

# Dear Son...

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*Son* is a multi-media installation of sound, photograph, text and moving images as a meditation on parenting a Black son under the constant threat of racial violence. The installation featured 180 black and white photographs depicting the relatively unremarkable tasks of domestic care as the back drop to two videos playing at either end of the room. The first video is an open letter I wrote to my son shortly after his 16th birthday, warning him of the potential of increased surveillance and vulnerability that he may be subject to as he grows. As the letter is read, it is redacted several times to reveal messages not present in the original (or voiced) letter. The second video brings the perspectives of other parents of Black sons into conversation with my own as they answer the questions: What is your greatest hope/joy/fear for your son? Their responses are pieced together—never quite overlapping, but allowing very little space to discern when one emotion has ended and another has begun—and form the soundscape for the images and videos of my son and his Black boy kin – protected, connected, laughing, cared for, nourished, peaceful, safe.

*Son* is a conversation about Black care—that which can be seen and that which cannot—and the emotional complexities of parenting in a context that, as Audre Lorde (1997) reminds us, we were never meant to survive (p.255).

## References

- Lorde, A. (1997). *Litany for Survival*. The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde, Norton.
- Sharpe, C. (2017). *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press.





Figure 1: During setup of Son at the Eco Arts & Media Festival, York University (2020)



Figure 2: Two of the 180 photos that lined the walls of the installation.



Dear Son,

It is a beautiful and terrifying privilege to watch you grow. There is something that happens, I think, when your child turns 16 that is different from when they turn 13 or 18 or even 21. You are now old enough to drive – opening the door to more independence, more freedom. Presumed by the province to be old enough to handle the responsibility that comes as a part of that package and at the same time, you are still considered a child – not yet old enough to have a voice in politics, to enter into a legal contract, or even to miss a day of school without my permission. You are now somewhere in between adulthood and childhood. And yet, to me, you have embodied this tension for some time.

Your huge, gentle heart that feels everything right along with those closest to you has been your source of otherworldly empathy and compassion, and has always exceeded what should reasonably be expected of someone your age. It is also likely the source of your enduring innocence. I marvel at how you have been able to maintain that for so long. Your priorities are exactly what they should be – avoiding homework, playing rugby, music and video games, baking cupcakes with your grandmother, and helping your granddad fix bikes for younger kids in the neighbourhood. I am so grateful that you have managed to stay a child in a culture that demands that you grow up quickly. Especially if you are Black.

I was only three years older than you are now when I became pregnant with you and believed certain things about the world then that I now know to be false. About safety and danger and what the people who are supposed to keep us safe see when they look at people who look like us. When they look at someone who looks like you – with your skin and your presumed gender and your hair the way you wear it now. And though everyone who knows you or who loves the rarity of a Black boy who has managed to grow up slowly can look into your face and see your mother, you are growing up and filling out and to the rest of the world you look less and less like a sweet boy in-between adulthood and childhood and more and more like what they have taught themselves to fear.

And it is not just your hair or your skin. The world doesn't understand gentle, Black boys – it comes as an assault on how they think of masculinity and what they conceive of Blackness. But I hope that their fear doesn't change you. I hope it doesn't give you the sharp edges they expect or clench your fists so that they no longer hold cupcakes. I hope their gaze doesn't blind you to the strength in your softness or bridle your tongue so that your words fall out jagged – severing you from these last moments of childhood.

Grow slowly, my love, and drive carefully – I can't keep you safe when you are far from home.

Figure 3: Unredacted letter, part of Son (2020).



