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Letter to My Son

“Here is what I would like for you to know: In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage.”

by Ta-Nehisi Coates

And have brought humanity to the edge of oblivion: because they think they are white. — James Baldwin

Son, Last Sunday the host of a popular news show asked me what it meant to lose my body. The host was broadcasting from Washington, D.C., and I was seated in a remote studio on the Far West Side of Manhattan. A satellite closed the miles between us, but no machinery could close the gap between her world and the world for which I had been summoned to speak. When the host asked me about my body, her face faded from the screen, and was replaced by a scroll of words, written by me earlier that week.

The host read these words for the audience, and when she finished she turned to the subject of my body, although she did not mention it specifically. But by now I am accustomed to intelligent people asking about the condition of my body without realizing the nature of their request. Specifically, the host wished to know why I felt that white America’s progress, or rather the progress of those Americans who believe that they are white, was built on looting and violence. Hearing this, I felt an old and indistinct sadness well up in me. The answer to this question is the record of the believers themselves. The answer is American history.

There is nothing extreme in this statement. Americans deify democracy in a way that allows for a dim awareness that they have, from time to time, stood in defiance of their God. This defiance is not to be much dwelled upon. Democracy is a forgiving God and America’s heresies—torture, theft, enslavement—are specimens of sin, so common among individuals and nations that none can declare themselves immune. In fact, Americans, in a real sense, have never betrayed their God. When Abraham Lincoln declared, in 1863, that the battle of Gettysburg must ensure “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth,” he was not merely being aspirational. At the onset of the Civil War, the United States of America had one of the highest rates of suffrage in the world. The question is not whether Lincoln truly meant “government of the people” but what our country has, throughout its history, taken the political term people to actually mean. In 1863 it did not mean your mother or your grandmother, and it did not mean you and me. As for now, it must be said that the elevation of the belief in being white was not achieved through wine tastings and ice-cream socials, but rather through the pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land.

That Sunday, on that news show, I tried to explain this as best I could within the time allotted. But at the end of the segment, the host flashed a widely shared picture of a 12-year-old black boy tearfully hugging a white police officer. Then she asked me about “hope.” And I knew then that I had failed. And I remembered that I had expected to fail. And I wondered again at the indistinct sadness welling up in me. Why exactly was I sad? I came out of the studio and walked for a while. It was a calm late-November day. Families, believing themselves white, were out on the streets. Infants, raised to be white, were bundled in strollers. And I was sad for these people, much as I was sad for the host and sad for all the people out there watching and reveling in a specious hope. I realized then why I was sad. When the journalist asked me about my body, it was like she was asking me to awaken her from the most gorgeous dream. I have seen that dream all my life. It is perfect houses with nice lawns.

It is Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways. The Dream is tree houses and the Cub Scouts. And for so long I have wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like a blanket. But this has never been an option, because the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies. And knowing this, knowing that the Dream persists by warring with the known world, I was sad for the host, I was sad for all those families, I was sad for my country, but above all, in that moment, I was sad for you.

That was the week you learned that the killers of Michael Brown would go free. The men who had left his body in the street would never be punished. It was not my expectation that anyone would ever be punished. But you were young and still believed. You stayed up till 11 p.m. that night, waiting for the announcement of an indictment, and when instead it was announced that there was none you said, "I've got to go," and you went into your room, and I heard you crying. I came in five minutes after, and I didn't hug you, and I didn't comfort you, because I thought it would be wrong to comfort you. I did not tell you that it would be okay, because I have never believed it would be okay. What I told you is what your grandparents tried to tell me: that this is your country, that this is your world, that this is your body, and you must find some way to live within the all of it.

I write you in your 15th year. I am writing you because this was the year you saw Eric Garner choked to death for selling cigarettes; because you know now that Renisha McBride was shot for seeking help, that John Crawford was shot down for browsing in a department store. And you have seen men in uniform drive by and murder Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old child whom they were oath-bound to protect. And you know now, if you did not before, that the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body. It does not matter if the destruction is the result of an unfortunate overreaction. It does not matter if it originates in a misunderstanding. It does not matter if the destruction springs from a foolish policy. Sell cigarettes without the proper authority and your body can be destroyed. Turn into a dark stairwell and your body can be destroyed. The destroyers will rarely be held accountable. Mostly they will receive pensions.

