

## Week 6 Discussion

*edited minimally, for style and flow*

### Tims Creek All Grown Up

**May:** I mentioned in the chat the idea of Tims Creek developing and now we're looking at the "adult" version of it. In the story "Ezekiel Saw the Wheel," Gloria expresses the way she feels about her oldest daughter's girlfriend (96). This goes to show the growth that has been taking place in Tims Creek.

**Tanner:** "Angels' Feet" also symbolized a lot of growth in Tims Creek. In the years since Horace's death it seems like being a gay man is not something that determines your social standing in the town. Cicero represents growth, too. He moved away and was able to be himself, find love (R.I.P. Jacson), and have a successful career. This is something that Horace would never see.

**Cheyron:** I think the movement beyond Tims Creek is growth, and it was something we saw developing in the short story "What Are Days." Lena was no longer in Tims Creek, but she did not forget certain things about Tims Creek. Instead, she found ways to layer it with the new things she learned in New Jersey. I think another example of this is Lazarus in "Ain't No Sunshine" refusing to listen to his aunt Hortensia, who has deemed herself the head of the family. What is interesting about Hortensia is that she has moved away, but she is more of a personification of old Tims Creek. She demands the family act a certain way, even down to how they spend their money. She is almost tyrannical in holding onto her family so tightly. Lazarus slowly starts to resist more forcefully against his aunt as the story progresses.

**Cheyron:** Something I have found interesting throughout the first half of this book is that, one way or another, Tims Creek is the final voice in each story. Either through a memory of a dead community member ("When I Get to Heaven"), the literal last word ("I Thought I Heard the Shuffle of Angel's Feet," "The Eternal Glory That is Hamhocks"), or simply not answering ("Ain't No Sunshine"), someone in Tims Creek has the last say or last impression.

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**Kyrsten:** I was recently looking back at that last paragraph of “Ain’t No Sunshine,” and I love your idea of the statement being the not answering. He doesn’t answer the call that is coming through and lets it continue to buzz buzz with the vibration of the call, but doesn’t pick up the phone. And I wonder, do we think this is meant to be Tims Creek not answering the call or Lazarus ignoring his past, ignoring Tims Creek itself? I think Lazarus is choosing to step away from that past, that city in that final moment

**Cade:** Rather than any specific story or moment, I felt the growth of Tims Creek mostly through the nonchalant announcements of many deaths of characters present in *Visitation* or *Let the Dead*. Reverend Barden, Ruth, lots of characters remembered in a natural way, rather than eulogized in a dramatic, storybook fashion. I felt the town’s shift was very natural, like rotated soil, one crop is just replaced with another, fertilized by the last.

**Kyrsten:** This idea of seeing the movement or change of the town through the deaths of other characters is really cool. It feels very organic in relation to life as well, since there is this overall idea that things will progress and move forward when an old generation dies. And I feel this organic shift aligns with Kenan himself and his own shift. Often, as we are seeing, the older generation tends to feel that their power is waning and shifting, so they try and hold onto the reigns even tighter. I think Kenan’s previous novel and short stories show how these older generations are fearing a shift in their control of Tims Creek, and as such it’s almost as if some of the moments from the previous books are driven by that fear. In this collection, I almost feel less of that fear, or at least, less of the power they hold through fear, so change can occur. One example is Cicero’s uncle, who is angry, but his power is gone so the fear he holds or the anger he unleashes doesn't really matter because Cicero has left and has raised himself above it.

### “Ezekiel Saw the Wheel”

**Oakley:** In “Ezekiel Saw the Wheel,” I wanted to talk about dreams. Gloria speaks of dreams throughout most of the short story. Kenan writes, “She knew when a dream was a dream and when a dream was more than a dream. This one felt like something more than a dream, and she knew there was not a thing she could do about it but pray” (96). She even questions how her

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daughter's girlfriend will react to the death of Tamara. This makes me wonder how she knows whether a dream is only a dream. I suppose it is the intuition a mother has for her children. I really liked the ability to see inside a mother's mind and her concern for her children. Here she is with a client mourning the death of his wife while she is mourning the "death" of her daughter.

**Kyrsten:** How I viewed this story was more within the realm of Tims Creek and the supernatural connection the people seem to have. It almost felt to me that Gloria has a special sense associated with death. I saw this story aligning the old with the new. Gloria has clearly grown with acceptance of her queer daughter, but her supernatural connection with death almost seems to connect with the old school ideas of Tims Creek. I think it is more her experience working with death that aids her knowledge in knowing the dreams that will come to pass and those that are merely dreams. Her age and experiences allow her to know this, but it is that same thing that has aided her in growing and accepting change in her family and society as a whole.

