

THE  
ROAD  
THAT  
BROUGHT  
US  
HERE

BY  
MELVIN BACKMAN

The drive  
from my last  
childhood home  
in North Charleston,  
South Carolina  
to the church  
where  
my family worships  
is about  
15 minutes  
in good traffic.

It's a mundane jaunt to the city from the suburbs, but a lot happens outside the car window. In all the times I've made that trip, I have steadily absorbed the little ways black life is devalued and left to whither.

North Charleston incorporated itself in 1972. From that date, it gradually bloomed, unfastening from Charleston proper. Neighborhoods formed — Windsor Hill, Wescott, and Whitehall, my own — many named after the plantations they used to be or whose heritage they wished to borrow, and, in that classic American way, their sum parts determined what became of the residents. Where whites gathered, resources followed.

On the drive, we spend the beginning minutes of the trip simply making our way out of the subdivision. Manmade lakes and hills mark the developers' attempt at creating a pastoral calm, at reminding residents that decent people live here, that the public schools are decent and there isn't all that much crime and it's a nice place to raise a family. We had few black neighbors.

Eventually you hit Dorchester Road, one of the city's main arteries. It carries people to their jobs and brings them back with the wages for property tax revenue and the building blocks for a nice, respectable middle-class existence.

As we make our way down, lush greens fade to greys as the vestiges of white privilege slip away. Banks and nice grocery stores become hard to spot. There are lots of folks walking on the side of the road, but there are few sidewalks. A rainy day might mean waiting for the bus in the mud. We pass an air force base and the rapidly expanding Boeing factory, and you wonder how the largesse doesn't spread more evenly.

We're getting close, though, taking Montague Avenue past the outlet mall, over I-26, past Rivers Avenue. A few miles to the left is where Walter Scott died. On the other side of the train tracks is Hilton's Mortuary Service. There are always nice, new hearses out front.

By now, North Charleston is very black. Royal Missionary Baptist Church, a very black church, is on your right.

A white neighbor of mine told me he had been in the area recently, and he noticed all the development the church had been doing. The building fund was so active he thought the gym and the youth center and other projects were the work of the state, not tithes and dues.

Royal is the sum of myriad ambitions, as safe a space as we're allowed, which is to say precariously safe.

Dylann Roof prayed at Mother Emanuel AME Church, another very black church, for an hour one mid-June evening. Then nine people died from bullets fired at them, inside their very black church.

Roof pled not guilty to firing those bullets, to being so angry at black people for doing something — existing? — that he would attack them for it in their safe space. Their sanctuary.

And when these spaces are under attack, what do we have left? We fall to our knees, and we look up: For a little hope, some guidance, for something to let us know that the road that brought us here will bring us more than here.