If I forget to stop rushing cars,
let me know
If I forget to tame the lightning,
let me know
—Afaa Michael Weaver

In the foundational book, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, the late Manning Marable writes about the history of lynching, explaining: “Terror is not the product of violence alone, but is created only by the random, senseless and even bestial use of coercion against an entire population.” Marable’s words help us understand that when one Black son is a victim of police brutality, all Black mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers are affected. One killing in Missouri polices Black people in Texas, in Paris, all over the world. The murder of Emmett Till brutalized Mamie Till and all other mothers of Black sons. This is what terror means.

When the Ferguson decision solidified another period of terror, my friend Veronica Watson wrote me right away—her scholar-mother words spilling onto the page, red with anger and anguish. While both of us were stressed with other work, neither of us could go on with our days, words between us somehow a salvo. When I heard about *Our Black Sons Matter* my heart said yes . . . the call becomes a refusal to allow grief to swallow us whole. Late at night, I called my now adult son, LaMar, and asked him if we could write something together. Below are my words in regular script and his in italics.
When my daughter Crystal came down the stairs late last fall, saying, "you got it rough . . ." I knew what she was referring to without her having to finish her sentence—the dangers facing my non-gender conforming, hoodie-wearing African American/Southern Ute activist daughter in Boston and my six-foot-three dark-skinned gorgeous son who lives in Oakland. Neither safe, day or night. Reporting on the protest in Oakland following the Ferguson decision, LaMar tells me on the phone . . . "yeah, I drove by the community center where I know the demonstration would begin but knew I couldn't stay. Not safe for me, in case someone got violent." Just being there might put him in jeopardy. Not even safe to breathe.

In the *New York Times* I read of a police chaplain who describes mothers of slain sons as having "homicide eyes." On the night after the Ferguson decision, Crystal and I went to the Black Lives Matter demonstration that began in Dudley Square (in a historically Black community in Boston). I scanned the crowd silently wondering who had lost a child or friend, who was worried about losing someone. Everyone looked worried. When it was too dark to see eyes, the feelings overshadowed us, sad, beyond sad, and angry. The organizers asked the Black elders in the crowd to come forward. I was relieved to hear from them first, the ones who have been able to make it through the decades. Many spoke. It was powerful, over 3,000 people. We all held up candles. We walked two miles to the Suffolk County Jail, as the organizers explained, "to be with our community there." The men in their cells stood at their windows—putting their hands up in silhouette, flashing the lights on and off. Our communication limited to hand gestures and lights.

When my son first came to me (when he was eight) the safety issues I most worried about were how to help him heal physically and emotionally from the welts on the top of his head from his white stepfather's belt; and from witnessing his mother being violated, moving way too many times, the disorientation of homeless shelters. At that point, he came up to my belly button, would burrow into my stomach in post office lines, under my coat in the winter. He wore hoodies in the summers and winter, still small enough (at least in my imagination) to be safe.
But when puberty began and his height shot up, I remember certain people crossing the street when we were walking toward them, my whiteness obviously not enough to protect them from their own paranoia. LaMar and I started to talk about which streets he could take, and not, when he went to get ice cream at night. I watched as some colleagues (who used to get way too familiar with LaMar’s hair and head), started not moving toward him at all. I contemplated whether to turn an audio tape of Ernest Gaine’s A Lesson Before Dying on or off when I would pick LaMar up from school—that razor-thin decision about what to tell Black children and not. How to arm and disarm them at the same time. My mentor, Dr. Reverend Katie Cannon, has said that raising Black children in this country means living with devastating contradictions—raising them for peace, teaching them about violence, asking them to open their hearts, teaching them to close down amidst daily physical and psychic affronts.

When he was thirteen years old, and at the beckoning of his biological mother, LaMar left our home and the multiracial community that was raising him, to live with his mother again in California. I fell into a deep place psychically, much of it not pretty. All hell broke out in his life—homelessness for extended periods; taking care of his little brother and sister when he should have been in school; being sexually molested by his white stepfather; hiding his writing and math skills in the high school he attended, fearing that being smart would not be seen as cool; losing all of the books and photographs and clothes I had sent with him; our losing contact for extended periods of time. In those years, I don’t know how he found a way to not be arrested, to not get into drugs, to not get caught up in a gang. Sometimes the only word I have for that is grace. When LaMar and I finally found our way back into each other’s lives again, my words got to change from “I lost my son” to “we were torn from each other.” Many tears between us. And healing, too.

