

are not their particular “problem,” nor their national guilt. We are not their niggers. If there is any comfort in this, it is not the kind that I would encourage you to indulge. Remember your name. Remember that you and I are brothers, are the children of trans-Atlantic rape. Remember the broader consciousness that comes with that. Remember that this consciousness can never ultimately be racial; it must be cosmic. Remember the Roma you saw begging with their children in the street, and the venom with which they were addressed. Remember the Algerian cab driver, speaking openly of his hatred of Paris, then looking at your mother and me and insisting that we were all united under Africa. Remember the rumbling we all felt under the beauty of Paris, as though the city had been built in abeyance of Pompeii. Remember the feeling that the great public gardens, the long lunches, might all be undone by a physics, cousin to our rules and the reckoning of our own country, that we do not fully comprehend.

It was good to have your uncle Ben and your aunt Janai there—someone else who had to balance the awe of what these people had built and the fact of whom they built so much of it upon; someone else who’d learned to travel in adulthood; people who’d been black in America and were mostly concerned with the safety of their bodies. And we were all aware that the forces that held back our bodies back at home were not unrelated to those that had given France its wealth. We were aware that much of what they had done was built on the plunder of Haitian bodies, on

the plunder of Wolof bodies, on the destruction of the Toucouleur, on the taking of Bissandugu.

That was the same summer that the killer of Trayvon Martin was acquitted, the summer I realized that I accepted that there is no velocity of escape. Home would find us in any language. Remember when we took the train up to Place de la Nation to celebrate your birthday with Janai and Ben and the kids? Remember the young man standing outside the subway in protest? Do you remember his sign? VIVE LE COMBAT DES JEUNES CONTRE LE CRIMES RACISTES! USA: TRAYVON MARTIN, 17 ANS ASSASSINÉ CAR NOIR ET LE RACISTE ACQUITÉ.

Ben

I did not die in my aimless youth. I did not perish in the agony of not knowing. I was not jailed. I had proven to myself that there was another way beyond the schools and the streets. I felt myself to be among the survivors of some great natural disaster, some plague, some avalanche or earthquake. And now, living in the wake of a decimation and having arrived at a land that I once considered mythical, everything seemed cast in a halo—the pastel Parisian scarves burned brighter, the morning odor wafting out of the boulangeries was hypnotic, and the language all around me struck me not so much as language but as dance.

Your route will be different. It must be. You knew things at eleven that I did not know when I was twenty-five. When I was eleven my highest priority was the simple

security of my body. My life was the immediate negotiation of violence—within my house and without. But already you have expectations, I see that in you. Survival and safety are not enough. Your hopes—your dreams, if you will—leave me with an array of warring emotions. I am so very proud of you—your openness, your ambition, your aggression, your intelligence. My job, in the little time we have left together, is to match that intelligence with wisdom. Part of that wisdom is understanding what you were given—a city where gay bars are unremarkable, a soccer team on which half the players speak some other language. What I am saying is that it does not all belong to you, that the beauty in you is not strictly yours and is largely the result of enjoying an abnormal amount of security in your black body.

Perhaps that is why, when you discovered that the killer of Mike Brown would go unpunished, you told me you had to go. Perhaps that is why you were crying, because in that moment you understood that even your relatively privileged security can never match a sustained assault launched in the name of the Dream. Our current politics tell you that should you fall victim to such an assault and lose your body, it somehow must be your fault. Trayvon Martin's hoodie got him killed. Jordan Davis's loud music did the same. John Crawford should never have touched the rifle on display. Kajieme Powell should have known not to be crazy. And all of them should have had fathers—

even the ones who had fathers, even you. Without its own justifications, the Dream would collapse upon itself. You first learned this from Michael Brown. I first learned it from Prince Jones.

Michael Brown did not die as so many of his defenders supposed. And still the questions behind the questions are never asked. Should assaulting an officer of the state be a capital offense, rendered without trial, with the officer as judge and executioner? Is that what we wish civilization to be? And all the time the Dreamers are pillaging Ferguson for municipal governance. And they are torturing Muslims, and their drones are bombing wedding parties (by accident!), and the Dreamers are quoting Martin Luther King and exulting nonviolence for the weak and the biggest guns for the strong. Each time a police officer engages us, death, injury, maiming is possible. It is not enough to say that this is true of anyone or more true of criminals. The moment the officers began their pursuit of Prince Jones, his life was in danger. The Dreamers accept this as the cost of doing business, accept our bodies as currency, because it is their tradition. As slaves we were this country's first windfall, the down payment on its freedom. After the ruin and liberation of the Civil War came Redemption for the unrepentant South and Reunion, and our bodies became this country's second mortgage. In the New Deal we were their guestroom, their finished basement. And today, with a sprawling prison system, which has turned

the warehousing of black bodies into a jobs program for Dreamers and a lucrative investment for Dreamers; today, when 8 percent of the world's prisoners are black men, our bodies have refinanced the Dream of being white. Black life is cheap, but in America black bodies are a natural resource of incomparable value.

III.

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

JAMES BALDWIN