**Elayna:** Oakley, I am glad you mentioned the idea of dreams in "Ezekiel Saw the Wheel," because I really was able to appreciate the detail Kenan wrote into describing what Gloria was seeing and feeling and going through. Her dream of her daughter's departure was vivid and kept blurring with reality. As a frequent dreamer, Gloria "knew when a dream was more than a dream."

### "I Thought I Heard the Shuffle of Angels' Feet"

**Oakley:** I'm not sure if I am just not remembering the other books correctly, but to me I felt like Kenan includes so much more imagery in each of his stories. In "I thought I Heard the Shuffle of Angels' Feet" there are many instances of describing food, people, and landscapes. For example, "he awoke to the smell of eggs and bacon and coffee and toast and grits. Lovely grits. Precious grits. How sweet the taste" (45). Although it is not directly stated that Cicero has a memory associated with grits, from the way Kenan writes we can assume that he does, which is something I admire in Kenan's writing.

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**Kyrsten:** I definitely feel you with this idea of imagery in “Angels’ Feet.” In each section, Cicero is bringing to light something about his life, his past, his past entwined with others, through his use of imagery. The grits moment stands out, but I also see imagery stand out in the emotional imagery. Cicero almost seems completely cut off emotionally as he is reflecting on these various moments of his life, and I think the use of the Ribeiro epigraph for this story is important as it too is connecting to this concept of emotion, or lack thereof. And his uncle’s angry outbursts, his emotional connection to his partner Jacson and their life, that emotional imagery. It is almost as if each section of reminiscence is pulling from one emotion or another – sadness, anger, acceptance. And feeling the other characters’ emotions over Cicero’s feels important to me too, as if that is intentional. Even as these are his own reflections, he does not want to succumb, so he projects those emotions onto the others he surrounds himself with. I’m not sure exactly where I was going with this, but this epigraph – “From the beginning I found the American male to be so alluring. They are like children, even the old ones. The fear of their own feelings gives them such magnetism. They do not seem to realize that such avoidance makes them that much more vulnerable” – pulls at me with this story. And yes, obviously Kenan included it for a reason, and it almost seems as if Cicero is admitting to us, the reader, that he too has this fear of his own feelings, so he is projecting those onto others – this perhaps allows him to tell us of these moments in his life, his experiences leading to the end of this story.

**Cade:** Rather than any real change in Kenan’s writing style, I observed more of a collaboration between his strengths. His descriptions were always powerful – the opening of *Visitation* is still one of the most riveting meals I’ve ever read – but they seemed more segmented. It feels as though Kenan has, in familiarizing both himself and the reader with the *way* he wants to write about Tims Creek, come to realize how interconnected everything is. No longer is there a need to separate the foodie sections with the family lineage, or magical realism; it is all connected through the atmosphere of Tims Creek.

### “The Eternal Glory That Is Ham Hocks”

**Cheyron:** I *really* want to talk about the subversion of the Mammy trope in “The Eternal Glory That is Ham Hocks.” So Hughes goes all the way to Tims Creek to find a woman he did not

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respect when she was in his life. Hughes cannot fully explain *why* he needs this woman in his life as an adult, so he reduces it to food. He doesn't need *her*; he needs her cooking. Hughes cannot connect the lines between food and love, and Mrs. Cross is not "raising" child Hughes the typical way Black caretakers are depicted in Southern fiction.

**Tanner:** I did think of the Mammy trope while reading this story. Kenan reminds us throughout that Hughes was a difficult child to deal with, and it seems as though Mrs. Cross did not nurture Hughes the way many "Mammies" might have, according to literature based off the myth of the Lost Cause. As for Hughes needing her cooking, I totally agree. The amount of money he offers is not out of respect, but more about getting what he wants.

**Kourtney:** The mammy is often a negative stereotype that many people don't really realize is still much apparent today. Kenan connected Hughes with his need for Mrs. Cross due to food, and today that same mammy depiction is seen on food labels. I may be reaching when I say this, but when you look at labels such as Aunt Jemina it is apparent what Kenan is showing. This narrative perpetuates a racist stereotype that is often connected to food and the need for a family structure.

**Cade:** I think the "raising" and the "Mammy" aspects correlate with Howard Hughes being diametrically opposed to the established Black experience – as is so often overlooked in capitalist America, the "employment" upon which people like Howard Hughes make their wealth is hardly gainful, or fair, and around the time of the Hughes fortune's start they were barely fifty years out of completely legal slavery. For a Black person, of all people, to profit immensely off the backs of undervalued labor is an abject betrayal of everything slavery could have taught this country. Thus, I imagine that Mrs. Cross could have felt an apprehension towards the child and what he represents, which would be a completely reasonable feeling considering the way he displays his views on people – not as people, but as something to buy.