What being LaMar’s (“second,” “adopted,” “chosen”—no words really fit) mother has taught me is that police brutality is only one of many dangers he faces. This is one of the hardest things for me to wrap my mind around. For many Black children, there is no safety in the home or on the streets, and that danger in the home often drives them out. The prison system is a huge part of the problem, robbing children of their parents, practicing acts of family destruction first honed under slavery. Heteronormativity just adds to this nasty mix as I worry when
my daughter wears her hoodie outside, as gay bashing is only worsened by the violence of racism.

Given the many forms of violence LaMar has had to deal with, I am not at all surprised that the career he is focusing on now is with surveillance in a casino where there are clear “bad guys” and “good guys,” where there is real-life video evidence of when people are stealing from the house and real-life protocol for intervening when people get out of control. I am not surprised that he was in a loving relationship with his teen love for five years and, even though they are no longer “together” they still support each other. I am not surprised that, when I asked him to write this essay with me, he immediately said “yes.” His perspective, eloquent and to the point; his will to stay alive and thrive, fierce.

I have always tried to challenge myself mentally to find ways to adapt. I try to remember times when I have become mentally stronger, in charge of my own life, someone who is respected. I remember my grandmother telling me when I was younger, that I asked my stepfather, Bill, after he had beaten me, if he would love me more if I was white. When I moved back with my biological mother when I was thirteen, I was much bigger physically than when I left at nine years old. Still Bill tried to beat me. I remember asking him to whoop me every day so that I would get so mentally tough that nothing would hurt me anymore. He walked away after that.

As I have grown older, I have learned ways of moving forward. Physical strength gets you through a day but mental strength gets you through your life. After I left Boston I attended Oakland high school where everyone needed to be tough and big. If you don’t have your head on your shoulders there you can lose your life. I wanted to be respected. It’s hard to admit now but I wanted people to be afraid of me. I didn’t want people to take advantage of me. There was an instance where I was trying to earn money. I would go to the dollar store and buy an eight pack of cookies and a six-pack of soda. I would sell it, a cookie and a soda for a dollar, and people would buy it (since that was cheaper than what you could get at the school). Not too many people were selling legit things. But whenever there is success, negativity will counteract it. In PE you put things in your locker. I found someone robbing my locker. I caught him. He was a smaller person. I was physical with him. I hit him . . . he tried to hit me back. I wanted to show everyone I
wouldn’t let anyone take advantage of me. I put him in a chokehold and kept him in it. But then it hit me. What I was doing was against everything I had stood for in my life. That had been my worst fear. That was going to be my reality. But then I stopped myself. I let him go. I walked away. I wish I could remember his name. I wish I could apologize to him. I apologize to him every day. I apologize to myself.

In East Oakland, you gotta be tough, nobody can question you. You gotta have the best shoes, the most talent. I didn’t have the best clothes, the best shoes. . . . I didn’t have the finances for that. So I went the route of trying to be tougher. If I was going to be accepted in the school that is what I had to do. I had gone to so many schools before high school in Oakland—in Illinois, Florida, New York, and the Quaker school in Boston. I didn’t sound like people from California. My education level was higher than the people in my grade. My teacher would be upset ‘cause I would leave my finished assignments under the desk ‘cause I didn’t want to be seen as a nerd. I just wanted to blend in. I didn’t want to be made fun of. These weren’t my rules. I wanted to be smart. . . . but I couldn’t be myself.

In Oakland there are places I don’t go to even though I know people who live there. I can’t afford to find myself in the wrong place at the wrong time. It is too real, every day. I don’t know if I necessarily feel sad about these restrictions. You just find yourself trying to survive. You don’t have time for that. I go home and go to sleep. That is the one place I can find some peace.

