

Excerpts from *Between the World & Me* - **By Ta-Nehisi Coates**

Between the World and Me is a work of nonfiction. Some names and identifying details have been changed.

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Pg. 8-12

Son,

I write you in your fifteenth 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 twelve-year-old child whom they were oath-bound to protect. And you have seen men in the same uniforms

pummel Marlene Pinnock, someone's grandmother, on the side of a road. 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. Resent the people trying to entrap your body and it 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. And destruction is merely the superlative form of a dominion whose prerogatives include friskings, detainings, beatings, and humiliations. All of this is common to black people. And all of this is old for black people. No one is held responsible.

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. 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. That Sunday, with that host, 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 an eleven-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 December 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 treehouses and the Cub Scouts. The Dream smells like peppermint 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 like some awesome declaration of their inviolable power 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 tell you now that the question of how one should live within a black body, within a country lost in the Dream, is the question of my life, and the pursuit of this question, I have found, ultimately answers itself.

Pg. 70-71

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. The world needs saving precisely because of the actions of these same men and women. 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. And this is not reducible to just you—the women around you must be responsible for their bodies in a way that you never will know. 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.

Pg. 73-83

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. 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 Kamilah, 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, Cornel 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 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....

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, 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 [Howard University], 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.

One afternoon your mother and I took you to visit a preschool. Our host took us down to a large gym filled with a bubbling ethnic stew of New York children. The children were running, jumping, and tumbling. You took one look at them, tore away from us, and ran right into the scrum. You have never been afraid of people, of rejection, and I have always admired you for this and always been afraid for you because of this. I watched you leap and laugh with these children you barely knew, and the wall rose in me and I felt I should grab you by the arm, pull you back and say, "We don't know these folks! Be cool!" I did not do this. I was growing, and if I could not name my anguish precisely I still knew that there was nothing noble in it. But now I understand the gravity of what I was proposing—that a four-year-old child be watchful, prudent, and shrewd, that I curtail your happiness, that you submit to a loss of time. And now when I measure this fear against the boldness that the masters of the galaxy imparted to their own children, I am ashamed.

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New York was another spectrum unto itself, and the great diversity I'd seen at Howard, solely among black people, now spread across a metropolis. Something different awaited around every corner. Here there were African drummers assembling in Union Square. Here there were dead office towers, brought to life at night by restaurants buried within girls, and Chinese-American girls with Dominican boys, and Dominican boys with Jamaican boys and every other imaginable combination. I would walk through the West Village, marveling at restaurants the size of living rooms, and I could see that the very smallness of these restaurants awarded the patrons a kind of erudite cool, as though they were laughing at a joke, and it would take the rest of the world a decade to catch on. Summer was unreal—whole swaths of the city became fashion shows, and the avenues were nothing but runways for the youth. There was a heat unlike anything I'd ever felt, a heat from the great buildings, compounded by the millions of people jamming themselves into subway cars, into bars, into those same tiny eateries and cafés. I had never seen so much life. And I had never imagined that such life could exist in so much variety. It was everyone's particular Mecca, packed into one singular city. But when I got off the train and came back to my hood, to my Flatbush Avenue, or my Harlem, the fear still held. It was the same boys, with the same bop, the same ice grill, and the same code I'd known all my life. If there was one difference in New York it was that we had more high-yellow cousins here in the Puerto Ricans and Dominicans. But their rituals were so similar, the way they walked and gave dap, it was all familiar to me. And so I found myself, on any given day, traveling through several New Yorks at once—dynamic, brutal, moneyed, sometimes all of those at once. Perhaps you remember that time we went to see Howl's Moving Castle on the Upper West Side. You were almost five 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 lays a hand on the body of his or her 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. And I was far from The Mecca [Howard University]. 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 shrunk 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 mixed with 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. I have never been a violent person. Even when I was young and adopted the rules of the street, anyone who knew me knew it was a bad fit. I've never felt the pride that is supposed to come with righteous self-defense and justified violence. Whenever it was me on top of someone, whatever my rage in the moment, afterward I always felt sick at having been lowered to the crudest form of communication. Malcolm made sense to me not out of a love of violence but because nothing in my life prepared me to understand tear gas as deliverance, as those Black History Month martyrs of the Civil Rights Movement did. But more than any shame I feel about my own actual violence, 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 error out here. Walk in single file. Work quietly. Pack an extra number 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 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. A society, almost necessarily, begins every success story with the chapter that most advantages itself, and in America, these precipitating chapters are almost always rendered as the singular action of exceptional individuals. "It only takes one person to make a change," you are often told. This is also a myth. Perhaps one person can make a change, but not the kind of change that would raise your body to equality with your countrymen. The fact of history is that black people have not—probably no people have ever—liberated themselves strictly through their own efforts. In every great change in the lives of African Americans we see the hand of events that were beyond our individual control, events that were not unalloyed goods. You cannot disconnect our emancipation in the

Northern colonies from the blood spilled in the Revolutionary War, any more than you can disconnect our emancipation from slavery in the South from the charnel houses of the Civil War, any more than you can disconnect our emancipation from Jim Crow from the genocides of the Second World War. History is not solely in our hands. And still 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. But I am not ashamed because I am a bad father, a bad individual or ill mannered. I am ashamed that I made an error, knowing that our errors always cost us more. This is the import of the history all around us, though very few people like to think about it. Had I informed this woman that when she pushed my son, she was acting according to a tradition that held black bodies as lesser, her response would likely have been, "I am not a racist." Or maybe not. But my experience in this world has been that the people who believe themselves to be white are obsessed with the politics of personal exoneration. And the word racist, to them, conjures, if not a tobacco-spitting oaf, then something just as fantastic—an orc, troll, or gorgon. "I'm not a racist," an entertainer once insisted after being filmed repeatedly yelling at a heckler: "He's a nigger! He's a nigger!" Considering segregationist senator Strom Thurmond, Richard Nixon concluded, "Strom is no racist." There are no racists in America, or at least none that the people who need to be white know personally. In the era of mass lynching, it was so difficult to find who, specifically, served as executioner that such deaths were often reported by the press as having happened "at the hands of persons unknown." In 1957, the white residents of Levittown, Pennsylvania, argued for their right to keep their town segregated. "As moral, religious and law-abiding citizens," the group wrote, "we feel that we are unprejudiced and undiscriminating in our wish to keep our community a closed community." This was the attempt to commit a shameful act while escaping all sanction, and I raise it to show you that there was no golden era when evildoers did their business and loudly proclaimed it as such. "We would prefer to say that such people cannot exist, that there aren't any," writes Solzhenitsyn. "To do evil a human being must first of all believe that what he's doing is good, or else that it's a well-considered act in conformity with natural law." This is the foundation of the Dream—its adherents must not just believe in it but believe that it is just, believe that their possession of the Dream is the natural result of grit, honor, and good works. There is some passing acknowledgment of the bad old days, which, jabbing out one's eyes and forgetting the work of one's hands. To acknowledge these horrors means turning away from the brightly rendered version of your country as it has always declared itself and turning toward something murkier and unknown. It is still too difficult for most Americans to do this. But that is your work. It must be, if only to preserve the sanctity of your mind.