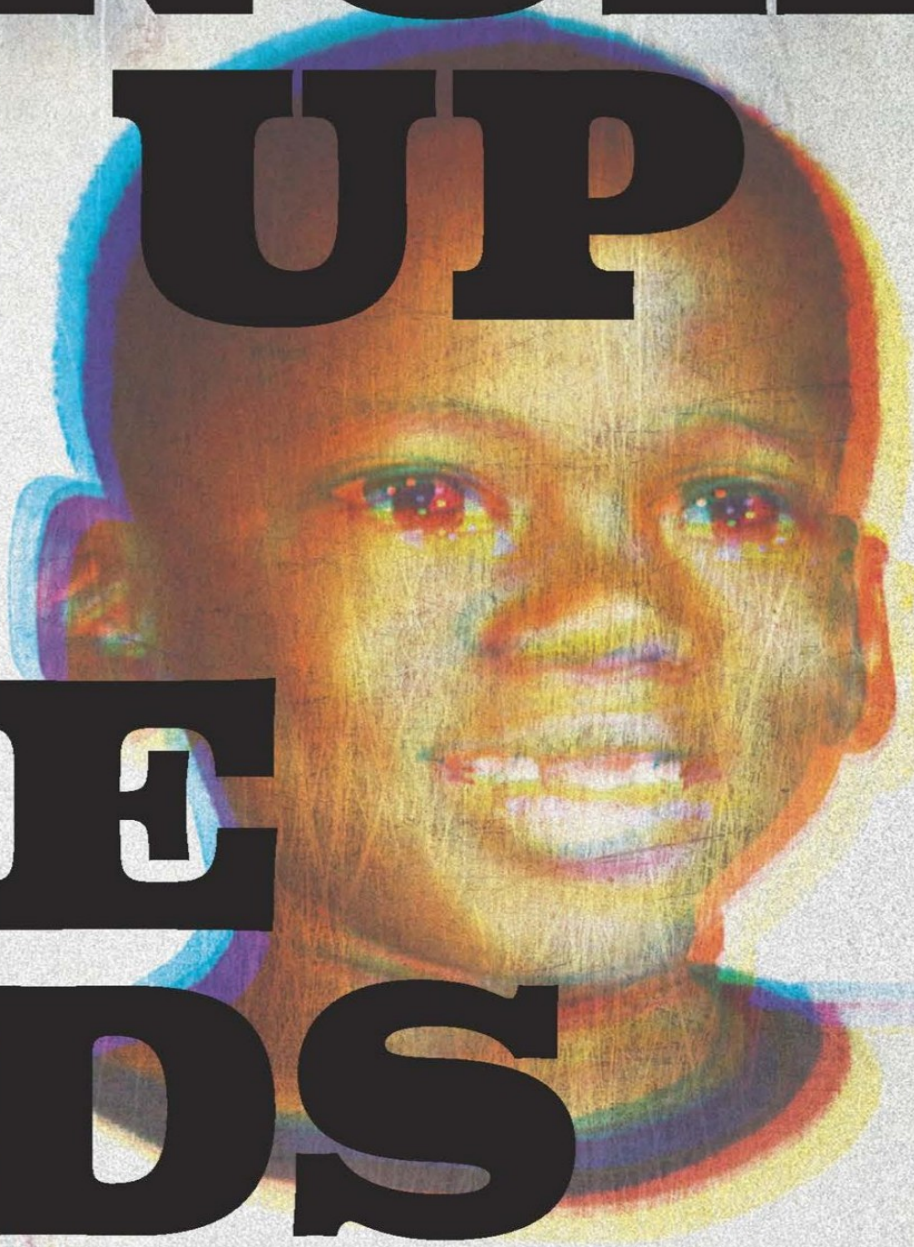


**UP UNCHED  
ME UP  
TO  
THE  
GODS**



**A MEMOIR**

**BRIAN  
BROOMER**



**PUNCH  
ME UP  
TO THE  
GODS**

**BRIAN BROOME**

*Houghton Mifflin Harcourt  
Boston New York*

2021



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The author has changed the names of some of the people portrayed in this book.

*To Brother and Sister Outsiders everywhere.*



# INTRODUCTION

by Yona Harvey

James Baldwin's gifts as a writer were evident and well documented by the time of his memorial service in New York City on December 8, 1987. On that day, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and Amiri Baraka went on record to convey how Baldwin, as a man and as an artist, made them feel. Each of these legendary writers exalted Baldwin in their own way; but the common thread was one of feeling loved by Baldwin, of loving Baldwin as their brother, and, most essentially, of being seen by him. Baldwin, after all, was a mirror for Black artists, for Black intelligentsia, and for the everyday Black American experiences that would inspire generations to come. Morrison said in her tribute, which was excerpted later that month in the *New York Times Book Review*, "I have been seeing the world through your eyes for so long, I believed that clear, clear view was my own."