There is nothing uniquely evil in these destroyers or even in this moment. The destroyers are merely men enforcing the whims of our country, correctly interpreting its heritage and legacy. This legacy aspires to the shackling of black bodies. It is hard to face this. But all our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body. And should one live in such a body? What should be our aim beyond meager survival of constant, generational, ongoing battery and assault? I have asked this question all my life. I have sought the answer through my reading and writings, through the music of my youth, through arguments with your grandfather, with your mother. I have searched for answers in nationalist myth, in classrooms, out on the streets, and on other continents. The question is unanswerable, which is not to say futile. The greatest reward of this constant interrogation, of confrontation with the brutality of my country, is that it has freed me from ghosts and myths. And yet I am still afraid. I feel the fear most acutely whenever you leave me. But I was afraid long before you, and in this I was unoriginal. When I was your age the only people I knew were black, and all of them were powerfully, adamantly, dangerously afraid. It was always right in front of me. The fear was there in the extravagant boys of my West Baltimore neighborhood, in their large rings and medallions, their big puffy coats and full-length fur-collared leathers, which was their armor against their world. They would stand on the corner of Gwynn Oak and Liberty, or Cold Spring and Park Heights, or outside Mondawmin Mall, with their hands dipped in Russell sweats. I think back on those boys now and all I see is fear, and all I see is them girding themselves against the ghosts of the bad old days when the Mississippi mob gathered 'round their grandfathers so that the branches of the black body might be torched, then cut away. The fear lived on in their practiced bop, their slouching denim, their big T-shirts, the calculated angle of their baseball caps, a catalog of behaviors and garments enlisted to inspire the belief that these boys were in firm possession of everything they desired.

I felt the fear in the visits to my Nana's home in Philadelphia. You never knew her. I barely knew her, but what I remember is her hard manner, her rough voice. And I knew that my father's father was dead and that my Uncle Oscar was dead and that my Uncle David was dead and that each of these instances was unnatural. And I saw it in my own father, who loves you, who

counsels you, who slipped me money to care for you. My father was so very afraid. I felt it in the sting of his black leather belt, which he applied with more anxiety than anger, my father who beat me as if someone might steal me away, because that is exactly what was happening all around us. Everyone had lost a child, somehow, to the streets, to jail, to drugs, to guns. It was said that these lost girls were sweet as honey and would not hurt a fly. It was said that these lost boys had just received a GED and had begun to turn their lives around. And now they were gone, and their legacy was a great fear.

When I was 6, Ma and Dad took me to a local park. I slipped from their gaze and found a playground. Your grandparents spent anxious minutes looking for me. When they found me, Dad did what every parent I knew would have done—he reached for his belt. I remember watching him in a kind of daze, awed at the distance between punishment and offense. Later, I would hear it in Dad's voice—"Either I can beat him, or the police." Maybe that saved me. Maybe it didn't. All I know is, the violence rose from the fear like smoke from a fire, and I cannot say whether that violence, even administered in fear and love, sounded the alarm or choked us at the exit. What I know is that fathers who slammed their teenage boys for sass would then release them to streets where their boys employed, and were subject to, the same justice. And I knew mothers who belted their girls, but the belt could not save these girls from drug dealers twice their age.

To be black in the Baltimore of my youth was to be naked before the elements of the world, before all the guns, fists, knives, crack, rape, and disease. The law did not protect us. And now, in your time, the law has become an excuse for stopping and frisking you, which is to say, for furthering the assault on your body. But a society that protects some people through a safety net of schools, government-backed home loans, and ancestral wealth but can protect you only with the club of criminal justice has either failed at enforcing its good intentions or succeeded at something much darker.

I remember being 11 years old, standing out in the parking lot in front of the 7-Eleven, watching a crew of older boys standing near the street. I stood there, marveling at the older boys' beautiful sense of fashion. They all wore ski jackets, the kind that mothers put on layaway in September, then piled up overtime hours so as to have the thing wrapped and ready for Christmas. A light-skinned boy with a long head and small eyes was scowling at another boy, who was standing close to me. It was just before three in the afternoon. I was in sixth grade. School had just let out, and it was not yet the fighting weather of early spring. What was the exact problem here? Who could know?

The boy with the small eyes reached into his ski jacket and pulled out a gun. I recall it in the slowest motion, as though in a dream. There the boy stood, with the gun brandished, which he slowly untucked, tucked, then untucked once more, and in his small eyes I saw a surging rage that could, in an instant, erase my body. That was 1986. That year I felt myself to be drowning in the news reports of murder. I was aware that these murders very often did not land upon the intended targets but fell upon great-aunts, PTA mothers, overtime uncles, and joyful children—fell upon them random and relentless, like great sheets of rain. I knew this in theory but could not understand it as fact until the boy with the small eyes stood across from me holding my entire body in his small hands.

