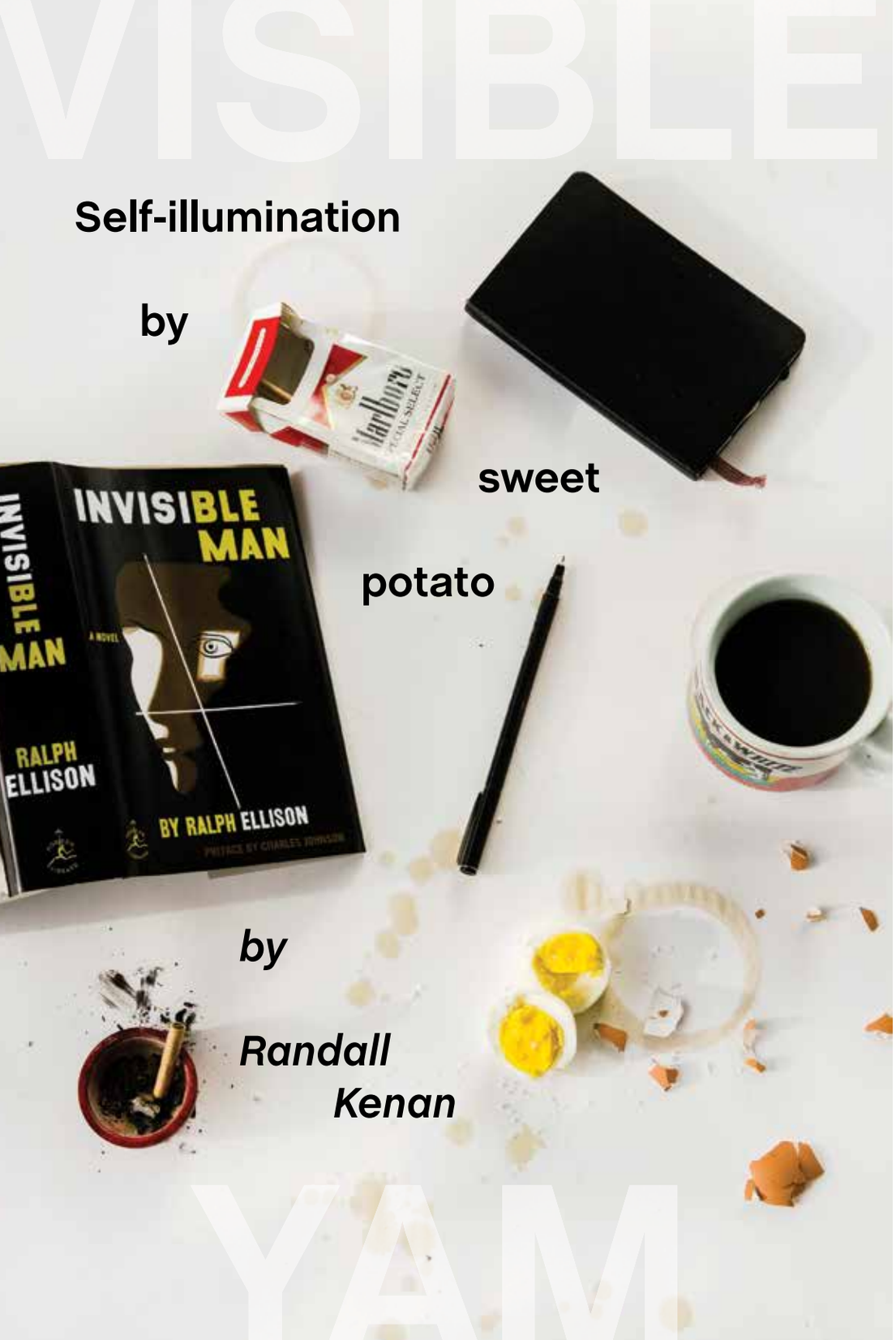

Photos by Oriana Koren

I OFTEN LIKE TO ASK MY STUDENTS, "WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT SENTENCE IN THE BIBLE?"

The answers tend to be obvious, like "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son." Or, "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth." Or, "No more water but fire next time," which is not in the Bible. Or any number of other famous and meaningful verses. But I like to point to the moment in the third chapter of Exodus when Moses stands before the burning bush and has a conversation with the Almighty. Moses asks whom he should tell Pharaoh sent him to court to demand the release of the Hebrew slaves. The flaming bush replies, "I am that I am." Powerful stuff, don't you think? "I am that I am."

Once upon a time, Americans spoke with great seriousness about the Great American Novel. There could only be one. And the people who took this seriously assumed the author would be a man, probably a white man.