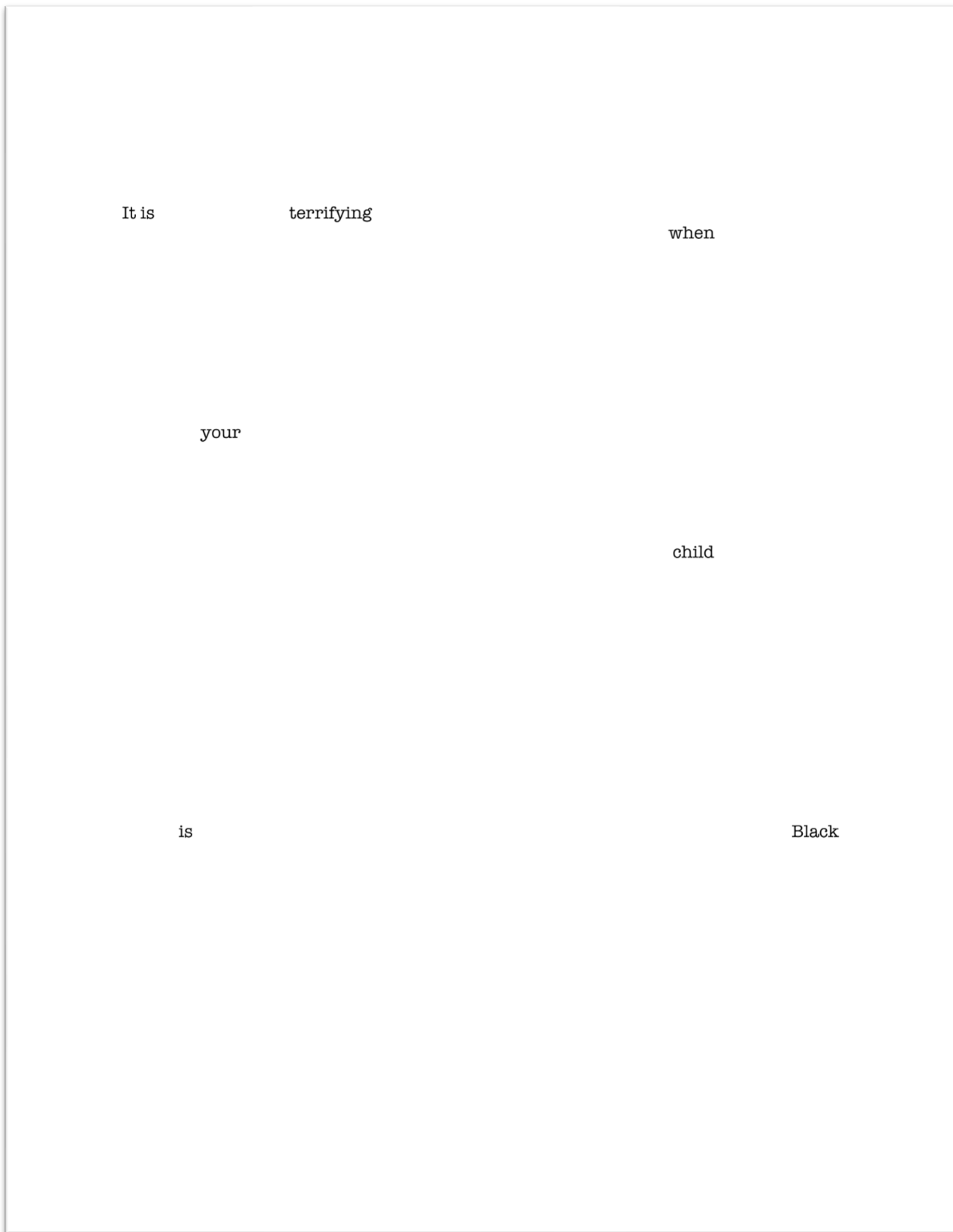


Figure 4: Redacted letter from Son (2020). It reads, "It is terrifying when your child is Black."



