

Remembering that Day

The narrator remembers when, as a child, she forgot the poem she had to recite in front of the congregation. All she remembered was the first line : "What you looking at me for... ?"

- 1 "What you looking at me for...?
I didn't come to stay..."

I hadn't so much forgot as I couldn't bring myself to remember. Other things were more important.

- 5 "What you looking at me for?
I didn't come to stay . . ."

Whether I could remember the rest of the poem or not was immaterial. The truth of the statement was like a wadded-up handkerchief, sopping wet in my fists, and the sooner they accepted it the quicker I could let my hands open and the air would cool my palms.

"What you looking at me for . . . ?"

- 10 The children's section of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church was wiggling and giggling over my well-known forgetfulness.

The dress I wore was lavender taffeta, and each time I breathed it rustled, and now that I was sucking in air to breathe out shame it sounded like crepe paper on the back of hearses.

- 15 As I'd watched Momma put ruffles on the hem and cute little tucks around the waist, I knew that once I put it on I'd look like a movie star. (It was silk and that made up for the awful color.) I was going to look like one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody's dream of what was right with the world. Hanging softly over the black Singer sewing machine, it looked like magic, and when people saw me wearing it they were going to run up to me and say, "Marguerite [sometimes it was 'dear Marguerite'], forgive us, please, we didn't know who you were," and I would answer
20 generously, "No, you couldn't have known. Of course I forgive you."

- Just thinking about it made me go around with angel's dust sprinkled over my face for days. But Easter's early morning sun had shown the dress to be a plain ugly cut-down from a white woman's once-was-purple throwaway. It was old-lady-long too, but it didn't hide my skinny legs, which had been greased with Blue Seal Vaseline and powdered with the Arkansas red clay. The age-faded
25 color made my skin look dirty like mud, and everyone in church was looking at my skinny legs.

- Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten? My light-blue eyes were going to hypnotize them, after all the things they said about "my daddy must of been a Chinaman" (I thought they meant made out of china, like a cup)
30 because my eyes were so small and squinty. Then they would understand why I had never picked up a Southern accent, or spoke the common slang, and why I had to be forced to eat pigs' tails and snouts. Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil.

35. "What you looking ..." The minister's wife leaned toward me, her long yellow face full of sorry. She
whispered, "I just come to tell you, it's Easter Day." I repeated, jamming the words together,
"Ijustcometotellyouit'sEasterDay," as low as possible. The giggles hung in the air like melting
clouds that were waiting to rain on me. I held up two fingers, close to my chest, which meant that I
40. had to go to the toilet, and tiptoed toward the rear of the church. Dimly, somewhere over my head, I
heard ladies saying, "Lord bless the child," and "Praise God." My head was up and my eyes were
open, but I didn't see anything. Halfway down the aisle, the church exploded with "Were you there
when they crucified my Lord?" and I tripped over a foot stuck out from the children's pew. I
stumbled and started to say something, or maybe to scream, but a green persimmon, or it could
45. have been a lemon, caught me between the legs and squeezed. I tasted the sour on my tongue
and felt it in the back of my mouth. Then before I reached the door, the sting was burning down my
legs and into my Sunday socks. I tried to hold, to squeeze it back, to keep it from speeding, but
when I reached the church porch I knew I'd have to let it go, or it would probably run right back up
to my head and my poor head would burst like a dropped watermelon, and all the brains and spit
and tongue and eyes would roll all over the place. So I ran down into the yard and let it go. I ran,
50. peeing and crying, not toward the toilet out back but to our house. I'd get a whipping for it, to be
sure, and the nasty children would have something new to tease me about. I laughed anyway,
partially for the sweet release; still, the greater joy came not only from being liberated from the silly
church but from the knowledge that I wouldn't die from a busted head.

If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on
the razor that threatens the throat.

It is an unnecessary insult.

Maya Angelou, *I know why the caged birds sing*, 1969

Glossary	wadded up: <i>mis en boule</i>
	sopping wet: <i>trempe</i>
	to rustle: <i>bruisser</i>
	hearse: <i>corbillard</i>
	ruffles: <i>volants, dentelle</i>
	squinty: <i>qui louchent</i>
	persimmon: <i>kaki (fruit)</i>

Answer in clear, full sentences. As much as you can, write only one sentence for each answer.

1. Who is the narrator of the story and what is his/her name?
2. What do the words between quotation marks represent?
3. Describe how the narrator used to perceive the dress as "Momma" was sewing it.
4. What did the narrator hope the dress would do?
5. Pick 2 words or expressions that prove the narrator believed the dress had special powers.
6. How did the narrator perceive the dress once she wore it?
7. Using key words only (no sentences), describe the narrator's...

a) real physical appearance	b) imagined physical appearance

8. Who did the narrator blame for her physical appearance?
9. Why did she leave the church (page 2)?
10. What happened halfway down the aisle as she was walking her way out of the church?
11. "The sting was burning down my legs into my Sunday socks" l. 45, 46. Explain what happened.
12. What was she afraid might happen if she did not "let it go"?
13. Check the 3 emotions she felt at the end of the text as she was running home. Justify with elements from the text.

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> humiliation..... | <input type="checkbox"/> joy..... |
| <input type="checkbox"/> fear..... | <input type="checkbox"/> boredom..... |
| <input type="checkbox"/> envy..... | <input type="checkbox"/> relief..... |

Essays: Choose one topic (indicate the number) and write about 250 words (about 25 lines).

- I. Relate your most humiliating moment. Focus on how every detail made you feel.
- II. Children have the wonderful ability to create fantasy worlds to escape an unpleasant reality. What imagined life did you project yourself into when, as a child, you wanted to get away from real life?
- III. If you could change one thing about you, what would it be, and why do you think it would make you happier than you are now?