

from *Breathe: A Letter to My Sons*, by Imani Perry,  
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My father had the poem “Who Killed McDuffie?” above his desk while I was growing up. It is a harrowing account of the unsolved murder of a Black man in Miami in 1979. I learned, practically from birth, that judicial procedure was a cruel choreography and not a fact finding when it came to violence against Black people. That is the terror that makes me want to say, “That could have been my child,” and also, “That could have been me,” even though thoughts of the self cannot, should not, take over our collective outrage and grief. And I know that, despite my fear, I cannot clip your wings, as though cowering is a respectful tribute to the beauty we have lost. No, I want your wingspan wide. To honor the departed, ancestral, and immediate—BE. Living defined by terror is itself destructive of the spirit. And it is submission. The truth is that life is unsafe. And genius, more often than not, remains unvalidated or, even worse, dormant. But joy, even in slivers, shows up everywhere. Take it. And keep taking it.

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All that said, here is a strange truth: death and brutality can happen to any Black child, but the suffering is not distributed evenly. Police do not cruise through our neighborhood. You will not be harassed every day on your way home. Some days, yes, but not every day, not most days. With all of the borders you cross in this society, of race and class and state, you have not crossed a national border without papers, have not been stopped and declared a violator. It will probably first happen when you are driving. Or maybe on public transportation. Or maybe in a mall, some security person will follow you. But it will probably not happen every day of your life. You do not dwell in the playgrounds of repression, even though you are squarely in America. You stand on the outskirts of the tornado, where you can get sucked in, but where you might have a chance to take cover.

You are saved more than a few ravages, because of class and status, but you must understand that is an accident of birth and nothing more and develop your ethics accordingly. That is to say, don't believe the hype. You aren't "different" from other Negroes. You are in the middle and on the margins of this configuration of beauty and its repression. That is all. And I do not mean that you haven't dealt with difficult things. You have. You are human. And you will deal with many more, and yes they will have to do with Blackness often enough, though not exclusively. And more than that, you are Black in America, which means rage is your familiar,

even if you haven't called it that yet. What I mean is, by virtue of where you live and go to school, and the possibility and comfort that are so often in your reach, you are not up close to the full weight of what Black life in America often is.

Remember once we went to a birthday party in North Philadelphia? We picked up the beautifully decorated cake from an Italian bakery on Fifth Street. We crowded into a small apartment. We drank Kool-Aid. We laughed, and you played. The language was different than the language at home, but it was a migrant's variation on the roots of Black English. I wondered that day, Did this feel as comfortable for you as for me? Did this feel safe? I wanted it to. I wanted it to feel like it could possibly be a refuge from the coldness of so many of the mostly white places that you found yourself. Maybe, maybe not. But you know this is a place to which you are bound, regardless. And if the little bit of advantage we cling onto slips out of our hands, it is a place you can go without being turned away.

Whether or not you ever have an intimate bond to any particular hood, it is inside you. It is yours. You cannot let the little modest spoils of capitalism's sorting hat confuse you. The landscape of your music and so much of your language lies there, a collage of past and present. An improvisation of dreams and their denial. We come from a common root—the grammar of the plantation, and before that of the continent, is yours and theirs. Think about it like this: The

three of us have different tastes in music. But we all yearn for the feeling of bass in the chest that massages away rage. We all like a persistent beat. We all have tempers—sometimes in ways that defy the rules of being bourgeois. We yearn to curse people out. Issa, I knew it was true of you when you said to a little boy who thought your hair was a source of entertainment, “If you don’t stop touching me, Imma drop you.” That feeling, that reads to many as being “hard” in a manner that is specifically “hood,” isn’t artifice. It is something that courses through us like some epigenetic disposition. After centuries of humiliation and denigration, the hairs on our arms stand at attention each time the past is jogged in our present.

I wonder at the restraint our ancestors showed in order to survive with mouths and energies like ours. Perhaps they studied the discipline of the cool calm and collected Yoruba orisha, Obatala, the one who is like the Christian father—God—but hardly so patriarchal and political. Maybe they made selves inside, under the flesh, that could hold the anchor even as the storms knocked them down. Obatala is like the snail, and loves them, too, because no matter how hot the surroundings, the snail remains cool. I aspire to be like that, to teach you to be like that. But it is difficult. This world causes inflammation, and it flames.

You do not have to taste lead on your walls, breathe the environmental hazards of sick schools and buildings, pass

through the metal detectors, stand under the daily gaze of cops. And still the toxins constantly threaten to seep under your skin and explode your insides outward, and like all Black people you must constantly drink the antidote. Every day, drink in the stories and the knowledge that teach you to refuse the pernicious myth that you are inferior. And not just of and about your own. Of all who have been desecrated and ground into nothingness. Refuse the lie. And when the antidote fails, hole yourself in a state of retreat, a cocoon of safety in which you can weep and rest.