

The next morning, we stood shivering in the damp grass of the museum courtyard, squinting at the early sun streaming into our faces. One of the other parent chaperones had lightly slapped my arm to wake me—apparently she and Sarah and several others had tried over the course of twenty minutes, but I wouldn't budge, and now I was holding up the rest of the class—so I'd thrown on my clothes and rolled up my sleeping bag and raced to meet the line. My mouth felt mossy and the chilly, bright air made me feel extra exposed.

Predictably, Esau stood close to Adam. I watched them openly; I didn't care about butterflies. Esau looked as though he had slept at a spa, his pretty skin glowing, his eyes fresh. Adam was oblivious, infuriatingly unremarkable—if this were a play he'd be chorus, back row—but what did my opinions matter? I wasn't in charge of anything. I leaned a little against Sarah, whose tallness usually got on my nerves, and watched three men from the museum set down covered cages on the long table we were standing around. I leaned on Sarah a bit more, bracing myself for a long boring lecture about butterflies and their dumb habits. But the three men merely counted to three and unlatched the doors, and all of us were made to forget for a second, as wings filled the air, what was hurting.

JOCELYN NICOLE JOHNSON

## Control Negro

FROM *Guernica*

BY THE TIME you read this, you may have figured it out. Perhaps your mother told you, though she was only privy to my timeworn thesis—never my aim or full intention. Still, maybe the truth of it breached your insides:

That I am your father, that you are *my* son.

In these typewritten pages, I mean to make manifest the truth, the whole. But please do not mistake this letter for some manner of veiled confession. I cannot afford to be sorry, not for any of it. I hope you'll come to understand, it was all for a grander good.

You see, I needed a Control Negro, grotesque as that may sound—

You should know I was there on the day you were born, a reflection behind the nursery glass. I laid eyes on you while your mother rested, along with her husband—that man you must have accepted, at least for a time, as your father. You seemed to see me too, my blurred silhouette. Your birth (natural, vaginal) took place at the university's teaching hospital. I noted your weight (7 lb., 7 oz.), your color (dark and florid), your temperament (outwardly placid) like mine.

I assisted with payment for your daycare as well, when you were so small, still in those plush, white Pampers. The facility sat at the edge of campus. So graduate students, like your mother, could enroll their young children while they worked or studied. And faculty, like me, could take guided tours and observe through mirrored one-way glass. I took mental notes on the room of children, a rainbow of faces, but my eyes hung on you: your mahogany skin

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and dark, keen eyes. Your fat, curled fingers grasping at blocks, trying to build something sturdy and true. I grew skilled at enduring the feeling you inspired, a seeping pride that filled my chest, then spilled into a painful ache.

Remember your season of Little League games, the ones at Washington Park, just down from the bus stop? I could always spot you, especially at a distance. You'd be standing at the plate, arms angled, aiming for the bright white ball, determined to hit it past every boundary we could see.

What I mean to say is that all this time I've watched you, or else had others watch in my stead. My TA did a practicum with your sixth-grade civics teacher. One of my graduate students tutored you in middle school at my suggestion that he "give something back." He shared anecdotes of your progress, never suspecting that you were mine. Your sophomore year, I hired a college student, a young man of legal age but slight enough to pass for seventeen. You knew him as "David" from the neighboring county. Under my direction he befriended you, prodded you toward swimming (and away from the fraught cliché of basketball). He ferried me printouts of your correspondence, revealing your vernacular speech, the slant of your smile in cellphone pictures. Hearing this now, you might feel manipulated, violated, even. But I am almost certain that my determination to shape and groom, my attempts and failures to protect, aren't terribly different from those of any other parent.

