Part one

All the Bones We Could Find

introduction

WE ARE STARDUST

I write to keep in contact with our ancestors and to spread truth to people.

SONIA SANCHEZ

Days after the elections of 2016, asha sent me a link to a talk by astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson. We have to have hope, she says to me across 3,000 miles, she in Brooklyn, me in Los Angeles. We listen together as Dr. deGrasse Tyson explains that the very atoms and molecules in our bodies are traceable to the crucibles in the centers of stars that once upon a time exploded into gas clouds. And those gas clouds formed other stars and those stars possessed the divine-right mix of properties needed to create not only planets, including our own, but also people, including us, me and her. He is saying that not only are we in the universe,

but that the universe is in us. He is saying that we, human beings, are literally made out of stardust.

And I know when I hear Dr. deGrasse Tyson say this that he is telling the truth because I have seen it since I was a child, the magic, the stardust we are, in the lives of the people I come from.

I watched it in the labor of my mother, a Jehovah's Witness and a woman who worked two and sometimes three jobs at a time, keeping other people's children, working the reception desks at gyms, telemarketing, doing anything and everything for 16 hours a day the whole of my childhood in the Van Nuys barrio where we lived. My mother, cocoa brown and smooth, disowned by her family for the children she had as a very young and unmarried woman. My mother, never giving up despite never making a living wage.

I saw it in the thin, brown face of my father, a boy out of Cajun country, a wounded healer, whose addictions were borne of a world that did not love him and told him so not once but constantly. My father, who always came back, who never stopped trying to be a version of himself there were no mirrors for.

And I knew it because I am the thirteenth-generation progeny of a people who survived the hulls of slave ships, survived the chains, the whips, the months laying in their own shit and piss. The human beings legislated as not human beings who watched their names, their languages, their Goddesses and Gods, the arc of their dances and beats of their songs, the majesty of their dreams, their very families snatched up and stolen, disassembled and discarded, and de-

spite this built language and honored God and created movement and upheld love. What could they be but stardust, these people who refused to die, who refused to accept the idea that their lives did not matter, that their children's lives did not matter?

Our foreparents imagined our families out of whole cloth. They imagined each individual one of us. They imagined me. They had to. It is the only way I am here, today, a mother and a wife, a community organizer and Queer, an artist and a dreamer learning to find hope while navigating the shadows of hell even as I know it might have been otherwise.

I was not expected or encouraged to survive. My brothers and little sister, my family—the one I was born into and the one I created—were not expected to survive. We lived a precarious life on the tightrope of poverty bordered at each end with the politics of personal responsibility that Black pastors and then the first Black president preached—they preached that more than they preached a commitment to collective responsibility.

They preached it more than they preached about what it meant to be the world's wealthiest nation and yet the place with extraordinary unemployment, an extraordinary lack of livable wages and an extraordinary disruption of basic opportunity.

And they preached that more than they preached about America having 5 percent of the world's population but 25 percent of its prison population, a population which for a long time included my disabled brother and gentle father

who never raised a hand to another human being. And a prison population that, with extraordinary deliberation, today excludes the man who shot and killed a 17-year-old boy who was carrying Skittles and iced tea.

There was a petition that was drafted and circulated all the way to the White House. It said we were terrorists. We, who in response to the killing of that child, said Black Lives Matter. The document gained traction during the first week of July 2016 after a week of protests against the back-to-back police killings of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge and Philando Castile in Minneapolis. At the end of that week, on July 7, in Dallas, Texas, a sniper opened fire during a Black Lives Matter protest that was populated with mothers and fathers who brought their children along to proclaim: We have a right to live.

The sniper, identified as 25-year-old Micah Johnson, an Army reservist home from Afghanistan, holed up in a building on the campus of El Centro College after killing five police officers and wounding eleven others, including two protesters. And in the early morning hours of July 8, 2016, he became the first individual ever to be blown up by local law enforcement. They used a military-grade bomb against Micah Johnson and programmed a robot to deliver it to him. No jury, no trial. No patience like the patience shown the killers who gunned down nine worshippers in Charleston, or moviegoers in Aurora, Colorado.

