

ON THE CORNER OF 12TH AND RICHMOND

by

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HONORS THESIS

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DEDICATION

Creating “*On the Corner of 12th and Richmond*” has been quite the ride. At the beginning of my college career, I was excited about the prospect of writing an undergraduate thesis, but I didn’t have a single clue about what I would write. The way forward became a little clearer when I took Jordan Morille’s *Writing for the Stage* course in the fall of 2017. The challenging invitation to write two ten-minute plays and a One Act got my creative juices flowing. Inspired by other established playwrights and poets, I took an intense liking to the choreopoem “*for colored girls/who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf,*” a series of poetic monologues, accompanied by dance movements and music, by Ntozake Shange. Raised, primarily, by a single mother, this celebration of triumphs and acknowledgment of trials endured by black women stirred me. I longed for a similar celebration and acknowledgement for my black *manhood*. At the end of the course, I approached Jordan with an idea for a play where such a celebration would ensue.

In 2019, I attended the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival (KCACTF) where Austin Dean Ashford performed his one man show entitled *Black Book*, “a dramedy that debates what happens to young minds when our educational spaces begin to resemble prisons more than schools...” I watched, glued to my seat, enthralled by Austin’s writing, and dynamic physical articulation in shifting characterization. I thought of all the times I played alone while growing up, reenacting movies (sometimes rewriting them altogether) and playing all the characters. I was doing solo performance work without ever knowing it! Amazed at this cosmic callback, I began exploring solo performance work in my artistic export anywhere I could. Later that semester, I wrote a short solo performance piece for my Beginning Voice class, exploring the external influences of my idiolect. At the end of the same semester, as a final assignment in Intermediate Acting, I devised yet another solo performance piece, this time with text taken from Suzan Lori-Parks’ “*The America Play*.” Solo performance work presented itself to me, yet again, at the beginning of fall 2019 through Nadine Mozon’s “*Blue Spiral*,” which followed the “girlhood song lodged in a grown woman’s psyche giving rise to a chorus of tragic events between the notes and lyrics.” I took this as an affirmation and inspiration to my journey and a confirmation in continuing.

I initially saw the world of my thesis involving interactions between 7-8 black male characters living in a walk up on the upper east coast. I had the stories for these men but no idea what it was like to live in a big city or in a walk up. I struggled finding where the characters related to each other and what they wanted to say beyond the first few pages. My character count shrunk down to 3, then back up to 5. But when I began writing Pierre’s piece, I couldn’t turn the character a loose. Here was a character that covered pain with a poem and a smile and I knew there was so much more under the surface.

When I stopped looking to make the piece work like other established works and pulled from my own experiences, the writing nearly took care of itself. Throughout this entire process I have learned that my experiences are golden, I need not look for inspiration

anywhere else but from within, and that I don't have to wait on anyone's permission to create. I am preparing to entire an industry where it is common to encounter a multitude of no's before hearing a yes. What do you do in the in between? You keep creating. I marvel at this work and submit in complete trust of where the rest of this story will take me in the coming months and even years.

This piece is dedicated to every black man in my life who tries in the way that they know how. I see you. I hear you. I thank you.

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To Jordan Morille for introducing me to playwriting and investing in my writing from the day we met. “Keep. Writing.”

To my family and friends for their support and prayers...and listening ears when I needed to hear dialogue out loud.

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ABSTRACT

“The only difference between the church and the barbershop is that you can actually tell people go to the barbershop.” In a short form narrative, through devised solo performance work, *On the Corner of 12th and Richmond* follows resident barbershop poet, Pierre Christopher Jackson, who grapples with racism and past childhood traumas that have crippled him and left him feeling disillusioned with higher education society, the performative nature of organized religion, and the systemic issues in infrastructural underpinnings of society. This richly theatrical mosaic reveals deeply human hopes, joys, sorrows, fears, and dreams.

