

Shortly before you were born, I was pulled over by the PG County police, the same police that all the D.C. poets had warned me of. They approached on both sides of the car, shining their flashing lights through the windows. They took my identification and returned to the squad car. I sat there in terror. By then I had added to the warnings of my teachers what I'd learned about PG County through reporting and reading the papers. And so I knew that the PG County police had killed Elmer Clay Newman, then claimed he'd rammed his own head into the wall of a jail cell. And I knew that they'd shot Gary Hopkins and said he'd gone for an officer's gun. And I knew they had beaten Freddie McCollum half-blind and blamed it all on a collapsing floor. And I had read reports of these officers choking mechanics, shooting construction workers, slamming suspects through the glass doors of shopping malls.

from  
Between the World  
and Me  
by Ta-Nehisi Coates  
(2015)

And I knew that they did this with great regularity, as though moved by some unseen cosmic clock. I knew that they shot at moving cars, shot at the unarmed, shot through the backs of men and claimed that it had been they who'd been under fire. These shooters were investigated, exonerated, and promptly returned to the streets, where, so emboldened, they shot again. At that point in American history, no police department fired its guns more than that of Prince George's County. The FBI opened multiple investigations—sometimes in the same week. The police chief was rewarded with a raise. I replayed all of this sitting there in my car, in their clutches. Better to have been shot in Baltimore, where there was the justice of the streets and someone might call the killer to account. But these officers had my body, could do with that body whatever they pleased, and should I live to explain what they had done with it, this complaint would mean nothing. The officer returned. He handed back my license. He gave no explanation for the stop.

Then that September I picked up *The Washington Post* and saw that the PG County police had killed again. I could not help but think that this could have been me, and holding you—a month old by then—I knew that such loss would not be mine alone. I skimmed the headline—their atrocities seemed so common back then. The story spread into a second day, and reading slightly closer, I saw it was a Howard student who had been killed. I thought perhaps I knew him. But I paid it no further mind. Then on the

third day a photo appeared with the story, and I glimpsed at and then focused on the portrait, and I saw him there. He was dressed in his formal clothes, as though it were his senior prom, and frozen in the amber of his youth. His face was lean, brown, and beautiful, and across that face, I saw the open, easy smile of Prince Carmen Jones.

I cannot remember what happened next. I think I stumbled back. I think I told your mother what I'd read. I think I called the girl with the long dreads and asked her if it could be true. I think she screamed. What I remember for sure is what I felt: rage and the old gravity of West Baltimore, the gravity that condemned me to the schools, the streets, the void. Prince Jones had made it through, and still they had taken him. And even though I already knew that I would never believe any account that justified this taking, I sat down to read the story. There were very few details. He had been shot by a PG County officer, not in PG County, not even in D.C., but somewhere in Northern Virginia. Prince had been driving to see his fiancée. He was killed yards from her home. The only witness to the killing of Prince Jones was the killer himself. The officer claimed that Prince had tried to run him over with his jeep, and I knew that the prosecutors would believe him.

Days later, your mother and I packed you into the car, drove down to Washington, left you with your aunt Kamillah, and went to the service for Prince at Rankin Chapel on Howard's campus, where I'd once sat amazed at the parade of activists and intellectuals—Joseph Lowery, Cor-

nel West, Calvin Butts—who preached at that pulpit. I must have seen a great number of old friends there, though I cannot recall precisely who. What I remember is all the people who spoke of Prince's religious zeal, his abiding belief that Jesus was with him. I remember watching the president of the university stand and weep. I remember Dr. Mable Jones, Prince's mother, speaking of her son's death as a call to move from her comfortable suburban life into activism. I heard several people ask for forgiveness for the officer who'd shot Prince Jones down. I only vaguely recall my impressions of all this. But I know that I have always felt great distance from the grieving rituals of my people, and I must have felt it powerfully then. The need to forgive the officer would not have moved me, because even then, in some inchoate form, I knew that Prince was not killed by a single officer so much as he was murdered by his country and all the fears that have marked it from birth.