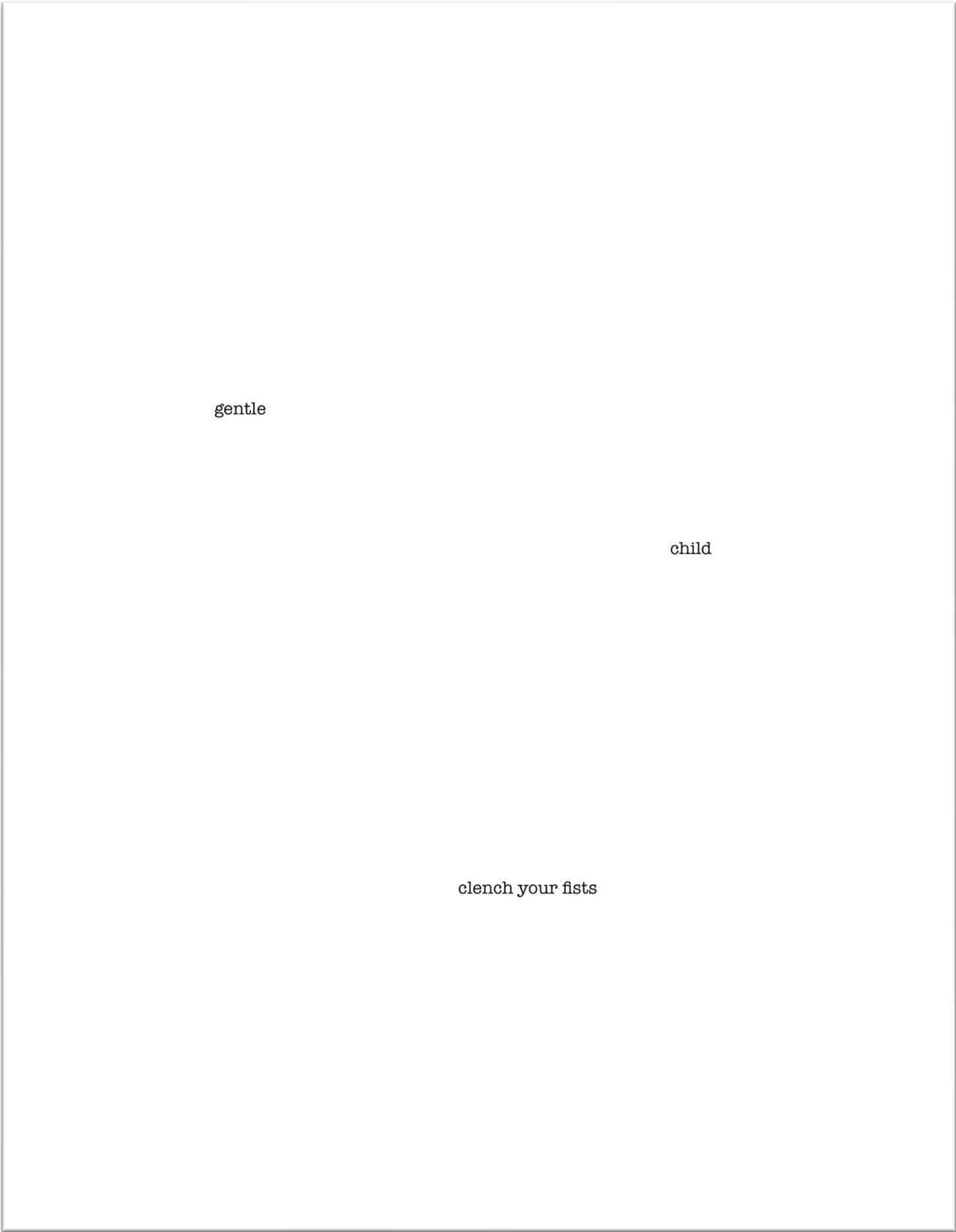


Figure 5: Redacted letter from Son (2020). It reads, "gentle child clench your fists."