I remember being amazed that death could so easily rise up from the nothing of a boyish afternoon, billow up like fog. I knew that West Baltimore, where I lived; that the north side of Philadelphia, where my cousins lived; that the South Side of Chicago, where friends of my father lived, comprised a world apart. Somewhere out there beyond the firmament, past the asteroid belt, there were other worlds where children did not regularly fear for their bodies. I knew this because there was a large television in my living room. In the evenings I would sit before this television bearing witness to the dispatches from this other world. There were little white boys with complete collections of football cards, their only want was a popular girlfriend and their only worry was poison oak. That other world was suburban and endless, organized around pot roasts, blueberry pies, fireworks, ice-cream sundaes, immaculate bathrooms, and small toy trucks that were loosed in wooded backyards with streams and endless lawns. Comparing these dispatches with the facts of my native world, I came to understand that my country was a galaxy, and this galaxy stretched from the pandemonium of West Baltimore to the happy hunting grounds of Mr. Belvedere. I obsessed over the distance between that other sector of space and my own. I knew that my portion of the American galaxy, where bodies were enslaved by a tenacious gravity, was black and that the other, liberated portion was not. I knew that some inscrutable energy

preserved the breach. I felt, but did not yet understand, the relation between that other world and me. And I felt in this a cosmic injustice, a profound cruelty, which infused an abiding, irrepressible desire to unshackle my body and achieve the velocity of escape.

Before I could escape, I had to survive, and this could only mean a clash with the streets, by which I mean not just physical blocks, nor simply the people packed into them, but the array of lethal puzzles and strange perils that seem to rise up from the asphalt itself. The streets transform every ordinary day into a series of trick questions, and every incorrect answer risks a beat-down, a shooting, or a pregnancy. No one survives unscathed. When I was your age, fully one-third of my brain was concerned with whom I was walking to school with, our precise number, the manner of our walk, the number of times I smiled, whom or what I smiled at, who offered a pound and who did not—all of which is to say that I practiced the culture of the streets, a culture concerned chiefly with securing the body.

The culture of the streets was essential—there was no alternative. I could not retreat into the church and its mysteries. My parents rejected all dogmas. We spurned the holidays marketed by the people who wanted to be white. We would not stand for their anthems. We would not kneel before their God. “The meek shall inherit the earth” meant nothing to me. The meek were battered in West Baltimore, stomped out at Walbrook Junction, bashed up on Park Heights, and raped in the showers of the city jail. My understanding of the universe was physical, and its moral arc bent toward chaos then concluded in a box. That was the message of the small-eyed boy, untucking the piece—a child bearing the power to body and banish other children to memory. Fear ruled everything around me, and I knew, as all black people do, that this fear was connected to the world out there, to the unworried boys, to pie and pot roast, to the white fences and green lawns nightly beamed into our television sets.

Every February my classmates and I were herded into assemblies for a ritual review of the civil-rights movement. Our teachers urged us toward the example of freedom marchers, Freedom Riders, and Freedom Summers, and it seemed that the month could not pass without a series of films dedicated to the glories of being beaten on camera. Why are they showing this to us? Why were only our heroes nonviolent? Back then all I could do was measure these freedom-lovers by what I knew. Which is to say, I measured them against children pulling out in the 7-Eleven parking lot, against parents wielding extension cords, and the threatening intonations of armed black gangs saying, “Yeah, nigger, what’s up now?” I judged them against the country I knew, which had acquired the land through murder and tamed it under slavery, against the country whose armies fanned out across the world to extend their dominion. The world, the real one, was civilization secured and ruled by savage means. How could the schools valorize men and women whose values society actively scorned? How could they send us out into the streets of Baltimore, knowing all that they were, and then speak of nonviolence?

