

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.

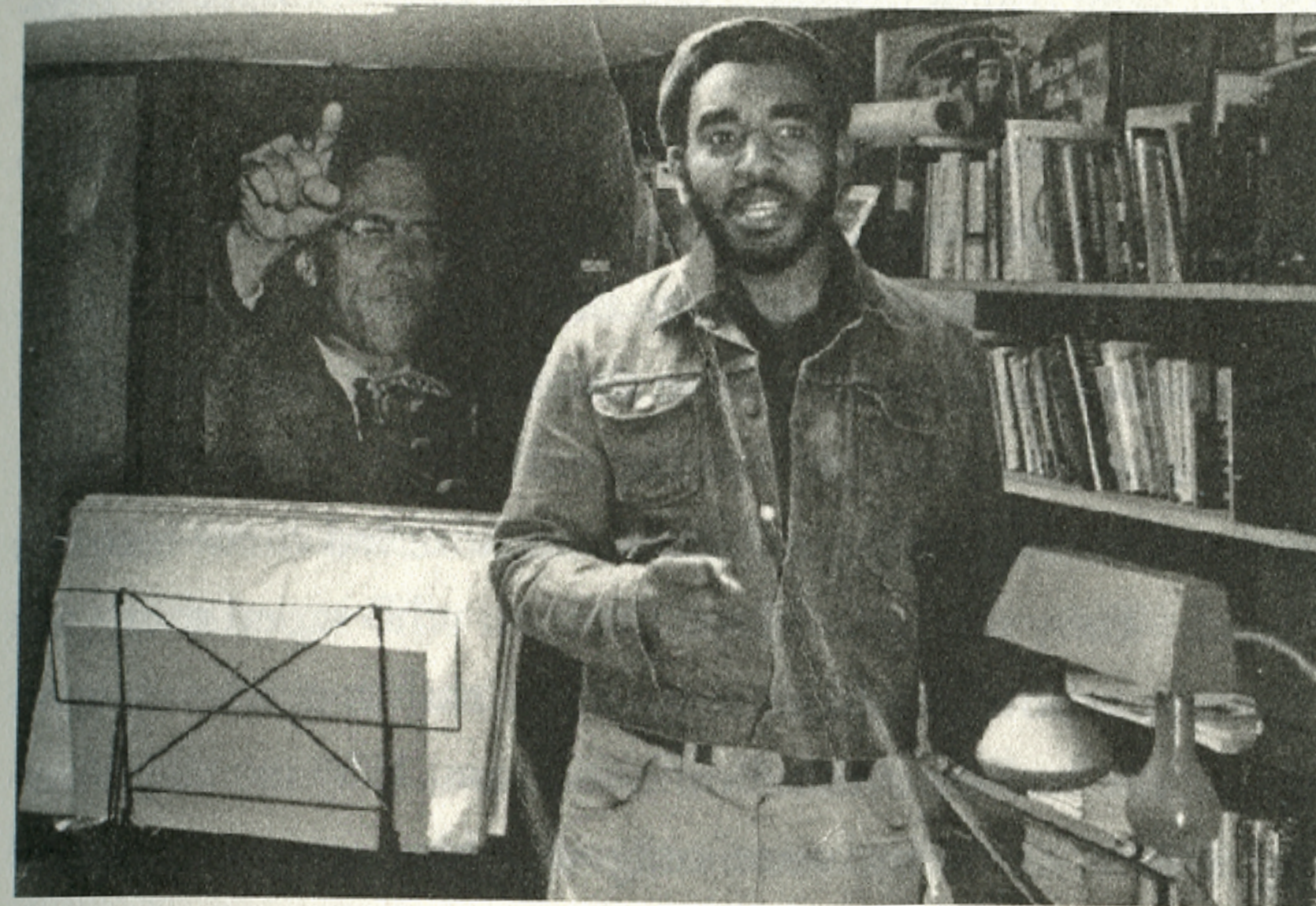
That was the message of the small-eyed boy, untucking the piece—a child bearing the power to body and banish other children to memory. Fear ruled everything around me, and I knew, as all black people do, that this fear was connected to the Dream out there, to the unworried boys, to pie and pot roast,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



An unceasing interrogation of the stories told to us by the schools now felt essential. It felt wrong not to ask why, and then to ask it again. I took these questions to my father, who very often refused to offer an answer, and instead referred me to more books. My mother and father were always pushing me away from secondhand answers—even the answers they themselves believed. I don't know that I have ever found any satisfactory answers of my own. But every time I ask it, the question is refined. That is the best of what the old heads meant when they spoke of being "politically conscious"—as much a series of actions as a state of being, a constant questioning, questioning as ritual, questioning as exploration rather than the search for certainty. Some things were clear to me: The violence that undergirded the country, so flagrantly on display during Black History Month, and the intimate violence of "Yeah, nigger, what's up now?" were not unrelated. And this violence was not magical, but was of a piece and by design.

