

Some Thoughts On Mercy

by Ross Gay

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I WAS IN my garden, walking aimlessly with sickle in hand, taking swipes at the plantain that had erupted into tiny flower heads or at the blowzy red clover growing in tall thickets and slurped at by bumblebees. I walked with absolute freedom, barefoot behind the house I own, in the garden I had built with a joyful toil unlike any other I'd experienced: nibbling the blueberries and what were left of the strawberries; studying the bees and wasps that wove through the small forest of lavender; parting the dense foliage of the Nanking cherry bush to find the remaining tart fruits, beneath which the neighbor's cat slept. The beehive I had set up two weeks earlier between the brush pile and the gooseberries was busy, a cluster of bees impending drought that would leave reservoirs so parched the soil would look like the surface of the moon, nor of the heat wave that would sear the lower Midwest for weeks with hundred-degree weather. It was a nearly perfect afternoon — cloudless, the sun warm on my shoulders, food in my garden and in my refrigerator, my bills paid — when I bent to tug free a head of new garlic to throw in with the potatoes and chard I'd planned for dinner, and my back seized up. It would be days before I could stand upright, let alone work in the garden, without pain.

I wasn't thinking of it, though it seems my body was: the seemingly insignificant run-in I'd had with the police the night before. For a black man any encounter with the police is tense, and that tension had found its way into my muscles, if not my mind.

I teach creative writing at Indiana University in Bloomington, and I had been in my office on campus until about eleven o'clock, working hard on my tenure file, trying to get a little breathing room before a guest came to stay for a few days. In my town, on an early-summer night at 11 PM, there's still a pleasant bit of activity on the street. So when the cop pulled me over, two local bars were crowded half a block away, their outside seating full to capacity, and the walking path was busy with pedestrians and cyclists.

I wasn't perturbed by the cop. I had made a decision in the recent past no longer to be afraid of the police. With their costumes, their hats, the boots worn by the "troopers," police are meant to make us feel scared, guilty, criminal (some of us more than others). There's a way in which they take up residence in our bodies (some of us more than others). When they appear behind us or in our line of sight, our heart rate accelerates, our breathing quickens, our muscles contract. We become acutely aware not only of what we were doing but also of what the cop might think we were doing.

But I had decided I'd try not to feel guilty when I next encountered the police. Why? First, because I am thirty-eight years old and generally law-abiding. Second, because it had occurred to me that when I paid my taxes, I was helping to pay police officers' salaries, and therefore this cop was actually my employee — though I wouldn't have said so to him. Third, I was tired of being afraid. So I'd decided to imagine the police in general — and this cop pulling me over in particular — as doing what I imagine a policeman should spend his time doing: making our community safer.

And so, for the first time in my life when a cop came to my car window, I looked him in the eye and asked as gently and openheartedly as possible if he could tell me why he'd stopped me. "After you give me your license and registration," he said. I handed them over, and he told me simply, "Your license-plate light is out." I'd had no idea there was such a thing as a license-plate light, and I told him as much, laughing to express my good-natured confusion and gratitude: *He wants to do me a favor.*

And he smiled — just for a second — then asked if I had any drugs in the car. When I said no, he asked if I had any guns in the

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car. When I said no, he asked if I'd been drinking. When I said no, he asked again, "You don't have any weapons or anything illegal in the car I should know about?" (Strange, you might think, for such questions to arise from a burned-out license-plate light.) And I said, looking straight ahead through the windshield, "No."

PROBABLY ANY OF YOU who are black or brown have a version of this story, if not a worse one. One friend of color, when I mentioned it to him, said, "I thought he was going to go toss the car and make you clean it up." Another friend's black father said, "Any time you meet the cops and don't go to jail is a good time."

The African American comedy duo Key and Peele have a skit in which President Obama is teaching his daughter Malia to drive. When she runs a stop sign, a cop pulls them over. Astonished and a bit embarrassed at having detained the president of the United States, the cop tells them they can go. But Obama, earnest as ever, says, "No, I want you to go ahead and treat us the way you would if I weren't the president." In the next shot we see Obama getting slammed on the hood of the car and handcuffed. It's funny. And not only black people laugh at such jokes. Everyone does, because *everyone knows*.

