SEE WHAT TOMORROW BRINGS

James W. Thompson (1935-), a Detroit-born poet and editor of Umhrah during the late 1960s, was part of the Black Arts movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. He later changed his name to Abba Elethea and continued his work as a columnist, dance critic, and poet-in-residence at Antioch University. His work has been presented at international festivals in Africa, Europe, and the United States, and he has published in such journals as Quicksilver, Pegasus, the Gallery, Sail Review, Negro History Bulletin, and Negro Digest. "See What Tomorrow Brings" appeared in the Transatlantic Review in the summer of 1968.

Laughter exploding in an extremely hollow room, that's how this day has been. Its echoes will linger to haunt Muhdear, for days to come. I could tell, immediately, when I came home that she had worried herself sick. She flew from the kitchen like a startled sparrow, her hands perched nervously upon her hips—all set to raise the roof!

"Not going through this worry tomorrow," she commanded. "Soon...school is out, you bring your butt home—just the way you leave here—in that station wagon. You hear me?" She frowned. Before I could open my mouth, she smiled. The little wrinkles about her eyes curved like tooled icing on a chocolate cake. "Wasn't too bad, was it Honey. And tomorrow will be easier. First of anything's always the worst to take. You get used to it." Turning toward my father and sister, who were sitting in the living room, she sighed: "Guess we can eat now."

Muhdear went back to the kitchen to re-heat the supper that had turned cold.

"Humphf," Ella Mae said, "you really showed out today—worrying everybody. Like I always say, you don't think about nobody but yourself." It's my sister's habit to accuse others of the crimes she's most guilty of committing. "You knew just as well we'd be worried." I can't imagine Ella worrying about anything, most of all me. "When those deputies come here and said you was nowhere to be found, Muhdear almost died. She sent daddy to hunt you up. The whole neighborhood was up in arms." I knew that there wasn't any way for me to explain my reason for having come home late and unescorted, at least not to Ella. My father, to my surprise, remained stony and silent. During supper he stared at me with granite eyes.

Muhdear had prepared my favorite meal: pork chops, smothered in onions, with fried corn and mashed potatoes. "Honey-boy," Muhdear winked at me, "guess what! I made new curtains for your room." She tapped her plate, intermittently, with her fork. "Know what," she said, "think maybe we can get that studio bed you been just raving to have." Muhdear looked at me, then she looked at my plate. I wasn't hungry. I tried to eat. Ella kept interrupting with questions. "Well, what's it gonna be like tomorrow," she wanted to know. I wouldn't dignify
that question with an answer. There are so many tomorrows, and today had just
been one of them.

When I discovered the sun, I had been dressed for over an hour. It inched
across the sky, a flaming snail on a bleached rock. The sound of Muhdear
fussing over her extra-special breakfast drifted from the kitchen along with the
scent of cinnamon and strong coffee. It was a wonderful breakfast. (Muhdear
makes the best cinnamon pancakes in the world, and these had banana bits in
them.) It was an important morning. I was one of four Negroes entering Central
High. I was the only one whose parents weren't professionals. I didn't feel half as
anxious as the rest of the family. The neighbors had discussed it with the relish of
vultures pecking over a delicate dish. You would have thought that I was going to
visit the Queen. As I sat looking out of the window, for a moment I wished that I
had had their enthusiasm. I didn't feel at all shook; if anything, I felt numb. All I
could think of was the time I sat on the front porch with Daddy (The yard lay
damp with dew, and the sweetness of evening burst in wisteria and rose, jasmin
and mint, mixed with the stinging scent of Dad's cigar and kerosene from the
porch lamp - where moths dizzied themselves and the light. Daddy insists on
using this lamp), talking about his job and my future. He looked at me. A deep
sigh ended in a smile.

He spoke softly, "Honey, sometimes...I look upon apples as they hang in
trees and wish to have their ripe indifference. One day...you'll know the
feeling."

