OF LOVE AND DUST

I suppose every writer has been asked, sometime or another, how did he happen to write that novel or that story? If he were a playwright—how did he happen to write that play? The poet, how did he happen to write that poem? The musician, how did he happen to write that tune? What was its origin—what started the artist on his way? Is it autobiographical? Did he hear someone else tell the story first? Did he read it somewhere?

I don’t know when the idea of "Of Love and Dust" came into my mind—I really don’t know. But here are a couple of things which led up to my writing it. My hobby is collecting records, when I have the money. I collect jazz records, popular music, folk music—and blues—especially the rural blues of the Negro. I was listening to one of Lightnin' Hopkins records one day, titled, "Mr. Tim Moore's Farm". (Lightnin' Hopkins is one of the great folk and blues singer of this country—and someone whom I consider a great poet.) I was listening to his "Mr. Tim Moore's Farm" one day, and I remember one of the verses going something like this: "The worse thing this black man ever done, when I moved my wife and family to Mr. Tim Moore's farm; Mr. Tim Moore's man never stands and grin—say if you keep out the graveyard, nigger, I'll keep you out the pen." (Lightnin' Hopkins is from Texas, and he was singing about a farm he knew in Texas.)
Now, a period of about ten years passed between the time I first heard that record and the time I started writing my novel, "Of Love and Dust". Here is another thing that happened to me about that same time, give or take a couple of years. I was visiting some relatives in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, I think about 1958, and a friend of mine and I went to a bar out in the country. This is the same Parish in Louisiana that Rap Brown comes from, this is the same Parish in Louisiana that James Farmer, in 1963, had to escape from a lynch mob by riding in the back of a hearse as a dead man. My friend and I went to this bar, and in this bar I saw a fight between two young men. This bar is surrounded by sugar cane fields, and most of the people who come here are from the country or from small towns not far away. They come to drink, they come to dance, they come to gamble, they come to fight, they come to steal your woman, they come to steal your man. Some of them come, knowing they'll probably end up and jail that night; they come, knowing they might get cut or even shot at. But they come. They come to forget the hard work in the field all week. They come to forget the cheap mechanic job, the shoeshine job, the janitor's job, the dishwasher's job; they come to forget, to forget, and to forget. And they will accept whatever fate is waiting them. If nothing terrible happens, then the night has been somewhat of a success; if something bad does happen, then these things are expected in a bar such as this one. So it was here that I saw the knife fight between the two young men. Fortunately for both, the fight was stopped before either was fatally wounded.
Now, when I saw this fight, just as when I heard the record by Lightnin' Hopkins, I had no idea that either event would lead me into writing "Of Love and Dust" or writing anything else. As I said, it was a period of eight or ten years between those events and the time I wrote one word of the book. During that time, I wrote at least four other novels—only one, "Catherine Carmier"—was published. I wrote at least two dozen short stories—of which six were published. Now, it was Spring, 1966. I had very little money, I had practically no money at all. I had been spunging of my friends for drinks, and I had not bought one drink for them in over a year. I had not given my poor mother a birthday present, a Christmas present, or a Mother's Day present in over two years. And neither had I given my girl anything in about that same amount of time. I needed money, I needed money badly, but I didn't want to go out on an eight-hour-a-day job that would take from my writing; I wanted to get money by my writing, my writing only. Now, if that was the case, I had to get something done. There had to be another novel in me somewhere that a publisher would accept. But where was that novel—where was it?

I don't know how the idea from Lightnin' Hopkins record got back in my mind. Maybe I heard it played again—I really don't know. Or maybe I remembered the incident in that bar when I went back to Louisiana for Christmas, 1965. Anyhow, in Spring of 66 I got started on the book. I started with these two ideas—"Mr. Tim Moore's man never stands and grin;
say if you keep out the graveyard, nigger, I'll keep you out the pen"; that, and with the fight between the two young men in the bar. So, all right, I had two ideas—but where do I go from there? I started racking the brains again—where do you go? where do you go? where do you go?

Then, things began to fall into place.

I was born on a Louisiana plantation in 1933, and left from there in 1948. (The Novel takes place Summer of 48.) But during those fifteen years, I had learned a lot about plantation life and about the people who lived in that part of Louisiana. I knew that Mr. Tim Moore's man whom Lightnin' Hopkins sang about didn't necessarily have to be an overseer on a farm in Texas, he could be a Cajun overseer on a Louisiana plantation. I knew that my young man in the bar could have landed on that plantation if he had killed that other boy in the knife fight. So I had him kill the boy, and I had the owner of the plantation bond him out of jail. (I won't tell you why he did this, I want you to buy the book and find out.) But bonding a Negro out of jail after he had killed another Negro and putting him to work in your field was a normal thing in the Forties. Some of our best Southern gentlemen did it. This sort of thing was still going on in the Fifties—and as late as 1963 when I was in Louisiana, a friend of mine pointed out a black youth to me who had killed another black youth, and who had been bonded out only a few days later. The only catch here, when the prisoner, the convict, found himself bonded out of jail, was that he usually spent almost twice as
much time on the plantation than he would have spent in the penitentiary. Many times he found himself working just as hard, and maybe even harder. And there was nothing he could do about it—because the day he decided to run, the white man was going to put the sheriff on his trail again.