Everyone has an origin story and this is yours: you began as a thought fully formed and sprung from my head. No, you were more like a determined line of questions marching altogether toward a momentous thrashing. It was 1985, years before you were born, and I'd just come to work here on this campus. Mother died at the start of fall semester, her body inundated with cancer, undiagnosed until she had passed. Still numb, I traveled south to bury her, missing the initiation of my own first classes, returning as promptly as I could. I was only away for a week and a day, still a cold snap had scattered leaves onto the great lawn. My first afternoon back, I walked over to my office and was straightening the objects on my desk, my sleeves rolled up, my back to the door. A man walked in and he startled when I turned to face him, so I startled too. He was—I learned a few minutes later—a senior colleague from my own department: history. He'd been away on

sabbatical, and had come to my office to welcome me. "Sorry," he said. "I'm looking for a Professor Adams. Do you know where I can find him, buddy?" I realized what was happening a moment before he did, and forced myself to laugh, to try to put him at ease, though I fear my laughter came out as a strangled sound. You see, he'd mistaken me for one of the evening janitors.

But then, the next week, I stood before all of my bright young students. For the first time in a long time, I felt, if not settled, then at least situated. Soon afterward, in a morning seminar, I remember feeling hopeful as I collected an early set of in-class writings, our topic, nineteenth-century thinkers. I discovered a hand-drawn cartoon among the shuffe, no name in the corner, passed in on purpose or by accident—it was hard to tell which. It was nothing really, just a single frame of itchy graphite titled "Irony." Within its borders, a history professor leaned over a lectern, looking quite like me—same jacket and bow tie—except with something primitive about his face. A thought bubble hovered over the room of students: "Darwin Taught to Men by an Ape."

*It's nothing.* I told myself again, walking back to my apartment that evening, though, in truth, I felt tired. *What does it matter,* I remember thinking. What does it matter how much I achieve, or how clearly I speak, or how carefully I conduct myself, if the brutal misjudgments remain regardless? What if, even here, they cannot bring themselves to see me, and instead see something oblique reflected where I thought I stood? Mother always told me, "Work hard, Cornelius. Work twice as hard and you can have something." But there I was, a grown man, wondering what it was I could have, and what would forever be withheld.

What I needed, it occurred to me then, was to watch another man's life unfold: a black boy not unlike me, but better than me—an African American who was otherwise equivalent to those broods of average American Caucasian Males who scudded through my classrooms. ACMs, I came to call them, and I wondered how they would measure up with this flawless young man as a watermark. No, it wasn't them exactly—I wanted to test my own beloved country: given the right conditions, could America extend her promise of Life and Liberty to me too, to someone like me? What I needed was a control, a Control Negro. And given what I teach, it wasn't lost on me, the agitation of those two words linked together, that archaic descriptor clanking off the end like a rusted shackle.

Those words struck in me and, from them, you grew.

That was the start of my true research, a secret second job hidden inside of the rigors of my first one. Evenings and weekends I searched library stacks, scoured journals and published studies. I focused on contemporary ACMs, looking for patterns, for cause and effect. An ACM's access to adequate childhood nutrition up against disciplinary referrals resulting in primary-school suspensions. An ACM's expected time with his father (watching the game, I imagined, practicing catch), versus police reports of petty vandalism, of said balls careening through a neighbor's window. I was determined to measure the relationship of support, to action, to *re*-action, to autonomy in these young men. At some point it occurred to me to work backwards. I gathered a more intimate sample: twenty-five case files borrowed from the university's records, culled from a larger random pool. These ACMs came from families of high-middle income, had average or slightly above average IQs, had faces that approached symmetry as determined by their student ID photos. In my pursuit to better understand them, I called suburban high schools, interviewed teachers, coaches, parents, even, always over the phone, under less than forthright pretenses, I concede. My ACMs were all "good" promising young men, but they were flawed too if you scratched the surface. My dredging uncovered attention deficit disorder, depression, vandalism, drug and alcohol abuse. In several cases, I found evidence of more serious transgressions: assault and battery, accusations of sexual misconduct. Not one of these young men was perfect, yet each held promise, and this promise, on balance, was enough to protect them and to buoy their young lives into the future. Five years of my life spent marveling at the resiliency of theirs.