Muhdear was standing on the porch with me when the two deputies came.
She had been reminding me of how I should act. She repeated the same words
over, and over, and over. I had ceased listening long ago. "Com'on, boyah," one
of the deputies shouted. "Jesse," my mother called, "it's time!" My father stepped
onto the porch. He stood, his thumbs tucked in his overalls, his fingers rolled in
huge fists. His face, a tight, dark mask, was enlivened only by the brown eyes
that darted from the deputies to our front walk (the walk that he had made with
bright reddish-brown bricks). The way his head was cocked, the way he held his
body, cheered and frightened me. Muhdear monkeyed with my collar again. And
for what must have been the twentieth time, she smoothed my tie. "There'll be a
pack out there," Muhdear began, "don't let them get your goat, honey. They're
more afraid of you than you are of them." Her eyes squinted toward the guards
and widened into mine. They hovered over me. Daddy pinched the back of my
neck and thumped the back of my head with his fingers. Muhdear dried cool
hands on her apron. She does this at the strangest times...

When news came that Archie, the rebel hereabouts, had been chased and
shot by the Rensalar Boys, she rushed over to his house. I was right on her tail.
The other neighbors were leaving when we got there. Muhdear still had on her
apron. Mrs. Matthews and Muhdear sat in the front room. I lingered in the hall.
She tried to console Mrs. Matthews, who was trying hard not to cry.
"Louise, they kilt my baby."
"Now, Lucille, don't talk about it any more."
"I gotta talk about it - I gotta make myself believe it. I knowed Archie were always
on for devilment, only this time...You know, I tole him time and time again,
'Archie.' (Her voice cracked. She paused, and her hands armored her head; she looked across the room at Archie's picture on the mantelpiece, anchored in a sea of lace.) 'Archie,' I'd say, 'if you so hot on gettin' back at the world, you'll just have to rise above it.' You knowed Archie ... never paid a mind to me. I think, maybe, he kinda thought I was crazy. Oh, I know .... some things I tole him sounded strange. Louise ... it was all I knew." (The whole time she spoke, Muhdear dried cool hands in the folds of her apron.)

"Well, Lucille, if you just gotta talk about it ..."

"You know them Rens'lar Boys. Archie worked for their father, sometime, at the gas station. They shot him! They were drunk ... Wanted some fun... Seems they tole Archie they wanted a live coon to hunt, and he were it. They went and got their guns and hounds, play-acting, you know. It seems that when Archie conceived their seriousness, he started to run. Why he didn't just com'on home I'll never know. Instead, he lit out behind the gas station into those woods. They chased him... shot him down..." (She stopped. For a long while she seemed not to breathe. She rocked back and forth on that old red leather chair, her arms clasped across her stomach so tight I could see the veins in her arms from where I stood in the hall.)

"IN THE BACK... shot him... MY BABY." (She took a deep breath.)

"And they CUT him."

"Henry, you can go on the porch now."

Muhdear said this without looking in my direction. I knew better than to object, so I went out and sat under the window. I heard Mrs. Matthews ending, "They had no call to do that... no call." Then she cried bitterly, and I went back in to see what I could do. Muhdear hadn't moved. She wasn't even crying. In the folds of her apron, she dried cool hands, just as she had done this morning.

When we neared the school, the sun that I'd found so beautiful was crashing over the entrance of Central High. It fell in fake golden specks at the foot of the steaming crowd, casting acute shadows through the calm green trees. They hung like hothouse specimens adopted by a bleak season. (It seems that I read that somewhere.) School. The thought hit me. The chilled air bit the whites of those glaring eyes surrounding the station wagon. Every face that I looked into, as the car crawled, glistened. The din: "Two, four, six, eight, we don't wanna in-urr-grate," split the morning. Arms flailed the air with homemade signs. Bodies hunched. Jaws were thrust dangerously forward, cutting grotesque lines: carving one massive and miserably tortured crowdface. I sat in the back of the station wagon, my back pressed against the hot leather seat. A tomato splashed against the window on my left. I didn't flinch. I felt suddenly tired and tense. I looked out at them, and I could have killed them all and never have felt a thing.
The car stopped. The pack writhed and screamed in a wild revival beat. "Two, four, six, eight, we don' wanna in-urr-grate." Little children were sewn in cardboards. NIGGERS NEVER. GOD SAVE US FROM NIGGERS. NO BLACKS IN OUR SCHOOLS. I didn't know whether I should feel angry or proud. Dad had said, way back during the summer after we'd made up following weeks of silence, that when this day came, I should feel proud. "The beautiful story that will become history," he'd said, "is all about you, honey, and you must hold to your dignity and not be daunted." I held. Their children stood, in their huge signs, blank and bewildered. I saw a few burrow between knees in fright when the voice of the rout rose threateningly. They were pummeled, squized, held high, knocked and shaken. I was locked behind glass and steel, waiting for their parents to calm down. Their pathetic little bodies reacted to the changing pressures with wails and tears. They were not soothed. The attention of their mothers and fathers was focused on me. The deputy had maneuvered the car so that it stood directly in front of the entrance, ringed on both sides by the Army and the State Police. When the door opened for me, the frenzy increased. The white-topped helmets of the troopers bobbed, sparkling in the sunlight, a striking contrast to the damp disheveled heads they fought to restrain. I wondered if their ears were ringing like mine. They were closer to the den.