Of course, we will never know what his motivations really were and we will never know if he was mentally unstable. We will only know for sure that the single organ-

ization to which he ever belonged was the U.S. Army. And we will remember that the white men who were mass killers, in Aurora and Charleston, were taken alive and one was fed fast food on the way to jail. We will remember that most of the cops who are killed in this nation are killed by white men who are taken alive.

And we will experience all the ways the ghost of Micah Johnson will be weaponized against Black Lives Matter, will be weaponized against me, a tactic from the way back that has continuously been used against people who challenge white supremacy. We will remember that Nelson Mandela remained on the FBI's list of terrorists until 2008.

Even still, the accusation of being a terrorist is devastating, and I allow myself space to cry quietly as I lie in bed on a Sunday morning listening to a red-faced, hysterical Rudolph Giuliani spit lies about us three days after Dallas.

Like many of the people who embody our movement, I have lived my life between the twin terrors of poverty and the police. Coming of age in the drug war climate that was ratcheted up by Ronald Reagan and then Bill Clinton, the neighborhood where I lived and loved and the neighborhoods where many of the members of Black Lives Matter have lived and loved were designated war zones and the enemy was us.

The fact that more white people have always used and sold drugs than Black and Brown people and yet when we close our eyes and think of a drug seller or user the face most of us see is Black or Brown tells you what you need to know if you cannot readily imagine how someone can be doing

no harm and yet be harassed by police. Literally breathing while Black became cause for arrest—or worse.

I carry the memory of living under that terror—the terror of knowing that I, or any member of my family, could be killed with impunity—in my blood, my bones, in every step I take.

And yet I was called a terrorist.

The members of our movement are called terrorists.

We—me, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi—the three women who founded Black Lives Matter, are called terrorists.

We, the people.

We are not terrorists.

I am not a terrorist.

I am Patrisse Marie Khan-Cullors Brignac.

I am a survivor.

I am stardust.

1

COMMUNITY, INTERRUPTED

We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be . . . black, but by getting the public to associate the . . . blacks with heroin . . . and then criminalizing [them] heavily, we could disrupt [their] communities . . . Did we know we were lying? Of course we did.

JOHN EHRLICHMAN, RICHARD M. NIXON'S NATIONAL DOMESTIC POLICY CHIEF, ON THE ADMINISTRATION'S POSITION ON BLACK PEOPLE

My mother, Cherice, raises us—my older brothers Paul and Monte, my baby sister Jasmine, and me—on a block that is the main strip in my Van Nuys, California, mostly Mexican neighborhood. We live in one of ten Section 8 apartments in a two-story, tan-colored building where the paint is peeling and where there is a gate that does not close properly and an intercom system that never works.

My mother and I are considered short in our family. She is five feet four inches, and I never get any taller than five feet two. But Jasmine, Paul and Monte are tall people, and by the time she is grown, my little sister will reach six feet. My brothers will also both soar up to well over six feet. They get it from our father, Alton Cullors, a mechanic with big, dark brown hands he uses to work the line at the GM plant in Van Nuys, hands that hold me, hug me and make me feel safe. He smells of gasoline and cars, smells that still make me think of love and snuggles and safety almost three decades on. Alton comes in and out of our home, in and out of our days, depending on how he and Mommy are getting along. By the time I am six, he will leave and never live with us again. But he won't disappear entirely from our lives, and his love won't disappear at all. It lingers, that good Alton Cullors love, inside me, beside me, even now, today.

Where we live is multiracial, although by far the majority of people are Mexican. But there are Korean people and Black people like us, and even one white woman who is morbidly obese and cannot bathe in the tub the apartments in our buildings provide. I watch her sneak down to the dilapidated swimming pool attached to our apartment building, the one I will learn to swim in. Each night when she thinks no one is looking, she bathes in the water, bath soap, washcloth, shampoo and all. She never knows I see her and I never say. Not only because she is an adult and I am a child. But because she is part of who makes us, us.