At this moment the phrase "police reform" has come into vogue, and the actions of our publicly appointed guardians have attracted attention presidential and pedestrian. You may have heard the talk of diversity, sensitivity training, and body cameras. These are all fine and applicable, but they understate the task and allow the citizens of this country to pretend that there is real distance between their own attitudes and those of the ones appointed to protect them. The truth is that the police reflect America in all of its will and fear, and whatever we might make of

this country's criminal justice policy, it cannot be said that it was imposed by a repressive minority. The abuses that have followed from these policies—the sprawling carceral state, the random detention of black people, the torture of suspects—are the product of democratic will. And so to challenge the police is to challenge the American people who send them into the ghettos armed with the same self-generated fears that compelled the people who think they are white to flee the cities and into the Dream. The problem with the police is not that they are fascist pigs but that our country is ruled by majoritarian pigs.

I knew some of this even then, sitting in Rankin Chapel, even if I could not yet express it. So forgiving the killer of Prince Jones would have seemed irrelevant to me. The killer was the direct expression of all his country's beliefs. And raised conscious, in rejection of a Christian God, I could see no higher purpose in Prince's death. I believed, and still do, that our bodies are our selves, that my soul is the voltage conducted through neurons and nerves, and that my spirit is my flesh. Prince Jones was a one of one, and they had destroyed his body, scorched his shoulders and arms, ripped open his back, mangled lung, kidney, and liver. I sat there feeling myself a heretic, believing only in this one-shot life and the body. For the crime of destroying the body of Prince Jones, I did not believe in forgiveness. When the assembled mourners bowed their heads in prayer, I was divided from them because I believed that the void would not answer back.

Weeks wore on. Nauseating details slowly dribbled out. The officer was a known liar. A year earlier he had arrested a man on false evidence. Prosecutors had been forced to drop every case in which the officer was involved. The officer was demoted, restored, then put out on the street to continue his work. Now, through additional reports, a narrative began to take shape. The officer had been dressed like an undercover drug dealer. He'd been sent out to track a man whose build was five foot four and 250 pounds. We know from the coroner that Prince's body was six foot three and 211 pounds. We know that the other man was apprehended later. The charges against him were dropped. None of this mattered. We know that his superiors sent this officer to follow Prince from Maryland, through Washington, D.C., and into Virginia, where the officer shot Prince several times. We know that the officer confronted Prince with his gun drawn, and no badge. We know that the officer claims he shot because Prince tried to run him over with his jeep. We know that the authorities charged with investigating this shooting did very little to investigate the officer and did everything in their power to investigate Prince Jones. This investigation produced no information that would explain why Prince Jones would suddenly shift his ambitions from college to cop killing. This officer, given maximum power, bore minimum responsibility. He was charged with nothing. He was punished by no one. He was returned to his work.

There were times when I imagined myself, like Prince,

tracked through many jurisdictions by a man in a criminal's costume. And I was horrified, because I knew what I would have done with such a man confronting me, gun drawn, mere feet from my own family's home. *Take care of my baby*, your grandmother had said, which was to say *Take care of your new family*. But I now knew the limits of my caring, the reach of its powers, etched by an enemy old as Virginia. I thought of all the beautiful black people I'd seen at The Mecca, all their variation, all their hair, all their language, all their stories and geography, all their stunning humanity, and none of it could save them from the mark of plunder and the gravity of our particular world. And it occurred to me then that you would not escape, that there were awful men who'd laid plans for you, and I could not stop them. Prince Jones was the superlative of all my fears. And if he, good Christian, scion of a striving class, patron saint of the twice as good, could be forever bound, who then could not? And the plunder was not just of Prince alone. Think of all the love poured into him. Think of the tuitions for Montessori and music lessons. 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 daycare, and the reference checks on babysitters. Think of *World Book* and *Childcraft*. Think of checks written for family photos. Think of credit cards charged for vacations. 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 him, sent flowing back to the earth. Think of your mother, who had no father. And your grandmother, who was abandoned by her father. And your grandfather, who was left behind by his father. And think of how Prince's daughter was now drafted into those solemn ranks and deprived of her birthright—that vessel which was her father, which brimmed with twenty-five years of love and was the investment of her grandparents and was to be her legacy.