Locked between the shoulders of the deputies, I began climbing the steps. I knew that in the minds of those two who were protecting me there was also the feeling that I was an invader. They had not made their feelings secret - I had been told during the drive. The patience of my fathers who had defied the singular death of time, who had traversed from chattel to changling was now concrete in me; I was the black challenger mounting the forbidden stairs; and all of the forces of their depressed and fantastic heritage were fermenting within me. It has yet to erupt! I felt as though I moved in a vacuum, my objective receding, my movement motionless. It was all Jules Verne. The shrill screams of the pack behind me set my stomach on fire. My throat felt parched. I think that I swallowed constantly. "Say, yeh black bastard, we don' wancha here," fell on my ears - gnawed at the back of my brain. It seemed as though the sun cracked over me, a huge egg, depositing a hot yoke. I wished for a big mirror to turn upon the crowd,
then a machine gun. And I wondered, what was it, other than stupidity, that was supposed to be so damned superior about these people. They're barbaric, I told myself. For some reason I stopped on the steps for a moment. One of the guards caught me by the arm. "Com'on now, Nigra," he drawled, "we gotta git you inside." I looked over the face of the building. The American flag fell over the heavily carved masonry of the peaked entrance. I smiled. Vines crept up the dark brick walls, mint-green on brown. The Army stood, legs spread, guns bayoneted held at their sides. I wanted suddenly to shout "TENCHUT." They were silent and unblinking. "Here, blackie," someone yelled. "Two, four, six, eight, we don' wanna in-urr-grate," the crowd chanted. I don't know what possessed me, but I spun around. Flash bulbs, popping, blinded me momentarily. My two heavy-set guards, puffing and sweating, and swearing, too, grabbed my arms. They drug me up the two remaining steps. I looked back once more before entering the building. A white man, very tall and very red, screamed to me. "That's right, black-boy, show' em what you're made of." I think that he would have said more, but he was swallowed by men with clubs, flying. I could not see him any longer. I wonder who he was?

Inside, I was greeted by six students. Four boys and two girls. They had come to wish me luck. Each class today was trying. I'm a senior, and the other three are juniors, so we don't have classes together. And we have a different lunch hour. A redhead tripped me in my history class. And now that I know who he is I have decided to fix him. I don't know what possesssed me, but I spun around. Flash bulbs, popping, blinded me momentarily. My two heavy-set guards, puffing and sweating, and swearing, too, grabbed my arms. They drug me up the two remaining steps. I looked back once more before entering the building. A white man, very tall and very red, screamed to me. "That's right, black-boy, show' em what you're made of." I think that he would have said more, but he was swallowed by men with clubs, flying. I could not see him any longer. I wonder who he was?

I knew that among the students I was very visible, and I knew, too, that no one really wanted to see me. Before the last bell I made for the side exit hoping to avoid the deputies. The black and white station wagon was there in front of the door. I was relieved when I saw that it was empty. I was on the sidewalk in seconds. The street looked as though it had been abandoned after a parade. Bits of string, cardboards, and cigarette butts littered the sidewalk. Dark pools of water stood in the gutter, morning's souvenirs, left by the fire hose that had been used to disperse the crowd. I walked along quickly, looking back, hoping that no one would spot me. When I reached my hideaway in the grove at the edge of town, I sat down. I was trembling, so I threw stones in the stream with all of my might. I heard my heart pounding, and I was shocked by the stinging taste of tears. I jumped up, and in an effort to relieve the tremors, I started singing. The road that leads to the grove looked wide and endless beneath the fading arc of trees. I bet my voice must have echoed into the mountain of the evening as I walked singing just as loud as I could, "Hurry down sunshine . . . See what tomorrow brings." And the sun died, bleeding across the sky.