She is poor and raising her daughter alone. She has a fast kind of mouth that reminds me of the quick-tongued Black women in my own family. She wears muumuus. I miss her presence when she leaves, as she eventually does, like most of our neighbors. Ours is a neighborhood designed to be transient, not a place where roots are meant to take hold, meant to grow into trees that live and live. The only place in my hood to buy groceries is a 7-Eleven. Without it, George's liquor store, the small Mexican and Chinese fast-food spots and the Taco Bell we would have nowhere in our neighborhood to get something to eat or drink.

But less than a mile away is Sherman Oaks, a wealthy white neighborhood with big old houses that have two-car garages, landscaped lawns and swimming pools that look nothing like the untended, postage-stamp-size one behind our apartment building. In Sherman Oaks, there is nothing that does not appear beautiful and well kept. There aren't even apartment buildings.

There are just expansive homes with fancy cars in front of them and parents who leave their houses each morning and drive their kids to school, a phenomenon that catches my eye the first time I see it. Mine is a neighborhood of kids who take the bus to school or walk from the time we are in first grade. Our parents are long gone to work by the time we emerge, little multicolored peepers in the springtime, our fresh brown faces trying to figure out a world we did not make and did not know we had the power to unmake.

My own mother worked 16 hours a day, at two and sometimes three jobs. She never had a career, only labored to pull together enough to make ends meet. Telemarketer, receptionist, domestic support, office cleaner—these were the jobs my mom did and all were vital to us, especially after the Van Nuys GM plant shut down and our family's stability did too, right along with it.

Alton got a series of low-wage jobs that had no insurance, no job security and no way to take care of us, his family, which is why I think, looking back now, he left, and while he visited and was always there, it was never the same again. In the 1980s, when all this was going down, unemployment among Black people, nearly triple that of white people's, was worse in multiple regions of the United States, including where I lived, than it was during the Great Recession of 2008–2009.

Sometimes when we would be hungry, when what was left was Honey Nut Cheerios we put water on to eat because there was no milk and, for a year, no working refrigerator in our home, my mother would lock herself in the bathroom and cuss that man to the heavens: Help me fucking feed our children, Alton. Our. Children. What kind of fucking man are you?

I wasn't supposed to hear those conversations, but I sat on the floor outside the bathroom and listened anyway to the yelling, to the problems, to the growl of my empty six-year-old stomach. Being hungry is the hardest thing, and to this day I have prayers of gratitude for the Black Panthers, who made Breakfast for Children a thing that schools should do. We qualified for free lunch and breakfast, and without

them I am almost sure we wouldn't have made it out of childhood alive despite my hardworking parents.

We love each other madly, my brothers, sister and I, and we are raised to look out for each other from the very beginning. Jasmine is the baby, our baby, and we love her up as such, but Paul is the oldest, so he takes charge when Alton moves out. It's his voice I wake up to each morning when it's time to go to school and my mother has left already for one of her jobs. It's Paul who gets us ready, tells us to brush our teeth and Come on, let's go. It's Paul who, when we have the ingredients in the house, makes grilled cheese sandwiches for us for dinner just like Mommy taught him to. It's Paul who says, Go on now, time to go to bed, while Mommy is on her second job, whatever it is.

But it's Monte who plays with me, lets me get away with stuff. Monte is the one with the ginormous heart. He can never *not* feed the stray cats and dogs that wander our streets even when our own food supplies are meager. Monte is the one who scoops up the baby birds that fall from their nests, puts them back in the right place. If I close my eyes right now I am back there with him, watching him ever so gently lift a miniature bird—I don't recall what kind we had in our hood—and put it back into the nest, which sometimes had fallen as well.