I recently realized that I've never, as an adult, driven past a car that's been pulled over without looking to see the race of its occupants. Part of every black child's education includes learning how to deal with the police so he or she won't be locked up or hurt or even killed. Despite my advanced degrees and my light-brown skin, I've had police take me out of my vehicle, threaten to bring in the dogs, and summon another two or three cars. But I've never been thrown facedown in the street or physically brutalized by the cops, as some of my black friends have. I've never been taken away for a few hours or days on account of "mistaken identity." All in all, this traffic stop the other night amounted to nothing. It was so nothing, in fact — so everyday, so known, so agreed upon, so understood — that I am embarrassed, ashamed even, by the scale of my upset, by the way this nonevent took up residence in my body and wrung me out like a rag. I didn't even get a ticket, after all. He just asked me some questions — questions I knew (we all knew, didn't we?) he had before he pulled me over. We say, "Yeah, that's just how it goes." Given what could've happened, I ought to be glad, right? I ought to get over it.

But it is also the familiarity of it all (black guy has unpleasant run-in with the cops) that makes my experience, and the many thousands like it, almost invisible — which makes the significant daily terror of being a black or brown person in this country almost invisible.

HAVING GROWN UP in a largely white, working-class suburb of Philadelphia, I'm rarely shocked by racism. I've heard it all: "He's a nigger lover." "That nigger jumps real high." "You're not like those other niggers." "That girl's as tan as a nigger." In fact, when I meet people who say they haven't been around racism or anti-Semitism, I usually don't believe them. I remember in fourth grade a popular white kid with feathered hair and a slight overbite yelled, "Nigger!" after me as I ran to get on the bus. I dashed back to punch him before running again to the bus, and he yelled after me again, "Nigger!" It went on like this until I decided I'd better catch my bus. (The kid's best friend was Puerto Rican.) As a child, walking with a friend's little sister, I was chased down the block by a grown man who screamed, "Don't come around here with white girls, nigger!" while Mr. Miller, another white man and the father of two of my friends, held him back and apologized to me. Mr. and Mrs. Lee, a black couple, were sitting across the courtyard on their stoop, seething. When I learned from my Chinese American best friend the Cantonese word for "white devil" (*bukwai*), I excitedly told a white buddy, as if to say, *See, they have names for you too!* — to which he rattled off an incredible litany of racial epithets for Asian Americans (though probably only about half as many as he had for black people).

Where I grew up, the white kids, some of whom were my close friends, told nigger jokes to my face or within earshot. I remember one redheaded, freckle-faced kid on the football team yelling across the locker room to one of the few black players, "The only thing I respect about you is your dick!" And even if they didn't make jokes, it might be that you couldn't go into their houses because you were black. Or your best friend's uncle might tell you to your face that black people are inherently lazy. Not to mention what we all watched on tv and read in the newspapers. There were the "welfare queens" and "crack babies." There was the Rodney King beating and the trial and the ensuing riots. There were the Central Park Five, a group of black and Latino teens falsely accused of raping a white jogger, and that strange new word *wilding*, supposedly used by the suspects for their nonexistent crime spree. And there was the fact that nearly every criminal on the news — rapist, murderer, burglar, drug dealer — was black. Even if I wasn't consciously aware of it, I got the message.

I remember being thirteen and walking into a clothing store at the mall with a white pal. As we perused the racks, it didn't take long for me to realize the security guard was following me and was oblivious to my friend. So I gradually made my way to the back of the store while I glimpsed my pal up front stuffing a few hundred dollars' worth of merchandise into his backpack. If I was going to be profiled, I thought, at least my blond-haired buddy could get some new clothes out of the deal. I think we could have made a racket out of this, but we didn't.

A friend of mine here at Indiana University, the late black writer and creative-writing professor Don Belton, came to my house one day looking especially weary. Don told me he had been at the bookstore, where a young white woman had asked if he needed any help, and he'd snapped, "Do I look like I need help?" I'm sure this behavior didn't make sense to the poor woman trying to assist him. Don thought he was being perceived as a criminal. "Can I help you?" twisted in his ear into "Are you stealing something?" I tried to tell him that I'd seen the clerks at that store ask everyone who walked in the same question. Don held his head in his hands. "I'm just so tired," he said.

As a result of this, I've developed the habit of buying something in stores whether I want to or not, to put such possibly suspicious white people at ease. I'm behaving in response to what I *imagine* other people are thinking. After all, the janitor and the antique-shop clerk didn't say anything to me about the color of my skin. Just as the cop didn't say, "Since you appear to be of some African extraction, I would like to ask you if you have any drugs or weapons in the car." He just asked if I had

AS ABOLITION became a real possibility in the nineteenth century, a mythology about black-male criminality was crafted by proponents of slavery, and that myth was then amplified after emancipation. Our current prison system, and the “drug war” that is responsible for that system’s status as the largest in the world, actively cultivates the same story of a unique criminal blackness. I put “drug war” in quotes, because, as Michelle Alexander points out in her brilliant book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, if there were a true War on Drugs, then “people of all colors, . . . who use and sell illegal drugs at remarkably similar rates,” would be incarcerated at very nearly the same rate. But that’s not the case.

