

“A Letter to my son” by Ala’a Tamam, Springfield

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I was 9 when Micheal Brown was murdered

Footage of the riots occupied every corner of my street on iPhone 5s, on newspapers, on the TV

There is no protection for the young when they- when we are the ones being killed

That night I had a dream not about me but for my son

It appeared in a poem and it danced in my mind because what is it to be Black if not to make art from unimaginable pain

So to my son- the son that I have not had yet I give you this

I give you your ancestry in the form of a poem because I cannot build you a wall- may it protect you

When you're a child no one warns you of the hate that awaits you

Different place, different time and it wouldn't have been you- is it- no it IS your fault

Questions asked are hushed quickly by a finger held to your mouth by the man or woman you love most

Get quiet quick- hands up or on the dashboard

Words so tight as if Uma and Baba are trying to lock you in themselves to protect you because they are

My inheritance is fear but it is not what I will be giving to my descendants

I will not give this to you my son I refuse

Can I tell you a story?

The greenest grass I've ever seen is the grass that makes up the park that I played at as a child

Memories these days appear through stained glass

Not Biblical stained glass, with hints of color and depictions of holy figures

But glass stained with “you don't belong here” and “you are not like the other blacks”

Glass stained with scornful eyes and the fear you wish you did not have

The fear that is in your heart, in your mother's heart, and your fathers

Stained, dirty, immigrant made in Sudan glass so opaque you can barely see the girl at the park anymore

America America America

Glass stained with red, white, and blue- so opaque that you now cannot see anything at all

All the pain is now patriotism and I'd give my life here and now to wipe the glass clean of the pigment for the sake of clarity

We see ourselves in everything

I see myself on a dollar store poster board

9 letters and a dropped apostrophe

As I look around at the normalization of my murder I see myself in everything

I see my son in everything- the son I have not had yet

Somedays I long for the smell of grass and the feeling of the hot sun that defined my childhood, others I curse my skin for looking like but not being wood

Today, however, at this moment that you and I share I am neither. I am bakhoor, my son lets be Bakhoor.

Noun: wood chips soaked in oils and perfumes, that when burned creates an aroma that reminds me of home.

A home that i'll do my best to show you, my son

Incense that floats around my house, from room to room occasionally out a window left open and just like you- it will take up room and venture into places unknown and that is how I stay brave

I stay brave for you when I cannot stay brave for myself

It is not easy to exist as an object son, despite legislature telling us that we are lucky for what we do have- we do not have much, we only have each other. But if we exist as smoke we are untouchable

We can be everywhere and nowhere at the same time, I can remind a young girl on the playground of home

I can give her the heat of the sun, my son I will give you the heat of the sun, the smell of grass and bakhoor mixed together to provide you the cultural experience that I have never had

The one I long for; The one I am creating for you my son.

For a life of struggle, the strength that I have but did not ask for would have all been worth it for that very moment.