But Monte, who is the second oldest, is, unlike Paul, also a step removed from responsibility. At night we curl up and watch TV together when I'm supposed to be sleeping. *Beverly Hills, 90210* is our favorite show, a world of rich white kids

and their problems, a world where we, and our problems, do not exist. No police cars circle blocks or people in *90210,* not like in Van Nuys, where they do all day, every day, like hungry hyenas out there on the flatlands. For a long time I see them, the police in their cars, but I do not understand them, what role they play in the neighborhood. They do not speak to us or help guide us across streets. They are never friendly. It is clear not only that they are not our friends, but that they do not like us very much. I try to avoid them, but this is impossible, of course. They are omnipresent. And then there comes a day when they pull up near our apartment building. They block the alleyway along the side of it.

The alleyway is where my brothers hang out with their friends and talk shit, probably about girls and all the things they probably never have done with them. Monte and Paul are 11 and 13 years old and there are no green spaces, no community centers to shoot hoops in, no playgrounds with handball courts, no parks for children to build castles in, so they make the alleyway their secret place and go there to discuss things they do not let me in on. I am the girl. Nine years old, I am the little sister banished behind the broken black wrought-iron gate that tries, but fails, to protect us from the outside world.

It's from behind that gate that I watch the police roll up on my brothers and their friends, not one of whom is over the age of 14 and all of whom are doing absolutely nothing but talking. They throw them up on the wall. They make them pull their shirts up. They make them turn out their pockets. They roughly touch my brothers' bodies, even their privates,

while from behind the gate, I watch, frozen. I cannot cry or scream. I cannot breathe and I cannot hear anything. Not the siren that would have been accompanying the swirl of red lights, not the screeching at the boys: Get on the fucking wall! Later, I will be angry with myself: Why didn't I help them?

And later, neither Paul nor Monte will say a word about what happened to them. They will not cry or cuss. They will not make loud although empty threats. They will not discuss it with me, who was a witness, or my mother, who was not. They will not be outraged. They will not say they do not deserve such treatment. Because by the time they hit puberty, neither will my brothers have expected that things could be another way.

They will be silent in the way we often hear of the silence of rape victims. They will be worried, maybe, that no one will believe them. Worried that there's nothing that can be done to fix things, make things better. Whatever goes through their minds after being half stripped in public and having their childhoods flung to the ground and ground into the concrete, we will never speak of this incident or the ones that will follow as Van Nuys becomes ground zero in the war on drugs and the war on gangs, designations that add even more license to police already empowered to do whatever they want to us. Now there are even more ways to make us the enemy, even more ways to make us disappear.

And I will not think of this particular incident until years and years later, when the reports about Mike Brown start flowing out of Ferguson, Missouri, and he is morphed by

police and the press from a beloved 18-year-old boy, a boy who was heading to college and a boy who was unarmed, into something like King Kong, an entity swollen, monster-like, that could only be killed with bullets that were shot into the top of his head. Because this is what that cop did to him. He shot bullets into the top of his head as he knelt on the ground with his hands up.

I will think of it again when I watch bike-riding Freddie Gray, just 25, snatched up and thrown into the back of a police van like he was a bag of trash being tossed aside. Freddie Gray, taken for a Baltimore "rough ride" vicious enough for the cops in the case to be charged with depraved heart murder. Those actual words. Cops who would be, like most law enforcement accused of shooting Black people, acquitted. Even with the presence of video.

Soon after the day that my brothers were set upon in the alley by cops, a new cycle begins: they start getting arrested on a regular basis, and it happens so often that my mother is eventually forced to move us to another part of Van Nuys. But there is nowhere that they can be or feel safe. No place where there are jobs. No city, no block, where what they know, all they know, is that their lives matter, that they are loved. We try to make a world and tell them they are important and tell ourselves we are too. But real life can be an insistent and merciless intruder.

Later, when I am sent out of my neighborhood, to Millikan, an all-white middle school in wealthy and beautiful Sherman Oaks, I will make friends with a white girl who, as it turns out, has a brother who is the local drug seller.

He literally has garbage bags filled with weed. *Garbage bags.*

But that surprises me less than the fact that not only has he never been arrested, he's never even feared arrest. When he tells me that, I try to let it sink in, living without fear of the police. But it never does sink in.

2

TWELVE

One of the worst things about racism is what it does to young people.