Over the years, those tenants—even the underlying question—seem to have fallen out of favor, for better or for worse. When is the last time you heard someone take seriously the idea of the Great American Novel?

But, being a gentleman of a certain age, the concept swims to the surface of my mind from time to time to time. Personally, I am obsessed with *Moby-Dick* and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, and, on given days, Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*. However, if I were a betting man and you made me put money down on it, I could make a powerful argument for Ralph Ellison's 1952, award-winning novel, *Invisible Man*. It might could be the Great American novel. It might could be.

IF YOU ARE UNFAMILIAR WITH THE book, please allow me to give a brief description.

Many critics like to call *Invisible Man* a *bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age novel, which it is. But I like to think of it as more of a picaresque in the mode of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, where our main character is on the road, traveling, or wandering, with purpose, and, like the man from La Mancha, the protagonist lacks self-awareness but comes to see his own delusion by and by. Our hero begins in the South, at a school very much like Tuskegee Institute, where Ellison studied music, in the shadow of the recently dead founder, Booker T. Washington; our hero who moves North, as did Ellison, first to Chicago, and then to Harlem, New York.

With a huge nod to Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, Ellison gives us an unnamed narrator who tells his story of essentially being on the lam, holed up in a basement or subway tunnel in Manhattan, illuminated by "1,369 lights." This fantastical element is another source of Ellison's genius: The book takes on many tones throughout its 581 pages—surrealism, expressionism, social realism, oral history.

On top of all that, Ellison's language is nothing short of virtuosic, a nearly impossible feat to maintain over such a long distance. He gives us the English of Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration; he gives us Ralph Waldo Emerson's high essay style; he gives us African American English flavored with salt pork and collard greens; he gives us the language of American mass media and business.

That Southern black folk away in cold New York would be catered to with piping-hot yams makes bold good sense, and reflects the reality of the time. And sweet potatoes are wonderfully mobile.

FOR OUR PURPOSES, I'LL FOCUS ON chapter thirteen. By now we have gotten well into the meat of the story, and, like Don Quixote, our hero is coming to some self-illumination. Where 1,369 light bulbs could not help him, a particular edible root would come to the rescue.

"'Get yo' hot, baked Car'lina yam,'" calls out a street vendor:

> At the corner the old man, wrapped in an army overcoat, his feet covered with gunny sacks, his head in a knitted cap, was puttering with a stack of paper bags. I saw a crude sign on the side of the wagon proclaiming YAMS, as I walked flush into the warmth thrown by the coals that glowed in a grate underneath.

We are in Harlem, USA, probably sometime between the two Great Wars.

Here are two facts that people often conveniently forget about Harlem, if they know them at all. First: Harlem, as we have come to know it, is essentially a Southern City at the north of Manhattan Island. Harlem became largely populated by black Southerners fleeing North & South Carolina and Virginia and Georgia and Alabama and Florida from the years just before World War I to the middle of the Great Depression. A great many arrived from the South on a locomotive train line known affectionately as the Chicken Bone Special. The second thing is that Harlem is essentially a twentieth-century phenomenon. In the nineteenth century, black folk lived all over the island, and even had a village, Seneca, within the city where now Central Park is located. It existed from 1825 to 1857, when it was torn down in the name of civic renewal. It was a foretaste of what would happen to so many black communities across North America in the twentieth century.

So what we think of today as Harlem

was not only largely African American, but it was also sweetly Southern. We could think of it as a Negro colony of the South taken root in the North. Southern culture—language, arts, religion, and of course, foodways—predominated north of 125th Street all the way up to Edgecombe Avenue.

Nowadays we think of food trucks as a culinary trend. We have television shows and movies about them. But in truth, they are as old as cities. Thebes, Athens, Ur, Edo: All had food carts of some fashion. Bringing the food to the people always made good business sense, and we have had the wheel for a good long time.

That Southern black folk away in cold New York would be catered to with piping-hot yams makes bold good sense, and reflects the reality of the time. The sweet potato was a standard, especially in the Carolinas (My native North Carolina now produces 60 percent of the nation's sweet potatoes, I'm proud to say.) And a wise entrepreneur would be providing what was most familiar to his clientele at a bargain price. Moreover, sweet potatoes are wonderfully mobile.

I did say "sweet potato" and not "yam." The yam is a product of Africa and Asia. The sweet potato is a New World Root. Sweet potatoes are dense and orange, rich in beta-carotene; yams are drier, starchier, and lighter in color. Linguists can't agree on when or exactly why it happened, but English speakers have been confusing the two foods for centuries, using sweet potato and yam interchangeably—which is a rather fitting metaphor for America. At Thanksgiving when my aunts put out the candied yams, I don't correct them. I know they know they are feeding me sweet potatoes, but

"candied yams" just sounds so darn festive.