Some things were clear to me: The violence that undergirded the country, so flagrantly on display during Black History Month, and the intimate violence of the streets were not unrelated. And this violence was not magical, but was of a piece and by design. But what exactly was the design? And why? I must know. I must get out ... but into what? I saw the design in those in the boys on the corner, in “the babies having babies.” The design explained everything, from our cracked-out fathers to HIV to the bleached skin of Michael Jackson. I felt this but I could not explain it. This was two years before the Million Man March. Almost every day I played Ice Cube’s album *Death Certificate*: “Let me live my life, if we can no longer live our life, then let us give our life for the liberation and salvation of the black nation.” I was haunted by the bodily sacrifice of Malcolm. I was haunted because I believed that we had left ourselves back there, and now in the crack era all we had was a great fear. Perhaps I must go back. That was what I heard in the rapper’s call to “keep it real.” Perhaps we should return to ourselves, to our own primordial streets, to our own ruggedness, to our own rude hair. Perhaps we should return to Mecca.

My only Mecca was, is, and shall always be Howard University. This Mecca, My Mecca—The Mecca—is a machine, crafted to capture and concentrate the dark energy of all African peoples and inject it directly into the student body. The Mecca derives its power from the heritage of Howard University, which in Jim Crow days enjoyed a near-monopoly on black talent. And whereas most other historically black schools were scattered like forts in the great wilderness of the old Confederacy, Howard was in Washington, D.C.—Chocolate City—and thus in proximity to both federal power and black power. I first

witnessed this power out on the Yard, that communal green space in the center of the campus where the students gathered and I saw everything I knew of my black self multiplied out into seemingly endless variations. There were the scions of Nigerian aristocrats in their business suits giving dap to bald-headed Qs in purple windbreakers and tan Timbs. There were the high-yellow progeny of A.M.E. preachers debating the clerics of Ausar-Set. There were California girls turned Muslim, born anew, in hijab and long skirt. There were Ponzi schemers and Christian cultists, Tabernacle fanatics and mathematical geniuses. It was like listening to a hundred different renditions of “Redemption Song,” each in a different color and key. And overlaying all of this was the history of Howard itself. I knew that I was literally walking in the footsteps of all the Toni Morrisons and Zora Neale Hurstons, of all the Sterling Browns and Kenneth Clarks, who’d come before.

The Mecca—the vastness of black people across space-time—could be experienced in a 20-minute walk across campus. I saw this vastness in the students chopping it up in front of the Frederick Douglass Memorial Hall, where Muhammad Ali had addressed their fathers and mothers in defiance of the Vietnam War. I saw its epic sweep in the students next to Ira Aldridge Theater, where Donny Hathaway had once sung, where Donald Byrd had once assembled his flock. The students came out with their saxophones, trumpets, and drums, played “My Favorite Things” or “Someday My Prince Will Come.” Some of the other students were out on the grass in front of Alain Locke Hall, in pink and green, chanting, singing, stomping, clapping, stepping. Some of them came up from Tubman Quadrangle with their roommates and rope for double Dutch. Some of them came down from Drew Hall, with their caps cocked and their backpacks slung through one arm, then fell into gorgeous ciphers of beatbox and rhyme. Some of the girls sat by the flagpole with bell hooks and Sonia Sanchez in their straw totes. Some of the boys, with their new Yoruba names, beseeched these girls by citing Frantz Fanon. Some of them studied Russian. Some of them worked in bone labs. They were Panamanian. They were Bajan. And some of them were from places I had never heard of. But all of them were hot and incredible, exotic even, though we hailed from the same tribe.

Now, the heirs of slaveholders could never directly acknowledge our beauty or reckon with its power. And so the beauty of the black body was never celebrated in movies, on television shows, or in the textbooks I’d seen as a child. Everyone of any import, from Jesus to George Washington, was white. This was why your grandparents banned Tarzan and the Lone Ranger and toys with white faces from the house. They were rebelling against the history books that spoke of black people only as sentimental “firsts”—first black four-star general, first black congressman, first black mayor—always presented in the bemused manner of a category of Trivial Pursuit. Serious history was the West, and the West was white. This was all distilled for me in a quote I once read, from the novelist Saul Bellow. I can’t remember where I read it, or when—only that I was already at Howard. “Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus?” Bellow quipped. Tolstoy was “white,” I understood him to say, and so Tolstoy “mattered,” like everything else that was white “mattered.” And this view of things was connected to the fear that passed through the generations, to the sense of dispossession. We were black, beyond the visible spectrum, beyond civilization. Our history was inferior because we were inferior, which is to say our bodies were inferior. And our inferior bodies could not possibly be accorded the same respect as those that built the West. Would it not be better, then, if our bodies were civilized, improved, and put to some legitimate Christian use?