A few years back I was teaching a summer enrichment class for public-school students in Philadelphia who were almost all black, and I had a discussion about drug use with them. One outspoken child told me, and the class, "Mr. Ross, my name's not Sally; my name's Takeisha. I smoke weed." God bless this child and her weed. But what she didn't know, and won't until she makes some white friends or goes off to college, is that Sally probably smokes just as much weed as she does, or takes OxyContin, or snorts Ritalin, or uses cocaine or Adderall. Takeisha believed that she was different from white people in her

habits. She believed she was a criminal, whereas her white counterparts were, well, *white*. I wish Takeisha and everyone else knew that people of all races use drugs. It's just that if you're black or brown, like the people in Takeisha's neighborhood, your drug use is more often policed and punished. But the fantasy of black criminality continues. This, to a large extent, is what the drug war is about: making Takeisha — along with her teachers, her local shop owners, her neighbors, her city's police, her prosecutors — believe she's a criminal. It is, perhaps, the only war the U.S. has won in the last thirty years.

I shudder at the emotional and psychic burden we've laid on the young black and brown New Yorkers — so many of them children — being profiled in that city's "stop-and-frisk" program. One man featured in a *New York Times* video speaks with courage and dignity about having been stopped as a teenager "at least sixty to seventy times." Another, in a video made by *The Nation*, talks about having been roughed up for "looking suspicious" and called a "mutt." Eighty-seven percent of stop-and-frisk targets are black or Latino, though blacks and Latinos constitute only about half of New York City's population. How, when their city believes them to be criminal, do these young people escape believing the same of themselves?

Isn't it, for them, for us, a gargantuan task not to imagine that everyone is imagining us as criminal? A nearly impossible task? What a waste, a *corruption*, of the imagination. Time and again we think the worst of anyone perceiving us: walking through the antique shop; standing in front of the lecture hall; entering the bank; considering whether or not to go camping someplace or another; driving to the hardware store; being pulled over by the police. Or, for the black and brown kids in New York City, simply walking down the street every day of their lives. The imagination, rather than being cultivated for connection or friendship or love, is employed simply for some crude version of survival. This corruption of the imagination afflicts all of us: we're all violated by it. I certainly know white people who worry, *Does he think I think what he thinks I think?* And in this way, moments of potential connection are fraught with suspicion and all that comes with it: fear, anger, paralysis, disappointment, despair. We all think the worst of each other and ourselves, and become our worst selves.

Among the more concrete ramifications of this corruption of the imagination is that when the police suspect a black man or boy of having a gun, he becomes murderable: Murderable despite having earned advanced degrees or bought a cute house or written a couple of books of poetry. Murderable whether he's an unarmed adult or a child riding a bike in the opposite direction. Murderable in the doorways of our houses. Murderable as we come home from the store. Murderable as we lie facedown on the ground in a subway station. Murderable the day before our weddings. Murderable, probably, in our gardens.

We all exist, mostly unwittingly, in a world of illusions with all-too-real consequences. Too often we exist, as Ralph Ellison's narrator in *Invisible Man* says, as "phantom[s] in other people's minds." The title of poet Cornelius Eady's book *Brutal Imagination*, about the Susan Smith murders, says it all. Smith drowned her two children, then conjured (from her imagination) a black carjacker to explain their disappearance. The main speaker throughout *Brutal Imagination* is that black phantom, made of our culture's fears, just as we are made of each other's fears. Eady says in the poem "My Heart": "Susan Smith has invented me because / Nobody else in town will do what / She needs me to do." And later in the same poem: "Since her fear is my blood / And her need part mythical, / Every thing she says about me is true."

But what if we acknowledged those fears, regardless of how awful or shameful they are? What if we acknowledged this country's terrible and ongoing history of imagining its own citizens — indigenous, black, Japanese American, Arab American, Latino — as monsters? What if we acknowledged the drug war, and the resulting mass incarceration of African Americans, and the myriad intermediate crimes against citizens and communities as a product of our fears? And what if we thereby had to reevaluate our sense of justice and the laws and procedures and beliefs that constitute it? What if we honestly assessed what we have come to believe about ourselves and each other, and how those beliefs shape our lives? And what if we did it with generosity and forgiveness? What if we did it with mercy?

It seems to me that part of my reason for writing this — for revealing my own fear and sorrow, my own paranoia and self-incrimination and shame — is to say, *Look how I've been made by this*. To have, perhaps, mercy on myself. When we have visible. Violence might become visible. Terror might become visible. And the things we've been doing to each other, despite the fact that we don't want to do such things to each other, might become visible.