This piece serves as the foundation and precursor to a character study of a larger work that will include the voices and perspectives of other prominent figures of the community of Port Abrams.

In the dark, a video montage of black and white pictures of black men plays on a projector screen. The stills of the men express a range of emotions: deep sadness, hopelessness, defeat, fear, anger, joy, excitement. There are clergy, grocers, teachers, fathers, grandfathers, children, entertainers, homeless men, barbers. The photos slowly transition into colors. Photographs of black men murdered by police are interspersed throughout. Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Philando Castile, Botham Jean, George Floyd. *Cristo Redentor* by Donald Byrd underscores. The lights slowly fade up, as NARRATOR, from the audience, takes the stage from. He is dressed in a wrinkled, white, button-down dress shirt, unbuttoned at the neck and rolled up at the sleeves. He surveys the audience.

NARRATOR

Ntozake Shange called for the colored girls and said, “*Somebody/anybody sing a black girl’s song.*” And I dance to that tune, too. I love my sisters. Protect them. Cherish them. Praise them! They are the life-giving Eve to all that is. (*beat*) But let the young men come, too. You, too, grandfather. Let the whole world...hear...you...laugh!

Narrator throws his head back, in demonstration and erupts with laughter.

Let them hear the roar of your joy roll like thunder. Flash the white of your smile like lightning! Throw your head back and laugh a deep, belly-aching laugh steeped in joy. This joy, that runs from your heart to your fingers and toys, little brother. Now, let your body do the talking and set down the burdens you’ve been carrying. Dance the dance your soul desires. A rhythm and song innately given; wild, true and free.

Narrator, isolating parts of his body, dances the dance of his soul. It is full and running over with warmth and danger, licking like fire.

There it go! There it go! Loose that man and let him go! “Put the fire out,” they cried one to another; but this fire can’t be quenched! Oh, I think somebody ought to sing a black boy’s song. Dance big and free! Send your laughter up, up, up. It’s sweet to God’s very own ear. Oh, somebody please sing a black boy’s song. One that ain’t always easy and ain’t always heard. It’s got pain mixed in it. I think a release is damn well deserved. Jump in the river, little brother, and let it swell it’s banks. Set down your weight, grandfather, and be new baptized. Oh, somebody sing a black boy’s song. “Black boy,” they say, “Sing your own damn song.” And I do! But I neeeeed my brothers to sing, too. Because when we shout, dance, whisper, and sing, we’ll send Jericho’s wall’s crashing down. I am

king! You better recognize. It exudes from my very being like the sap of a tree.

Narrator, on fire, stands in a chair or atop a block and calls for the men.

Black boys! big, tall and strong! Black boys! meek and quiet! Black boys! misunderstood. Black boys! ancient and just beginning! Let's sing, laugh and dance; jump into troubled waters and heal.

Narrator transitions to PIERRE, local neighborhood barbershop poet. Pierre, in deep, asthmatic gasps for air, and standing on the top step of the barbershop patio, mocks a local preacher.

PIERRE

"Anybody wanta be made whole? Anybody wanta be set free?" Yeah, from the tyranny of Reverend Wayne T. Meeks.

Pierre laughs heartily.

I mean, what class they take make them change they voice like that? Nigga, if you don't stop yelling at me! You can't get nobody to live "holy," because you done preached 'em deaf. I ask my grandmama every time she come from church: "Mama, what the preach about?" "*I don't know, baby, but it sho' was good.*" "Well, mama what was good about it?" "*I don't know, baby, but he sho' was up there preachin'.*" They ain't out here trying to help nobody. I'm telling you, don't go down there to Rose of Sharon Deliverance Temple. You'll come out of there \$50 shorter and not know which pot-belly penguin in a suit you gave it to.

I went down there for Easter and heard this cat singing. Had a nice little voice on 'em. I used to be in the same choir singing, too, when I was coming up. The only difference between me and him is I can sing on key. I don't mean no harm. What? You ain't getting no song out of me. Not for free. Times is hard and if you ain't trying to pay, get the hell away from me, busta!