Indeed, Baldwin's vision impacted not only Morrison, but countless others who recognized themselves and their struggles in Baldwin's language. "We all react to and, to whatever extent, become what that eye sees," Baldwin wrote in "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," for *Playboy* magazine in 1985. "This judgment," he continued, "begins in the eyes of one's parents (the crucial, the definitive, the all-but-everlasting judgment), and so we move, in the vast and claustrophobic gallery of Others, on up or down the line, to the eye of one's enemy or one's friend or one's lover." The fear of judgment Baldwin named is older than the Bible. Brian Broome's debut memoir, *Punch Me Up to the Gods*, brought this fear to the surface in riveting detail. I recognized in this book Broome's ability to hone that dreadful eying of our nonconformist behaviors, which were maligned as flawed and erroneous—whether wanting to stay inside and read rather than go outside and play, preferring dolls to trucks (or vice versa), or the genuine inability to *behave* as others insisted we do. This predicament was especially tough for those of us who knew our

disobedience would have consequences ranging from the minor—our favorite things taken away for a period—to the major—being bullied, physically or verbally abused, or, in some instances, being kicked out of the house. *Punch Me Up to the Gods* reminded me that Baldwin’s “vast and claustrophobic gallery of Others” was not often comprised of strangers, but of people in close proximity whose affections we coveted, of people who, for better or worse, we envied, admired, desired, relied upon, and frequently loved. We wanted to be loved beyond judgment, without having to conform. With tenderness, devilish wit, and the most gorgeous prose this side of the Ohio River, Broome renders these relational complexities as persistent and grounded, with few escape hatches, which make them difficult to dismiss.

As adults, the gallery’s composition may change, but complex ideas of intersectionality, politics, race, gender, and identity risk being misunderstood, distorted, and outright falsified—even among artists. Even in chosen families, relationships can feel euphoric and everlasting at one point, only to feel combatant and fleeting in another. Consider James Baldwin and Richard Wright or Ishmael Reed and Amiri Baraka. Consider visual artist Faith Ringgold’s infamous critique of her daughter Michele Wallace’s book *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* and every Black critic and writer who weighed in on that intergenerational debate. *Punch Me Up to the Gods* reminded me that sometimes the trouble has less to do with the truthfulness of our multidimensional narratives, and more to do with “who pays what for speaking,” as Audre Lorde put it.

Reading *Punch Me Up to the Gods* revealed that my concerns about judgment were also about nagging doubts and insecurities, Baldwin’s “all-but-everlasting” hang-ups and imperfections, which I’d rather not expose publicly. As a young college student in the mid-to-late nineties, I must have absorbed some of the vitriol and backlash against memoir writing. I certainly recall being a poet in an MFA program, attending writers’ conferences, and hearing disparaging words spoken about the so-called sham of creative nonfiction threatening the livelihoods of *real writers* and criticizing the genre’s *godfather*, Lee Gutkind. People hated the word “creative,” I’m guessing, because it implied for them something untrue or invented. The nineties did not seem to me a great time for folks to be all up in their feelings. Luckily, lasting literature has a way of bending time.

*Punch Me Up to the Gods* does this. Broome’s unsentimental, unapologetic recollections of the past—some of them cringeworthy—

liberate us to view our pasts as well. He is not a self-help or tour guide, but someone offering a portal to his hometown. Broome doesn't aim to coerce or convince us of anything. It is as if I was there too. But I have room to process for myself—without intrusion, without judgment. Reading this memoir was more like listening to Broome's stories on a drive in the dark in which the conversation ebbed and flowed, high and low. He revealed one disappointment or another and then, like a seasoned stand-up comedian, delivered the anodyne punch line, which made me think as much as laugh.

Broome doesn't wait for the materialization of the perfect self, which—spoiler alert—never happens. *Punch Me Up to the Gods* unearths the mysteries of Broome's longings and perceived shortcomings—the need to be accepted, to be loved, and to feel desired persists. It's that persistence, that sense of ongoingness that carried me page after page, like a good friend will do, leading with candor, sidesplitting humor, and charm. It's that ongoingness which made space for contradiction and error. Writing openly about growing up “dark-skinned” in Warren, Ohio, and feeling at odds with his body, Broome opens the door to overlooked vulnerabilities, to a conversation about the hurts of colorism that seemed less prevalent in literature authored by Black men. “*If I'm a work-in-progress,*” it seems to say, “*then who am I to judge? I'll make space for you.*” It says the damaging slights and wounds of racial discrimination, family secrets, and heartbreak need not be overcome completely in a single, tidy narrative. What a relief. Because would we even trust a book that claimed to do that?