If we don't, we will all remain phantoms — and, as it turns out, it's hard for phantoms to care for one another, let alone love one another. And it's easy for phantoms to hurt one another. So when the cop and I met that night, how could he possibly have seen the real me for all the stories and fantasies that have been heaped on my body, and the bodies of those like me, for centuries? And how could I see him?

Meanwhile he stood no more than three feet from me, and we looked each other in the eye. And when I gave him my license and registration, our hands almost certainly touched. And they almost certainly touched again as he gave them back.

THREE WEEKS before that incident, I brought home my first box of bees. I'd picked them up from Hunter's Honey Farm,

twenty miles up the road in Martinsville. Bees often come, as mine did, in a small screened box with a tin can full of sugar water that they drink from for the handful of days they're in transit. As instructed by the beekeeper, I removed three frames from my hive and set the entire box into the open space, where it fit snugly. Then I simply removed the tin-can feeder and began waiting for the bees — all nine thousand of them — to slowly walk out of the box. Ideally within three days they would be busy gathering nectar and making honey. I was hoping I could then open the hive, remove the box, replace the three frames, close the hive back up, and leave the bees alone.

Four days later I went back to the hive. I took off my shirt and wore my thinnest-soled shoes, so as to be both as close to the earth as I could and as vulnerable to the bees as they were to me. I was trying to convey to them my good intentions. I know it sounds crazy — my neighbor, a college kid, seemed to think it was, looking on from the farthest corner of her yard — but I knew it was right somehow. And though I'd assisted with a few beehives and had experienced thousands of bees flying in a constellation near my head and making their beautiful moan, I'd not done the handling of the frames myself, the real negotiating with the bees. On this day I would.

As I opened the hive, I saw that the bees had made substantial honeycomb on the hive lid, in addition to some on the box itself. I hadn't been told this might happen. Some people (my sweetheart is one of them) handle bees with ease and grace, singing lightly or talking to them: "Hey, girls, I'm gonna have to move you around a little bit. Excuse me." Some keepers almost dance with the bees while they do their work.

And some people, it is said, come to the hive angry or anxious or afraid, and the bees know this from far away. They can sense your fear, and they just might sting you for it — which was not reassuring to me as I lifted the box from the hive with what looked like a thousand bees clinging to it, still working on the comb they had been making. Nor was it reassuring when I needed to cut loose the comb they had built on the hive lid, comb that I'd accidentally ripped apart when opening the hive, and that now prevented me from closing the hive back up.

Using a small kitchen knife to free the comb while asking the hundreds of bees as gently as possible to mosey out of the way, I became, despite my best intentions, as terrified as I've ever been in my life. The memory of every previous peaceful interaction with bees flew from my head, and rushing in came the image of the entire hive, all nine thousand, wrathful and swarming me. My hands were shaking, and the feeling of a bee landing on me, which had previously been pleasant, made my skin twitch like a horse's. And the song of the bees changed ever so slightly, climbing half an octave, as it does when they become anxious. And it took every shred of concentration just to hold steady and cut free the comb. And it took every shred of concentration as well not to weep.

What I wouldn't understand until after the frames were snugged back into the hive, the lid was on, and the comb was placed on a chair nearby (so the bees could haul its honey back inside) is just how afraid I'd been. I was on my knees, still on the verge of sobbing, helping the handful of bees who had gotten caught in the thick grass while I was working and were now struggling to find their way out. I gave my forefinger to each one, letting it crawl aboard, gather itself, and fly up to the hive while I whispered, "Climb up. You can do it, sweetie," the tiny needle of each stinger just kissing my flesh. And it was then I became fully aware of a vision I'd had while handling the bees.

I'd had it while the thousands of bees flew around me and the knife started shaking in my hand, and the possibility of the hive turning on me was all I could feel. I saw myself pouring gasoline on this hive that I loved and torching it. And I saw a billowing, and I felt such relief at their being no more. I saw cinders of the box and the sooty concrete blocks it sat on and the charred patch of grass beneath smoldering and the few bees not inside lost and circling in wider and wider loops. I saw myself standing with the pack of matches in my hand and the red fuel canister at my feet.

It is said, and I believe it, that bees can see inside you. And yet, and yet, the bees didn't attack. Not one sting. They didn't even warn me by coming toward my face. They didn't believe what I thought — *what I imagined* — was real. They knew inside me was a truth other than murder. They had mercy. And once the hive was all closed up, they went back to their business.

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* What is to give light must endure burning. — Viktor Frankl

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