Pierre waits.

Damn, I can't get a quarter? I mean, I thought surely somebody wanted to hear this angelic voice of mine. They don't do barbershop quartettes no more, but I'm pretty damn close. Come on, I'll take the bottom and you take the top. You got some cash in them pockets. I know you got some money.

Pierre waits, expectantly.

Nah, I'm just playing. I don't want your money. Save that for Mr. Jolivet. Like my daddy used to say: "Put your money where you can see it." You go in, get a haircut, pay the man

– it’s a reasonable service. I’m Pierre; resident poet of these front steps. “From 12 to 2, you know what to do. Step outside so Pierre can talk to you. I’ll talk about anything: religion, tax fraud, or maybe your next boo. You in a safe space, homeboy. Welcome to my stoop.” That was ass but you get my drift. I mean, our ladies got the church, and we got the barbershop. It’s appropriate. Where else is a brother gonna go to express his feelings without being shouted over, misunderstood, or put out? There ain’t a man in Port Abram that don’t come to the corner of 12th and Richmond. The kids come, the junkies come, the pastors come, board members come, we make your mama – never mind. I’m just playing. Don’t be so sensitive.

Pierre looks up and down the street. Taking in the neighborhood.

Yep, right here on Richmond. You know this was supposed to be a major highway but the way the government people decided to go was through Springfield. Rerouted all that traffic from here, through there to the pigeon shit cities. I call ‘em pigeon shit cities ‘cause everybody stay there is pigeon shit white and they all got bad attitudes. You can’t shop in Springfield. You can’t eat in Springfield. You don’t want to send your kids to school in Springfield. Take your little brown tail across the highway and see if they don’t look at you like you farted on their best suit. Don’t go to Springfield. You like good music, good food, and good people? Then you stay put. We take care of each other ‘round here. We got the Gold Tail on Procter if you want live music, the best barbecue in a hundred mile radius at the old Burger King, and Miss Mary Jane, up the block on Taft, who’ll take care of your snotty nose kids while you run errands or do whatever you unfortunately enslaved souls do. I mean, it’s a real talent or something to be a good parent and everybody ain’t got that. You got Justin’s Tire Service over on the Circle, a little water park and playground at Rose Hill, Abram High down the corner, and Rose of Sharon Deliverance Temple on Thomas. That’s pretty much all you get. But it ain’t the quantity, it’s the quality. Don’t forget that.

A beat of realization.

Oh! We got a big, gargantuan ass chemical plant that’s buying up all the land across the tracks and poisoning all the old people. City Council will be pissed off if I forgot to mention that one. “Beakon will be the reason this city stays afloat.” Nigga, shut up. Beakon is the reason the kids in the neighborhood gonna glow in the dark in three years, talking ‘bout, “Ooo! Mommy look!” Beakon is the reason the city ain’t fixed none of the street lights. After 7, every night, this big ass tower with a flame on top burns off “the excess chemicals, so there isn’t an explosion. We don’t want there to be an explosion.” And I don’t want to smell rotten ass Vienna sausage every time I’m trying to get my freak on, but I do. What you think they gonna do about that? Nothing. I mean, it’d be just my luck, 50 years from now, they run a commercial on TV talkin’ ‘bout: “If you, or a loved one have ever been exposed to a chemical I can’t fucking pronounce, then you may be entitled to a compensation of \$100,000.” Yeah, you give me cancer, then pay me off with the money that it’s way too late for me to use for treatment with. Get the hell outta here. And, boy, we just jump at a chance to work for ‘em, too. I done right there at City

Hall, watching people bitch and complain about how “these mfers don’t help the city!” “They’re killing the community.” “They don’t even offer substantial scholarships to the local students.” So I walked up to the front desk and gave my application to a woman named Judy. What? Don’t look at me like that. You all wouldn’t even give me a quarter five minutes ago. You gonna pay my rent? I didn’t think so. My change stay strange and beggars can’t choosers so yeah, I walked my ass down there and filled out an application, got the job, and lost the job all in the same breath. They had me working under this dude named Dennis. His hair was over-gelled, his pants was too tight and the mfer smelt like cheese.