In his foreword to *Romare Bearden: His Life and Art*, August Wilson recounts the day he stood outside Romare Bearden's Manhattan loft “daring myself to knock on his door.” Wilson telegraphs his life-changing experience of encountering Bearden's work at the age of thirty-two and, twelve years earlier, Bessie Smith and the blues. It's an homage to Bearden, but also a testament to the power of art, its ability to challenge us, to transform our relationships, and to sharpen our perceptions of the communities in which we grew up: “I was, as are all artists, searching for a way to define myself in relation to the world I lived in. The blues gave me a firm and secure ground. It became, and remains, the wellspring of my art.” The images in Bearden's exhibition catalog, *The Prevalence of Ritual*, helped Wilson translate the blues aesthetic to the narratives of his award-winning plays: “What for me had been so difficult, Bearden made seem so simple, so easy. What I saw was black life presented on its own terms, on a

grand and epic scale, with all its richness and fullness. . . . I was looking at myself in ways I hadn't thought of before and have never ceased to think of since." The narrative Wilson aimed to produce was also inspired by Baldwin. For Wilson, that narrative was the one "that sustains black American life."

To that end, reading *Punch Me Up to the Gods* feels like assemblage—the remnants of internalized judgments and accumulated hurts quilted together. The humor and shamelessness offered warmth. Broome was that friend talking and laughing *too loudly* as some have accused us, but with a narrative completely uninhibited by the fear of outside critique. It's hard to imagine Baldwin ever being out of fashion or criticized for similar examinations because, for so many of us, Baldwin never went away. But he was in fact critiqued for positing "love" as one possible solution to political upheaval. Eldridge Cleaver accused Baldwin of self-hatred. And in a 1998 review of Baldwin's *Collected Essays*, edited by Toni Morrison, then *New York Times Book Review* editor Michael Anderson scorned a "near-frenzied gratitude" for Baldwin's work in the early 1960s and in the 1990s which, in his estimation, suffered from an unexamined nostalgia by readers of Henry Louis Gates' generation. Even as a Black male editor, Anderson disparaged Baldwin's recurring themes of the troubled relationship between father and son and American racism. According to Anderson, Baldwin had lost his audience after 1964 because America had "moved forward." Considering the Black Lives Matter movement, however, Baldwin's skepticism of America's racial progress seems more prescient.

Fortunately, a new generation of writers can seek and find themselves in print and digital platforms beyond the *New York Times* and now in *Punch Me Up to the Gods*, which resists accusations like Cleaver's and brings to mind again Baldwin's "vast and claustrophobic gallery of Others." For some of us, it manifested in a chant heard whenever siblings or cousins disobeyed instructions to go to the store and come right back, damaged the living room furniture, spilled or broke something they had no business messing with: "You gon get in trouble," we said—the last syllable of the word, trouble, drawn out several seconds. Before reading *Punch Me Up to the Gods*, I hadn't thought about that singsong chant in years. "You gon get in trouble," I whispered above the pages, as if I were seven years old, fearing adult wrath and disapproval. Reading Broome's words at first was like worrying about a favorite cousin getting yanked by his neck because of

a comment spoken too loudly, the too-true sentiment exasperating and embarrassing a parent or elder, though they'd never admit it. As children, we knew there would be consequences for our alleged grievances. And in adulthood, there's fear of the memories and, very often, of the telling and how we might be judged. We are somehow expected to keep our hurts and shortcomings private, even as they threaten to suffocate us. I didn't want Broome to "get in trouble," to be harshly judged. But I felt defiantly excited by the sheer audacity of what he wrote, the deceptive ease and shrug of it—not pained or confessional, just the facts of his life, that steady tension between content and delivery (often humorous), threading the bobbin of this incredible book.