Now all I had to do was monitor a boy who enjoyed, on average, the same lifted circumstances that my ACMs had experienced. Prenatal care and regular visits to the dentist. An educated mother and father (or father figure). Well-funded schools and a residence situated in a "good," safe neighborhood. For his part, this young man would have to keep his grades up, have clear diction, wear his pants at an average perch on his waist. He would have to present a moderate temperament, maybe twice as moderate—just to be safe—as those bright boys he'd be buffed so hard to mirror.

What I aimed to do was to painstakingly mark the route of this black child, one whom I could *prove* was so strikingly decent and

true that America could not find fault in him unless we as a nation had projected it there.

About this time, I met your mother.

What can I say—she was, in her own way, a force of nature, and the sole woman of color in the graduate program for environmental studies that year. I spotted her one rainy afternoon in a dimly lit classroom. The door half open, she stood at the lectern rehearsing, her PowerPoint blinking furiously behind her, projecting light and shadow on her face. Slide after slide of washed-out shores and water rising. She looked up at me but did not lose her place. It would be only one more year before you were born.

Our first night together, your mother informed me she was married—she intended to *remain* married—which came as a relief. Those early years of struggle and I'd become a solitary sort of man. Nonetheless we continued to see one another, sporadically, into the spring. She wanted a child, I knew, and although her husband was likely the source of her childlessness, to protect his pride she alone bore the blame between them. That winter, when I found out you were growing inside her, part mine and a boy, we both agreed. I would contribute financially and keep silent about my paternity. She would keep you nearby and take my requests regarding you to heart. She knew about my ACMs, but never that I needed a boy to balance them. Right then and there, I realized who you would be.

There are many studies now about the cost of race in this great nation. Most convincing is the work from other departments: sociology, cultural anthropology. Researchers send out identical résumés or home loan applications, half of which are headed with "ethnic-sounding" names. They instruct black and white individuals to watch other black and white individuals receive a painful-looking shot. The needle digs into muscle and the researchers mark how much sweat leaks from the pores of the watchers. They measure who gets the job, the loan, who gets the lion's share of salted, dank empathy. They mark which human-shaped targets get shot at by police, in study after study, no matter how innocuous the silhouetted objects they cradle. All these studies, I concede, are good, great work, but I wonder if there isn't something flawed in them that makes the findings too easy to dismiss.

My research, by contrast, has been more personal, challenging me, at times, to re-examine my history. How different my life has

water, my skin a wrinkled softness that would soon scrape away or be eaten by crawfish, by those microscopic creatures that troubled the silted bottom, until no one could tell or else it didn't matter what color I was.

The following fall, Mother insisted I attend a private boarding school, miles out of town. I wasn't to live in the dormitory with the others. Instead, I woke before sunrise, walked out to the highway, and caught a ride with a deacon from our church, an elderly man who smelled of polishing oil. He was the boarding school's custodian and the only other brown face to grace those halls besides mine. During the school day, we never looked at one another. I was always aware when he was in the same room, but I never let my eyes rest on his, not until we were far away from that place, and even then it was with a kind of shame.

The school's headmaster—the man who had agreed to my admittance—had gone “up north” for some number of years. His surname was the name of the school, and everyone knew it was his family's money that kept that dying boarding school from going under. At school assemblies, this headmaster would find excuses to parade me across the stage—my improbably strong elocution, the sharp crease in my uniform—defiant or oblivious to the contempt my visibility inspired. Even the dimmest boys were clever in their cruelty. Mother had been hired to cook and clean at the headmaster's residence in town, and for this, the others mocked her mercifully. What could I do, it was true—my scholarship was her bowed back, her bleach-bitten hands. Enrolling me there must have been an act of faith or desperation, like pressing a message into a bottle and floating it onto turbulent waters.