Pierre transforms into DENNIS during his description of him. His spine is rounded, with pants hiked up as far as they can possibly go. DENNIS, overly excited, loud and smiling a little too enthusiastically, reaches out a hand to Pierre.

DENNIS

GOOOOOOOOD MORNING!!! WELCOME TO YOUR FIRST DAY AT BEAKON!
CAN I TAKE YOUR COAT?

A quick transition to Pierre.

PIERRE

I that motherfucker no. I don’t know where your hands been.

A quick transition to Dennis.

DENNIS

OOO! A LITTLE FIRE IN THE BELLY. WE LIKE THAT HERE. LET ME SHOW YOU AROUND THE FLOOR. THIS IS SHARON BARNS, SHE WORKS IN HUMAN RESOURCES. THIS IS JARED LAUREN, HE’S A GUY FOR PIPEFITTING. OH, SAM! COME SAY HELLO TO OUR NEW...

Dennis fades out like a malfunctioning robot.

PIERRE

Quite honestly, I didn’t hear nothing he said. I was too busy looking for the black people. Imagine. They give you a brochure when you get there to fill out your application and the brochure got black people. Black people, a little Asian lady, a white-haired man smiling at you from behind his desk like –

Pierre demonstrates the weird, lippy smile.

And I’m like, “Where are all the black people?” I don’t even see the Asian lady. I was preparing myself to see a WHITE’S ONLY sign on a water fountain when we turned down a hallway.

Beat.

Shit. It was dark as hell down this hallway. Light kinda flickering down at the end. Green tile down on the floor. I turn to look at Dennis, this motherfucker is smiling. I'm going to the 'lectric chair because ain't no way in hell anything happy is on the other side of that door down there at the end. We get down there to the end, and he pushes the door open like TA-DA and, oh my damn, the light is so bright, it almost knocks me off my feet. I put my hand up like this and shut my eyes because my pupils started doing some ping-pong shit I wasn't used to. I felt Heat shove it's hand up my shirt and onto my belly. What realm of hell of this? I opened my eyes...y'all. We are standing outside, in the back, in the heat among 'bout 42 black foreman, checking tanks and shit. I look at Dennis, Dennis look at me. I look at Dennis, this motherfucker still smiling and I think to myself, "Welp, cotton sho' is looking different these days." This is not what I signed up. I thought I'd have a nice little desk job, in the AC, with the printer/copier a sput, sput, sputting in the background. I tried it, though. I really did. I held out for about 2 weeks. I just couldn't take it no more though. I barged into Dennis' office, I said: "Hey! Do you really expect people to work under these conditions? Because this heat has mishandled my hope and quiet as it's kept, I wanna quit. Yes, I have rent, bills, and a book-buying habit that I just can't seem to kick, but I am this close from drinking from the cool spring of unemployment. YOU HAVE TWO PEOPLE WORKING OUT HERE! This concrete puddle of a walking lot has the Sun digging holes on top of my feet as blisters hug my toes, a dazzling pain shimmies through my knee, and my arms scream for joy as I trek testing ten times two equals twenty tanks around this big motherfucker. Are you crazy? "But you get a thirty-minute lunch with two fifteen-minute breaks." Sir, would you throw a coin-toss of water on a house fire? Let me or Mr. Tibbs over there take a break or go to lunch and watch just how fast this plant goes up in flames. SO, HIRE MORE HELP. HELP MY HOPE. AND HOPE I STAY. Or this'll be a shit show before you know." Now, you can do one of two things here: you can walk away, trusting that they heard your complaint, and they will govern themselves accordingly OR you could show them better than you're telling them just how much you mean business. Guess what option I chose? Oh, yeah, I showed their ass. I freaked! I freaked all of the office. I kicked the file cabinets over. I flipped Dennis's desk over on his tiny, little feet. I freaked as Judy from the front desk called the police and they picked me up by my collar and threw me in the back of the patrol car. I freaked all the way through the front doors of Westwood Mental and up the stairs and in the cell as the put the straight jacket on me. I just got out yesterday. I got back to this front step, and I thought DAMN. This shit is just too childish for words, man. Here I was, back on the perch, back on the step, at the stoop, watching! Watching everybody else got a chance to get on with their lives. Watching everybody find peace and love and happiness and all the other shit we want life. Making more money than they know what do with. And what am I do? Reciting a poem on a perch. (beat) I'm a poet. I turn words over in my hands the same way a potter turns his clay. From the second the barbershop opens, I'm out on the perch sharing with anybody who'll listen even for a fraction of a second to see if they know, to see if they get it. "That shit don't pay." Oh yeah? I got this gift I really can't do shit with because ain't nobody trying to hear what I got to say. And tell that "never too late" shit to somebody younger

