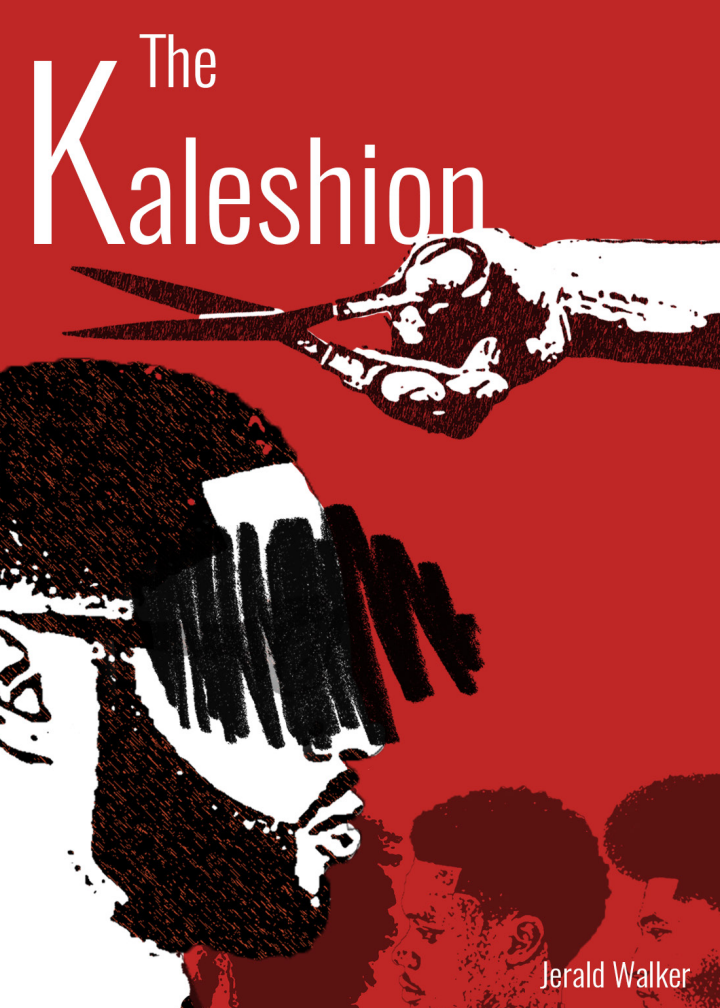
The Kaleshion



Jerald Walker

"It's amazing the difference a haircut can make."

Kaleshion isn't a word in the dictionary. It's a word on your barber's wall, handwritten beneath a photo of a bald head. There are other photos up there with made-up words to identify other haircuts, but your father never selects those, because they require hair. Male preschoolers should not have hair, your father believes; that's a crime to which he'll no more be party than to genocide. Your friends' fathers feel similarly, so your friends are bald too. But as they turn seven or eight and certainly by nine, their fathers let them try different styles, while yours keeps making you get a kaleshion until you are ten. What's the deal with that? You don't know. All you know is he relaxes his stance in the nick of time, because it's 1974 and the Afro is king. You grow yours the size of a basketball and swear on your grandmother's grave that you'll never get a kaleshion again.

But it's never a good idea to swear on your grandmother's grave. One summer day, when you are twenty-six and have just moved to a new neighborhood, you try out the barbershop near your apartment. It's 1990, and the Afro long ago gave way to the Jheri curl, which gave way to flattops, which you are not particularly fond of, so now you wear your hair an inch long all around. As you sit in the chair, you tell the barber you'd like a trim. Close your eyes. Relax. Nod off after a while but be startled awake when the clippers graze your upper lip.

Ask the barber,

"What are you doing?"

When he says,

"Tightening up your mustache,"

you respond,

"Don't touch my mustache."

But, he says,

"It's too late."

Then he says,

"I'll just finish this up,"

as you wonder, What's this guy's deal? His deal is he's incompetent, though you don't know to what extent because the mirror is behind you. When he spins the chair around, you are surprised to discover the mirror is actually a window, through which you see another man in another barber's chair staring at you. And yet, somehow, the barber standing behind that man's chair is also standing behind yours, which means the window isn't a window and the man is you. It's amazing the difference a kaleshion can make.

