

Between the World and Me

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your Adidas shoebox, then calling up your own cousins (who really aren't) and returning to that same block, on that same day, and to that same crew, hollering out, "Yeah, nigger, what's up now?" I recall learning these laws clearer than I recall learning my colors and shapes, because these laws were essential to the security of my body.

I think of this as a great difference between us. You have some acquaintance with the old rules, but they are not as essential to you as they were to me. I am sure that you have had to deal with the occasional roughneck on the subway or in the park, but when I was about your age, each day, fully one-third of my brain was concerned with who I was walking to school with, our precise number, the manner of our walk, the number of times I smiled, who or what I smiled at, who offered a pound and who did not—all of which is to say that I practiced the culture of the streets, a culture concerned chiefly with securing the body. I do not long for those days. I have no desire to make you "tough" or "street," perhaps because any "toughness" I garnered came reluctantly. I think I was always, somehow, aware of the price. I think I somehow knew that that third of my brain should have been concerned with more beautiful things. I think I felt that something out there, some force, nameless and vast, had robbed me of . . . what? Time? Experience? I think you know something of what that third could have done, and I think that is why you may feel the need for escape even more than I did. You have seen all the wonderful life up above the tree-line, yet you under-

stand that there is no real distance between you and Trayvon Martin, and thus Trayvon Martin must terrify you in a way that he could never terrify me. You have seen so much more of all that is lost when they destroy your body.

The streets were not my only problem. If the streets shackled my right leg, the schools shackled my left. Fail to comprehend the streets and you gave up your body now. But fail to comprehend the schools and you gave up your body later. I suffered at the hands of both, but I resent the schools more. There was nothing sanctified about the laws of the streets—the laws were amoral and practical. You rolled with a posse to the party as sure as you wore boots in the snow, or raised an umbrella in the rain. These were rules aimed at something obvious—the great danger that haunted every visit to Shake & Bake, every bus ride downtown. But the laws of the schools were aimed at something distant and vague. What did it mean to, as our elders told us, "grow up and be somebody"? And what precisely did this have to do with an education rendered as rote discipline? To be educated in my Baltimore mostly meant always packing an extra number 2 pencil and working quietly. Educated children walked in single file on the right side of the hallway, raised their hands to use the lavatory, and carried the lavatory pass when en route. Educated children never offered excuses—certainly not childhood itself. The world had no time for the childhoods of black boys and girls. How could the schools? Algebra, Biology, and English were not subjects so much as opportunities to

better discipline the body, to practice writing between the lines, copying the directions legibly, memorizing theorems extracted from the world they were created to represent. All of it felt so distant to me. I remember sitting in my seventh-grade French class and not having any idea why I was there. I did not know any French people, and nothing around me suggested I ever would. France was a rock rotating in another galaxy, around another sun, in another sky that I would never cross. Why, precisely, was I sitting in this classroom?

The question was never answered. I was a curious boy, but the schools were not concerned with curiosity. They were concerned with compliance. I loved a few of my teachers. But I cannot say that I truly believed any of them. Some years after I'd left school, after I'd dropped out of college, I heard a few lines from Nas that struck me:

Ecstasy, coke, you say it's love, it is poison

Schools where I learn they should be burned, it is poison

That was exactly how I felt back then. I sensed the schools were hiding something, drugging us with false morality so that we would not see, so that we did not ask: Why—for us and only us—is the other side of free will and free spirits an assault upon our bodies? This is not a hyperbolic concern. When our elders presented school to us, they did not present it as a place of high learning but as a means of escape from death and penal warehousing.

Fully 60 percent of all young black men who drop out of high school will go to jail. This should disgrace the country. But it does not, and while I couldn't crunch the numbers or plumb the history back then, I sensed that the fear that marked West Baltimore could not be explained by the schools. Schools did not reveal truths, they concealed them. Perhaps they must be burned away so that the heart of this thing might be known.

