

The Breath of Empty Space

THE EULOGY

Shaun Leonardo

MASS MoCA

What are you waiting for me to tell you? What good will it do? What if I said that this isn't a funeral—that it's a holiday celebration, that if you stick around the band will end up playing 'Damn-it-to-Hell-the Fun's All Over'? Or do you expect to see some magic... the dead rise up and walk again?

Go home, he's as dead as he'll ever die. That's the end in the beginning and there's no encore. There'll be no miracles and there's no one here to preach a sermon. Go home. Forget him. He's inside this box, newly dead. Go home and don't think about him. He's dead and you've got all you can do to think about you... I've told you to go home, but you keep standing there. Don't you know it's hot out here in the sun? So what if you wait for what little I can tell you? Can I say in twenty minutes what was building twenty-one years and ended in twenty seconds? What are you waiting for when all I can tell you is his name? And when I tell you; what will you know that you didn't know already... except perhaps his name? All right, you do the listening in the sun and I'll try to tell you in the sun. Then you go home and forget it. Forget it...

His name was Oscar Grant and they shot him down. His name was Michael Brown and he was tall and some folks thought him handsome. And though he didn't believe it, I think he was. His name was Eric Garner and his face was black and his hair was thin with tight-rolled curls—or call them naps or kinks. He's dead, uninterested, and, except to a few young ladies, it doesn't matter...

Have you got it? Can you see him? Think of your brother or your cousin Junior. His lips were thick with an upward curve at the corners. He often smiled. He had good eyes and a pair of fast hands, and he had a heart. He thought about things and he felt deeply. I won't call him noble because what's such a word to do with one of us? His name was Freddy, Freddy Gray, and like any man, he was born of a woman to live awhile, and fall, and die. So that's his tale to the minute.

His name was Trayvon Martin and for a while he lived among us and aroused a few hopes in the young manhood of man, and we who knew him loved him, and he died. So why are you waiting?

You've heard it all. Why wait for more, when all I can do is repeat it? Very well, so I'll tell you. His name was Walter Scott and he was young, and he was a leader, and when he fell there was a hole in the heel of his sock and when he stretched forward he didn't seem as tall as when he stood. So he died; and we who loved him are gathered here to mourn him. It's as simple as that and as short as that. His name was Akai Gurley and he was black and they shot him. Isn't that enough to appease your thirst for drama and send you home to sleep it off? Go have a drink and forget it. Or read it in *The Daily News*.

His name was Jonathan Ferrell and they shot him, and I was there to see him fall. So I know it as I know it. Here are the facts. He was standing and he fell. He fell and he kneeled. He kneeled and he bled. He bled and he died. He fell like a heap like any man and his blood spilled out like any blood; *red* as any blood, *wet* as any blood, and reflected the sky and the buildings and birds and trees; or your face if you'd taken the time to look into its dulling mirror—and it dried in the sun as blood dries. That's all.

They spilled his blood and he bled. They cut him down and he died; the blood pooled on the sidewalk, gleamed awhile, and after awhile became dull, then dusty, then dried. That's the story and that's how it ended. It's an old story and there's been too much blood to excite you. Besides, it's only important when it fills the veins of a living man.

Aren't you tired of such stories? Aren't you sick of the blood? Then why listen? Why don't you go? It's hot out here. There's the odor of embalming fluid. But the beer is cold in the taverns; the saxophones will be mellow at the Savoy; plenty good-laughing-lies will be told in the barber shops and beauty parlors; and there'll be sermons in two hundred churches in the cool of the evening; and plenty of laughs at the movies. Go listen to *Dave Chapelle* and forget it.

Here you have only the same old story. There's not even a young wife up here dressed in red to mourn him. There's nothing here to pity; no one to break down and shout; nothing to give you that good old frightened feeling. The story's too short

and too simple. His name was Tamir, Tamir Rice. He was unarmed and his death was as senseless as his life was futile. He had struggled for Brotherhood on a hundred street corners 'cause he thought it would make him more human, but he died like any dog in a road.

All, all right, listen to me standing up on this so-called mountain! Let me tell it as it truly was! His name was Sean Bell and he was full of illusions. He thought he was a man when he was only John Crawford. He was shot for a simple mistake of judgment, and he bled, and his blood dried, and shortly the crowd would trample out the stains. It was a normal mistake of which many are guilty: He thought he was a man and that men were not meant to be pushed around.

But it was hot downtown and he forgot his history, he forgot the time, and he forgot the place. He lost his hold on reality. There was a cop and a waiting audience but he was only Ramarley Graham and cops are everywhere. The cop? What *about* him? He was a cop. A good citizen. But this cop had an itching finger and an eager ear for a word that rhymed with 'trigger,' and when he shot him, he found it. The Police Special spoke its lines and the rhyme was completed.

Just look around you. Look at what he made. Look inside you and feel his awful power. It was perfectly natural. The blood ran like blood in a comic-book killing, on a comic-book street, in a comic-book town, on a comic-book day, in a comic-book world. Kajieme Powell is one with the ages. But what's that got to do with you in this heat, under this veiled sun? Now he's part of history, and he has received his true... freedom.

Didn't they scribble his name on a standardized pad? His Race: colored! Religion: unknown, probably born Baptist. Place of birth: United States, some southern town. Next of kin: unknown. Address: unknown. Occupation: unemployed. Cause of death (be specific): resisting reality in the form of a .38 caliber revolver in the hands of the arresting officer, on forty-second street between the library and the subway in the heat of the afternoon, of gunshot wounds received from three bullets, fired at three paces: one there, another severing the spinal ganglia traveling

downward to lodge in the pelvis, the other breaking through the back and traveling God knows where.

Such was the short bitter life of Kalief Browder. Now he's in this box with the bolts tightened down. He's in the box and we're in there with him, and when I've told you this, you can go. It's dark in this box and it's crowded. It has rats and roaches, and it's far, far too expensive a dwelling. The air is bad and it'll be cold this winter. Ezell Ford is crowded and he needs the room. *'Tell them to get out of the box,'* that's what he would say if you could hear him. *'Tell them to get out of the box and go teach the cops to forget that rhyme.* Tell them to teach them that when they call you *nigger* to make a rhyme with *trigger*, it makes the gun backfire.'

So there you have it. In a few hours Alton Sterling will be cold bones in the ground. And don't be fooled, for these bones shall not rise again. You and I will still be in the box. I don't know if Philando Castile had a soul. I only know the ache that I feel in my heart, my sense of loss. I don't know if *you* have a soul. I only know that we are all made of flesh and blood; and that blood will spill and flesh grow cold.

I do not know if all cops are poets, but I know that all cops carry guns with triggers. And I know, too, how we are labeled. So in the name of Laquan McDonald beware of the triggers. Go home, stay safe away from these streets. Forget him. When he was alive he was our hope, but why worry over a hope that's dead? So there's only one thing left to tell and I've already told it. His name was Amadou Diallo, he believed in Brotherhood, he aroused our hopes and he died.

Transcript of *The Eulogy*, a public art piece performed by Shaun Leonardo between 2015 and 2017 that features original text by the artist in dialogue with passages from Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, (New York: Vintage International, 1995). To view and learn more about *The Eulogy* performance, visit bronxmuseum.org.

MASS MoCA

1040 MASS MoCA Way
North Adams, MA 01247
413.MoCA.111
massmoca.org