

the line that was charged by George Pickett on the final day of Gettysburg. He told us that Brian was a black man, that Gettysburg was home to a free black community, that Brian and his family fled their home for fear of losing their bodies to the advancing army of enslavement, led by the honored and holy Confederate general Robert E. Lee, whose army was then stealing black people from themselves and selling them south. George Pickett and his troops were repulsed by the Union Army. Standing there, a century and a half later, I thought of one of Faulkner's characters famously recalling how this failure tantalyzed the minds of all "Southern" boys—"It's all in the balance, it hasn't happened yet, it hasn't even begun..." All of Faulkner's Southern boys were white. But I, standing on the farm of a black man who fled with his family to stay free of the South, saw Pickett's soldiers charging through history, in wild pursuit of their strange birthright—the right to beat, rape, rob, and pillage the black body. That is all of what was "in the balance," the nostalgic moment's corrupt and unspeakable core.

But American reunion was built on a comfortable narrative that made enslavement into benevolence, white knights of body snatchers, and the mass slaughter of the war into a kind of sport in which one could conclude that both sides conducted their affairs with courage, honor, and élan. This lie of the Civil War is the lie of innocence, is the Dream. Historians conjured the Dream. Hollywood fortified the Dream. The Dream was gilded by novels and ad-

venture stories. John Carter flees the broken Confederacy for Mars. We are not supposed to ask what, precisely, he was running from. I, like every kid I knew, loved *The Dukes of Hazzard*. But I would have done well to think more about why two outlaws, driving a car named the General Lee, must necessarily be portrayed as "just some good ole boys, never meanin' no harm"—a mantra for the Dreamers if there ever was one. But what one "means" is neither important nor relevant. It is not necessary that you believe that the officer who choked Eric Garner set out that day to destroy a body. All you need to understand is that the officer carries with him the power of the American state and the weight of an American legacy, and they necessitate that of the bodies destroyed every year, some wild and disproportionate number of them will be black.

Here is what I would like for you to know: In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is *heritage*. Enslavement was not merely the antiseptic borrowing of labor—it is not so easy to get a human being to commit their body against its own elemental interest. And so enslavement must be casual wrath and random manglings, the gashing of heads and brains blown out over the river as the body seeks to escape. It must be rape so regular as to be industrial. There is no uplifting way to say this. I have no praise anthems, nor old Negro spirituals. The spirit and soul are the body and brain, which are destructible—that is precisely why they are so precious. And the soul did not escape. The spirit did not steal away on gospel wings. The

soul was the body that fed the tobacco, and the spirit was the blood that watered the cotton, and these created the first fruits of the American garden. And the fruits were secured through the bashing of children with stovewood, through hot iron peeling skin away like husk from corn.

It had to be blood. It had to be nails driven through tongue and ears pruned away. "Some disobedience," wrote a Southern mistress. "Much idleness, sullenness, slovenliness.... Used the rod." It had to be the thrashing of kitchen hands for the crime of churning butter at a leisurely clip. It had to some woman "cheard... with thirty lashes a Saturday last and as many more a Tuesday again." It could only be the employment of carriage whips, tongs, iron pokers, handsaws, stones, paperweights, or whatever might be handy to break the black body, the black family, the black community, the black nation. The bodies were pulverized into stock and marked with insurance. And the bodies were an aspiration, lucrative as Indian land, a veranda, a beautiful wife, or a summer home in the mountains. For the men who needed to believe themselves white, the bodies were the key to a social club, and the right to break the bodies was the mark of civilization. "The two great divisions of society are not the rich and poor, but white and black," said the great South Carolina senator John C. Calhoun. "And all the former, the poor as well as the rich, belong to the upper class, and are respected and treated as equals." And there it is—the right to break the black body as the meaning of their sacred equality. And that right has

always given them meaning, has always meant that there was someone down in the valley because a mountain is not a mountain if there is nothing below.*

You and I, my son, are that "below." That was true in 1776. It is true today. There is no them without you, and without the right to break you they must necessarily fall from the mountain, lose their divinity, and tumble out of the Dream. And then they would have to determine how to build their suburbs on something other than human bones, how to angle their jails toward something other than a human stockyard, how to erect a democracy independent of cannibalism. But because they believe themselves to be white, they would rather countenance a man choked to death on film under their laws. And they would rather subscribe to the myth of Trayvon Martin, slight teenager, hands full of candy and soft drinks, transforming into a murderous juggernaut. And they would rather see Prince Jones followed by a bad cop through three jurisdictions and shot down for acting like a human. And they would rather reach out, in all their sanity, and push my four-year-old son as though he were merely an obstacle in the path of their too-important day.

I was there, Samori. No. I was back in Baltimore surrounded by them boys. I was on my parents' living room floor, staring out at that distant world, impenetrable to me. I was in all the anger of my years. I was where Eric Garner

* Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*.