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Seventy Years Ago in Jamaica

Zora Neale Hurston traveled and conducted field work in Jamaica and Haiti in the late months of 1936. She wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in a brisk seven weeks, and collected material that she would later present in *Tell My Horse* and other publications. In addition to recording highly valuable ethnographic and historical data, she was a truly gifted writer. Here is a passage from *Tell My Horse*, originally published in 1938 (Harper & Row edition, 1990, pp. 40-41), describing part of a funeral ceremony in Jamaica:



"This man had died in the hospital some distance from home. He was as poor in death as he had been in life. He had walked barefooted all his days so now there would be no hearse, no car, no cart -- not even a donkey to move this wretched clay. Well then, a rude stretcher was made out of a sheet and two bamboo poles and men set out on foot to bring the body home. There are always more men than donkeys."

"According to custom, several people from the district went along with the body-bearers to sing along the road with the body. The rest of the district were to meet them halfway. It is a rigid rule that the whole district must participate in case of death. All kinds of bad feelings are suspended for the time being so that they sing together with the dead. . . ."

"The bearers and these folks had been gone a long time when we other set out to meet them half way. Two or three naked lights or flambeaux were among us but nobody felt the need of them. A little cement bridge had been agreed upon as the halfway mark, so we halted there to wait. Perhaps it seemed longer than it really was because people saved up the entertainment in them for the time when the body would arrive. So we were a sort of sightless, soundless, shapeless, stillness there in the dark, wishing for life."

"At last a way-off whisper began to put on flesh. In the space of a dozen breaths the keening harmony was lapping at our ears. Somebody among us struck matches and our naked lights flared. The shapeless crowd-mass became individuals. A hum seemed to rise from the ground around us and became singing in answer to the coming singers and in welcome to the dead."

"The corpse might have been an African monarch on safari, the way he came borne in his hammock. The two crowds became one. Fresh shoulders eagerly took up the burden and all voices agreed to sing on one song. Then there was a jumbled motion that finally straightened out into some sort of marching order with singing. Harmony rained down on sea and shore. The mountains of St. Thomas heaved up in the moonlessness; the smoking flambeaux splashed the walking herd; bare feet trod the road in soundless rhythm and the dead man rode like a Pharaoh -- his rags and wretchedness gilded in glory."