And so I came to Howard toting a new and different history, myth really, which inverted all the stories of the people who believed themselves to be white. I majored in history with all the motives of a man looking to fill a trophy case. They had heroes, so we must have heroes too. But my history professors thought nothing of telling me that my search for myth was doomed, that the stories I wanted to tell myself could not be matched to truths. Indeed, they felt it their duty to disabuse me of my weaponized history. Their method was rough and direct. Did black skin really convey nobility? Always? Yes. What about the blacks who’d practiced slavery for millennia and sold slaves across the Sahara and then across the sea? Victims of a trick. Would those be the same black kings who birthed all of civilization? Were they then both deposed masters of the galaxy and gullible puppets all at once? And what did I mean by “black”? You know, black. Did I think this a timeless category stretching into the deep past? Yes? Could it be supposed that simply because color was important to me, it had always been so?

This heap of realizations was a weight. I found them physically painful and exhausting. True, I was coming to enjoy the dizziness, the vertigo that must come with any odyssey. But in those early moments, the unceasing contradictions sent me into a gloom. There was nothing holy or particular in my skin; I was black because of history and heritage. There was no nobility in

falling, in being bound, in living oppressed, and there was no inherent meaning in black blood. Black blood wasn't black; black skin wasn't even black. And now I looked back on my need for a trophy case, on the desire to live by the standards of Saul Bellow, and I felt that this need was not an escape but fear again—fear that “they,” the alleged authors and heirs of the universe, were right. And this fear ran so deep that we accepted their standards of civilization and humanity.

But not all of us. It must have been around that time that I discovered an essay by Ralph Wiley in which he responded to Bellow's quip. “Tolstoy is the Tolstoy of the Zulus,” wrote Wiley. “Unless you find a profit in fencing off universal properties of mankind into exclusive tribal ownership.” And there it was. I had accepted Bellow's premise. In fact, Bellow was no closer to Tolstoy than I was to Nzinga. And if I were closer it would be because I chose to be, not because of destiny written in DNA. My great error was not that I had accepted someone else's dream but that I had accepted the fact of dreams, the need for escape, and the invention of racecraft. And still and all I knew that we were something, that we were a tribe—on one hand, invented, and on the other, no less real. The reality was out there on the Yard, on the first warm day of spring when it seemed that every sector, borough, affiliation, county, and corner of the broad diaspora had sent a delegate to the great world party. I remember those days like an OutKast song, painted in lust and joy. The black world was expanding before me, and I could see now that that world was more than a photonegative of that of the people who believe they are white. “White America” is a syndicate arrayed to protect its exclusive power to dominate and control our bodies. Sometimes this power is direct (lynching), and sometimes it is insidious (redlining). But however it appears, the power of domination and exclusion is central to the belief in being white, and without it, “white people” would cease to exist for want of reasons. There will surely always be people with straight hair and blue eyes, as there have been for all of history. But some of these straight-haired people with blue eyes have been “black,” and this points to the great difference between their world and ours. We did not choose our fences. They were imposed on us by Virginia planters obsessed with enslaving as many Americans as possible. Now I saw that we had made something down here, in slavery, in Jim Crow, in ghettos. At The Mecca I saw how we had taken their one-drop rule and flipped it. They made us into a race. We made ourselves into a people.

And what did that mean for the Dreamers I'd seen as a child? Could I ever want to get into the world they made? No. I was born among a people, Samori, and in that realization I knew that I was out of something. It was the psychosis of questioning myself, of constantly wondering if I could measure up. But the whole theory was wrong, their whole notion of race was wrong. And apprehending that, I felt my first measure of freedom.

This realization was important but intellectual. It could not save my body. Indeed, it made me understand what the loss of all our black bodies really meant. No one of us were “black people.” We were individuals, a one of one, and when we died there was nothing. Always remember that Trayvon Martin was a boy, that Tamir Rice was a particular boy, that Jordan Davis was a boy, like you. When you hear these names think of all the wealth poured into them. Think of the gasoline expended, the treads worn carting him to football games, basketball tournaments, and Little League. Think of the time spent regulating sleepovers. Think of the surprise birthday parties, the day care, and the reference checks on babysitters. Think of checks written for family photos. Think of soccer balls, science kits, chemistry sets, racetracks, and model trains. Think of all the embraces, all the private jokes, customs, greetings, names, dreams, all the shared knowledge and capacity of a black family injected into that vessel of flesh and bone. And think of how that vessel was taken, shattered on the concrete, and all its holy contents, all that had gone into each of them, was sent flowing back to the earth. It is terrible to truly see our particular beauty, Samori, because then you see the scope of the loss. But you must push even further. You must see that this loss is mandated by the history of your country, by the Dream of living white.