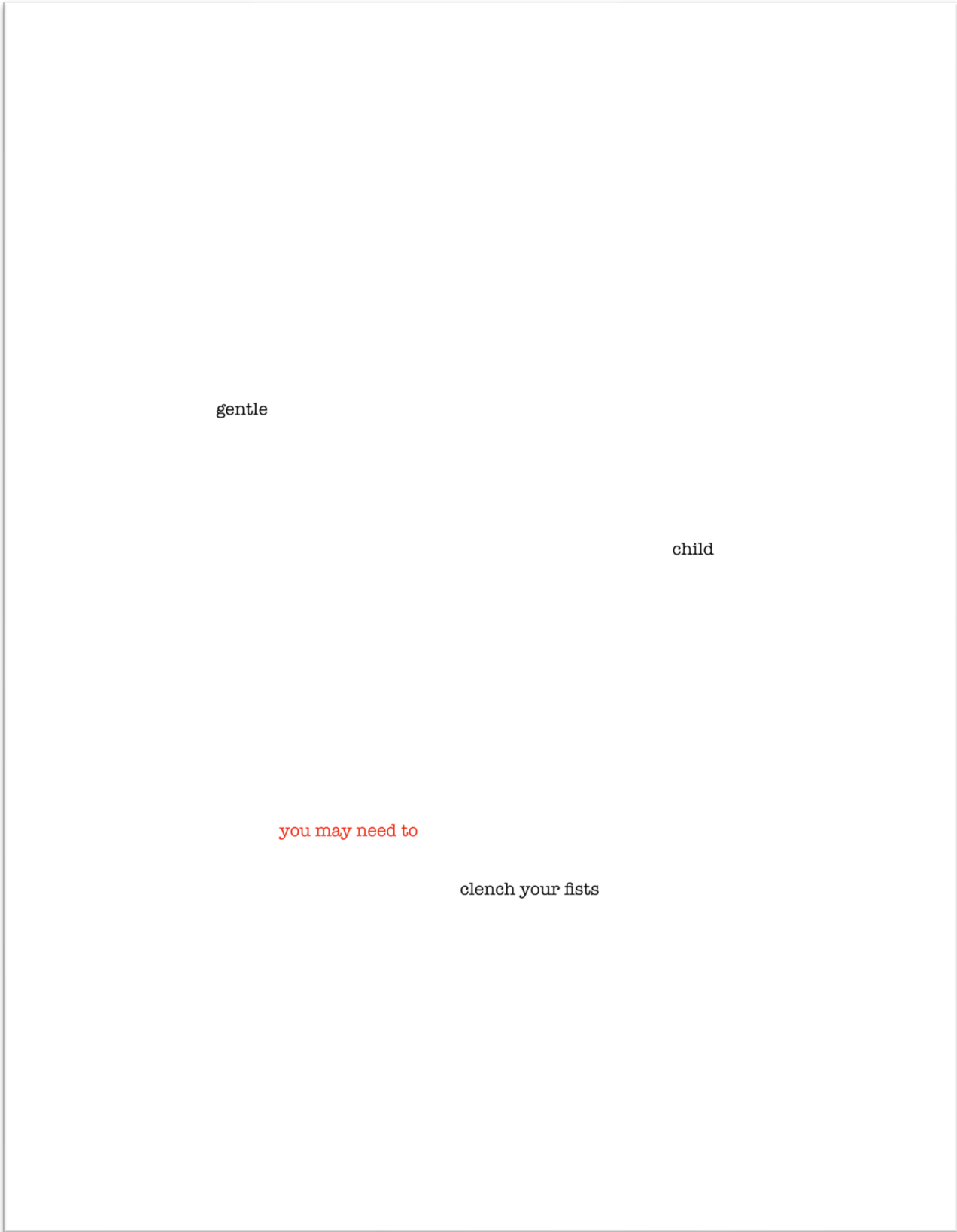


Figure 6: Redacted letter from Son (2020). It reads, “gentle child you may need to clench your fists.” The text in red (“you may need to”) is an annotation not present in the original letter.



