

The Stars Through My Window

By Blaise Zerega

A response to Ishmael Reed's "Lady Stardust"

The tenement across the street where I grew up was a triple-decker with six units and each one had a porch. Five of the apartments were occupied by Portuguese boatbuilder families. The sixth, top floor upper right, was rented by a very nice lady, a real saint named Joan, her alcoholic husband, and their developmentally disabled son, Steve, who was about my age. On hot summer nights, Steve's father would move his black and white tv to their porch to watch the Yankees. He kept a green recliner out there and he would settle in with a big glass of ice and a jug of vodka.

Through the open window by my bed, I gazed across Dubois to the flickering tv. It was too far away to really see the action, but the volume was loud enough that I could hear Phil Rizzuto call the games. I shared a room with my brothers and if they were still awake, I would repeat-whisper the Scooter's Holy Cow descriptions for them. The window by their bunk beds faced the side of a building and only I had a view of the tv across the street. Its sputtery silver light was my very own starry night, one where the constellations were named Reggie Jackson, Catfish Hunter, Thurman Munson. That season though, this little corner of my universe would end before the playoffs.

Many times, I had watched Steve's father drink and slump into his chair, the tv still on. I'd stay awake until the game ended and in the morning the recliner would be empty. Mrs. Ferreira told my mother that Joan was determined to keep up appearances and not have her

husband asleep on the porch when the other men in the building were heading to work at the shipyard.

One August night, my brothers conked out early. I'm not sure why but we were very tired. Steve's father was still sitting up when I rolled over and closed my eyes in the sixth inning.

A few hours later – the middle of the night, Joan shrieked and woke me. I pressed my nose against the screen and watched her shake her husband's shoulders and slap his face three, four, five times. The tv was still on. My brothers had not stirred. Lights throughout the building came on. Some of Joan's neighbors stepped out to their porches and stared. An ambulance came right away, lights flashing, no siren.

The tenement had a narrow central staircase with a window on each landing and too many turns for a stretcher. I rubbed my eyes and followed the paramedics' progress down the three floors. One had his hands under Steve's father's armpits, the other grasped his bare ankles. His feet looked impossibly large—the toes too long, the soles too wide— for such a skinny man. His head lolled forward, backward, side-to-side, and then back again, the very definition of deadweight.

Joan and Steve did not move away as Mrs. Ferreira said they would and a couple of months later, the Yankees played the Dodgers in the World Series. My brothers and I listened to the night games on a transistor radio, my bedroom window open to the dark.