I remember that summer that you may well remember when I loaded you and your cousin Christopher into the back seat of a rented car and pushed out to see what remained of Petersburg, Shirley Plantation, and the Wilderness. I was obsessed with the Civil War because six hundred thousand people had died in it. And yet it had been glossed over in my education, and in popular culture, representations of the war and its reasons seemed obscured. And yet I knew that in 1859 we were enslaved and in 1865 we were not, and what happened to us in those years struck me as having some amount of import. But whenever I visited any of the battlefields, I felt like I was greeted as if I were a nosy accountant conducting an audit and someone was trying to hide the books.

I don't know if you remember how the film we saw at the Petersburg Battlefield ended as though the fall of the Confederacy were the onset of a tragedy, not jubilee. I doubt you remember the man on our tour dressed in the gray wool of the Confederacy, or how every visitor seemed most interested in flanking maneuvers, hardtack, smoothbore rifles, grapeshot, and ironclads, but virtually no one was interested in what all of this engineering, invention, and design had been marshaled to achieve. You were only 10 years old. But even then I knew that I must trouble you, and this meant taking you into rooms where people would insult your intelligence, where thieves would try to enlist you in your own robbery and disguise their burning and looting as Christian charity. But robbery is what this is, what it always was.

At the onset of the Civil War, our stolen bodies were worth \$4 billion, more than all of American industry, all of American railroads, workshops, and factories combined, and the prime product rendered by our stolen bodies—cotton—was America's primary export. The richest men in America lived in the Mississippi River Valley, and they made their riches off our stolen bodies. Our bodies were held in bondage by the early presidents. Our bodies were traded from the White House by James K. Polk. Our bodies built the Capitol and the National Mall. The first shot of the Civil War was fired in South Carolina, where our bodies constituted the majority of human bodies in the state. Here is the motive for the great war. It's not a secret. But we can do better and find the bandit confessing his crime. "Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery," declared Mississippi as it left the Union, "the greatest material interest of the world."

But American reunion was built on a comfortable narrative that made enslavement into benevolence, white knights of body snatchers, and the mass slaughter of the war into a kind of sport in which one could conclude that both sides conducted their affairs with courage, honor, and élan. This lie of the Civil War is the lie of innocence, is the Dream. Historians conjured the Dream. Hollywood fortified the Dream. The Dream was gilded by novels and adventure stories. John Carter flees the broken Confederacy for Mars. We are not supposed to ask what, precisely, he was running from. I, like every kid I knew, loved *The Dukes of Hazzard*. But I would have done well to think more about why two outlaws, driving a car named the General Lee, must necessarily be portrayed as "just some good ole boys, never meanin' no harm"—a mantra for the Dreamers if there ever was one. But what one "means" is neither important nor relevant. It is not necessary that you believe that the officer who choked Eric Garner set out that day to destroy a body. All you need to understand is that the officer carries with him the power of the American state and the weight of an American legacy, and they necessitate that of the bodies destroyed every year, some wild and disproportionate number of them will be black.

Here is what I would like for you to know: In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage. Enslavement was not merely the antiseptic borrowing of labor—it is not so easy to get a human being to commit their body against its own elemental interest. And so enslavement must be casual wrath and random manglings, the gashing of heads and brains blown out over the river as the body seeks to escape. It must be rape so regular as to be industrial. There is no uplifting way to say this. I have no praise anthems, nor old Negro spirituals. The spirit and soul are the body and brain, which are destructible—that is precisely why they are so precious. And the soul did not escape. The spirit did not steal away on gospel wings. The soul was the body that fed the tobacco, and the spirit was the blood that watered the cotton, and these created the first fruits of the American garden. And the fruits were secured through the bashing of children with stovewood, through hot iron peeling skin away like husk from corn.