Even so I clung to my formal education, setting off at seventeen to a small all-black college, then going far north for graduate school. The boys I'd grown up with mostly stayed rooted. They married girls from church, worked hard to scrape together a living or get ahead. Some were shipped off to Vietnam, a few marched in bigger towns, facing police dogs and fire hoses. I devoted my life to scholarly truth, spending the majority of my adult life here at this esteemed institution. After you were born, I purchased my own home, just a two-bedroom bungalow, but in a good neighborhood not far from campus. I can walk to work, and sometimes I do. Whenever I walk my mind wanders. Occasionally I worry that I've been self-indulgent in my research, somehow selfish in my se-

been from the lives of my ACMs, and from your life. You grew up on that tree-lined cul-de-sac, while I was born in the backroom of a two-room house, in the sand hills of South Carolina. I was a dark-skinned bookish child—we both are only sons. My own mother didn't have much money, but then again, no one had much. Certainly not any of the colored folks we knew, the only point of comparison one dared in those days. Most of my schoolmates had fathers, though, and mine had gone north, to Chicago, for work, and not come back. He was essentially a stranger. Even so, growing up, I felt his abandonment acutely, like hunger. I filled that hunger with reading.

Like you, I played baseball, if briefly. The summer I turned ten I joined the Negro Youth League. I went for the promised uniforms, which turned out to be sweat-stained cast-offs salvaged from a white church's collection. Even so, thick patches had been sewn onto the chests, and underneath mine, my heart felt sanctioned. Our very first practice, I managed a decent hit, a satisfying thwack like an axe cleaving wood. Afterward, I should have walked back with the others, but instead I set off on my own, replaying my minuscule victory in my head until it felt epic and novel-worthy. I wandered down behind White Knoll, crossing Main, still dreaming. I didn't realize where I was until I heard car doors slap shut behind me, felt the chilled shadows of strangers. Three young white men had gathered around me, their bodies blocking each path of escape I darted toward. “Where does this boy believe he's going?” the one in the work boots said.

As they knocked and beat me to the ground, I couldn't help but think of a boy we all knew of—Tully Jones—whose body had been found some summer before, floating in the river, his head bashed in. *When these men finish killing me, they'll drag my body down to the water too*, I remember thinking. Please, don't hold me down under that murky water—I can't even swim! Why hadn't I learned to swim? And how would Mother even find my body? What if she thought I'd run off, like my father had? Up close, the men reeked of peach brandy, the kind my schoolmates' fathers would nurse Friday nights under the sycamores. When those men finished doing what they did to me, I lay chest and cheek in the sand, playing dead, as they staggered back to their car, breathless. Even after they pulled off, sending up a sharp spray of gravel over my body, I kept on playing dead, as if I were sunk down under that endless

cret fatherhood. Walking, I think the world is surely a better place now than it used to be for people of color. Aren't I myself living proof against my theories? Can't I be satisfied?

But then, like current, I'll feel it again, even now. It might be the guard at the campus market who follows me when I walk in to buy a carton of milk for my tea. Or a pair of young mothers who push their strollers widely around me on the great lawn. Mostly it's a growing unease about my career. Yes, I was hired. Yes, I've managed to keep my head above water, but in these final years, they've burdened me with the lowliest committee assignments, filled my schedule with 100-level classes, as if I were an adjunct. Of course this might be a reflection of some defect in my performance—a failure to publish as well as some colleague down the hall, my secret research obscuring my official work. But how can I know for sure? How does anyone know if they are getting more or less than they deserve? All I know for certain is that, last September, a police car trailed me when I was walking home one brisk evening. Me, Professor Cornelius Adams, in my sixties, in my overcoat and loafers, my briefcase clutched beneath my arm. As you well know, cruisers often patrol the edges of campus, quieting fraternity parties, corralling drunken freshmen back onto grounds. They only pulsed their lights at me. When I turned, the one on the passenger side—a black officer—shouted from his window. Where was I going, he wanted to know. Before I could gather words to answer, a more urgent call must have come in. They turned on lights and sirens in earnest and sped away.