“So,”

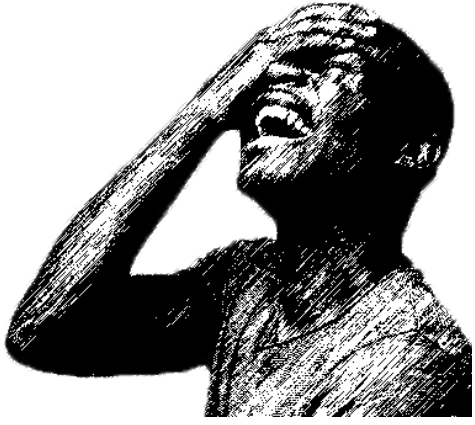
the barber asks,

“what do you think?”

and you consider punching him but instead refuse to pay. He orders you to leave and bans you from returning, which is a misuse of the word ban. He can’t ban you from doing something you’d never do. That’d be the same as banning you from eating frog legs or skydiving or from still wearing a Jheri curl like the guy at work you are about to dethrone as the office laughingstock, though maybe, it occurs to you as you walk home, you can mitigate this fate by shaving off your new pencil mustache. With this thought in mind, you start to jog, though it’s sweltering outside and you haven’t jogged in a while. You cut through an alley to shorten the distance, but even with that you arrive on the back porch of your third-floor apartment breathless and sweaty—much like, one could imagine, a drug addict about to commit a burglary.

Your girlfriend imagines this. You’ve left your keys on the kitchen table, so you knock on the window for her to let you in. You shout her name, then realize she can’t hear you because she’s in the front room, where the phone is, calling the police. Don’t panic; all you’ll have to do is tell them about the incompetent barber. Take out your driver’s license to illustrate that your new face is also your old face. If at least one of the officers is black he’ll see the resemblance. There is a high likelihood, however, that—like your girlfriend—both officers will be white, which means weapons could come into play, so you need to either convince your girlfriend you are her boyfriend, or run. Lift your driver’s license to the window. Press it against the glass. Watch your girlfriend squint at your photo, then at you, and then back at your photo. Beg her to let you in. A voice in your head orders you to get the hell out of there just as something in hers clicks; one hand cups her mouth, the other releases the curtain. The deadbolt and your fate turn.

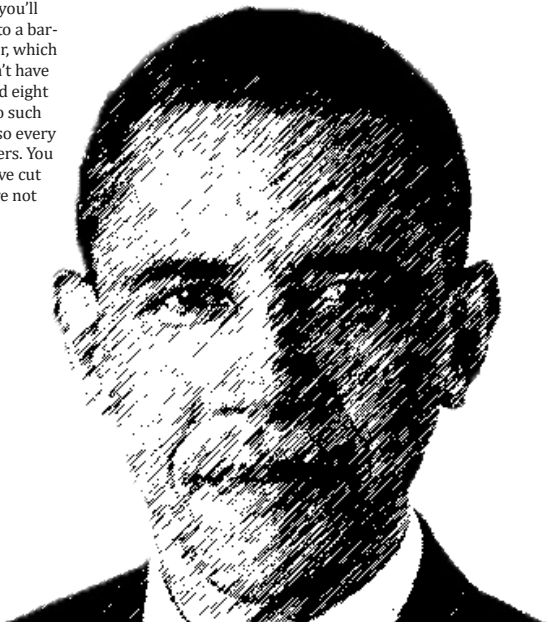
Moments later, while shaving off your mustache, you vow never to set foot in another barbershop. This doesn't improve your mood, so you try another approach too. You start to feel better during your third cocktail at your favorite bar—good enough, even, to tell the bartender what happened. He doesn't believe you. Lift your baseball cap. When he bursts into laughter you can't help but join him. It is funny, after all. Repeat the part about seeing the stranger through the window and laugh some more. And when the bartender, who knows you're an aspiring writer, says this would make a good story, smile and say you definitely intend to write it someday.



You write a lot of other stories first, though, which earns you publications, a faculty position, your first book contract, and, after many years, an invitation to read your work at a prestigious literary conference. According to the invitation, there are some notable writers scheduled to participate, one of whom is quite famous. This is a big deal. This is huge! It could mark your arrival as a serious man of letters, and it's too bad, in a way, that your girlfriend isn't around to see it. She was supportive of your early efforts, even serving as your copy editor, an arrangement you'd projected far into a future where you'd discuss comma splices together in your old age, though perhaps you should have taken her attempt to have you arrested as a bad omen: you broke up a few months later.

A lot has changed in fifteen years. You learned to copy edit, for example. You moved to a new city. You got married, had a son, moved to a different city, and had another son. One thing that hasn't changed, though, is your self-imposed barbershop ban. Who knows, maybe one day you'll lift it after growing tired of the split ends and generally scraggly appearance that results from cutting your own hair. And you'll probably have to start taking your sons to a barbershop when they realize that their hair, which you've cut since they were babies, doesn't have to look like this either. But at ages six and eight they're still too young to pay attention to such things, and you're still wary of barbers, so every couple of weeks you break out the clippers. You all three get the same style, a conservative cut that speaks of sophistication and a desire not to scare white people. You call it

"The Obama."