Surely that is how the protagonist in *Invisible Man* feels when he encounters the Carolina Yams on the streets of Harlem:

> "How much are your yams?" I said, suddenly hungry.
>
> "They ten cents and they sweet," he said, his voice quavering with age. "These ain't none of them binding ones neither. These here is real, sweet, yaller yams. How many?"
>
> "One," I said, "If they're that good, one should be enough."
>
> ...I knew that it was sweet before I broke it; bubbles of brown syrup had burst the skin...
>
> "Break it and I'll give you some butter since you gon' eat it right here. Lots of folks takes 'em home. They got their own butter at home."
>
> I broke it, seeing the sugary pulp steaming in the cold...I held it, watching him pour a spoonful of melted butter over the yam and the butter seeping in.

And later:

> I took a bite, finding it as sweet and hot as any I'd ever had, and was overcome with such a surge of homesickness that I turned away to keep my control. I walked along, munching the yam, just as suddenly overcome by an intense feeling of freedom—simply because I was eating while walking along the street. It was exhilarating. I no longer had to worry about who saw me or about what was proper. To hell with all that, and as sweet as the yam actually was, it became like nectar with the thought.

I should point out here two things: One, that Ellison and his good buddy, the novelist Richard Wright, were both deeply influenced by the European novel of ideas, philosophy masquerading as fiction. Think Albert Camus, think Jean-Paul Sartre. Ellison floats weighty philosophical ideas throughout the novel, but buoyantly, concretely, this yam episode in chapter thirteen being one of his most successful forays. The other point is that chapter thirteen in particular is packed full of food imagery. Not long after the aforementioned breaking of the yam, the narrator invokes: "You're a shameless chitterling eater!" He talks about mustard greens, pig ears, pork chops and black-eyed peas, "with dull accusing eyes."

Our hero goes on such a Camus-style reverie that he comes to confront his own conflicted notions and emotions about blackness, which leads him to declare of the yam: "They're my birthmark," I said. *"I yam what I am!"*

And to ultimately think:

> What and how much had I lost by trying to do only what was expected of me instead of what I myself had wished to do? What a waste, what a senseless waste! But what of those things which you actually didn't like, not because you were not supposed to like them, not because to dislike them was considered a mark of refinement and education—but because you actually found them distasteful? ...How could you know? It involved a problem of choice. I would have to weigh many things carefully before deciding and there would be some things that would cause quite a bit of trouble, simply because I had never formed a personal attitude toward so much. I had accepted the accepted attitudes and it had made life seem simple...

"I yam what I am!"

AS A BOY, I LOVED ME SOME POPEYE. When I first read this book, back in my late teens, the idea that Ralph Ellison was playing with a cartoon character, a cartoon character who got his super powers from spinach—*canned spinach*—and the idea that a fancy-pants intellectual, National Book Award–winning novelist would play around with pop culture, seemed well beyond the veil, but Popeye had been around for decades by 1952, and Ellison was clearly and intentionally messing with us like that. "I yam what I am!"

As a sometime literary critic and as a writer of fiction, I militate against the term "symbol." Symbols are the stuff of literary garden parties and seventh-grade English classes. They are weak beer, and we are looking for the strong stuff. What Ellison is doing here is much more akin to moonshine. It can make a dead man holler.

The yam/sweet potato in *Invisible Man* is not simply a symbol. It has a function. It is a character. In many ways, it is alive. (In fact it was, once!)

For me, the hallmark of food in literature, raised to the level of art, is food interacting with character, food as character, food doing stuff, food being stuff, just as it happens with our flesh and blood, our mouths and our bellies and our memories. The best writers, the better writers, know that food is identity, food is alive, food is us.

Gertrude Stein once observed, it is rude to have your characters sit down to dine and not tell the reader what they are eating. This notion always made profound sense to me. I always tell you what my people eat, what they love, what they hate to put in their mouths.

The hallmark of food in literature, raised to the level of art, is food interacting with character, food as character, food doing stuff, food being stuff. The best writers know that food is identity, food is alive, food is us.

I yam what I am!

"I am that I am" is of course the King James translation of the Old Testament Pentateuch. Other translations from the original Hebrew have it as, "I am who I am," "I am he who is," and "I am because I am," among many other permutations. Language can do that.

Language bends. Language reflects and refracts. Language resonates. Language multiplies and has multiple meanings. Language confounds. Language comforts. Language is how we take hold of the world. "I will be what I will be." "I create what I create." I am what I yam.

Randall Kenan is the author of six books of fiction and nonfiction. He delivered a version of this piece on the porch of William Faulkner's Rowan Oak at the 2018 Southern Foodways Symposium.