

#### IV. Drumsticks (age 10, 1952)

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* was published.

So here they were (seen in broad daylight  
not underground and now striding south  
of Harlem's limits breaching the boundary set,  
97th, where the train tracks emerge, scouting  
the guilt of the Avenue marching in protest

strutting right under the awnings, passing  
the uniformed doormen gilded for service,  
sedate as the awnings (dark grey or blue),  
poised to hail taxis for businessmen leaving  
their cloisters of wealth, leaving their wives

who would saunter out later none of them  
needing to study their very own skins (so pale!),  
though some of them knew they were wrongwhite,  
Jewish, not Anglowwhite),

this phalanx of teens, the three of them wearing  
I have forgotten what never saw their blur  
from a block away saw them, between me  
and my building knew I couldn't make it home  
*but you will not see them on this Avenue*

*where (and how) we live* before something  
might happen, so I tried to act normal  
like a nocolor boy, invisible, not afraid of  
Negroes or teens or both, hoping for a tame  
or not-encounter, just a nod of the head

their eyes pushing my face back, as if they owned,  
*droit du seigneur*, the Avenue, or me — or were owed  
the whole stretch of Avenue, and I owing  
now — whatever they asked, and one of them  
now barking out from the three of them

(that I played at my school on the snare-drum,  
brought home each day for practice)  
and didn't shove me, but gave me *I said*,  
another chance:  
*give me your drumsticks*, "boy"! and I shaped

me with strikes, hits from my drumsticks, or stomp  
me. But only robbed, because I was younger  
and wrongcolor (and they right there on a lark,  
my home street, *their street also, further north*),  
no one nearby to witness my unrights

and shame. And then, on the very longest of all  
the thousand gliding elevator rides  
up to the eighth floor, not daring to tell  
my mother of that skirmish, how somehow  
I lost my drumsticks down there on the street

(*notmyfault*), there on the far-below street,  
as she sometimes made catty slurs about  
“the Negroes” that made me blanch, or shudder  
that she might say such things again, and wonder  
why she’d given me those books on heroes

in revolt (Harriet, skull-smit; that man who taught)--  
the small parade that marched through my mind  
all the way to free soil, one way or the other,  
as if their children’s children, some who swaggered  
down the Avenue now, had gotten smirched  
more blackly when or because

*I didn’t understand it*

they fled north,  
and lived among us but not close by  
but is *their kind so different that she acts*  
*sometimes as if they’re beneath*

*dirt, and if*

*they’ve been shut apart from human rights, or ours,*  
*could she please tell me why we still sing*  
those songs she taught me, *the ones by Stephen Foster*  
*she loves to play at the piano, with all*

*their sweet darkeys*

*“longing for de’ old plantation”?*