Unfit for the schools, and in good measure wanting to be unfit for them, and lacking the savvy I needed to master the streets, I felt there could be no escape for me or, honestly, anyone else. The fearless boys and girls who would knuckle up, call on cousins and crews, and, if it came to it, pull guns seemed to have mastered the streets. But their knowledge peaked at seventeen, when they ventured out of their parents' homes and discovered that America had guns and cousins, too. I saw their futures in the tired faces of mothers dragging themselves onto the 28 bus, swatting and cursing at three-year-olds; I saw their futures in the men out on the corner yelling obscenely at some young girl because she would not smile. Some of them stood outside liquor stores waiting on a few dollars for a bottle. We would hand them a twenty and tell them to keep the change. They would dash inside and return with Red Bull, Mad Dog, or Cisco. Then we would walk to the house of someone whose mother worked nights, play "Fuck tha Police," and drink to our youth. We could not get out. The ground we walked was trip-wired. The air we breathed

was toxic. The water stunted our growth. We could not get out.

A year after I watched the boy with the small eyes pull out a gun, my father beat me for letting another boy steal from me. Two years later, he beat me for threatening my ninth-grade teacher. Not being violent enough could cost me my body. Being too violent could cost me my body. We could not get out. I was a capable boy, intelligent, well-liked, but powerfully afraid. And I felt, vaguely, wordlessly, that for a child to be marked off for such a life, to be forced to live in fear was a great injustice. And what was the source of this fear? What was hiding behind the smoke screen of streets and schools? And what did it mean that number 2 pencils, conjugations without context, Pythagorean theorems, handshakes, and head nods were the difference between life and death, were the curtains drawing down between the world and me?

I could not retreat, as did so many, into the church and its mysteries. My parents rejected all dogmas. We spurned the holidays marketed by the people who wanted to be white. We would not stand for their anthems. We would not kneel before their God. And so I had no sense that any just God was on my side. "The meek shall inherit the earth" meant nothing to me. The meek were battered in West Baltimore, stomped out at Walbrook Junction, bashed up on Park Heights, and raped in the showers of the city jail. My understanding of the universe was physical, and its moral arc bent toward chaos then concluded in a box.

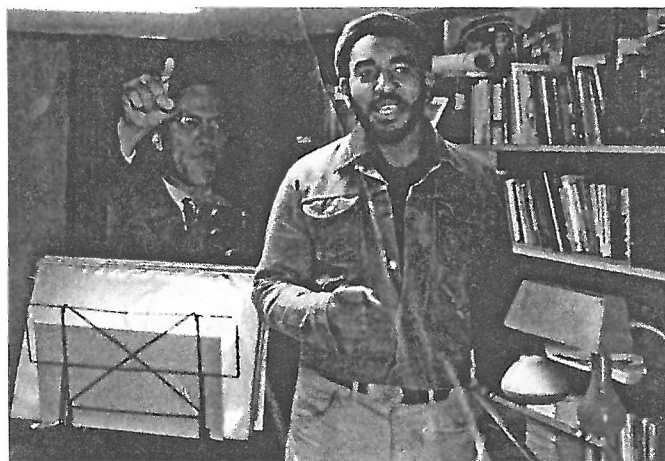
That was the message of the small-eyed boy, untucking the piece—a child bearing the power to body and banish other children to memory. Fear ruled everything around me, and I knew, as all black people do, that this fear was connected to the Dream out there, to the unworried boys, to pie and pot roast, to the white fences and green lawns nightly beamed into our television sets.

