

CORTNEY LAMAR CHARLESTON
How Do You Raise a Black Child?

—with a nod to Claire Kageyama-Ramakrishnan

From the dead. With pallbearers who are half as young
as their faces suggest and twice the oxen they should be.
Without a daddy at all, or with a daddy in prison, or at home,
or in a different home. With a mama. With a grandmama
if mama ain't around, maybe even if she is. In a house, or not.
In the hood. In the suburbs if you're smart or not afraid of white
fear or even if you are. Taking risks. Scratching lottery tickets.
Making big bets. On a basketball court. Inside a courtroom.
Poorly in the ever-pathological court of opinion. On faith. Like
a prayer from the belly of a whale. In church on Sunday morning,
on Monday, Tuesday, and every other. Before school and after.
In a school you hope doesn't fail. In a school of thought named
for Frederick Douglass. Old school or not at all. With hip-hop or
without. At least with a little Curtis Mayfield, some Motown,
sounds by Sam Cooke. Eating that good down-home cooking.
Putting some wood to their behind. With a switch. With a belt
to keep their pants high. Not high all the time. On all-time highs
at all times until they learn not to feel and think so lowly of
their aims. To be six feet tall and not under. With a little elbow
grease and some duct tape. Sweating bullets. On a short leash.
Away from the big boys on the block. Away from the boys in blue.
Without the frill of innocence. From the dead, again. Like a flag.