So, I brought my young killer to the plantation. I knew the kind of house he would have to live in—I had lived there fifteen years myself; I knew the kind of food he would eat, I knew the kind of clothes he would wear in the field, the work he would have to do, the people he would come in contact with day in and day out. So I had a good starting point. But was that enough? Where would things go from there? What am I going to do with my young killer? He's no plantation worker, he's not even a country boy, he's from Baton Rouge. He's a playboy, he's a lover, and he hates authority—especially when this authority is given out by a Cajun—whom he considers White Trash. So what am I going to do with these two people? I have two people on my hand who will never, can't ever get along with each other—what am I going to do with them? Well, let's see now, my young killer is going to be here five, seven, maybe ten years of his life. He will need a woman—yes, yes—he will need a woman—and she will be my third character. Now, he must start looking for that woman—but he doesn't want just any woman, not he, he wants the most beautiful woman on the plantation. But when he finds her, he finds that he can't have her. And why? Because she's the overseer's mistress.
"Oh, God," my boy moans deep down inside of him, "there's something rotten in the State of Louisiana. How can this be? What are they trying to do to me? I was born in—no no born, never say born—I was invented by this rotten society—the fathers of this society knowing all the time that when I grew up, I would end up in that bar among those cane fields, knowing all the time once I was there I was going to kill that other black boy, knowing once I did I would be slammed into a jail cell for a night, knowing that one or the other of them would bond me out, knowing that I would be put on one of their plantations to work out my time, knowing that I'm a man of passion and will need a woman—and here, the only woman I want, the only woman that appeals to me at all, is owned by the man who dogs my trail day in and day out. What is a man of my passion to do—kill this man as I did the black boy? No, I can't kill him. To kill him would mean my own death—he's not that black boy. That black boy was just a nigger—but this man is White, and now all rules are different. There must be some other way to get even, there's got to be some other way for me... I have it; I have it; he has a wife, hasn't he? Yes, he has a wife, and what I've seen of her, she is lonely. Well, overseer, we'll both play the same game, because I know you would rather I slapped your face than look at your woman. Well, sir, I won't only look at her, but someway, somehow, I'll take her. I'll kiss clown for her, stand on my head for her, walk on my hands for her—then I'll take her, and I'll take her with all the viciousness that you and men like you have forced into me. Yes, overseer; yes, my country—yes, yes, yes...\"
But what my young killer doesn't know is that this White woman wants him to take her. For she too wants revenge on that husband who sleeps with that Black woman when he should be sleeping with her. She doesn't want herself a Black lover, now, that's not it at all—she wants trouble between the two men, and maybe her husband will be killed. But why does this particular White woman wants this Black man to help her destroy her husband? There are other White women of the South who know that their husbands have in the past and who are now sleeping with Black women, and they aren't seeking revenge: why does this one want revenge?...