ALVIN AILEY

The first time I am arrested, I am 12 years old.

One sentence and I am back there, all that little girl fear and humiliation forever settled in me at the cellular level.

It's the break between seventh and eighth grades, and for the first time I have to attend summer school because of my math and science grades and I am angry about it. No other Millikan kids come here, to this school in Van Nuys, for remediation, only me. The summer school I attend is for the kids who live in my neighborhood. It doesn't have a campus, but it has metal detectors and police. There are no police or metal detectors at Millikan.

Somehow, mentally, I don't make the adjustment. I still

think of myself as a student there, which I am but not for these summer months, and one day I do what I'd learned from my Millikan peers to do to cope: I smoke some weed. At Millikan it is a daily occurrence for kids to show up to class high, to light up in the bathroom, to smoke on the campus lawn. No one gets in trouble. Nowhere is there police. Millikan is the middle school where the gifted kids go.

But in my neighborhood school things are totally different and someone must have said something about me and my weed—two girls had come into the bathroom when I'd been in there—because two days later a police officer comes to my class. I remember my stomach dropping the way it does on one of those monster roller-coaster rides at Six Flags. I can just *feel* that they are coming for me and I am right. The cop tells me to come to the front of the room, where he handcuffs me in front of everyone and takes me to the dean's office, where my bag is searched, where I am searched, pockets turned out, shoes checked, just like my brothers in the alleyway when I was nine years old. I have no weed on me but I am made to call my mother at work and tell her what happened, which I do through tears. I didn't do it, Mommy, I lie through genuine tears of fear. My mother believes me. I am the good girl and she takes my side.

Later, when we are home together, she will not ask me how I am feeling or get righteously angry. She will not rub my wrists where the handcuffs pinched them or hold me or tell me she loves me. This is not a judgment of her. My mother is a manager, figuring out how to get herself and her

four children through the day alive. That this has happened, but that she and her kids are all at home and, relatively speaking, safe, is a victory for my mother. It is enough. And for all of my childhood, this is just the way it is.

What made middle school such a culture shock, beyond the race and class differences, was that all throughout elementary school I was considered bright, gifted even, a star student whom my fourth-grade teacher, Ms. Goldberg, indulged when I asked if I could teach the class about the Civil Rights Movement. A week before she had given me a book, *The Gold Cadillac* by Mildred Taylor, about a girl making the frightening drive with her father from Ohio through the Jim Crow South, down to Mississippi, where her extended family lives.

The terror in it was palpable for me, the growing sense on every page that they might be killed; by the time I was nine, police had already raided our small apartment in search of one of my favorite uncles, my father Alton's brother. My uncle who used and sold drugs, and who had a big laugh and who used to hug me up and tell me I was brilliant, but who did not with live us, whose whereabouts we did not know the day the police in full riot gear burst in.

Even tiny Jasmine, probably five years old during that raid, was yelled at and told to sit on the couch with me as police tore through our home in a way I would never later see on *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit,* where Olivia Benson is always gentle with the kids. In real life, when I was a little kid, when my brothers and sisters were, we were treated

like suspects. We had to make our own gentle, Jasmine and I, holding each other, frozen like I was the day of the alleyway incident, this time cops tearing through our rooms instead of the bodies of my brothers.

They even tore through our drawers. Did they think my uncle was hiding in the dresser drawer?

But as with the incident with my brothers, we did not speak of it once it was over.

In any event, I am sure this incident is at least partially why *The Gold Cadillac,* of another time and another place, was a story I clung to so deeply, why I remember it now, decades on. Where the details wove together differently, the fear drawn out across those pages is the same, is my own. Finishing it, I wanted more. I wanted confirmation that that which we did not speak of was real. Which was why I asked, Please, Ms. Goldberg, may I have more books to read?

Of course, she said, and gave me stories I devoured, child-size bites of the fight for freedom and justice.

Please, I went back and asked Ms. Goldberg, can I teach the class about the books?

Yes, she said, Why not? Because that's how she was. Ms. Goldberg, with her 80s' feathered brown hair and her *Flashdance*-style workout gear she wore to school every day.