It is crazy the damage police do to Black youth, the damage we do to each other. I look at the cues for how things are set up. I think about how the media responded to the protests in Oakland after the Trayvon Martin murder and the Oscar Grant murder where he was shot at the Bart station. After he was killed, there was a demonstration. Hundreds of people were sitting in front of the Marriott Hotel. When it turned toward evening, the media spokespeople said there might be a “state of anarchy.” The media was not highlighting the positive parts of the protest—that it had been peaceful all day. The media was looking for what might happen. As it got dark, people continued to march and chant peacefully. I don’t know who or how it happened but something broke and then police began arresting people for just being there.

It is really hard to keep your eyes on your goals. I didn’t have a car then. I needed to take Bart. After the protests, Bart would not stop in
certain areas. It was intense. Sometimes busses wouldn't pick people up at certain stops. It felt close to impossible to try to navigate, and survive while living in such an unjust world. . . . Sometimes I feel powerless myself. Then I think about what we can do, as people. We breathe, we sleep, we eat, we need water to live. What can we do to be as one?

When I was the Americorp supervisor for the East Bay, I remember there was a shooting that was followed by a lock down. I arrived at the school and began asking people . . . is everything okay? . . . But people were acting like nothing really happened. The violence and lockdowns were so common. It was like a normal day. Like a snow day in Boston. A regular snow day. All so normal. Something you almost expect.

It is so hard to reflect on this. I am living it. It is not a movie. Am I scared when I get stopped? Yes . . . we only hear the outcome. Another black male dead. I try to work hard within myself and do well . . . but Trayvon Martin was doing well in school but still, another deceased person. I just try to look at my life. To try to beat the stereotypes. I am 26 now. Almost 27. By 25, most African American males are in jail. I just try to push forward. To push into areas beyond color. Into spaces where people show love. And then to show other Black guys that they can make it. That I got out of a family where there was so much abuse. I got out. Others can, too.

Now, working surveillance at a casino, I work with police departments a lot. I find myself forgetting that police are human beings. Where I lived when I was younger in Oakland, police did not treat us in human ways. They were robots making sure we were afraid of them. It makes it very hard to feel safe when the police officer increases fear. I am more afraid if officers come than if they stay away. As a Black youth walking around I know there is a certain fear, on either side of the fence. Now, driving my car (which is a Lexus), I have been stopped a lot. Everything is legit but the officer feels the need to check me, or make me understand he is there. I carry myself well. I try to look at things from the point of view that we are all people. The spoiled apples make it hard for the police who want to be honest in their profession. Now the police are trying to build community. But a lot of youth think, well my cousin was shot by one of you, I don't know which one. One of you was in my house and broke down the door and it hasn't been fixed. The police are supposed to help us but they use the classic line, "we have to match fire
with fire.” People just want to live. They want to be free. They want to take care of their families.

My son’s words move me beyond tears, to a place of awe—his discipline, his willingness, his wide-open heart. Two years ago, after he unfairly lost his job at Americorp and then he and his long-term girlfriend broke up, we almost lost LaMar. No bullet, no jail, just too much loss, too much violence, too much betrayal to hold in his one precious body. If I were to lose him, after all he has been through, I am not sure I could take it. That is one of the many things we have in common, LaMar and me, our feelings too raw, our hearts too open to (sometimes) feel like we can make it. But then LaMar started talking deeply about the emotional support he needed, and he started to find traction again. He found a new job, reconciled with his girlfriend, found a therapist who really listened, and I got him the fanciest new cell phone we could find, so he could call me, no matter what.

Now, I go to as many Black Lives Matter demonstrations as I can. I march with my daughter, and many of my students, who seem to know to stay close to me, way beyond when they graduate. And I keep scanning the eyes of mothers, hoping they can see mine, that they can see that I see theirs. In many ways, my analysis of the police violence as more than just a few bad apples, as systematic and historically rooted in slavery, come from my white privilege. LaMar can’t afford to walk around thinking that police, as a group, have been trained to see him as a target. I marvel at LaMar’s stamina. I grieve for this world. Recently, I dreamt of LaMar when he was a toddler, before I even officially knew him. He was sweet, rocking in my arms like they were a swing set, to some soulful music, enjoying the sunlight, wrapped safely in his own dark radiance.