Gwendolyn Brooks praised Baldwin because he "dared to confront and examine himself, ourselves, and the enigmas between," which is a skill of great artists and scholars. The Pulitzer Prize-winning poet also called Baldwin "love personified" in her formal introduction of him at the Library of Congress less than a year before Baldwin died. Would Baldwin have written more essays like "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood" if he felt he had permission? My own "frenzy" for Baldwin's work is, of course, for Baldwin's language and sentences, but also the content of those sentences, the flashes of the father bubbling to the surface, the prophetic readings of American hypocrisy, and the utter frustration with what poet Douglas Kearney has called "the changing same," riffing on Amiri Baraka's *Black Music* essay, "The Changing Same: R&B and New Black Music." Similarly, the themes in *Punch Me Up to the Gods* are timeless, undeniable, and, yes, recurring. It's the kind of writing for which we turn to nonfiction again and again.

What does Broome's eye see? There is something specific and tragic about that resegregated, 1980s Ohio locale—both physically and emotionally. Too much hinged on the whims of white people and their children. Even the ones who claimed to "like" you sometimes proved unreliable and disloyal—especially beyond the school grounds. Broome reminded me of the early frustrations of daring to trust others—especially of another class and race—and the hurt of having that trust trampled or betrayed in a region where creative and social outlets were so few, of the suffocating and limited choices for black expression. *Punch Me Up to the Gods* will take its well-earned place among the narratives of Black masculinity because it enriches and complicates those narratives through its

art and through its refusal of Black macho stereotypes. It is written in the tradition of great nonfiction, but also with the fluidity and experimentation that contemporary memoirs and personal essays lend themselves to. This was a realm in which Baldwin flourished, though his critics didn't have a working language for what he was doing. *Punch Me Up to the Gods* offers a new way of seeing what will influence Black readers and writers for many years to come.

Black artists and scholars have relied upon and been sustained by literary conversations across decades. Steven G. Fullwood, founder of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture's In the Life Archive, understood the importance of coming-out books being published each year. Every generation possesses its unique variations of ease or difficulty in so doing. In an interview with Sheena C. Howard, he also notes that despite the Schomburg having a huge collection of queer life materials in poetry (no shortage there) and fiction (gaining on the poetry), the nonfiction works were lacking. He recognized trends in publishing and archival preservation and tracked what was missing. The "explosion of culture" and queer organizations in the 1960s and '70s was crucial, though Fuller found that "nobody knew about them unless you lived in New York or Philadelphia or DC or somewhere out in California or possibly Atlanta."

Like Broome, naivety and optimism landed me in Pittsburgh. As a writer of Not-New York and Not-California, I cherish Broome's attention to Black life in the overlooked parts of the Midwest and regions like Pittsburgh, where we have managed to write and mature as artists. Pittsburgh native August Wilson ultimately never knocked on Bearden's door. But his ten plays known as the *Century Cycle* are a testament to Bearden's work and the ability of artists to commune across time and space through their creations. They affirm the notion that no matter where we escape, the imprints of our birthplaces and hometowns shape up. These imprints and all of the regrets and longings accompanying them have sparked some of the most memorable and lasting works. *Punch Me Up to the Gods* is written with that same spark. Broome's memoir revisits the hurts, hilarities, and discomforts of coming out in imperfect Ohio, the temporary rest after narrow escape. I'm grateful for his friendship and for his watchful eye, the one aimed not only at the absurdities of others, but the one turned inward at his ongoing self. When reading *Punch Me Up to the Gods*, the impulse wasn't to compare Broome and Baldwin. The feeling, rather, was one of joy

for readers and writers in the life expanding with this book in their hands. The feeling is one of joy in acknowledging Baldwin's legacy and Broome's inheritance—one, perhaps, neither writer could ever have imagined.

## **We Real Cool**

THE POOL PLAYERS.  
SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOVEL.

We real cool. We  
Left school. We

Lurk late. We  
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We  
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We  
Die soon.

—GWENDOLYN BROOKS



# THE INITIATION OF TUAN



I am standing at a bus stop in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, on the Black end of town. It's a hot but overcast summer day. To my left is a young man mesmerized by his cell phone. He laughs out loud periodically while staring into its depths, then his thumbs fly like hummingbird wings over the keyboard. He is dressed like all the other young men around here, in the newest iteration of "distressed" jeans, with stark white tennis shoes and a shirt with a sports logo emblazoned across the front. I notice him only because a little boy wearing an almost identical outfit in miniature is circling around and around his feet like a toy train. The toddler, who is doing all the things toddlers do with their newly found feet, pitches forward with full force onto the sidewalk, enormous toddler head first. The women around me gasp and so do I. Some of them take halting steps toward the boy. Pearls are clutched while we wait for the young man, who I assume is the boy's father, to pick the boy up and tend to him. The boy's wails are high-pitched and earsplitting.

The child's name is Tuan.