But what exactly was the design? And why? I must know. I must get out ... but into what? I devoured the books because they were the rays of light peeking out from the doorframe, and perhaps past that door there was another world, one beyond the gripping fear that undergirded the Dream.

In this blooming consciousness, in this period of intense questioning, I was not alone. Seeds planted in the 1960s, forgotten by so many, sprung up from the ground and bore fruit. Malcolm X, who'd been dead for twenty-five years,

exploded out of the small gatherings of his surviving apostles and returned to the world. Hip-hop artists quoted him in lyrics, cut his speeches across the breaks, or flashed his likeness in their videos. This was the early '90s. I was then approaching the end of my time in my parents' home and wondering about my life out there. If I could have chosen a flag back then, it would have been embroidered with a portrait of Malcolm X, dressed in a business suit, his tie dangling, one hand parting a window shade, the other holding a rifle. The portrait communicated everything I wanted to be—controlled, intelligent, and beyond the fear. I would buy tapes of Malcolm's speeches—"Message to the Grassroots," "The Ballot or the Bullet"—down at Everyone's Place, a black bookstore on North Avenue, and play them on my Walkman. Here was all the angst I felt before the heroes of February, distilled and quotable. "Don't give up your life, preserve your life," he would say. "And if you got to give it up, make it even-steven." This was not boasting—it was a declaration of equality rooted not in better angels or the intangible spirit but in the sanctity of the black body. You preserved your life because your life, your body, was as good as anyone's, because your blood was as precious as jewels, and it should never be sold for magic, for spirituals inspired by the unknowable hereafter. You do not give your precious body to the billy clubs of Birmingham sheriffs nor to the insidious gravity of the streets. Black is beautiful—which is to say that the black body is beautiful, that black hair must be guarded

spectrum of dark energy over each particular ray of light? These were notes on how to write, and thus notes on how to think. The Dream thrives on generalization, on limiting the number of possible questions, on privileging immediate answers. The Dream is the enemy of all art, courageous thinking, and honest writing. And it became clear that this was not just for the dreams concocted by Americans to justify themselves but also for the dreams that I had conjured to replace them. I had thought that I must mirror the outside world, create a carbon copy of white claims to civilization. It was beginning to occur to me to question the logic of the claim itself. I had forgotten my own self-interrogations pushed upon me by my mother, or rather I had not yet apprehended their deeper, lifelong meaning. I was only beginning to learn to be wary of my own humanity, of my own hurt and anger—I didn't yet realize that the boot on your neck is just as likely to make you delusional as it is to ennoble.

The art I was coming to love lived in this void, in the not yet knowable, in the pain, in the question. The older poets introduced me to artists who pulled their energy from the void—Bubber Miley, Otis Redding, Sam and Dave, C. K. Williams, Carolyn Forché. The older poets were Ethelbert Miller, Kenneth Carroll, Brian Gilmore. It is important that I tell you their names, that you know that I have never achieved anything alone. I remember sitting with Joel Dias-Porter, who had not gone to Howard but whom I found at The Mecca, reviewing every line of

Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage." And I was stunned by how much Hayden managed to say without, seemingly, saying anything at all—he could bring forth joy and agony without literally writing the words, which formed as pictures and not slogans. Hayden imagined the enslaved, during the Middle Passage, from the perspective of the enslavers—a mind-trip for me, in and of itself; why should the enslaver be allowed to speak? But Hayden's poems did not speak. They conjured:

*You cannot stare that hatred down
or chain the fear that stalks the watches*

I was not in any slave ship. Or perhaps I was, because so much of what I'd felt in Baltimore, the sharp hatred, the immortal wish, and the timeless will, I saw in Hayden's work. And that was what I heard in Malcolm, but never like this—quiet, pure, and unadorned. I was learning the craft of poetry, which really was an intensive version of what my mother had taught me all those years ago—the craft of writing as the art of thinking. Poetry aims for an economy of truth—loose and useless words must be discarded, and I found that these loose and useless words were not separate from loose and useless thoughts. Poetry was not simply the transcription of notions—beautiful writing rarely is. I wanted to learn to write, which was ultimately, still, as my mother had taught me, a confrontation with my own innocence, my own rationalizations. Poetry was the

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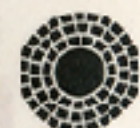
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