To achieve it, simply use the #1 clipper guard on the top and the #1/2 for the sides and back. Sometimes you tease your sons by saying you can't find the clipper guards so they'll have to get kaleshions, and when they jump from the chair and run, you chase them around the house, all of you laughing wildly. It's a good time.

The day before the literary conference begins, you get out the clippers and give your sons their Obamas. And then it's your turn. You start on the crown of your head and work your way forward, as you always do, and then you scream because the #1 guard has tumbled before your face and landed in the sink, followed by a clump of hair. Lean toward the mirror to stare at the long strip of pale scalp. Whisper, "Please God, no, please," but God cannot help you. Nor can your wife, who runs to the bathroom and, much like your girlfriend all those years ago, is staring at you with a hand cupping her mouth. Your sons burst into the room. They want to know what the screaming is about. Your wife, speaking into her palm, says, "Daddy's giving himself a kaleshion."

The boys want to see. Reluctantly, you bend toward them. They erupt in laughter. You shoo them away. Try to convince yourself it's not as bad as you think, but you can see from the way your wife is looking at you that it is. She lowers her hand and asks, "What happened?"

That's simple: your grandmother, on whose grave you swore all those years ago, reached down from the heavens to flick off the clipper guard. But don't say this. Say you're not sure. You are sure, however, of what must be done. Ask your wife for the shoe polish.

"You can't," wear shoe polish on your head,"
she responds.

"Why not?"

"Because that's insane."

"You have a better idea?"

"Yes. Shave the rest of your head."

Look horrified and say,
"Are you crazy?"

"You have to,"
she insists.

Remind her that the important literary
conference is tomorrow.

"Exactly,"
she responds, and a stalemate is reached.

Twenty-four hours later, you arrive at the important literary conference. As you enter the auditorium, a writer you know strikes up a conversation, thereby establishing the expectation that you will sit together, which is fine, as long as he doesn't go to the first row, which of course he does. Thanks to the stadium-style seating, everyone will have a clear view of the top of your head. But it will not be a view of shoe polish, because your wife convinced you not to use it on the grounds it would be difficult to remove. The same effect, she explained, could be achieved with mascara. You don't know much about mascara, having never worn it before, though you are pretty certain that under certain conditions, such as high humidity, it runs.

The auditorium feels like a rain forest. You're already sweating. You're already imagining your rectangle of scalp being slowly revealed. You can all but hear the snorts and giggles.

You have to stop obsessing. Distract yourself by perusing the conference's brochure. The first scheduled reader is the famous writer. You saw him when you entered the auditorium, sitting dead center of the room with a few of his books on the desk before him, colorful Post-its sticking out from the pages, and a chill went down your spine. Everyone is eager to hear him, no doubt, but you allow yourself to believe he's eager to hear you too.

Why not? Maybe it's true. Maybe he's as much an admirer of your work as you are of his. You're not famous by a long stretch, but you are, you've noticed, last on the schedule, a position, like first, often reserved for a writer of a certain ability, with a certain gravitas.

Gravitas indeed! The famous writer brings down the house and leaves the podium to thundering applause. The next reader is outstanding too. As is the next. Everyone is quite good, although, admittedly, it's difficult to pay close attention while imagining mascara working its way down your head.

Finally, you're introduced. Go to the podium. Look around the room, really for the first time, and take in the size of the crowd. It's enormous! Of the hundred or so seats, only a few are empty, one of which, you note, is the famous writer's. His books are gone too. As indignation bubbles up from some dark place inside you, you wonder what this guy's deal is, though the real question, you've begun to suspect, is what's the deal with you. For a split second you are back in the barber's chair staring into a mirror at a man you don't recognize, a man who's at an important literary conference with mascara on his head, hoping to impress a famous writer who has ducked out of the room, and not seeing the humor in the situation. It's amazing the difference an ego can make.

You look away from the famous writer's chair. Greet the audience. Announce that, before you begin, you'd like to take a brief moment, if you could, to talk about your hair. Raise your hands to the heavens. Smile. Now swear, as your beloved grandmother is your witness, that the story you are about to tell is true.

Jerald Walker is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. He has published in magazines such as Creative Nonfiction, The Missouri Review, The Harvard Review, Mother Jones, The Iowa Review, and The Oxford American. He is a finalist for the 2020 National Book Award in Nonfiction, and winner of the 2020 Massachusetts Book Award in Nonfiction. Walker's doctorate is in Interdisciplinary Studies, combining the fields of African American literature, African American history, and creative writing.