

Joyce Wilson

On Finding a Letter from Paul Laurence Dunbar to My Grandfather

I hardly knew my grandfather at all.
He died when I was just beginning school.
Reserved, owl-mannered minister, his rule
Was golden and with God, who made “the call.”

I was astonished by the poetry
That arrived among his many books
And the title with that word, the “lowly,”
Tucked in at the bottom of the box.

The *Lyrics of the Lowly Life*. Really?
The Browning, I could see, a set of four,
Leather bound and underlined assertively.
The Paul Lawrence Dunbar held something more.

With it, I found a letter tucked inside
The cover, folded once, then three times back,
The perfect place to keep a note, to hide
The message, typed in blue, then signed in black.

Addressed to my grandfather in detail,
The text expressed how much his fine oration
Had moved the poet — its communication
Having traveled safely through the mail —

So that he showed the contents to his friends,
Who were delighted with his eloquence,
The stand he took, and that the sermon lends,
To capture both the soul and heart at once.

It did not matter — far as I could tell —
That the name had been misspelled “Henry”
When my grandfather’s name was spelled “Harry.”
Some trust emerged as hesitation fell.

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At letter's end, things made another turn,
When Dunbar typed "With best wishes and deep
Regret," crossed out "regret," and penned a neat
"Regards" to best express his real concern.

That year, Dunbar was only thirty-one,
A poet, well respected and well known.
Tuberculosis stalked him for its own.
He must have seen the hurdles he would run.

My grandfather, that year, was also young,
Enrolled at Baker University,
Preparing for the Methodist ministry.
In many ways his life had just begun.

Six years apart in age and differences, they met.
What led the ailing poet to observe
The spark behind my grandfather's reserve?
How much can I construe through signs typeset?

And my grandfather? Was it out of duty
That he read plantation dialect?
Did mastery of craft gain his respect?
I sense he was beholden to the beauty.

I don't know how my grandfather replied,
Or even if he did, but marvel now:
He kept this letter like a lover's vow,
Companion to the verse, until he died.