Foreword

At the heart of Robert Morgan’s latest and much anticipated collection, *The Oratorio That Was Time*, is reverence: in time, geographical setting, humming memories, and the shadows of consecrated narratives known as history. Sensually measured by objects of the past, by the regal sense of their shattering, his poems and stories both unspool between the marvelous and mundane, between the fantastic and fact, between memory and cross-generational history. In Morgan’s poems, commonplace objects like marbles and harmonicas are raised to sacredness by the touch and tune of willful observations; we experience the glow of the stove where his father, “with hair both wet and groomed,” sat to read his Bible; the “apocalyptic radiance” of icy stalactites and stalagmites becoming “chandeliers”; purple factory cloths “for wiping hands” becoming “hues of kings and amethyst”; a church bell, “like a bucket,” emptying “out its startle.”

Morgan’s three stories are vivid reminders that our physical and moral worlds exist in tensions of past history and influence our present. In the story “Survey,” an eighteenth-century surveyor is hired to document the new geography of Carolina. Within his absolute appreciation of natural beauty of the New World (also knowing its dangers) the surveyor begins to question his trespass in Native American lands. Nonetheless, having finally reached the zenith of his journey, his joy is overshadowed by a darkened vision both surreal and inevitable. “Jack” is told with a simplicity that veils the complicity of an old man’s loss of memory and love. In “War No More,” truly one of the finest stories about war, Morgan’s skill as a historian comes into play as we follow a deserter in the Civil War, a story of survival and love with an ending that warrants astonishment.

Morgan is without comparison in writing about intergenerational history and geography, where we can uproot ourselves but never quite shake off the
soil. He remains a mediator of daily experiences and these generous and intimate images and stories can only arise from a writer given over to the qualities of grace and gratitude, one who holds an equitable vision of the world. That and a profound belief in love as well.

Helena María Viramontes
The flowers on Grandma’s grave were heaped so thick and close they seemed more like a compost pile than decorations. I knew they came from shops in town and not from any local soil. The roses, gladioli, ferns, and many colors of carnations, looked like a clutter of redundancy compared to the geraniums and dahlias spaced so carefully around her yard, illuminating the bare, swept ground. I watched them hide with blossoms brought from far away the place they sank her body in the red-hot clay, far from the heaven they said was her destination.
WISE VIRGIN

Aunt Wessie never could be tied completely down in her last days in the expensive nursing home. The nurses were afraid she’d fall again if left to wander in the halls. They strapped her to the bed with belts and cords. But in the dark she always freed herself somehow. Her mind, confused by day, would come alert in darkness with the cunning of an elderly Houdini to get loose, explore the secret nooks, remote extensions of the large facility, and look into the most forbidden zones and rooms, the offices and pharmacy, the farthest wing of hospice care. They often found her in the chapel, imagining she was in a church, the one attended years before. They never figured how she worked the shackles free, arthritic hands and stroke-numbed legs, performing tasks the young would find a challenge. In the darkness with no help she did the tricks of a contortionist. One night she dumped a pitcher of cold water on her roommate’s face, as though to douse a threatening fire, committed to her vigil to the very end, determined to be on her feet and ready as a waiting bride, oil in her lamp, when death came asking for her hand.
You scratch a circle on the ground to be a field of battle, then place all the pot of marbles at the center in a pod. And next you aim a favorite shooter with your thumb, for this is war. You pick them off like Sergeant York, who took a company of German soldiers, and drive as many as you can out of the ring, collecting all that roll beyond the boundary as booty. Best of shooters is a buckshot-sized ball bearing to flick off with a spin to burst the cluster, stick in place to fire again to empty out the nest before opponents get their chance. You bend on knees as though in prayer to blast the cat eyes, reds, and blues, to claim before the teacher’s bell. They rattle in your pocket with the sound of victory as you walk, your knuckles raw from grinding dirt, through fragrant April air.
SOME MIGHT CALL ME A COWARD, a deserter, even a traitor. But looking back on those terrible days, I wouldn’t have done anything different after Shiloh. I did what had to be done and would again if circumstances were the same. There is even Biblical sanction for my actions, come to that, events I live, and live again, replaying them in memory.