than me whose actually got the time to go chasing dreams. Been there, done that, got a t-shirt for it, and still ended up back on this perch. “Go to college so you can get a good job with better opportunities. Make a better life for yourself.” I think whatever magic college was supposed work on my life, hexed the fuck out of me. I had enough money for one semester. I begged my daddy to help me out. I don’t come from money. I come from “I put my money where I can see it, son. Get you a real job. That shit won’t pay.” I come from “Get out of here and get some sun. It ain’t healthy for little boys to sit in the house all day.” I come from, “If you don’t get him around some men, he gon’ turn out to be just like a little sissy.” I come from, “If I find out you skipping school to go to library again, I’m gon’ beat your ass.” I come from the the rich, wet smell of fertilizer and Nana’s fresh garden flowers in bloom. I come from the taste of salted tears running from my eyes to hide in my mouth, as the wanna-be Bloods, that patrolled my street, introduced their shoe-shod feet to the back of my skull and bend of my ribs, pressing me, pulling me, picking me apart, bruising me on every side. I come from, “Put that book down and come from outta that garden so you cut this here grass before I call them boys back to beat your ass.” I come from “You gotta keep working at it, baby. Keep your head down and do what you gotta do.” I come from, “God will make a way.” I come from the whispered “Yes, Lord,” of the saints, the laying on of hands, coughing up of demons and sheets and prayer shawls that were spread. I come from suffocating dreams and empty prayers.

Beat.

Pierre’s got a perch,
A possibly pernicious perch,
Where he passes out poetry.

Pierre’s got a pain
Packed, patched and full

Pierre’s got a poem on the page
That purges all the pain away
The only thing about it is
That shit just don’t pay.

Pierre sits a while. The choir can be heard rehearsing from down the street at Rose of Sharon Temple of Deliverance. “Something Got a Hold of Me” by James Cleveland. Just as quickly as Pierre is aware the music, it fades away. He stares in the direction of the church. His eyes swell with water. He begins to sing.

PIERRE

*Something got a hold of me,
Oh yes it did, I said
Something got a hold of me.*

*I went to a meeting one night,
And my heart wasn't right,
Something got a hold of me.*

An abated pain rises in Pierre.

*It was at a revival,
On the Mourner's Bench,
I was filled with misery.
The same God
That touched my mama,
He laid His hands on me.*

“Fuck God. What that nigga ever done for me? Fuck God. What that nigga ever done for me?”

Beat. Pierre, overtaken by the memory.

I used to be a Junior Deacon at Rose of Sharon. Sat with the men on first Sunday's and served communion to the congregation and everything.

Pierre struggles to tell this story.

One Sunday, there was man that came in. It was summertime 'cause I remember he had on a leather jacket with a wife beater underneath and a beanie on his head. And we standing at the front of the church, Pastor Meeks behind the “DO THIS IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME” table. And I see him come in and he's crying. Snot in the beads of his beards, dripping with every step he takes.

