By the next spring the place where the barn had been would be covered with weeds and we would be catching deep fly balls where Eugene's mother had stood, clothespins in her mouth, hanging up her laundry.

As we returned to our backyard from the alley, our mother was waiting. "Eugene is going to stay with us for a few days," she announced, "while his mother looks for a new place to live."

Hank and I stood stock still, not daring even to glance at each other. Mom had *that* look on her face and spoke in the voice we'd long since learned would brook no opposition whatever.

"I want you to be nice to him," she went on. "Play with him. He's up in your room now."

And so we did. Upstairs, in the third-floor attic that was our room, Eugene was wearing a pair of my blue jeans and one of my flannel shirts, a mirror image of myself that made me jump. He had interested himself in our plastic figures of cowboys and Indians, and after a moment or two we were deep in play. Hank, being three years older, soon drifted off to something else, and Eugene and I remained crouched on the floor, taking turns shooting and dying, winning and losing, but playing in an eerie silence, without the running argument that was the usual soundtrack to the game.

That night at dinner our parents tried to engage him in small talk, and Eugene replied as any boy would—in polite monosyllables. Even these began to give me an inkling of his situation, of how much he had lost—all his clothes, all his toys, his yard, his ball, his baseball glove, his bed, his house. His brothers and sisters were all separated for the time being, living with friends and relatives. No, he didn't know where his mama would try to find a new place for them.

After dinner we stood side by side brushing our teeth, spitting into the sink. He slept that night on a couch in the upstairs room that served as what would now be called a tv room, except that the tv there did not work, had never worked, and never would work. The next morning Eugene

was still asleep when Hank and I, bracing ourselves, stepped outside for the walk to school. Ronnie and Larry and a few other boys from the neighboring blocks were waiting for us, as usual, on the corner.

They fell silent as we approached. My face burned beneath the impassive gaze of Ronnie's gray eyes. But to our surprise they said nothing. No *nigger lover* this or *Yankee* that—words we'd heard a lot of when we first moved to the block. The fact that Eugene was at that moment *in* our house was simply passed over. We started talking about something else and set off on the long walk to school.

Mrs. House took my hand, unasked, and instead of crossing the street we walked along the opposite block until we were directly across from our house and the fire trucks. Their ladders rose dramatically to the attic, in the side of which gaped a large black rectangle where there had once been a window. A fireman in a yellow slicker climbed out and started down the ladder. Other firemen were passing in and out of our front door. A deflated fire hose snaked up the front stoop and disappeared into the hall. I could see water flowing out of the house and down the steps.

"Come on to our house," Mrs. House said. "You all will stay with us tonight."

And so it was that for the first time in two years I set foot in Larry and Ronnie's. A prohibition of embarrassment—the same embarrassment we felt when we ran into Bobbie Allen at the filling station—had always kept us out of their house and them out of ours. But now here I was.

"Come on into the kitchen and have a snack," said Mrs. House. She was being nice, but I was still afraid of her. I knew her mostly as a voice over the fence yelling at Ronnie, bawling out Larry: *Get in here before I smack you. When your daddy gets home and I tell him, he's going to tar the living daylight out of you.* We had heard about their father's belt, the thick one with the buckle. As she spread Welch's grape jelly on a slice of bread, I glanced around.

Unadorned is the word, I suppose. What I experienced as

a six-year-old was a kind of horror of blankness. The sun poured in through every window because there were no curtains or shades, yet its intense light fell on no colors because there were none. There were no rugs on the floor. The linoleum was gray, the wood was gray. The kitchen table was covered by cracked white enamel. Chains of faded roses crisscrossed the torn and faded wallpaper. A Carling Black Label beer calendar hung on the wall beside the stove, and that was the only decoration I could see. There was something corpse-like about the pallor, something dead about the air that hung there (all the windows closed tight) filled with the smells of yesterday's cooking.

Mrs. House sat down opposite me and lit a cigarette.

"Can you believe it, honey?" Her tone exuded *I told you so*. "That little boy Eugene burns down his own house, and the very next day he's playing with matches again in yours. Burned your whole attic to charcoal." Smoke poured from her nostrils, and she shook her head with profound satisfaction.

That night we got to stay up late and watch *Gunsmoke* through a haze of cigarette smoke. Mr. and Mrs. House sat in matching armchairs of a kind I had seen only at the thrift store, where my mother sometimes shopped for clothes for us. Mrs. House smoked one Lucky Strike after another, breaking our silence occasionally to comment sarcastically on something in the show—the clothes a character was wearing, the words someone had spoken. From Mr. House came an air of deep exhaustion. He seemed ill at ease in our presence—not hostile but awkward, as if calling on a politeness that had grown stiff from disuse. They had no rules about homework, and after brushing our teeth, Hank and I got into Ronnie's bed, and he climbed into Larry's. Even in the dark, with all the windows closed, our discomfort was palpable. We needed the space of the sidewalk and the pathways of the alleys. To be easy with one another we needed to be *going* somewhere. For a long time we lay listening to each other breathe, to the muffled gunfire on television downstairs, to the cars passing in the street below. Where, I wondered, was Eugene?

We left the block about a year later, when I was halfway through second grade, and moved to Baghdad, where my father took up his first foreign posting as a second secretary in the United States Embassy. Our house had a flat mud roof and a wide verandah that overlooked the Tigris River, and beneath the dusty trees in the garden stood a large cage holding four magpies the previous tenant had tried to tame, then left behind. From Baghdad we moved to Amman, Jordan; later Hank and I were sent to a boarding school in Massachusetts. When our parents finally returned to Virginia, they sold our old house and bought a smaller one on the other side of town. Old Town.

Every once in a while, though, we'd drive by the old block and gaze through the windows at the world we were no longer inside of. We heard that Ronnie and Larry had moved, but we never learned where. One morning, after we pulled into the filling station where Bobbie Allen had worked (we heard he had gone to Vietnam), the pale young man who pumped our gas suddenly broke into a huge smile. His gray eyes shone with pleasure.

"Mrs. Bromell?" he asked hesitantly.

We all stared while an image came gradually into focus.

"Ronnie? Ronnie House?" He looked so *old*. Much older than Hank, who had started college and sat in the backseat with long hair dripping over his collar and *The Colossus of Maroussi* in his lap.

Our mother handled the small talk while we murmured and tried to smile back. Yes, Ronnie told us, washing our windshield, his family still lived in town. His daddy was fine; his mama had died. Cancer. Larry was fine, didn't see him much, though. The gas pump clicked. We paid. Ronnie just couldn't stop smiling, shaking his head with the wonder of it all. We rolled forward at last, and when I turned to wave out the back window, he was still standing there, still smiling. Eventually I turned and looked forward again, blinded by the sunlight caught in the web of water on the windshield. I was going somewhere down a street that suddenly had no features, even after the drops had dried and I could see again.