Back in the awful summer of 1862, after Shiloh and the advance on Corinth, and then the battle of Corinth, I lived for almost a year in the attic of an old plantation house, in heat that could suffocate or broil you, and in cold that turned your bones to glass. For company I had bats, an old spinning wheel, a rocking horse, tobacco leaves, wasps, a trunk full of papers and hidden silver and a wedding dress, empty jars, a pitcher, old letters, a globe, yellowed newspapers, half an encyclopedia, a telescope, a moth-eaten top hat, Venetian blinds, a whip, fishing tackle, a chest of drawers, a chamber pot, a pallet, a rusting lantern, a coil of rope, a large indigo snake that fed on mice, two bottles of laudanum, and a mistress from Ohio.

How I got into the attic is not an unusual story in wartime. In the second advance in Mississippi, in the summer heat that made you crazy, I saw men I’d served with, eaten breakfast with, lose arms and legs, and heads, to cannon fire. Grapeshot hissed, a ball touched my left arm. Bodies lay around me, intestines spilled on the ground. I could smell blood and excrement in the smoke. Major Stokes ordered an advance, and Sergeant Enslow screamed the command. The blood and smoke made me throw up and I didn’t crawl forward. Instead I groveled to the left, into a field or garden. Coughing and crying, I heaved along. There was no decision; it was made for me. On hands and knees I reached some woods. My eyes burned and streamed, and dirt and leaves stuck to my face.

What have you done, Dwight Williams? I said, hardly knowing what had happened. I’d deserted, and could face a rope or firing squad. I’d acted under an unconscious order. I soon stood and ran, leaving the screams, groans, and boom-vowels of the battlefield behind me. Tears blurred my sight, and I banged into tree trunks, scratched my legs on briars, stung my eyes with twigs.
I ran bent over, as if following a voice I couldn’t hear, stumbling mile after mile, to escape the rope, the shame, the disgrace to my family in New York.

It was almost dark when I emerged from the woods at the edge of a cornfield, hands and face bloody and swollen with scratches and bug bites. My legs were ready to buckle, and my chest sore from gulping smoke and humid air. I fell and tried to think. There were lights in a large white house ahead, and a fire in the backyard. Figures stirred around the fire and I could smell cooking. Behind the big house stretched a line of cabins, slave quarters I guessed. Light shone from some of the cabin doors. A windlass over a well was visible behind the big house.

It was then thirst hit me, the ache in the mouth and throat, a stiffness, when you’re willing to give your life for a cup of cool water, or even warm water. The sweating and panting had drained me. But I was a blue-belly, a Yankee, and knew the danger. I could be shot as an enemy, or thief. I lay on the ground as the stars appeared and noise around the big house subsided. Silhouettes drew water from the well; lights in the shacks vanished. The fire in the yard shrank to a glow and then died.

Stepping through rows of cotton, I advanced, swinging wide around the slave cabins. No one seemed to stir in the yard. I didn’t try to draw water with the noisy windlass, and the bucket on the rim was empty. My hope was to find a pail of water on the back porch or in the kitchen. A dog walked up to me and whimpered. I held out my hand and it didn’t bark. The screen door to the porch groaned a little when I opened it.

I struck a match and saw a wooden bucket with a dipper. I filled the dipper and brought it to my lips, but just as I drank the precious liquid a figure carrying a lantern appeared in the shadows of the yard.

“Miss Alice, is that you?” a man said.

The door into the kitchen was open on the right and I slipped through, smelling the smoke and sweat on my uniform. The man carrying the lantern opened the porch door and stepped inside. “Miss Alice, is that you?” he said again.

I eased through a door to the left and found my hand on the newel post of stairs. Instinctively I held to the railing and climbed the steps, reaching the landing just as the man with the lantern entered the room. Gripping the bannister, I felt my way to the second flight.

“Miss Alice,” the voice called from below, and the lantern began mounting the stairs.