

I didn't know my skin until I was forced to reckon with it, introduced to it like a strange relative. There was no hi or hello. I was born, and before I learned to tie my shoes, my father looked me in the eye and told me that my skin, that I, was black. And that meant I had to work harder than everyone else if I wanted to live. In the first grade, there is only so much a six-year-old brain can understand. Addition. Subtraction. Spelling. And as my non-black peers marveled at verbs and adjectives, I instead marveled at the morning breaking news. Over cereal, I watched my skin riddled with bullet holes on national television before heading to school. At six, I understood. I knew my skin in only two ways: violence and death. And I wore it like an ugly, permanent jacket, ashamed. In black skin, everyday was a funeral.

As I got older, I learned more. Multiplication. Cursive. Long division and grammar rules. My skin like a curse, I learned to fear. Be careful, my parents said, there's crazy people out there. At twelve, I understood. I understood crazy people often wore guns and badges, and that they hunted my skin for sport. I understood that when my skin cries, cries I can't breathe, its suffering falls on deaf ears. That when my skin turns and runs it's shot in the back. That when my skin slumbers it is slaughtered and when it moves it is slaughtered and when it's twelve and plays with a toy gun, it too is slaughtered. In this skin I learned to swallow fear like swords, wincing as they sliced through my throat. With blades on my tongue, I learned to be silent. Quiet. Because my black skin was already too loud. And each minute I feared and feared that one day, the skin of my three older brothers would be so loud the black bullets would find them before I could speak.

But today I am speaking. With metal in my mouth and blood in my teeth, I stand here in bruised black skin with a voice that carries across crowds. They want me silent so I speak. They want me dead so I live. Because in black skin, existence is resistance enough. So I will live and live until my skin wrinkles and returns to dust.