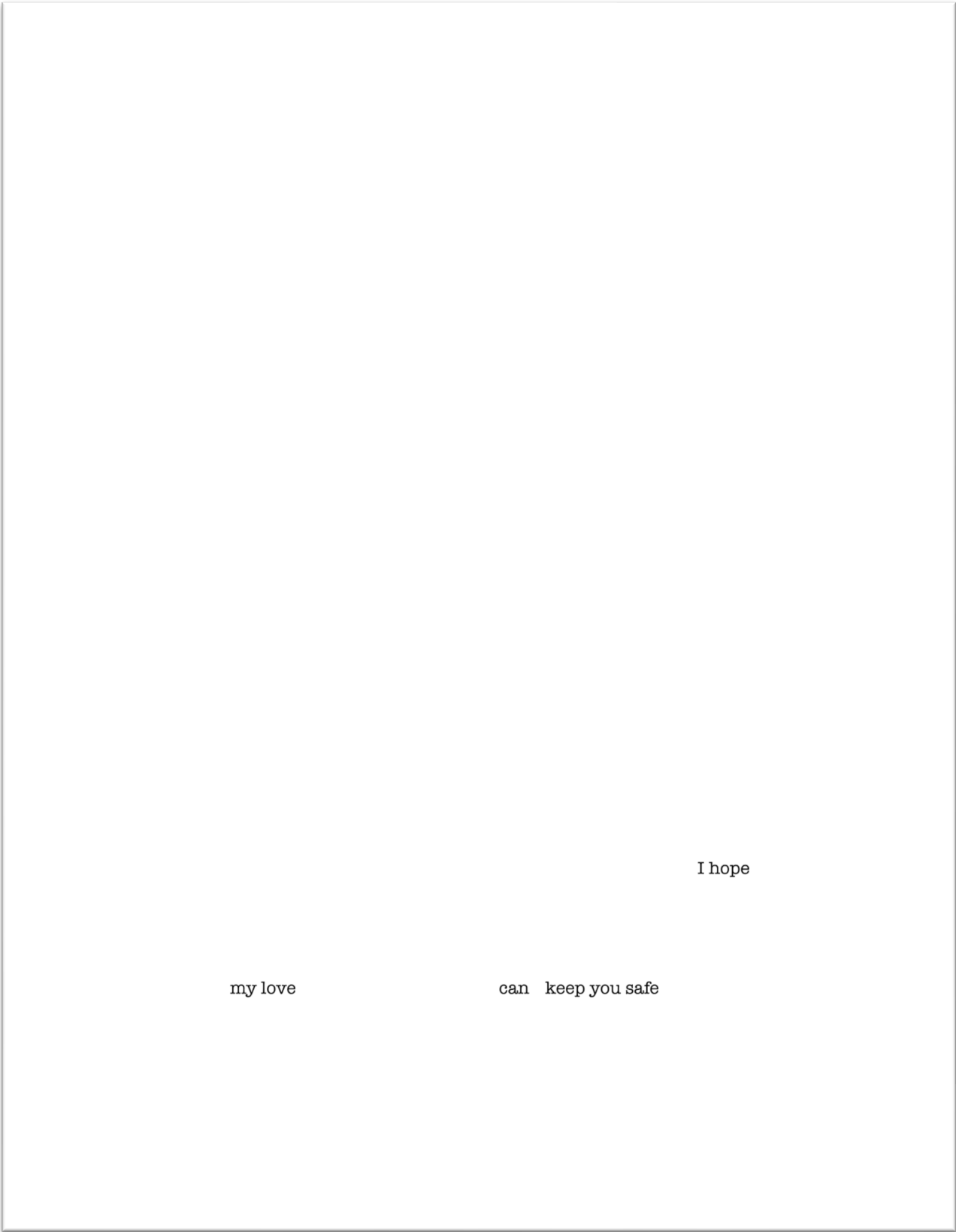


Figure 7: Redacted letter from Son (2020). It reads, "I hope my love can keep you safe."

