

## MY SELF AND THE SELF THAT WATCHES MY SELF

By Dawn Monique Williams

Tanya Barfield's *Blue Door* delves into one man's psyche to explore memory, history, identity, and the legacy left him by his forefathers. Through the convention of a fevered dream, Lewis—a middle-aged Black mathematics professor who struggles with his sense of self and cultural heritage—is visited by ancestors from his deceased brother and as far back as his great-grandfather, who lived during the period of African enslavement in the United States. Employing elements of magical realism and integrating song in the tradition of spirituals and field hollers, Barfield unpacks the psychological effects of generational trauma.

Barfield explores themes of alienation, guilt, and redemption that are reminiscent of Charles Dickens' novels. In very Dickensian tropes, Lewis (a tormented antihero grappling with an existential crisis and haunted by his past) is visited by the ghosts of his great-grandfather Simon, grandfather Jesse, and brother Rex over the course of a restless night. Lewis, all too aware of his Blackness, sees himself divorced from certain aspects of his community and cultural movements as a result of his intellectual and academic pursuits and his marriage to a white woman. These visitations call to the surface Lewis' deep conflict with himself about his roots and how he came to feel disconnected from his African American heritage.

Lewis' refusal to attend the Million Man March leads to the dissolution of his marriage, which serves as the catalyst for the play. Barfield uses the historical March as a device for Lewis to reflect on his relationship with and within the Black community and the development of his own racial identity. The Million Man March was a call-to-action gathering held on October 16, 1995, in Washington, D.C. The controversial Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan organized the event. While other prominent Black leaders took part in the planning of and certainly participated in the event, the involvement of Minister Farrakhan was cause for concern for many. The March placed an emphasis on the need for personal accountability, spiritual renewal, collective action, and Black male solidarity, addressing issues such as fatherhood, education, economic empowerment, and community building.

Throughout the play, Lewis grapples with his family's history, particularly reconciling the stories of resilience in the face of racism, oppression, and cruel enslavement with his experience of the pressures to conform to what it means to be a successful Black man in America. The titular blue door serves as a portal through which the past and present are linked, a potent symbol of memory, trauma, and passage. In many African and Black American spiritual traditions, the color blue is believed to have protective qualities, warding off evil spirits and negative energy, so a blue door is thought to bring protection from haunts or malevolent spirits to the home and those residing within. Lewis' visitors perhaps mean him no harm, however, their great need prevents them from resting in or being at peace. Symbolically the figure of a door is also that of a mirror: Lewis must learn to see himself, to see his ancestors as part of himself.

Lewis's journey in *Blue Door* is a deeply personal exploration of race, memory, and the complex interplay between individual identity and collective history. As he confronts his past and wrestles with his own demons, Lewis undergoes a profound transformation, ultimately finding a deeper understanding of himself and his place in the world.