"Shake it off, Tuan," the young father says, glancing briefly down at the boy and then turning back to his phone. Tuan sits down on the sidewalk only to howl more loudly. The women around me shift their eyes from the child to the father and back again. Their worried looks are digging deep creases between their brows. They exchange disapproving glances with one another. The boy's screams are now

rattling his voice box and his mouth is open so wide that his little face appears to be tearing itself apart.

As I watch the boy sitting on the sidewalk, I try to remember what real crying feels like. I can't. I can only remember the tactics I employed to try to suppress it.

Tuan's father picks the boy up off the ground and places him on the bus stop bench before turning back to the flickering lights inside his phone. Tuan has no interest in shaking it off.

"Be a man, Tuan," the boy's father says out of the corner of his mouth, eyes steady on the phone. Tuan has no interest in being a man, and his screaming continues. Tuan's father kneels down, grips the boy by the shoulders, and looks him straight in the eyes.

"Stop cryin', Tuan! Be a man, Tuan!"

When I was a boy, I used to sit on the back steps of our house after an ass-whuppin' because, afterward, I was always commanded not to leave our yard. My father would wander out after a long while with his head down and the same hands he'd used to just whoop my ass shoved deeply into his pockets. Instead of letting the screen door slam as he usually did, he would close it carefully. He knew he had let his temper get the best of him and so he would come out, weighed down by a remorse he was unable to express with words. He'd just sit down next to me and quietly look off into the distance. He'd fish out his packet of Winstons, place one between his lips, use both hands on his lighter to light it, and exhale a thick cloud of ivory smoke. For a little while, he and I would share a silence that was occasionally broken by my hiccupping sobs and sharp intakes of air. Sometimes he would come out bearing gifts: a Popsicle or a candy bar that he'd hand to me wordlessly while still looking out on the back yard. And we'd sit there until he couldn't take listening to my sopping-wet whimpering any longer, and he'd command me suddenly as if he'd just woken out of a dream.

"Stop cryin'. You done cried enough. Stop cryin' right now."

I would stop immediately.

As Tuan's father's voice becomes louder, demanding that the boy stop crying, all I want to do is pick the boy up to make sure he's alright. I can't explain it. Something to do with his tiny shoulders

being held in a vise-like grip by the very person he needs tenderness from in this moment. Something about the unaddressed ache.

And I realize that this, what I am witnessing, is the playing out of one of the very conditions that have dogged my entire existence: this “being a man” to the exclusion of all other things.

As Tuan’s father publicly chastises him for his tears, I remember how my own tears were seen as an affront. I remember how my own father looked at me as if I was leaking gasoline and about to set the whole concept of Black manhood on fire.

Stop crying. Be a man.

My father’s beatings were like lightning strikes. Powerful, fast, and unpredictable. He held his anger so tightly that, when it finally overtook him, the force was bone-shaking. He punched me like I was a grown-ass man. He went blind with rage and just punched with all the strength of a steelworker. It never took more than one to lay me on my back, windless. Then he would dare me to get up. I never did. When he punched me in the stomach, my flesh engulfed his fist. When he caught me in the chest, I could swear I heard ribs crack. His punches to my head rocked it back on my shoulders so violently that I momentarily lost vision in one eye. This is how he meted out punishment for the offenses of not listening to him, for talking too slick, or for “acting like a girl.”

I close my eyes at the memory and, in my mind, drop down to Tuan’s perspective. I see things through his eyes. I am looking into the angry face of the man who will teach me how to be in the world. I cannot understand his words, but I can see his furrowed brow and feel his hands imploring me to stop feeling what I am most definitely feeling. Stop feeling fear and pain. Tuan’s father is telling me to tuck it away somewhere where no one can see it. To be ashamed of it. It’s the age-old conundrum. Black boys have to be tough but, in doing so, we must also sacrifice our sensitivity, our humanity. I can feel his urgency and know that my body has done something wrong.

Tuan’s wailing begins to subside, like a police siren fading into the distance, until he is silent. When he is, his father stands up, turns away, and begins once again to gaze into his phone. But back on the bench the boy’s face is still contorted into a mask of pain and confusion. His lips are stretched out over his teeth and no sound

dares escape his mouth. His breath comes in short bursts. His whole body is occupied with the act of suppressing. Fists clenched. Body taut. Eyebrows knitted in total concentration. He sits this way until the bus arrives and his father stands him on his feet.

I board the bus behind them as I'm drawn back to my boyhood lessons in disaffectedness, nonchalance, and hollow strength. It was a never-ending performance that I could not keep up to save my life. And when I failed consistently, there was never any shortage of people around to punish me for it.