When the first shipload of Africans were brought here 350 years ago, they were not looked upon as human beings, but as animals to work the field. The White overseer in the Southern fields had the right to do whatever he wanted to do to the Black man or with the Black woman. If he beat him, crippled him, or killed the Black man, in many instances, little or nothing was done about it. He had as much freedom as he wanted with the Black woman. She was not considered human (or if she was, at a very low level) so he used her as he willed. Rape?—No, it was not he raping her, but she raping him. Because the mind—the mind of those in power look at a situation and make that situation what they want it to be. So when the Black woman gave birth to a half white child, it was said by White America that it was not the overseer who had raped the Black woman, but that it was the Black woman who could not resist the overseer's beauty, his charm—his acquiline nose, his blue eyes, his straight brown hair—and therefore she raped him.
Raped this poor defenseless overseer while her husband stood by. Some times the husband even helped. And their reason was this, they wanted to lighten up their blacker race. Of course, now, this was the opinion of White America—never, never the opinion of Black. Their opinion was quite different, but they were not in power. The power belonged to the Whites—and the Whites had to give this reason. Because once they admitted to themselves that the White man did find interest in the Black woman, then they had to admit that the Black woman was a human being and that slavery was wrong, and the sub-human position that they forced her race to be in was wrong. "So, let's say she raped him," they said. "Let's say it and say it and say it. Let's say it so much that we'll still believe it three hundred and fifty years from now. If this were not the case, How else could they possibly stand to see their half brothers walking by the gate, hungry, half naked, and not offer them bread or clothes? How else could they stand to see their husbands' half Black children and not hate their husbands?—Wouldn't they hate their husbands, even leave their husbands if these children were White and belong to another White woman? How else could they look in the face of their half Black cousins, half black nieces, half black nephews every day of their lives and not feel some kind of pity? There defense was this, this was their defense: It was not the Black woman who was raped, it was the poor White man. Poor Papa, poor Brother, poor Uncle Clem who were raped—and it was just too damned bad that those little half Black creatures were there as a result of the Black woman's animal passion.
Now, let us say that one little White Woman feels differently. Maybe she feels differently because she does not have all up here—but still she feels differently. She knows for certain that her husband not only looks at that Black woman as a human being, but he looks upon the Black woman as someone superior to her. Now, what does she do? She can't go out and tell White Society that she's jealous of a Black woman. They would laugh her out of the community. They might even commit her to the insane asylum for even suggesting such a thing could possibly happen. So what does she do? Well, according to Gaines, she runs away. But she does not get very far before the husband brings her back. She runs away again, she runs away several times, but each time that she does, the husband brings her back. (Not because he loves her, mind you, and she knows this; he brings her back because he needs her in that house. He needs her there because he cannot bring that Black woman there, because Society does not allow it. Society says no, never. Society takes him by the shoulder and leads him to the side and says, "Now, listen here, boy, we told you over three hundred years ago what she is and how you s'pose to treat her. We gave you the right, then, to take her—slam her down on that ground and get your fill—and to forget her till you needed your fill again. Now, maybe in them three hundred years, she's advance a little toward our human level, but she's far, far, boy, from being fully human. And you got to wipe it out your mind that she is... Now, listen, boy, listen. Let me talk to you like Father to Son. We can't let this kind
of thing happen. If we let you and that Black woman live like two human beings in this country, we go'n have to let that nigger boy and your poor little old White sister live like humans, too. Now, boy, I'm sure you don't want that, now, do you? And if that don't curdle your blood, boy, look at it this way. What would happen to our politicians in Washington, who can only survive because they keep races apart? I ain't speaking only for the White politicians, boy, the Black ones, too—they want it that way. Now, you don't want all them politicians out of work now, do you? What else can they do—think now, now think—what else can a politician do but keep the races apart? Think about the realtors, Son. What go'n happen when they try to sell one of them old beat up houses to a nigger and your poor little White sister? You know what that nigger go'n say? He go'n say, 'Y'all must be crazy. I ain't paying no double for them old beat up houses no more—for me and my little White sugar baby here.' You see, boy; you see how you would completely destroy our way of living? Please listen to me, boy, because if you don't, if we find you serious about that Black woman, we go'n have to destroy you. White man or no White man, boy, we just go'n have to get rid of you.' . . . So my little White woman knows why her husband keeps her there—not that he loves her—he keeps her there because Society will not let him bring anyone else in. Now, since she can't get away, and since Society won't believe her if she tells them her husband has interest in the Black woman, there's only one thing left for her to do, destroy him. And who does she seek to help her?—my young killer. . .
So now they come together—no love for each other at all—
not even hatred. They come together to destroy that White
man whom this Society has forced to hurt both of them. But
then, something unexpected happens when my two young villans
meet. They/that there's something about each other which they
have not found in anyone else. They find that it's no longer
important to hate that White man, now; the only important thing
is to find ways and time to love each other. All this viciousness
that was in my young killer's heart, all this revengeness in
my young woman's heart has flown away—and has been replaced
now by love...

But what about Society? Let's not forget Society, for
Society is still out there waiting. Hasn't it warned my
overseer over and over and over—hasn't it told him that if
he kept on feeling that that Black woman was fully human, that
eventually his little White sister (in this case his wife) was
going to feel the same way, too? Hasn't Society warned him and
warned him and warned him—hasn't Society told him what it would
do him if this did happen?

My overseer says to Society, "I could not help falling in
love with her. I know you told me I was free to rape her—just
as my father did her mother, my grandfather did her grandmother,
my great grandfather did her great grandmother. Not only did
they rape the Black woman, they raped the Indian woman, too.
Now, since this war, we have raped the Japanese woman—and
in the future my sons shall rape the Korean and Vietnamese
women as well. We do these things, have done these things,
and shall continue to do these things because we have so much power, because we are so great. But, oh, God, how I wish that we could use our greatness some other way. How greater we would be if we were free to love anyone and everyone. How much better human beings we all would be, how much better everything in this world would be. Yes, I know I am to be destroyed, because you have that power, Society, to control and destroy me. But you will not destroy, Society, what I've found in my heart—and that is love for her.

And because my overseer truly loved, he let the door open for the others to love, and because they loved, they were destroyed. Because we in this country—my country and your country—are not ready for love yet. How long will it be before we are—I really don't know. But I feel deep in me that we better hurry. Yes, lovers are destroyed in America. Men who preach love are also destroyed in America. (We remember a president five years ago, we remember a King just over a month ago.) But isn't it true that people who don't love at all are dead from the beginning? Isn't it true that nothing in this world is worth anything if there's no love with it? To me this is true. To me, Love is everything. Dust is the absence of Love.

I thank you.