Now at night, I held you and a great fear, wide as all our American generations, took me. Now I personally understood my father and the old mantra—"Either I can beat him or the police." I understood it all—the cable wires, the extension cords, the ritual switch. Black people love their children with a kind of obsession. You are all we have, and you come to us endangered. I think we would like to kill you ourselves before seeing you killed by the streets that America made. That is a philosophy of the disembodied, of a people who control nothing, who can protect nothing, who are made to fear not just the criminals among them but the police who lord over them with all the moral authority of a protection racket. It was only after you that I understood this love, that I understood the grip of my

mother's hand. She knew that the galaxy itself could kill me, that all of me could be shattered and all of her legacy spilled upon the curb like bum wine. And no one would be brought to account for this destruction, because my death would not be the fault of any human but the fault of some unfortunate but immutable fact of "race," imposed upon an innocent country by the inscrutable judgment of invisible gods. The earthquake cannot be subpoenaed. The typhoon will not bend under indictment. They sent the killer of Prince Jones back to his work, because he was not a killer at all. He was a force of nature, the helpless agent of our world's physical laws.

This entire episode took me from fear to a rage that burned in me then, animates me now, and will likely leave me on fire for the rest of my days. I still had my journalism. My response was, in this moment, to write. I was lucky I had even that. Most of us are forced to drink our travesties straight and smile about it. I wrote about the history of the Prince George's County police. Nothing had ever felt so essential to me. Here is what I knew at the outset: The officer who killed Prince Jones was black. The politicians who empowered this officer to kill were black. Many of the black politicians, many of them twice as good, seemed unconcerned. How could this be? It was like I was back at Moorland again, called by great mysteries. But by then I didn't need any call slips; the Internet had bloomed into an instrument of research. That must strike you as novel. For all of your life, whenever you've had a question you have

been able to type that question out on a keyboard, watch it appear in a rectangular space bordered by a corporate logo, and within seconds revel in the flood of potential answers. But I still remember when typewriters were useful, the dawn of the Commodore 64, and days when a song you loved would have its moment on the radio and then disappear into the nothing. I must have gone five years without hearing the Mary Jane Girls sing "All Night Long." For a young man like me, the invention of the Internet was the invention of space travel.

My curiosity, in the case of Prince Jones, opened a world of newspaper clippings, histories, and sociologies. I called politicians and questioned them. I was told that the citizens were more likely to ask for police support than to complain about brutality. I was told that the black citizens of PG County were comfortable and had "a certain impatience" with crime. I had seen these theories before, back when I was researching in Moorland, leafing through the various fights within and without the black community. I knew that these were theories, even in the mouths of black people, that justified the jails springing up around me, that argued for ghettos and projects, that viewed the destruction of the black body as incidental to the preservation of order. According to this theory "safety" was a higher value than justice, perhaps the highest value. I understood. What I would not have given, back in Baltimore, for a line of officers, agents of my country and my community, patrolling my route to school! There were no such officers, and

whenever I saw the police it meant that something had already gone wrong. All along I knew that there were some, those who lived in the Dream, for whom the conversation was different. Their "safety" was in schools, portfolios, and skyscrapers. Ours was in men with guns who could only view us with the same contempt as the society that sent them.

And the lack of safety cannot help but constrain your sense of the galaxy. It never occurred to me, for instance, that I could, or should even want to, live in New York. I did love Baltimore. I loved Charlie Rudo's and the sidewalk sales at Mondawmin. I loved sitting out on the porch with your uncle Damani waiting for Frank Ski to play "Fresh Is the Word." I always thought I was destined to go back home after college—but not simply because I loved home but because I could not imagine much else for myself. And that stunted imagination is something I owe to my chains. And yet some of us really do see more.

I met many of them at The Mecca—like your uncle Ben, who was raised in New York, which forced him to understand himself as an African American navigating among Haitians, Jamaicans, Hasidic Jews, and Italians. And there were others like him, others who, having gotten a boost from a teacher, an aunt, an older brother, had peered over the wall as children, and as adults became set on seeing the full view. These black people felt, as did I, that their bodies could be snatched back at a whim, but this set in them a different kind of fear that propelled them out

into the cosmos. They spent semesters abroad. I never knew what they did or why. But perhaps I always sensed I was going down too easy. Perhaps that explains every girl I've ever loved, because every girl I've ever loved was a bridge to somewhere else. Your mother, who knew so much more of the world than me, fell in love with New York through culture, through *Crossing Delancey*, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, *Working Girl*, Nas, and Wu-Tang. Your mother secured a job, and I followed, stowed away almost, because no one in New York, at that time, was paying for me to write much of anything. What little I did make, reviewing an album or a book, covered approximately two electric bills every year.