But how? Religion could not tell me. The schools could not tell me. The streets could not help me see beyond the scramble of each day. And I was such a curious boy. I was raised that way. Your grandmother taught me to read when I was only four. She also taught me to write, by which I mean not simply organizing a set of sentences into a series of paragraphs, but organizing them as a means of investigation. When I was in trouble at school (which was quite often) she would make me write about it. The writing had to answer a series of questions: Why did I feel the need to talk at the same time as my teacher? Why did I not believe that my teacher was entitled to respect? How would I want someone to behave while I was talking? What would I do the next time I felt the urge to talk to my friends during a lesson? I have given you these same assignments. I gave them to you not because I thought they would curb your behavior—they certainly did not curb mine—but because these were the earliest acts of interrogation, of drawing myself into consciousness. Your grandmother was not teaching me how to behave in class. She was teaching me how to ruthlessly interrogate the

subject that elicited the most sympathy and rationalizing—myself. Here was the lesson: I was not an innocent. My impulses were not filled with unfailing virtue. And feeling that I was as human as anyone, this must be true for other humans. If I was not innocent, then they were not innocent. Could this mix of motivation also affect the stories they tell? The cities they built? The country they claimed as given to them by God?

Now the questions began burning in me. The materials for research were all around me, in the form of books assembled by your grandfather. He was then working at Howard University as a research librarian in the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, one of the largest collections of Africana in the world. Your grandfather loved books and loves them to this day, and they were all over the house, books about black people, by black people, for black people spilling off shelves and out of the living room, boxed up in the basement. Dad had been a local captain in the Black Panther Party. I read through all of Dad's books about the Panthers and his stash of old Party newspapers. I was attracted to their guns, because the guns seemed honest. The guns seemed to address this country, which invented the streets that secured them with despotic police, in its primary language—violence. And I compared the Panthers to the heroes given to me by the schools, men and women who struck me as ridiculous and contrary to everything I knew.

Every February my classmates and I were herded into



assemblies for a ritual review of the Civil Rights Movement. Our teachers urged us toward the example of freedom marchers, Freedom Riders, and Freedom Summers, and it seemed that the month could not pass without a series of films dedicated to the glories of being beaten on camera. The black people in these films seemed to love the worst things in life—love the dogs that rent their children apart, the tear gas that clawed at their lungs, the firehoses that tore off their clothes and tumbled them into the streets. They seemed to love the men who raped them, the women who cursed them, love the children who spat on them, the terrorists that bombed them. *Why are they showing this to us?* Why were only our heroes nonviolent? I speak not of the morality of nonviolence, but of the sense that blacks are in especial need of this morality. Back then all I could do was measure these freedom-lovers by what I knew. Which is to say, I measured them against children pulling out in the 7-Eleven parking lot, against parents wielding extension cords, and “Yeah, nigger, what’s up now?” I judged them against the country I knew, which had acquired the land through murder and tamed it under slavery, against the country whose armies fanned out across the world to extend their dominion. The world, the real one, was civilization secured and ruled by savage means. How could the schools valorize men and women whose values society actively scorned? How could they send us out into the streets of Baltimore, knowing all that they were, and then speak of nonviolence?

I came to see the streets and the schools as arms of the same beast. One enjoyed the official power of the state while the other enjoyed its implicit sanction. But fear and violence were the weaponry of both. Fail in the streets and the crews would catch you slipping and take your body. Fail in the schools and you would be suspended and sent back to those same streets, where they would take your body. And I began to see these two arms in relation—those who failed in the schools justified their destruction in the streets. The society could say, “He should have stayed in school,” and then wash its hands of him.

It does not matter that the “intentions” of individual educators were noble. Forget about intentions. What any institution, or its agents, “intend” for you is secondary. Our world is physical. Learn to play defense—ignore the head and keep your eyes on the body. Very few Americans will directly proclaim that they are in favor of black people being left to the streets. But a very large number of Americans will do all they can to preserve the Dream. No one directly proclaimed that schools were designed to sanctify failure and destruction. But a great number of educators spoke of “personal responsibility” in a country authored and sustained by a criminal irresponsibility. The point of this language of “intention” and “personal responsibility” is broad exoneration. Mistakes were made. Bodies were broken. People were enslaved. We meant well. We tried our best. “Good intention” is a hall pass through history, a sleeping pill that ensures the Dream.