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To Kill a Black Body

by Stephon Senegal

“Fuck you my nigga!” His voice carried with force. The irony of being “his nigga” and spurned all at once. Cohorts near. We stood center in that customary circle, our makeshift coliseum. Something familiar from my youth. To my sides and rear stood our audience. Tapping their feet, waiting for the competition to begin. Some were friends, most caged observers. The contest for that day had not escalated, for now this would be one on one. We were all Black, negros, niggas and twentysomethings, typical for this area. These occasions were like real life rehearsals for us, a brand of hood improv. The stakes were high, but not that high. We were there to test our mettle, not save our people. He began to come closer. I asked him again as I did before his previous outburst, if his posture was a true signal of what he desired. Not in those words, but that was the gist. His response was in the affirmative. In those seconds of confirmation, the air became still. Tension dissipating as the angst of indecision loosens. An imaginary nudge from the pit of my stomach, his fists clenched. He starts to move forward. Intermission.

Many years before that day in my youth. I stood amongst a similar group. All young boys on that day though. May have been about eight, think that’s third grade. I was surrounded by at least eight kids from the neighborhood. Four of them were my cousins. I had just fought one, but the eldest amongst us, also my cousin, was not yet satisfied. “Who next”, he belted. Still breathing heavy from contest one, the fear returned as I realized that one victory would not be enough. We were all transfixed back then. Our choices were limited. Most of us came from broken homes, let the whitefolk tell it, but in hindsight, our homes were not broken, they were simply a little unique. Such is for most people I think, but for us violence was part of that equation. Fight to win or fight to lose, those were the choices that day and every other day before or after. Having bested one, while overrating other options like a bike ride or going to play fight with my toy action figures, I soon understood the only clear way out was to fight all of them. Fuck! Well, that was the mandate. The other boys in the neighborhood stood nearby. They wanted no parts because many of them had already faced this madness before. We started. Our fists flying wildly. Side to side our heads went, flowing from the force of our rudimentary palm strikes. Youthful vehemence, the fear had gone, wiped away by the glancing blows from my second eldest cousin. The contest felt fair, almost fun once you got started. And then. Seemingly in slow motion, a nearby fallen branch began to rise. Menacing and magical, like the stories my elders sometimes told. Floating midair. How? I thought. What version of trickery? Fleeting questions. Slight hesitations, but barely perceptible. In a fight, focus becomes otherworldly. The person or humans are threats, yes, but there is a connection. An intimacy of sorts. Like hammering a nail. The nail is not an enemy, but a task who nonetheless requires commitment, albeit temporary. In that metaphorical place humanity has no sway, no opinion, no questions. I began to gain ground on him. And then. Silence. There I was. Sitting on the hood of their mother’s Ford Pinto under the carport. Only two of the brothers were around now, one being the eldest who had orchestrated the contest. The sound of other kids in the street nearby, I glance to check who. He held a faded pink towel against my head. The towel was cold, wet, frayed, no frilly stitching, a hole or two maybe, held together by some stubborn threading. The others nearby asked how my head felt. Apparently one of the brothers had picked up a piece of wood and concluded the contest early that day. Magic.

Some years after that lesson, a sliver beyond eighteen. I exited the car, clean and ready, white kicks, white tee. Me and a close friend had just driven into the gas station. We were coming from a small gathering with some young girls we knew. Talking flamboyantly and taking in the noise of the evening, we laughed and plotted out next adventure. We were barely legal at that point, as were our female conquests for the night. Please forgive my social crassness, but things were different then or at least they are framed differently now. Click. The sound of pressing the gas lever a little too hard. Common, yes, but back then that click was a symptom of freedom. Pumping gas meant something. A mundane aspiration of youth, but we were driving. As children we would plot this driving thing from the back seat. Hugging the white lines on dark roads or cutting through a barrage of eighteen wheelers and skirting a tight corner or three. A reprieve from the midnight bike rides. Trading the slow crawl into a conquest’s bedroom for her dash through the front lawn. That night, we indulged, and we could do as we pleased. One gallon in, the requisite amount to get above a quarter tank. A little smirk, we ready now I thought. As I returned the nozzle to the pump, I glanced into the station. Pause.