I had a reward—pieces of candy—for my classmates who answered the questions I posed during the 15-minute presentations I was allowed to give on the books I read. I wanted them to know our history in this nation, what it was we come from. I wanted them to learn, as I had learned, the terror we knew. Somehow it connected to a terror I—we—felt in our

own neighborhoods, in our own current lives, but could not quite name.

But between Ms. Goldberg and then Ms. Bilal—the afterschool teacher and the single dark-skinned Black woman I would have during my early education, who brought us Kwanzaa and Afrocentricity—I turned toward middle school hopeful, even if it was in a community I didn't know, a community without my community. I expected to still be loved, encouraged. My best friend Lisa's mother was the one who'd heard of Millikan. It was considered generally a good school, but what made it special was its program for gifted children centered on the arts. She submitted Lisa's name as a candidate and then, Why not, she told my mother and I one afternoon. With your permission, I will submit Patrisse's name too! Great if the girls can stay together, I remember her saying.

Months on, I was accepted to the gifted children's program; Lisa was not. But Lisa's mom was able to manipulate her address and get Lisa into the standard program, so in the end we are both Millikan students. But we don't remain friends, not as we were.

Millikan Middle School is sufficiently far enough away from my home that I need a ride each morning in order to get to school on time. Before, I could simply hop on the city bus with all the other kids from my hood, but getting into Sherman Oaks is a more complicated endeavor. The problem is that my family does not own a car, which is why our neighbor Cynthia steps in to help. My mother borrows her car to

ensure my safe passage. This is not quite as straightforward as it may sound.

Cynthia, no more than 19, a young mother who has on and off been involved with my brother Monte and who will eventually have a child, my nephew Chase, with him, had been shot a year before in a drive-by while she was at a party. From the waist down, she was left paralyzed. But she has a car she loans my mother, a beat-up, champagne-colored station wagon. The back windows are gone, replaced by plastic lining, and the whole thing smells like pee because with Cynthia being mostly paralyzed, she sometimes loses control of her bladder.

My mother takes me to Millikan in that car, which initially I deal with because, a car! But after the first day, I realize quickly I have to make a change. Day two and I say, Drop me off here, Mommy, meaning a few blocks away from the school. The car we are in does not look like any of the other cars that pull up to Millikan, all gleaming and new in the morning sun. Kids pour out of those vehicles, Mercedes and Lexuses, and run from waving parents onto the campus's greener-than-green lawn, as all at once I become familiar with a sudden and new feeling taking root in my spirit: a shame that goes deep, that is encompassing and defining. I realize we are poor.

Later, as an adult, a friend will say to me, Of course you felt that. Oppression is embarrassing, she will say quietly. But in middle school, segregated as it is, between Black and white kids, wealthy and poor kids, I don't quite know what to do with this feeling or the terrible question that

encircles my 12-year-old soul: Am I supposed to be embarrassed about the people who nurtured me, who gave me to the world and gave the world to me?

I don't fit in with the white kids who smoke weed in between classes in bathrooms or on the campus lawn. I don't fit in with the few Black girls who want to be Janet Jackson or Whitney Houston when they grow up. I wear MC Hammer pants, crotch swinging low. I wear my own brand of Blackness informed as it also is by the Mexicanness of the neighborhood I was raised in. People say I am weird, but I don't feel weird. I only feel like myself: a girl from Van Nuys who loves poetry and reading and, more than anything, dancing. I am in the dance department and my dances are equal parts African, Hip Hop and Mariachi, which is also to say, weird.

I do make a friend, a white boy, Mikie, who is not disturbed by my alleged weirdness, my MC Hammer pants. I pester my mother to allow me to bring him home. I love my room and I want him to see the place I became me. I don't yet appreciate my mother's own shame, the humbleness of our home. My mother who came from middle-class, pious parents who had cast her aside when she turned up 15 and pregnant with my brother Paul nearly two decades before.