We arrived two months before September 11, 2001. I suppose everyone who was in New York that day has a story. Here is mine: That evening, I stood on the roof of an apartment building with your mother, your aunt Chana, and her boyfriend, Jamal. So we were there on the roof, talking and taking in the sight—great plumes of smoke covered Manhattan Island. Everyone knew someone who knew someone who was missing. But looking out upon the ruins of America, my heart was cold. I had disasters all my own. The officer who killed Prince Jones, like all the officers who regard us so warily, was the sword of the American citizenry. I would never consider any American citizen pure. I was out of sync with the city. I kept thinking about how southern Manhattan had always been Ground Zero for us. They auctioned our bodies down there, in

that same devastated, and rightly named, financial district. And there was once a burial ground for the auctioned there. They built a department store over part of it and then tried to erect a government building over another part. Only a community of right-thinking black people stopped them. I had not formed any of this into a coherent theory. But I did know that Bin Laden was not the first man to bring terror to that section of the city. I never forgot that. Neither should you. In the days after, I watched the ridiculous pageantry of flags, the machismo of firemen, the overwrought slogans. Damn it all. Prince Jones was dead. And hell upon those who tell us to be twice as good and shoot us no matter. Hell for ancestral fear that put black parents under terror. And hell upon those who shatter the holy vessel.

I could see no difference between the officer who killed Prince Jones and the police who died, or the firefighters who died. They were not human to me. Black, white, or whatever, they were the menaces of nature; they were the fire, the comet, the storm, which could—with no justification—shatter my body.

I saw Prince Jones, one last time, alive and whole. He was standing in front of me. We were in a museum. I felt in that moment that his death had just been an awful dream. No, a premonition. But I had a chance. I would warn him. I walked over, gave him a pound, and felt that heat of the spectrum, the warmth of The Mecca. I wanted to tell him something. I wanted to say—Beware the plun-

derer. But when I opened my mouth, he just shook his head and walked away.

We lived in a basement apartment in Brooklyn, which I doubt you remember, down the street from Uncle Ben and his wife, your aunt Janai. These were not great times. I remember borrowing two hundred dollars from Ben, and it feeling like a million. I remember your grandfather coming to New York, taking me out for Ethiopian, after which I walked him to the West Fourth Street subway station. We said our goodbyes and walked away. He called me back. He had forgotten something. He handed me a check for \$120. I tell you this because you must understand, no matter the point of our talk, that I didn't always have things, but I had people—I *always had people*. I had a mother and father who I would match against any other. I had a brother who looked out for me all through college. I had The Mecca that directed me. I had friends who would leap in front of a bus for me. You need to know that I was loved, that whatever my lack of religious feeling, I have always loved my people and that broad love is directly related to the specific love I feel for you. I remember sitting out on Ben's stoop on Friday nights, drinking Jack Daniel's, debating the mayor's race or the rush to war. My weeks felt aimless. I pitched to various magazines with no success. Your aunt Chana lent me another two hundred dollars; I burned it all on a scam bartending school. I de-

livered food for a small deli in Park Slope. In New York, everyone wanted to know your occupation. I told people that I was "trying to be a writer."

Some days I would take the train into Manhattan. There was so much money everywhere, money flowing out of bistros and cafés, money pushing the people, at incredible speeds, up the wide avenues, money drawing intergalactic traffic through Times Square, money in the limestones and brownstones, money out on West Broadway where white people spilled out of wine bars with sloshing glasses and without police. I would see these people at the club, drunken, laughing, challenging breakdancers to battles. They would be destroyed and humiliated in these battles. But afterward they would give dap, laugh, order more beers. They were utterly fearless. I did not understand it until I looked out on the street. That was where I saw white parents pushing double-wide strollers down gentrifying Harlem boulevards in T-shirts and jogging shorts. Or I saw them lost in conversation with each other, mother and father, while their sons commanded entire sidewalks with their tricycles. The galaxy belonged to them, and as terror was communicated to our children, I saw mastery communicated to theirs.

And so when I remember pushing you in your stroller to other parts of the city, the West Village for instance, almost instinctively believing that you should see more, I remember feeling ill at ease, like I had borrowed someone else's heirloom, like I was traveling under an assumed