In the station are two individuals minus the station attendant. One is someone who challenged me a day earlier. My dog (southern vernacular for a close friend) recognizes the look on my face, it is one he knows all too well. He briefly peeks in the same direction. "Dog, wha'you wanta do?", he asks. I had previously told him about the occurrence and how this individual had taunted me the other day. There was no violence then though. We were in a crowded grocery store and a friendly officer was literally a couple yards away. Nevertheless, the person in question yelled obscenities and threats. I said nothing in response and began to back out of the store. I maintained a hurried stare and then exited as the officer began to approach. On that day a simple nod was the sole acknowledgement of that future opponent's tirade. Tonight, the silence was similar, I said nothing to my friend as we walked into the station. No need to respond to his question, he already knew. The contestant for that day, and his associate were to the left with whatever they intended to buy. We came in and approached the counter. My friend was to my right. A brief glance. A subtle nod to the offender from the other day in recognition of his presence. Another abbreviated silence. A palpable tightness, I began to speak to the attendant about payment for the gas. My friend relaxes a bit suspecting the opportunity for conflict has been abated. As my left arm relaxed, my left leg slid slightly back. Abruptly twisting to face the contestant or the nail for that day, my other fist comes into view. I hit him in the chest. Thoughts of his choice speech the other day, this is my response. I throw another quick combination in the midst of a counterstrike. His guy begins to circle. His fists tightening. I do not notice him. I stutter past the dropped Funyuns and Fritos. Careful not to slip or ruin any snacks. The contestant stumbles a bit as he glides unexpectedly on some spilt Slurpee. Probably his drink. Somebody has to pay for that. He looks at his guy, bewildered as his boy takes a step. Back. My friend has impeded his path. He knows my dog well. His reputation as a fierce fighter is well known amongst our folk. He shrugs and turns his glare instead to the gas store canned goods and snacks (Little Debbie). Deflated. The contestant throws a couple more punches. One catches, the side of my head, the other misses. My turn. The next series of strikes puts him against the freezer door and then to the ground. I move forward to do more. Meanwhile, the attendant has exited the store. My friend rushes briefly to the front glass. The attendant has flagged down some cops on a nearby beat. He quickly turns and hurries to grab me. Grasping and tearing at the arm of my shirt, the action breaks, he motions. I know what he means. We rush to the car and back out away from the approaching friendlies, down a one way and make a quick turn. Contest concluded, free gas and bigger issues averted. We drive to the next gathering. Lessons.

Intermission done (back to the opening story). "I am not interested in hurting you Black man". These were neither my words nor my thoughts that night in the coliseum. He had made his decision. And I felt obliged. I had had plenty practice, so tonight should be noteworthy. As his hands came up, mine stayed down. He swung or lunged and missed. One. Two. Jab, cross, but actually felt more like a cross and another cross since I was squared up. I shuffled slightly back to avoid his advance. The two punches made contact, mine that is, dazed, he stumbled forward. I planted, slight lean forward while putting his head into my armpit, forearm and partial wrist into his trachea, I clasp that hand with the other as I arch my back, chest to the sky in one motion. This particular movement is called a guillotine. The name should provide some context but basically its a choking technique a grade higher than your standard. As it sunk in, the calm of violent intent silenced the room. For me. I squeezed. There was no more. Sound. Their voices and chants had faded into whispers, but soundless ones.

His body went limp and I hardly noticed. Someone murmured "Let him go bruh". More like a loud echo in that minute, the request was barely acknowledged. Louder this time, "Dog!". The sound of the room returned, and I released. His body slumped. His shoulder dragging down my abdomen as I intently move to avoid any more contact. He hits the floor. You could only see his whites, fluttering, rem, mouth agape, a little wet. He was not awake. I could hear the voices now. Some jubilant with the quick ousting of this contestant, others more concerned. A muffled scream from a nearby female spectator, as my friend grabbed me abruptly, jerking my left shoulder back "dog, the fuck....", yanking me harder the second time, he seemed deflated by the prospective handiwork that night. Others gathered around that limp body attempting to bring the contender back. Still in a slight trance from the conflict, I squatted nearby, slightly ashamed, the thrill of victory snatched by the reality that this opponent may not see another.

They brought him back that day. I sat still as they shook and prodded his mouth for a signal. Crouched on the floor nearby. Staring into or onto some arbitrary point of a nearby wall. Vaguely concerned, largely unbothered, the latter was for my audience. The former was a foreshadowing of the plight I ponder today. The broken tenor of Blackness had resonated through centuries. The tone of that designation, Blackness, has been one of fear and loathing. The weight of that word is what shaped that night and still shapes my cousins and adopted brethren today. The designation is meant to signify our distance from humanity. Our distance from whiteness. The lore of Blackness is a construction of European fear and apathy. It is scantily built, talking about the Black thing, but its sturdiness has proved a durable export. Their fear of our genetic disposition are the lessons they teach. Tightly curled hair, brown skin, belligerent, their enemy: nature itself. That day gave me a different feel for my Blackness and the quandary of my people. It awaked a different responsibility to evolve beyond the veneer that has cornered my heritage into a monolith of obscurity. The Black, the Negro or nigga, these constructions are cages. They are metaphorical enclosures fabricated for the ferocity of our history and our identities. What beast do these prisons hold? I wonder. At what cost do we continue to avert our metaphysical yearnings? Call me what you will though, beast, dark, savage. I prefer to be that. A beast that is. Beasts are driven, insatiable and unyielding. These are qualities to embrace, not discard. But if I am to be a beast, best not to be caged.