It had to be blood. It had to be the thrashing of kitchen hands for the crime of churning butter at a leisurely clip. It had to be some woman "cheard ... with thirty lashes a Saturday last and as many more a Tuesday again." It could only be the employment of carriage whips, tongs, iron pokers, handsaws, stones, paperweights, or whatever might be handy to break the black body, the black family, the black community, the black nation. The bodies were pulverized into stock and marked with insurance. And the bodies were an aspiration, lucrative as Indian land, a veranda, a beautiful wife, or a summer home in the mountains. For the men who needed to believe themselves white, the bodies were the key to a social club, and the right to break the bodies was the mark of civilization. "The two great divisions of society are not the rich and poor, but white and black," said the great South Carolina senator John C. Calhoun. "And all the former, the poor as well as the rich, belong to the upper class, and are respected and treated as equals." And there it is—the right to break the black body as the meaning of their sacred equality. And that right has always given them meaning, has always meant that there was someone down in the valley because

a mountain is not a mountain if there is nothing below.

You and I, my son, are that “below.” That was true in 1776. It is true today. There is no them without you, and without the right to break you they must necessarily fall from the mountain, lose their divinity, and tumble out of the Dream. And then they would have to determine how to build their suburbs on something other than human bones, how to angle their jails toward something other than a human stockyard, how to erect a democracy independent of cannibalism. I would like to tell you that such a day approaches when the people who believe themselves to be white renounce this demon religion and begin to think of themselves as human. But I can see no real promise of such a day. We are captured, brother, surrounded by the majoritarian bandits of America. And this has happened here, in our only home, and the terrible truth is that we cannot will ourselves to an escape on our own.

But still you must struggle. The Struggle is in your name, Samori—you were named for Samori Touré, who struggled against French colonizers for the right to his own black body. He died in captivity, but the profits of that struggle and others like it are ours, even when the object of our struggle, as is so often true, escapes our grasp. I think now of the old rule that held that should a boy be set upon in someone else’s chancy hood, his friends must stand with him, and they must all take their beating together. I now know that within this edict lay the key to all living. None of us were promised to end the fight on our feet, fists raised to the sky. We could not control our enemies’ number, strength, or weaponry. Sometimes you just caught a bad one. But whether you fought or ran, you did it together, because that is the part that was in our control. What we must never do is willingly hand over our own bodies or the bodies of our friends. That was the wisdom: We knew we did not lay down the direction of the street, but despite that, we could—and must—fashion the way of our walk. And that is the deeper meaning of your name—that the struggle, in and of itself, has meaning. That wisdom is not unique to our people, but I think it has special meaning to those of us born out of mass rape, whose ancestors were carried off and divided up into policies and stocks. I have raised you to respect every human being as singular, and you must extend that same respect into the past. Slavery is not an indefinable mass of flesh. It is a particular, specific enslaved woman, whose mind is as active as your own, whose range of feeling is as vast as your own; who prefers the way the light falls in one particular spot in the woods, who enjoys fishing where the water eddies in a nearby stream, who loves her mother in her own complicated way, thinks her sister talks too loud, has a favorite cousin, a favorite season, who excels at dressmaking and knows, inside herself, that she is as intelligent and capable as anyone. “Slavery” is this same woman born in a world that loudly proclaims its love of freedom and inscribes this love in its essential texts, a world in which these same professors hold this woman a slave, hold her mother a slave, her father a slave, her daughter a slave, and when this woman peers back into the generations all she sees is the enslaved. She can hope for more. She can imagine some future for her grandchildren. But when she dies, the world—which is really the only world she can ever know—ends. For this woman, enslavement is not a parable. It is damnation. It is the never-ending night. And the length of that night is most of our history. Never forget that we were enslaved in this country longer than we have been free. Never forget that for 250 years black people were born into chains—whole generations followed by more generations who knew nothing but chains. You must struggle to truly remember this past. You must resist the common urge toward the comforting narrative of divine law, toward fairy tales that imply some irrepressible justice. The enslaved were not bricks in your road, and their lives were not chapters in your redemptive history. They were people turned to fuel for the American machine. Enslavement was not destined to end, and it is wrong to claim our present circumstance—no matter how improved—as the redemption for the lives of people who never asked for the posthumous, untouchable glory of dying for their children. Our triumphs can never redeem this. Perhaps our triumphs are not even the point. Perhaps struggle is all we have. So you must wake up every morning knowing that no natural promise is unbreakable, least of all the promise of waking up at all. This is not despair. These are the preferences of the universe itself: verbs over nouns, actions over states, struggle over hope.