Pierre becomes JUNKIE as he describes him.

And he's tired. You can see it in his eyes. He just needs a little help. A hand or two to help get him where he needs to be. He comes down the left aisle and the ushers are after him, but he keeps coming. And the people in the pews don't move. They won't even stand up to help. But he keeps coming. Dirty looks and all he keeps coming.

JUNKIE

FUCK GOD! What that nigga ever do for me? FUCK GOD!

PIERRE

And the ushers are trying hold him down. Meeks failing from being the table. Like MOVE! WHAT ARE YOU DOING? HELP HIM.

JUNKIE

I'M A MAN! I'M A MAN! I'M A MAN!

Junkie pulls out a blade from his coat pocket and places it at his throat.

I'M A MAN!! I'M A MAN!

An easy and slow transition from Junkie to Pierre.
Breathe.

PIERRE

He slit his throat. (beat) Now everybody wanna move. Deacons rushing over. Women screaming. People leaving. Meeks trying to calm the crowds. I just stood there. He was coming down the aisle and I wanted to run up to him and hug him until his dirt became mine and he was free and he could sit and rest and didn't have to shout anymore, but I didn't. I get it now. I understand it now. I mean, did God forget? You come into this world as you are, pure and kind and accepting, and then life gets a hold of your ass and wears you out. You don't get it at twelve, but the older you get the more you start to wonder how close each of us are from that moment. How close am I to the weight being too much to bear? How close am I to having to remind God that I'm here and I hurt? And who do you run to for that? Who do you go to, to help you contextualize and make sense of seeing a man...

Pierre cannot continue.

Elijah said, "Shout louder. Perhaps he is deep in thought. Perhaps asleep?"...and they slashed themselves with swords and spears...but there was no response. No one answered. No one paid attention.

Beat.

I saw my dad in that man so I couldn't go to him. I was scared he'd do the same thing. That the thought and idea alone would... So, I went to the preacher. Choir rehearsals were cancelled for weeks but the evening we got to go back, I was outside of his office.

Pierre transitions to his twelve-year-old self. He is timid. He knocks on the door of the Pastor's Study, peering his head in.

12-YEAR-OLD PIERRE

Sir?

12-year-old Pierre freezes. Pierre fights to return to himself. Wins.

PIERRE

Meeks was drunk. And I wanted to do what his members apparently didn't know how to do. I helped him. Got him water, a cool towel...I was just there to help him. I didn't want...

Pierre struggles.

He/

Pierre's sentence is interrupted by the bell of the barbershop's door. A customer has walked out. As best he can, Pierre composes himself and performs, feigning a smile.

Alright, I see you, little brother! You look sharp, man. You dangerous out here!

Pierre cringes. Maybe he shouldn't have said that. His smiles nearly fades.

(with an apology and encouragement)

Keep your head up, little man!

Pierre watches as the customer gets in their car and drives away. His smile dies.

You remember what it was like being a kid? I mean, the good stuff. My favorite game was hide and seek. 1-2-3, not it! Me and my cousins used to stand in a circle at Rose Hill and argue for hours on end about who was gonna be "it".

Pierre transforms into each one of his cousins as they argue on the playground.

C.J.

Man, I did it last time!

COUSIN A

That's not fair, CJ. Everybody 'spose to get a chance.

COUSIN B

Pie can't chase none of us.

PIE

He right, I can't.

C.J.

Can y'all just decide? I'm finna go back in the house.

PIE

Shit, I got my sweat in my eye.

COUSIN C

Awww, you said a bad word.

C.J.

I'm finna just start running and whoever last gon' be the one chasing.

PIERRE

1-2-3, not it! Too slow and you'd be chasing after your bigger cousins with a blow torch in your lungs for the next four, five games.