Here are our lives laid out together: At ten, while I flailed beneath the blows of work boots, you flew down a zip line at a well-rated day camp. At twelve, while I reread tattered spy novels on the bumpy ride back home from that boarding school, your baseball team placed second in the region. You brought home a trophy. Your mother took a photo of you lifting it. Eventually she sent it to me.

As you grew older, I continued to make certain wishes clear to your mother—about your friends, your schooling, about the crop and length of your hair. Only once did she truly bristle at my intervention, when I insisted you leave swim team your senior year. The swimming had been good at first, but then you placed at state, a dive so graceful a big-league coach courted you. For a season, you took private lessons, shearing your hair, waking before

dawn. You excelled in the water, your mother said—you might get a scholarship or more, so why not let you continue? I could feel her picturing you, her black son, draped in red, white, and blue, holding gold. In truth, I entertained this vision too, but in the end, I couldn't allow such a glaring deviation. When you were small, I'd worried you would sink below my ACMs, that you would be dragged down. But here you were, soaring too high for a fair comparison instead. Of course I did not say any of this to your mother. All I could do was remind her of my unwavering discretion: Hadn't I held up my side of the bargain all those years? When I said this, she hung up on me, and for a long time we did not speak, though I soon found out that the swimming had stopped.

And so I was surprised when your mother called last August to inform me that you were transferring here to finish your degree. I was only startled to hear her voice. I already knew you were coming, of course—I'd seen it on your social media. Perhaps your return was an act of muscle memory: all the years spent here at daycare, then later, in the back offices with your mother. It's possible too that you were persuaded by the slick recruiting packets I mailed to your PO box each semester. Two years you'd attended that out-of-state school, and while you were away, I followed you as best as I could, though less closely than felt comfortable. Like any parent whose child leaves for college, I was forced to let go of some of my sway—though this gap depressed me. Were you drinking too much? I wondered. Had you gotten in a fistfight, or fallen in love with somebody? I drove up to your campus once, but found the whole layout disconcerting—and never did set eyes on you. After that, I watched from a safer distance, monitoring arrest reports, subscribing to your local and school media sites. I hoped to catch a glimpse of your life. Did it resemble the lives of my ACMs, those boys I'd watched so ardently years earlier—their drunken escapades, their fearless hearts?

All I know is, when I spotted you here, you looked tall, so lithe. I did the math—your age against mine—and you'd just turned twenty-one. Whatever else had happened in the intervening years, you'd also become a man. Your visible ease in your own skin awakened something in me. Never mind those tragic stories from other towns and cities, young men lost and taken—they were not *you*, they were not mine. Your ascendance was a glimpse of what could be and their deaths felt submerged. I realized you had never been

their ball caps askew. They look relieved that it's you there on the ground, or else they flash faux gang signs at a camera only they seem to appreciate. The police made a statement before the video surfaced, in defiance of the fact that there is always a video nowadays. You seemed dangerous, they said, and I think of you as a swaddled newborn. They feared for their safety, they said, and perhaps this is true. Later, in a press conference, they admitted you had an ID, but there was some discrepancy. It was from a neighboring state and unfamiliar. You did not appear to be who you said you were.

Beyond all of this, I understood a separate truth, one not yet found in any publication. I knew that they had *chosen* you out of all those wasted students partying on the strip of college bars. I knew this because I'd worked late that night, the first warm evening of spring. I'd decided to walk home through the carnival of youth, and only by chance spotted you out front of that bar on the corner. You were right there in the fray of students, half swaying to music that spilled from an open patio. You tilted your head toward me. Did you see me, too? Did you recognize me? I can't adequately explain it, but I must tell you now that I was the one who called the precinct, claiming to have seen a "suspicious young man" at the corner of University and Second. I called but I did not specify your height, your *color*. Afterward, I hurried home, reassuring myself. Nothing will come of this, I tried to tell myself—and I will finally be able to let it go, or be let go by it. Son, please believe this, if you believe nothing else I've written: this was a test for *them*—for the world!—not for you.