Because despite the shame I feel within the walls of Millikan, away from there, it disappears to a large degree. This neighborhood, this world, is all I have known, it's what I have loved, despite the hardship I don't really know as hardship because it's how everyone lives. Everyone is hungry at

times. Everyone lives in small, rented apartments. Most of us don't have cars or extra stuff or things that shine.

In any case, my mother relents, probably out of exhaustion, and Mikie, who will become my first boyfriend in the years before he comes out as Gay and me as Queer, is dropped off at my apartment building by his parents.

I go downstairs to let him in and in the background there is an ambulance on the block screeching, which I don't notice at first because there's always an ambulance screeching on the block. But for Mikie it is new and between that and our building with its peeling paint, my friend says matter-of-factly, without trying to be mean, I didn't think you lived like this. I do not respond. We go into my room and try to act as though things are the same.

Middle school is the first time in my life when I feel unsure of myself. No one is calling me gifted anymore. No one, save for my dance teacher, encourages me or seems to have patience with me. It's in middle school that my grades drop for the first time and that I come to believe that maybe all that love I'd gotten in elementary school had somehow dried up, my ration run dry. At the age of 12 I am on my own, no longer in the world as a child, as a small human, innocent and in need of support. I saw it happen to my brothers and now it was happening to me, this moment when we become the thing that's no longer adorable or cherished. The year we become a thing to be discarded.

For my brothers, and especially for Monte, learning that they did not matter, that they were expendable, began in the streets, began while they were hanging out with friends,

began while they were literally breathing while Black. The extraordinary presence of police in our communities, a result of a drug war aimed at us, despite our never using or selling drugs more than unpoliced white children, ensured that we all knew this. For us, law enforcement had nothing to do with protecting and serving, but controlling and containing the movement of children who had been labeled super-predators simply by virtue of who they were born to and where they were born, not because they were actually doing anything predatory.

I learned I didn't matter from the very same place that lifted me up, the place I'd found my center and voice: school. And it will not be until I am an adult, determined to achieve a degree in religion, part of a long and dedicated process I undertook to become an ordained minister, that I will enjoy school again.

A few years after I complete my degree, Dr. Monique W. Morris published her groundbreaking book, *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*, demonstrating how Black girls are rendered disposable in schools, unwanted, unloved. Twelve percent of us receive at least one suspension during our school careers while our white (girl) counterparts are suspended at a rate of 2 percent. In Wisconsin the rate is actually 21 percent for Black girls but 2 percent for white girls.

But having attended schools with both Black and white girls, one thing I learned quickly is that while we can behave in the same or very similar ways, we are almost never punished

similarly. In fact, in white schools, I witnessed an extraordinary amount of drug use compared to what my friends in my neighborhood schools experienced. And yet my friends were the ones policed. My neighborhood friends went to schools where no mass or even singular shootings occurred, but where police in full Kevlar patrolled the hallways, often with drug-sniffing dogs, the very same kind that they turned on children in the South who demanded an end to segregation.

By the time Black Lives Matter is born, we not only know that we have been rendered disposable because of our lived experience—which few listened to—but also from data and finally from those terrible, viral images of Black girls being thrown brutally out of their seats by people who are called School Safety Officers, for the crime of having their phones out in the classroom. Monique Morris's reporting will tell us about the 12-year-old girl from Detroit who is threatened with both expulsion and criminal charges for writing the word "Hi" on her locker door; and the one in Orlando who is also threatened with expulsion from her private school if she doesn't stop wearing her hair natural.

Twelve.

And for me, too, it started the year I turned twelve. That was the year that I learned that being Black and poor defined me more than being bright and hopeful and ready. I had been so ready to learn. So willing.

Twelve, the moment our grades and engagement as students seem to matter less than how we can be proven to be criminals, people to be arrested.

Twelve, and childhood already gone.

Twelve, and being who we are can cost us our lives.

It cost Tamir Rice his life.

He was a child of twelve. And the cop who shot him took under two seconds, literally, to determine that Tamir should die.

Tamir Rice. Twelve.

Twelve, and out of time.