The birth of a better world is not ultimately up to you, though I know, each day, there are grown men and women who tell you otherwise. I am not a cynic. I love you, and I love the world, and I love it more with every new inch I discover. But you are a black boy, and you must be responsible for your body in a way that other boys cannot know. Indeed, you must be responsible for the worst actions of other black bodies, which, somehow, will always be assigned to you. And you must be responsible for the bodies of the powerful—the policeman who cracks you with a nightstick will quickly find his excuse in your furtive movements. You have to make your peace with the chaos, but you cannot lie. You cannot forget how much they took from us and how they transfigured our very bodies into sugar, tobacco, cotton, and gold. Perhaps you remember that time we went to

see Howl's Moving Castle on the Upper West Side. You were almost 5 years old. The theater was crowded, and when we came out we rode a set of escalators down to the ground floor. As we came off, you were moving at the dawdling speed of a small child. A white woman pushed you and said, "Come on!" Many things now happened at once. There was the reaction of any parent when a stranger puts a hand on the body of their child. And there was my own insecurity in my ability to protect your black body. And more: There was my sense that this woman was pulling rank. I knew, for instance, that she would not have pushed a black child out on my part of Flatbush, because she would be afraid there and would sense, if not know, that there would be a penalty for such an action. But I was not out on my part of Flatbush. And I was not in West Baltimore. I forgot all of that. I was only aware that someone had invoked their right over the body of my son. I turned and spoke to this woman, and my words were hot with all of the moment and all of my history. She shrank back, shocked. A white man standing nearby spoke up in her defense. I experienced this as his attempt to rescue the damsel from the beast. He had made no such attempt on behalf of my son. And he was now supported by other white people in the assembling crowd. The man came closer. He grew louder. I pushed him away. He said, "I could have you arrested!" I did not care. I told him this, and the desire to do much more was hot in my throat. This desire was only controllable because I remembered someone standing off to the side there, bearing witness to more fury than he had ever seen from me—you. I came home shook. It was a mix of shame for having gone back to the law of the streets, and rage—"I could have you arrested!" Which is to say: "I could take your body." I have told this story many times, not out of bravado, but out of a need for absolution. But more than any shame I felt, my greatest regret was that in seeking to defend you I was, in fact, endangering you.

"I could have you arrested," he said. Which is to say: "One of your son's earliest memories will be watching the men who sodomized Abner Louima and choked Anthony Baez cuff, club, tase, and break you." I had forgotten the rules, an error as dangerous on the Upper West Side of Manhattan as on the West Side of Baltimore. One must be without error out here. Walk in single file. Work quietly. Pack an extra No. 2 pencil. Make no mistakes.

But you are human and you will make mistakes. You will misjudge. You will yell. You will drink too much. You will hang out with people whom you shouldn't. Not all of us can always be Jackie Robinson—not even Jackie Robinson was always Jackie Robinson. But the price of error is higher for you than it is for your countrymen, and so that America might justify itself, the story of a black body's destruction must always begin with his or her error, real or imagined—with Eric Garner's anger, with Trayvon Martin's mythical words ("You are gonna die tonight"), with Sean Bell's mistake of running with the wrong crowd, with me standing too close to the small-eyed boy pulling out. You are called to struggle, not because it assures you victory but because it assures you an honorable and sane life. I am ashamed of how I acted that day, ashamed of endangering your body. I am ashamed that I made an error, knowing that our errors always cost us more. I am sorry that I cannot make it okay. I am sorry that I cannot save you—but not that sorry. Part of me thinks that your very vulnerability brings you closer to the meaning of life, just as for others, the quest to believe oneself white divides them from it. The fact is that despite their dreams, their lives are also not inviolable. When their own vulnerability becomes real—when the police decide that tactics intended for the ghetto should enjoy wider usage, when their armed society shoots down their children, when nature sends hurricanes against their cities—they are shocked by the rages of logic and the natural world in a way that those of us who were born and bred to understand cause and effect can never be. And I would not have you live like them. You have been cast into a race in which the wind is always at your face and the hounds are always at your heels. And to varying degrees this is true of all life. The difference is that you do not have the privilege of living in ignorance of this essential fact.

I am speaking to you as I always have—treating you as the sober and serious man I have always wanted you to be, who does not apologize for his human feelings, who does not make excuses for his height, his long arms, his beautiful smile. You are growing into consciousness, and my wish for you is that you feel no need to constrict yourself to make other people comfortable. None of that can change the math anyway. I never wanted you to be twice as good as them, so much as I have always wanted you to attack every day of your brief bright life determined to struggle. The people who must believe they are white can never be your measuring stick. I would not have you descend into your own dream. I would have you be a conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world.