

"A searing cry for racial justice from one of our nation's greatest thinkers and most compelling prophets." —ROBIN DIANGELO, author of *White Fragility*

MICHAEL  
ERIC  
DYSON

THE  
NEW YORK TIMES  
BESTSELLING  
AUTHOR

Long  
Time  
Coming

RECKONING  
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MICHAEL  
ERIC  
DYSON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
EVERETT DYSON

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To

**LeBron James**

*Greatest basketball player on the globe*

*In the conversation for G.O.A.T.*

*Founder of the I Promise School for at-risk children*

*Media mogul*

*Global business magnate*

*Transformative philanthropist*

*Outspoken social activist who refused to shut up and dribble*

*Started at the bottom, now you're here*

*For standing with Black people without excuse or apology*

*And for embracing people of all races around the world*

*“Black men, Black women, Black kids, we are terrified.... You have no idea how that cop that day left the house.... You don't know if he had an argument at home with his significant other. You don't know if his kids said something crazy to him and he left the house steaming. Or maybe he just left the house thinking that today is going to be the end for one of these Black people. That's what it feels like. It hurts.”*

*—LeBron James*

It's been a long, a long time coming  
But I know a change gon' come, oh yes it will  
—Sam Cooke, “A Change Is Gonna Come”

For the Lord of hosts will have a day of reckoning  
Against everyone who is proud and lofty  
And against everyone who is lifted up,  
That he may be abased.

—Isaiah 2:12

When my sons were in high school and pictures of Philando Castile were on the front page of the *Times*, I wanted to burn all the newspapers so they would not see the gun coming in the window, the blood on Castile's T-shirt, the terror in his partner's face, and the eyes of his witnessing baby girl. But I was too late, too late generationally, because they were not looking at the newspaper; they were looking at their phones, where the image was a house of mirrors straight to Hell.

—ELIZABETH ALEXANDER

## PRELUDE

### GOLD ORB



DEAR ELIJAH McCLAIN,

I write to you out of profound grief. It is not easy to watch the Black bodies pile up in the streets and in our imaginations as we reckon with a racial catastrophe that has haunted this nation from its first breath. When I saw the video of your fatal encounter with the police, it literally made me—a grown Black man from the tough streets of Detroit teeming with mayhem and murders—weep almost uncontrollably. I suppose it was your sweet demeanor. I suppose it was your palpable innocence. I suppose it was the fact that a video was even posted. It told me from the start that the outcome wasn't going to be good, that you wouldn't survive, that your death would be another death that would happen as if it hadn't happened at all.

God, I thought, I fairly prayed, even begged, not this sweet young man,

not this beautiful soul, not this humble spirit, not him, he cannot have posed a threat to anybody and surely not to cops armed with guns and batons and Tasers. All he had was a coat and a mask and a gentle bearing that enveloped his vulnerable soul as he was trying to get by on his own terms.

But those terms were soon to come to a cataclysmic end. The history of race would yet again be condensed into an interaction between the cops and a young Black anybody from Black anywhere doing Black anything on any given Black night. Yes, it was random, you were to that degree random, but it was a randomness that exists within a universe of perverse predictability that means any Black person can be targeted anywhere at any time. This reinforces the vulnerability that all of us Black folk share, and that you, sweet young Elijah, bore in your body on that fateful night.

Like all the Black deaths this nation has recently reckoned with, your loss was an egregious offense to humanity. You could have been our baby brother or son or grandson, anyone young whose life had just begun, who, like any soul, deserves to exist until time expires and space collapses in a natural rhythm of life and death. As is often the case for the Black dead, most of us got to know your name only after you were gone. With the belated circulation of the video capturing the events that led to your death, we learned that you met your fate in Aurora, Colorado. We grieve for you still.

Just twenty-three, you were a tenderhearted, beautiful young man who, in your own words, was “different,” because you did things like play the violin to soothe stray cats. Your co-worker said you seemed to walk with a gold orb around you. Someone called the cops on you, saying you appeared suspicious as you walked home from a convenience store in the summer of 2019, waving your arms. You wore a ski mask because your anemia made you get cold easily. When the cops arrived, you begged them to truly see you: “I am an introvert, please respect the boundaries that I am speaking.” You told them you were on your way home and asked them to stop being so aggressive. The interaction quickly escalated as you, all of five feet six inches and 140 pounds, tried to speak to the cops, and they refused to listen; they applied a carotid hold to limit the blood flow to your brain, rendering you temporarily unconscious. And when the Aurora Fire Rescue arrived, they administered ketamine to you in an effort to sedate you, which, in combination with the trauma you endured, was enough to eventually kill you.

Elijah, your words that evening are heartbreaking. You tried so hard to