Pierre transforms into the seven-year-old version of himself, shuts his eyes and counts.

SEVEN-YEAR-OLD PIERRE

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10. Ready or not, here I come. You get good at it though, once you learn where all the favorite hiding spots are. You only got so many places to hide and every hiding place, ain't a good place, so you gotta be selective. Then, you navigate your hunt based on where the good spots are. My cousin, Pie, looked for us so long one time without finding anyone, that he got mad and went back home without telling anybody. And we all just stayed where we were until we got bored and decided to start coming out. But when C.J. was it? You had to run and run hard! He was the oldest of all of us and if you could outrun C.J., then you were basically the "it" cousin. You got first in everything.

Pierre transitions back to his current self.
Reminiscing.

PIERRE

I remember what it was like to be a kid. A good kid. So, where do we even start with it all? At the carnival, with your pigeon shit buddy?

BUDDY

Hey, my nigga, Trey, thinks you're cute. He just wants to get on the ride with you, that's all. You don't want to give him a chance? Ah man, come on. I don't cut lines, I'm just trying to be a good friend. Okay, you don't have to like talk to him like that. You can just be friends, be cordial, ya know? You don't want to make friends? If you support Black Lives Matter, you'll let us ride with you. No? (laughs) Bro, what the fuck?

PIERRE

Or how about at school?

TEACHER

When I ask you a question, you are to respond to me. This is a classroom setting, these are current events and you are to participate. Alyssa's father is an officer, so explain to me how any of this is fair to her. Actually, go! Get out of my room! If you want to be a walking statistic, you go ahead. It's your own damn fault. No, go! I punch a clock and get

a paycheck whether you are here or not. Do you hear me, boy? Okay, I'm not doing this with you. I know how to get rid of you. (To a different student) Can you go and get the Officer Davis? (back) He can take your black ass to jail where you belong.

PIERRE

Or in the in kitchen with your grandmother?

MAMA

Baby, keep writing those poems. I love 'em. Don't you try to fit in for the sake of having friends. You don't stoop down to where they are. If they can't come up to you, they can't come with you. Keep your back straight, your shoulders back and your head up. Pants where they belong and a belt at all times. Keep your hands out of your pockets and you speak loud, clear sentences. It's "yes ma'am, no ma'am, yes sir, no sir." I don't care who it is. You smart, baby, and you got a quick mind with a mouth to match. But you got wisdom and discernment, too, okay? Use it. Be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to take offense. And sugar, don't run.

Pierre takes off running in place. He slows to a slow-motion run. He stops running. He stands, facing the audience, with hands up.

PIERRE

1-2-3, not it. Except when you are, right? "Don't run." Funny how things change between childhood and adulthood. I remember when running wasn't a matter of life or death. When playing with a toy gun in your front yard didn't mean a bullet to the gut. When you didn't know anything about a hashtag or your stomach diving to the floor of your feet when you saw a black man's face on the news. I'm stuck. I'm stuck trying to find the rhyme to the reason. What's the reason? The reason why. What's the reason? Help me make sense of it. Maybe if it made sense, I wouldn't be so angry. Help me. I don't want to be angry anymore. I don't want to be scared. Tell me. What's the sense of it? What do you say to the little boy in the barbershop when he asks what his valedictorian brother did wrong in the parking lot of the school after a study session? How do you tell this little boy, whose eyes are full of hope and wonder, that he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time AT HIS OWN DAMN SCHOOL? How do I keep his eyes from looking like the eyes of the man who walked in the church and made his neck smile? How do I stop myself from being that man? How do I go back and grab the twelve-year-old in the pastor's study and tell him that it's okay to tell? How do I dream in a cage? How do I hope?

A beat. A long beat.

At the barbershop, you can talk about anything. It's why I guess I keep coming back to the perch. I guess, it's where I look for hope. Where I scratch out a poem to see if, maybe, you know what I'm talking about. But hey...sometimes you just...tell your black boys it's okay.