

Questions (from Hachette Book Group)

1. In the introduction, Yusef Salaam writes, “I believe that everything that’s happening to you is actually happening for you.” What does he mean by this, and what are some examples of the ways it applies to Yusef’s story? Can you think of instances in your own life where you’ve held this perspective?
2. In chapter two, Yusef states that at the very heart of the systems and structures that uphold white supremacy is the mission to affirm the false notion of Black people’s inferiority. By holding on to the truth of who he was and other people’s definitions of him, Yusef was able to mentally escape the bondage of prison. How did Yusef ensure that other people’s definitions did not affect the way he defined himself? How did it help him survive?
3. For Yusef, he was a teenage boy stripped of his youth and innocence, which had a ripple effect throughout his life even after being exonerated. Describe the ways that this adultification has worked to uphold the tenets of white supremacy, not just for the Exonerated Five but throughout American society.

We Wear the Mask

BY PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR (1872-1908)

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
 We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
 We wear the mask!

If We Must Die

BY CLAUDE MCKAY (1890-1948)

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursèd lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

***Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it.
Because what the world needs is people who have come alive. --Howard Thurman***