“Letter to My Son” by Ta-Nehisi Coates (edited)

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*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.

This is your country, this is your world, this is your body, and you must find some way to live within the all of it.

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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.

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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 “chear’d ... 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.

The terrible truth is that we cannot will ourselves to an escape on our own.

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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 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.

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.

This article is adapted from Coates’s forthcoming book, *Between the World and Me*.

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