But here, again, we must take a step back, and remind ourselves that this has all been in service to something bigger—that someday our sons' sons might be spared. Your mother used to say to me, "The seas are rising, whatever you believe. Soon we will all be wet together, and together we will gasp for air . . ."

I saw you again the other day, out on the lawn at the student-led protests. At first I didn't recognize you, with that white bandage plastered across your head and the new bowed way you hold your body. But then they delivered you to the front and the small crowd swelled in support. I've read there have been other demonstrations on other campuses along the East Coast. A rainbow of faces chanting and wailing as if there are multitudes of watchers now.

average: you were more like a line of poetry too lofty for me to decipher. With you here, I convinced myself that you'd made it out past an invisible trip wire, out to some safe and boundless future. Even if I could not be part of that future, I might still be able to revel in its promise. I was nearly ready to give up on my questions, or claim that they'd been answered favorably—those questions of mine, which had always been about hope.

But then—we both know what happened then.

As soon as I heard what they'd done to you, I wrote through that first long night and cancelled my next day's classes. Decades of research became a single anguished letter detailing the difference I could now measure on your face. I wrote about the burden of Race—how it warps the lives of black and white people. I did not speak of my experiment directly. Instead I used what happened to you as an anchor for my findings. I could never have predicted that my essay would spread so widely, that inside of a week I'd be invited to appear on several networks and a handful of national radio shows. In studio after sound stage, I laid out my meticulous argument, supported by data and by true stories I'd witnessed with my own eyes. I thought they'd be convinced, but instead they interrupted with other stories, opposing conclusions. I thought they might believe me, but instead they held up a few undisciplined lines from my essay as proof that I was angry and absurd. Death threats flooded my inbox, along with crooning love letters from mothers and sisters, from fathers and sons. Still, last night, I was contacted with an offer of publication—not from a prestigious university press, as I'd always envisioned, but rather a two-book deal from a large, traditional publisher best known for true crime stories. Maybe there I can finally write what I want—if it's all right by you—about what's been done to me, about the things I've done.

As far as what happened to you: I saw the pictures like everyone else, I read every account. I studied the cellphone video, frame by bloody frame. Here is your face, in which I have always recognized fragments of my own.

Here is your blood, too bright and pouring. Even as you lie stock-still, pinned to the pavement, the police shout staccato commands, which they seem desperate for you to follow. The camera veers and I see them too, sauntering by in spotless sneakers,

When I saw you, I knew that you would recover, and it felt like I could breathe again for the first time in a very long while. But even closer to the bone was a feeling of grace that may well soon release me. I mean, look at you—look at all *you've* accomplished, in spite of everything. You made it here, just like *they* did. And I saw you, Son, turning and wild—free, even—for a moment at least.

MATTHEW LYONS

## *The Brothers Brujo*

FROM *Tough*

THE FUNERAL IS a Day of the Dead fever dream, all crowns and skeletons and robes and icons burning in the shimmering, dying light of the west. Women in face paint urge the icon down the street as mourners come and pin slips of green paper to his bedazzled robes, their faces slashed with tears. Men beat their chests and howl like apes, women offer up quiet prayers. Children dressed like mutilated angels kiss foreheads and pass out cardboard blessings. The air is thick and cloying with the cheap sugar of dollar-store candles and cigar smoke. This will last all day and deep into the denial of night, carried by songs of redemption and resurrection.

The mayor is dead, and the town, a part of it at least, dies with him and screams to be reborn.

Skeet's down by the riverbank, cutting symbols into the spackly mud with a stick when his brother crests the hill past the fence and calls down to him.

"Dad's looking for you."

Skeet keeps cutting in the dirt. He decides that one of the symbols means ribbon. He draws it again, just to make sure he's got it. Above him, Leonel skids down the crumbly hill, knocking sheets of dirt loose and tumbling down ahead of him.

"You have to come home."

"Who says?"

"I told you. Dad."

"He can come and get me himself then."